FRACTURED MEMORY, DIVIDED SOCIETY: SHIFTING COMMEMORATIVE POLITICS IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE SHADOW OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

By
Róbert Roland Kovács

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Supervisor: Balázs Trencsényi

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ABSTRACT

Societal polarisation often stems from the fractured nature of interpreting and commemorating historical events. To comprehend this phenomenon, this thesis analyses the underexplored field of how the Russian aggression against Ukraine has influenced two case studies of commemorations in East Central Europe: the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. It examines official and counter-commemorations from 2022 to 2024, primarily drawing on interviews, media coverage, and official speeches. The interpretative framework employs the theories of Bernhard and Kubik (2014) concerning the politics of memory to contextualise the findings, and Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics to analyse the performative and narrative elements of the commemorations (2004). The findings reveal the emergence of a significant fracture in both cases following the war between "sovereigntist-pacifist" and "pro-European democratic" interpretations. The former reflects populist nationalism and a pro-Kremlin stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war, while the latter embodies a staunch pro-European orientation. These dynamics align with broader trends in the politics of memory shaped by new nationalism and populism (Maissen 2021).

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Róbert Roland Kovács, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics and Society declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Fractured Memory, Divided Society: Shifting Commemorative Politics in East Central Europe in the Shadow of the Russo-Ukrainian War" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 19. May 2025

Róbert Roland Kovács

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"Everybody knows that the boat is leaking
Everybody knows the captain lied"
Leonard Cohen

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INTRODUCTION

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has profoundly influenced the commemoration of historical events in East Central Europe, reflecting the ever-changing nature of commemorative practices in response to societies' shifting values and political contexts. These processes are captured by the concept of collective memory, popularised by Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that individual memories are formed and structured within social frameworks (Halbwachs 1992, cited in Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011, 10). Collective memory plays a crucial role in shaping collective identities, particularly nationalist ones. Nationalism is rooted in shared historical narratives, as Anthony D. Smith argues (1999), and also creates "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*)—such as monuments, archives, and commemorations—that preserve and anchor fragments of the past (Nora 1989).

While this framework emphasises the unifying power of memory in society, communities are often polarised by the fragmented nature of remembrance. Analysing the fierce battles fought over the creation, appropriation, and abolition of commemorative practices concerns the politics of memory. The analytical framework that typically encapuslates these contested dynamics draws on the notion of a "memory regime," which describes "a set of cultural and institutional practices that are designed to publicly commemorate and/or remember a single event, a relatively clearly delineated and interrelated set of events, or a distinguishable past process" (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 15-16). Memory regimes are continuously subject to change due to factors such as the entry or exit of "mnemonic actors" (who can be individuals, parties, or organisations engaging in the politics of memory), the evolving significance of memory issues, the development of new interpretations of the past, and shifts in political power (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 16). "Fractured regimes" emerge when at least one "mnemonic warrior" is present, claiming to possess the one "true" version of the past (Bernhard and Kubik

2014, 11-13). These actors often favour a non-scientific approach, a “revisionist historiography” to reinterpret history (Tucker 2008). Commemorations in fractured memory regimes may be described, on one hand, as “multivocal”, involving a shared time and space but participants with differing interpretations. On the other hand, they can be “fragmented”, which entails "multiple commemorations in various spaces and times where diverse discourses of the past are voiced and aimed at disparate audiences" (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002, 31-32).

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly reshaped the political dynamics of East Central Europe, giving rise to narratives that either support Ukraine or normalise the aggression (Kazharski 2023). As this thesis argues, these narratives have fundamentally altered the region's memory regimes. Given the region’s historical entanglement with Russia and the Soviet Union, key sites of memory frequently feature Russia. Therefore, mnemonic actors inevitably make commemorative choices that reflect or deliberately avoid connections to the ongoing war when drawing parallels between past and present. However, no study has been conducted that analyses the effects of the war on relevant commemorations in East Central Europe. Bridging this gap is essential, as one of the key drivers of polarisation in the era of new nationalism, closely linked to populism, is the growing societal divide over interpretations of national history (see Maissen 2021). As argued, the war in Ukraine has further intensified this split.

Therefore, this thesis explores how the Russo-Ukrainian War has altered the dynamics of memory politics in East Central Europe by analysing two case studies of commemorations between 2022 and 2024. It focuses on official and counter-commemorations of the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, both foundational national holidays that play a central role in shaping national identity and legitimising the respective republics. These events resonate strongly with the current war in Ukraine, particularly in their themes of resisting foreign domination and asserting national sovereignty, with Russia playing

opposing roles: a liberator in the Slovak case and an occupier in the Hungarian one. These two cases were selected because, following the war, they have represented two of the most fragmented memory regimes in East Central Europe, largely due to the high influence of political parties advancing populist and anti-EU agendas.

To illustrate the changes brought about by the Russian aggression, the thesis examines the performative and narrative dimensions of the commemorations. Performatively, it focuses on the locations of the commemorations, the actors involved, and how meaning was conveyed through symbolic elements. Narratively, the thesis analyses how the historical events were framed, which aspects were emphasised or omitted, and how these choices relate to the current war. Furthermore, it considers the broader structural and cultural contexts in which these commemorative practices occurred. The thesis argues that in both cases, the war exacerbated the pre-war fracture among mnemonic actors along "sovereigntist-pacifist" and “pro-European democratic” lines, which also manifested in performative practices.

For data collection, the thesis draws on a diverse array of sources, including media coverage of the commemorations, official speeches, articles, two semi-structured interviews, and social media content. To interpret the data, key concepts and theories from the politics of memory, particularly the insights of Bernhard and Kubik (2014), are applied to situate the commemorations within their political and cultural contexts. This approach is complemented by the theory of cultural pragmatics in line with Jeffrey C. Alexander’s framework of the elements of cultural performance (2004) to understand the performative and narrative aspects of the commemorations.

This thesis has four sections. First, I elaborate on the theoretical framework guiding this study. Second, I provide a brief background to the celebrated events, outlining their historical significance and the evolving narratives that have shaped their commemoration. Third, I analyse the Slovak and Hungarian cases, examining the broader political context in which these

commemorations occurred and examining their performative and narrative dimensions. Finally, I present my conclusions.

BACKGROUND

The Slovak National Uprising and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution are central to national collective memory as they marked a fundamental change in the course of history for the respective nations. They symbolise resistance against totalitarianism, resulting in the dominant interpretation of a moral victory despite defeat. To understand the impact of today's Russo-Ukrainian war on the commemorations, it is essential to understand the history of the events and how memory regimes of later eras have approached them, with particular attention to the question of Soviet involvement.

HISTORY AND RECEPTION OF THE SLOVAK NATIONAL UPRISING

The Slovak National Uprising occurred within the context of the Nazi satellite wartime Slovak State (1939-1945). This clerico-fascist state, as Kamenec (2011) outlines, evolved from an authoritarian to a totalitarian regime, led by Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest. The regime exercised its power through paramilitary organisations such as the Hlinka Guard, systematically depriving minorities, especially Jews and Roma, of their rights and deporting them to extermination camps. Slovakia was fully subjugated to Nazi Germany and participated in the invasion of Poland and the Soviet Union.

As Prečan (2011) summarises, the second-largest anti-fascist uprising of the Second World War—lasting from August 29 to October 28, 1944—was a joint effort by various resistance groups who opposed Nazi Germany and its Slovak collaborators and advocated for a shared Slovak and Czech state based on parity of the two peoples. It was led by the Slovak National Council, composed of "civic-democratic" and "socialist" blocs, and involved parts of the Slovak regular army and partisans. The Soviet Union supported the uprising in the form of weapons and partisans, but the Red Army did not directly get involved. Triggered by the entry of German forces into Slovakia, insurgents seized control of Central Slovakia, with Banská

Bystrica as their centre, and defended the region for two months before being defeated. Brutal repression followed, including the mass deportation of Slovakia's remaining Jews and widespread reprisals against civilians.

Despite its failure, the uprising became a pivotal moment in Slovak collective memory. It was recognised by the Allies, thereby aligning Slovakia with the victorious side in the war. Moreover, it helped shift responsibility for the wartime state onto specific social groups, such as the Germans and fascists, thus absolving the majority of Slovaks from collective guilt (Naxera and Krčál 2021, 93).

Immediately after the war, struggles between mnemonic actors began over the interpretation of the uprising with two narratives: a civic-democratic one that highlighted the Slovak insurgent army, and a communist one that emphasised partisan forces and popular support (Naxera and Krčál 2021, 92–93). Following the communist takeover in 1948, the latter narrative was monopolised and reshaped to mirror the regime's ideological framework. It argued that the uprising was the first step on the road to socialism, paving the way for the liberation of Slovakia by the Soviet Union, whose leading role in the uprising was asserted (Đurašković 2015, 532; Naxera and Krčál 2021, 93-94). Only the ideologically appropriate communist actors of the uprising were included in the commemorations, completely marginalising the memory of non-communist fighters (Naxera and Krčál 2021, 94). During the period of normalisation from 1968, the memory of the uprising shifted towards a "red-nationalist" interpretation, which emphasised the Slovak national character of the uprising and linked it to state-building aspirations; at the same time, the acknowledgement of the Soviet role remained central (Đurašković 2015, 534-535).

After the regime change, a fractured memory regime emerged, where the Slovak National Uprising was primarily framed by two opposing positions: "for" and "against" (Michela 2017, 134). The latter interpretation, rooted in the narratives of fascist Slovak émigrés,

presents the uprising as a betrayal of Slovak statehood, while simultaneously attempting to rehabilitate the fascist state (Michela 2017, 134-135; Naxera and Krčál 2021, 97-98). The other interpretation achieved dominant status, and in 1992, the date of the uprising's outbreak, August 29, was declared a national holiday (Hudek 2015).

However, the dominant narrative became internally divided, in recent decades, between "civic liberal" and red-nationalist currents. The civic-liberal interpretation emphasises that a significant portion of Slovaks rose for freedom against oppressive powers. As a result, the event's legacy is seen as fundamentally democratic and can be incorporated into the broader pan-European anti-fascist liberal-democratic memory culture (Hudek 2015). In contrast, the red-nationalist interpretation—the version emerging after the regime change—frames the uprising as part of the Slovak national struggle for emancipation and statehood. This perspective adopts a plebeian view, highlighting the mass participation of ordinary people (Đurašković 2015, 549–552). The type of official commemoration that developed was multivocal, with all participants celebrating in Banská Bystrica, but with different interpretations. The mnemonic actors do not question the role of the Soviet Union in overthrowing Nazism in Slovakia and interpret it as liberation (Naxera and Krčál 2021, 102), yet there are differences of opinion about the role of the Soviet Union and the communists in the uprising. The civic liberal line and the dominant version of the red-nationalist line under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar have highlighted the Slovak people's involvement, downplaying the Soviet contribution (Đurašković 2015, 550; Hudek 2015). In contrast, Prime Minister Robert Fico (Smer), following the red-nationalist tradition, regularly praised the Red Army's role, especially in recent years (Đurašković 2015, 551-552; Naxera and Krčál 2021, 102).

HISTORY AND RECEPTION OF THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1956

The revolution occurred in the context of Soviet control in Hungary (1944-1989), during the de-Stalinisation period. At the end of the Second World War, as Gyarmati and Valuch explain (2009), a Stalinist-style one-party dictatorship was gradually established in Hungary. The regime was characterised by intense political repression, forced collectivisation and a planned economy, leading to widespread economic decline and public dissatisfaction. After Stalin's death, the reformist faction within the Communist Party grew stronger, leading to Imre Nagy becoming prime minister in 1953. He attempted to alleviate the situation in the country through social and political reforms, but in 1955, the Stalinist line regained power.

By October 1956, criticism of the regime's inability to renew culminated in a nationwide popular revolution that lasted two weeks. On October 23, as Gyarmati and Valuch further elaborate (2009), a protest organised by university students in solidarity with the Poznań protests (see Kemp-Welch 2006) quickly escalated, leading to clashes with the security forces. The next day, the Soviet troops deployed in Budapest were confronted by armed revolutionary groups comprised mainly of workers and students, and Imre Nagy was reappointed prime minister. In a few days, he had finally committed himself to the revolution. Workers' councils and revolutionary committees were formed, effectively taking over local control. The revolution also spread to the provinces. The revolutionaries showed unanimity in their demands, calling for national sovereignty, democratic freedoms, economic reform, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, and embracing a "third-road vision"—representative democracy with a state-run welfare economy and public ownership (see Rainer 2006, 1193). The Soviet leadership, frightened that the Hungarian revolution could lead to the toppling of the Soviet regime in the region, ordered an intervention. On November 4, the Red Army entered Budapest and crushed the revolution. The Soviets installed a new government led by János Kádár, followed by bloody reprisals, including the execution of Imre Nagy and the exodus of over 200,000 people from the country.

The revolution was not only a fundamental experience for Hungarian society, but also, as Rainer argues (2006, 1196), its example and moral force had "world historical importance", notably because he argues that it was the "biggest challenge to the Soviet Union" from Eastern Europe (2006, 1189) and hence contributed to a positive image of the country. Therefore, both for the communist regime that crushed the revolution and for the political systems that emerged after the regime change, '56 was a fundamental point of reference.

The legitimacy of the Kádár regime (1956-1989) was intrinsically linked to the evaluation of 1956 as the regime was brought to power by the Soviet Union, which crushed the revolution (Reynolds 2020, 62). The official historical narrative defined these events as a counter-revolution, depicting them as an attempt to restore the anti-communist, right-wing fascist political regimes of the 20th century, based on which the Soviet intervention was justified (Mink 2008, 170-173). While this interpretation remained the official narrative throughout the regime, following the execution of Imre Nagy in 1958, the memory of the events began to be characterised by a state-enforced amnesia that manifested in a conscious avoidance of their discussion (Reynolds 2020, 62-63). However, counter-narratives to the official memory emerged among dissidents, both in exile and at home, as well as among Western observers, who refuted all the claims of communist propaganda and proclaimed that '56 was a spontaneous uprising, triggered by the Stalinist repression and was framed within a kind of democratic socialism (Mink 2008, 172-173).

The legacy of the 1956 revolution played a pivotal role in delegitimising the communist system during the regime change, and the tradition of 1956 became the founding principle of the new Hungarian republic. This connection was most powerfully symbolised at the state reburial of Imre Nagy and his comrades (Csipke 2011, 99–101). There, the young Viktor Orbán delivered a speech calling for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and framing the events of 1989 as the peaceful fulfilment of the revolutionaries' goals. This explicit linking of 1956 and 1989

was later affirmed by the newly elected democratic parliament, which passed its first law designating October 23 as a national holiday, consecrating the 1956 revolution as a cornerstone of the new system (Csipke 2011, 100–101).

Following the regime change, a fractured memory regime emerged in Hungary, with the legacy of 1956 becoming a significant point of political polarisation. Competing mnemonic actors were often reluctant to acknowledge each other's interpretations, leading to fragmented commemorations where the actors celebrated separately. Three main narratives developed. The first—and ultimately dominant—was the traditional right-wing narrative rooted in the ethno-nationalist interpretation of history, which Fidesz (today a right-wing populist party) eventually adopted and later redefined. This interpretation emphasises the nationalist and anti-communist elements of 1956, framing it as a story of national martyrdom and heroism. It tends to downplay the role of Imre Nagy and the reformist communist intelligentsia, instead highlighting the heroism of street fighters (Csipke 2011; Mink 2008; Rainer 2017). The second was the liberal narrative, focused on the revolution's democratic and third-way aspirations, but failing to overcome the prevailing right-wing discourse (Csipke 2011; Rainer 2017). The third was the socialist interpretation. After an initial period of silence, socialists attempted to appropriate the memory of the revolution around the figure of Imre Nagy; however, their ambivalent stance failed to present a coherent alternative capable of challenging the dominant one (Csipke 2011; Mink 2008; Rainer 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The significance of the theoretical framework lies in its ability, on one hand, to zoom out and interpret the commemorations in their broader context of political and cultural considerations, on the other hand, to zoom into the celebrations on the national holidays and closely dissect the multiple practices of constructing the past.

To contextualise the commemorations, I draw on Bernhard and Kubik's (2014) conceptualisation of the politics of memory and the elements shaping mnemonic actors' choices identified by them. They argue that mnemonic actors can make structural and cultural choices (strategies) and face structural and cultural constraints. Structural choices refer to the position taken by the mnemonic actors in the memory regime, such as being a mnemonic warrior. Structural constraints encompass the factors beyond the direct control of mnemonic actors that limit their capacity to act, such as a party's relative strength within the political system. Cultural constraints include the existing meanings, values, identities, and discourses that shape what can be expressed within a cultural field. Finally, cultural choices describe the selection of particular themes, symbols, and rhetorical styles from the national cultural repertoire to craft narratives about the past.

To analyse the performative and narrative elements of the commemorations in Slovakia and Hungary, the thesis applies Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics (2004), specifically his conceptualisation of the elements of cultural performance. As he argues, cultural performance, "the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (2004, 529), is analogous to theatrical ones. Commemorations are examples of such performances, where mnemonic actors interpret their social situation in light of historical events. This thesis utilises some of the key elements of cultural performance identified by Alexander (2004, 529–533) and divides them into two main groups. The first group concerns the performative elements of the commemorations, comprising

their material and social framework. These include the "actors" enacting these performances, who correspond to mnemonic actors. The "audience", conceptualised as the recipients of meaning, plays a crucial role in decoding. "Means of symbolic production" refers to the material resources required for symbolic expression, such as costumes and performance spaces. "Mise-en-scène" encompasses the spatial and temporal orchestration of symbolic elements, including choreography and set design. The second category includes the narrative elements that Alexander describes as the "systems of collective representation", which consist of "background symbols" (e.g., sites of memory) and "foreground scripts" (e.g., speeches), forming structured signifiers that convey existential, emotional, and moral meanings. The thesis largely focuses on this latter aspect, analysing the narratives appearing in commemorative speeches.

ANALYSIS

Drawing on the theoretical framework, this thesis analyses commemorations of the Slovak National Uprising and the Hungarian Revolution between 2022 and 2024. Rather than following a year-by-year chronology, the analysis is organised thematically around two distinct narratives, a sovereigntist-pacifist stance and a pro-European democratic attitude. The associated performative practices are also identified.

THE SOVEREIGNTIST-PACIFIST NARRATIVE IN SLOVAKIA

In Slovakia's fractured memory regime, one of the most prominent mnemonic warriors is Robert Fico and his party, Smer, who advocate a red-nationalist interpretation of history (see Đurašković 2015). Although Fico's first government (2006–2010) was still largely shaped by an anti-Hungarian politics of memory (see Burzová 2012), it also took an ambivalent stance towards condemning the communist past. This was evident in the government's sceptical stance towards the November 17 national holiday commemorating the overthrow of communism (Leff, Deegan-Krause, and Wolchik 2014, 115–118). Over the past decade, the party's populist rhetoric has intensified, accompanied by a pronounced pro-Kremlin stance. It has often been employed during the official commemoration of the Slovak National Uprising (Naxera and Krčál 2020), a holiday favoured by the party for its potential to legitimise their agenda from both "red" and "nationalist" perspectives.

In the shadow of the Russo-Ukrainian war, commemorations of the Slovak National Uprising offered Smer an opportunity to advance their political agenda and historical interpretation on the symbolic terrain of their preferred holiday, resulting in a sovereigntist-pacifist stance. However, in 2022 and 2023, this realisation required overcoming the structural constraint of being out of power, and thus not in control of the official commemorations. Furthermore, a cultural constraint also emerged. As Kazharski (2023) argues, following the

invasion, promoting pro-Kremlin narratives has become significantly more costly both morally and politically in Central Europe.

To counter these constraints, four performative and narrative strategies were deployed. First, while still in opposition, departing from previous practice, Smer politicians did not participate in the official commemoration in Banská Bystrica; instead, they invited their supporters to a counter-event in Zvolen, a town which is a significant site of memory of the uprising. Thus, they created an opportunity to express their own narratives, and in doing so, to oppose the government's politics of memory. In Zvolen mnemonic actors such as Matica slovenská and the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters took part—both known for promoting pro-Kremlin narratives (Golianová and Kazharski 2020, 14-16). Representatives of the former Soviet republics were traditionally invited to the official ceremony every year until the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, when Russian and Belarusian delegates were no longer welcome for moral reasons. Smer found this unacceptable and chose instead to celebrate together with them. In 2024, upon returning to power, they celebrated again at the original site, alongside the Russians, taking advantage of the 80th anniversary to hold a two-day event.

The second strategy was that they blamed the government for fostering liberal democracy as a political system, which they claimed had betrayed the legacy of the uprising. Thereby, they portrayed themselves as the bearers of the only credible narrative of the uprising, while also expressing their position regarding the war. They went so far as to label government officials as outright fascists, akin to the Ukrainians the government supported. In a more moderate tone, Robert Fico stated in 2022 that the participants in the uprising had fought for democracy and freedom, but if they had seen "some of the ministers, some of the judges" today, "they would not have believed their eyes" (SMER–SD 2022).[2] In contrast to the liberal democratic model, Fico advocated for a sovereign "illiberal democracy" as a more faithful

[2] All translations from Slovak are from Alexandra Dzurillová.

continuation of the uprising's ideals. Meanwhile, the party's Marxist radical vice-president, Ľuboš Blaha, took a more extreme stance:

> The historical truth is that the Slovak National Uprising was also suppressed by the Ukrainian fascist detachments of Galicia. Are we supposed to thank them for that? No. Dear friends, fascism always has two pillars: hatred of freedom and hatred of Russia. The current Slovak government has two pillars: hatred of freedom and hatred of Russia. […] What are they? They are fascists (SMER–SD 2022)!

In doing so, he disproportionately attributed responsibility for suppressing the uprising to Ukrainians and equated the Slovak government with fascist.

The third strategy used by Smer was that they openly endorsed the communist interpretation of the uprising, highlighting the central role of communist leaders and the Soviet Union. Once again, Blaha summarised this stance most radically and succinctly: "They say that only the "civic-democratic bloc" fought in the Slovak National Uprising. No. The Communists played a key role. […] We were not liberated by the Americans, we were liberated by the Red Army, by the Soviet Union, and it was the Russian people who suffered the most" (SMER - SD 2023).[3] A key element of the narrative was the speakers' praise for communist politicians who participated in the uprising and later played a significant role during the socialist era, most notably Gustáv Husák, who exerted firm control over Czechoslovakia following the suppression of the Prague Spring. Fico stated: "I believe that the time will come when we give this man the place in Slovak history that he deserves." After commending his role in the uprising and describing his persecution in the 1950s, the speaker referenced Husák's later political career: "Yet he stood up. And then he came and stood for the Federation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. And he offered a solid performance. He is one of the most important people in modern Slovak history" (SMER–SD 2023). This statement made it clear that of the two defining figures of 20th-century Slovak history, Alexander Dubček, the leader of the Prague Spring, and Husák,

[3] While the Soviets suffered many more casualties in the uprising, Western allies, including Americans, were also involved (see Katuška 2024). Western ambassadors also emphasised this before the 80th anniversary (aktuality.sk 2024).

Fico shifted his support for the latter despite having prioritised Dubček's heritage until the end of the 2010s.[4]

Finally, now in power, Fico used the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising in 2024 to articulate his suddenly more moderate views on the current geopolitical situation, drawing on the "neutralist-pacifist" discourse. As identified by Kazharski (2023), this discourse serves to normalise Russia's invasion of Ukraine while avoiding direct alignment with pro-Kremlin narratives. Fico stated, "we all know very well that the main message of the Slovak National Uprising was to end the war and establish peace. […] And that is why, dear Slovaks, we have the right to demand peace even from here, from Banská Bystrica to the whole world" (Fico 2024). He reflected on the collapse of the postwar international order established at Yalta by "very wise and capable world leaders." He criticised Europe's tendency to impose its values on others, including, he noted, "that you can't go compete in the Olympics somewhere," an implicit reference to Russia (Fico 2024). Thus, the prime minister appeared to be making a universal call for peace. However, Fico failed to acknowledge Russia's role in undermining the international order, only criticising Europe for doing so, revealing that his ostensibly pro-peace message aligns with a pro-Kremlin position.

THE PRO-EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE IN SLOVAKIA

The mnemonic actors—liberal, populist, and centrist politicians—who sought to present an alternative narrative to that of Smer regarding the Slovak National Uprising faced three crucial constraints. First, they are young parties with no historical roots, who have not been involved in defining moments of the country's history (e.g., regime change), which is one of the reasons why they have been largely focusing on contemporary issues such as anti-corruption, the rule of law or entrepreneurship. As Petrović, Raos, and Fila (2023) show, for example, one

[4] Interview with Miroslav Michela on the politics of memory in Slovakia, interview by Róbert Roland Kovács, Online (Zoom), 21 May 2025.

such party, OĽaNO (today called Slovensko), who were the leading governing party in 2022, is a mnemonic abnegator according to Bernhard and Kubik's (2014) taxonomy, meaning that they largely ignore or avoid memory politics.

Second, when these parties do engage in memory politics, they tend to emphasise both the anti-communist and anti-fascist legacy of Slovakia. On the one hand, OĽaNO has banned certain forms of communist nostalgia (Petrović, Raos, and Fila 2023, 287), and Progressive Slovakia—the party of President Zuzana Čaputová (2019-2024)—has frequently used the November 17 celebration of the Velvet Revolution to mobilise its supporters (see The Slovak Spectator staff 2024). On the other hand, these actors also fully embrace the celebrations of the uprising from a civic-liberal, occasionally nationalist perspective. However, unlike the Slovak National Uprising, in which the Soviets and communists played a crucial role, the November 17 celebration provides a clearer opportunity to criticise Smer's frequent pro-communist rhetoric.

The third constraint affecting the performative articulation of this narrative was the internal fragmentation and political instability among the relevant actors. The 2022 commemorations were organised by Eduard Heger's (OĽaNO) minority government, during which the dominant narrative continued to prevail, albeit accompanied by differing emphases from various mnemonic actors, including government members and President Čaputová. However, by the 2023 commemorations, Heger's government had collapsed, and a caretaker administration led by the independent Ľudovít Ódor oversaw the events. Probably due to the government's interim status, the organisers opted not to include a section for political speeches in the official commemoration. Instead, they held a gala event the day before, attended only by invited representative guests, where the prime minister and the president gave speeches. By the 2024 commemorations, SMER and its coalition partners had returned to power, holding both

the parliamentary majority and the presidency. Notably, the opposition did not organise any separate commemorative events that year.

Two distinctive strategies emerged in the speakers' narratives of the uprising, reaching a pro-European democratic stance. First, in line with the civic-liberal tradition, the uprising was interpreted as a struggle for democracy, human rights and dignity, which had ultimately triumphed in 1989, but has since come under renewed threat. Eduard Heger, addressing the veterans, summarised the aims of the uprising as follows: “You, the participants of the Slovak National Uprising, stood up for human dignity against tyranny. You stood for equality among people against superiority and privilege. And you stood for democracy against totalitarianism” (Heger 2022). In contrast to Smer’s narrative, which claims that freedom arrived in 1945, following the Soviet troops, several speakers, including President Čaputová, argued that “in the end, the dream of freedom from 1944 was only truly fulfilled in November '89” (Jabůrková 2023). Several speakers, including Heger, warned that “even today, a new fascism is pushing its way into Slovak society. There are politicians who exploit the difficult situation of citizens and cultivate extremism within them” (Heger 2022). Hence, even within this framing, speakers employed anti-fascist rhetorical tools, labelling their political opponents fascists.

Second, based on the anti-totalitarian interpretation of the uprising, the narrative justified the current advocacy for Ukraine and the condemnation of Russia. Heger claimed that the veterans’ democratic ”legacy resonates even more strongly in the context of the war in our neighbouring country” (Heger 2022). Like Fico, he noted that "war is the worst thing. Nothing good can come from war." But unlike the Smer prime minister, he continued in this way: “I am glad that when Slovakia once again faced a situation in which it could show whether it understands the legacy of the Slovak National Uprising, it once again stood on the right side of history and helped Ukraine. […] Because we see what Russia is doing in Ukraine […], the atrocities taking place there” (Heger 2022). In other words, in response to the war, Heger saw

the struggle for freedom as legitimate, based on the legacy of the uprising, and named Russia as the disruptor of the world order.

In summary, both narratives are based on the dominant pro-uprising narrative that emerged after the regime change. Smer's sovereigntist-pacifist argument represents the red-nationalist line, notably the pro-Kremlin version, which is used to normalise Russian aggression and equate Ukrainians with the fascists of the Second World War. The pro-European democratic position of the liberal and centrist parties fostered the civic-liberal tradition, which sees the essence of the Slovak National Uprising in the defence of freedoms and, on that basis, promotes support for Ukraine.

THE SOVEREIGNTIST-PACIFIST NARRATIVE IN HUNGARY

To understand how the Russo-Ukrainian war has influenced mnemonic actors in Hungary, it is crucial to examine first the strategic and cultural choices that have shaped Hungary's official memory regime since 2010. Fidesz, Hungary's ruling party, has been described as a "very active and restless mnemonic warrior" (Benazzo 2017, 198). Even during Orbán's first term (1998–2002), his government used the politics of history for legitimisation, promoting the right-wing nationalist narrative, exemplified by the creation of the House of Terror Museum. The political discourse already reflected a mix of "anti-communism, anti-liberalism, cultural traditionalism, etatism, and increasing ethnonationalism" (Trencsényi 2021, 175). Following Fidesz's 2010 supermajority, they reshaped the institutional landscape of historical research, founding new state-backed institutes to promote a revised historical canon, while undermining the independence of established ones, such as the Institute for the Study of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution (Laczó 2019, 30). The historical narrative portrays the party as a champion of national sovereignty and underpins the nation's suffering under external oppressive powers (Benazzo 2017, 198).

Despite dominating the memory regime and the interpretation of the revolution, Fidesz approached the 1956 commemorations following the outbreak of the war with growing anxiety, as two earlier structural and cultural choices had become constraints in the context of the war. First, although in 2008 Orbán still openly condemned Russia's attack on Georgia by invoking the memory of 1956 (444.hu, 2014), Hungary's foreign policy rapprochement with Russia since 2014 has led to the fact that "the reference to the Russians as creators and propagators of the communist oppressive system, as well as invaders who smashed the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, has gradually dissolved" (Benazzo 2017, 209-210). Instead, as Benazzo demonstrates, the West has become enemy number one for not assisting the revolution. Second, shortly after the outbreak of the war, parliamentary elections were held in Hungary, where Fidesz's main message was that the opposition would take the country into war in alliance with the Ukrainian president, which helped Orbán win the elections by a landslide, annihilating the opposition (Krekó 2022). However, while the government promoted a strongly anti-Ukrainian narrative, an ironic tension surfaced in public discourse: many began to point to the parallels between Ukraine's resistance against Russia and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, in which Hungarians fought for national sovereignty against Soviet domination. It created an uncomfortable situation for the government, considering how to reconcile the narrative on the war with the memory of the revolution. The government had to develop strategies in both the performative and narrative considerations to manage these constraints, which resulted in the sovereigntist-pacifist position.

To avoid uneasy confrontations, while enjoying the freedom of facing no serious mnemonic opposition, significant changes were made in the performative elements, and for the first time in Orbán's political career, the commemorations were held outside the capital in both 2022 and 2023. Unlike in the previous year, when he addressed tens of thousands in Budapest, these commemorations were cordoned off, open only to registered attendees. Orbán, as the only

main speaker, justified this unusual choice of location through a populist rhetoric, accusing the "Left" of failing to understand that "Budapest is not equivalent to the country" and stressing that "1956 was not a revolution of one city, but of the whole country" (Orbán 2022b). The two chosen sites, Zalaegerszeg and Veszprém—both county seats and centres of revolutionary activity in 1956—were seen as ideal background symbols for the commemorations. Moreover, both venues supported the interpretation of the revolution as a stand against communist religious persecution. The prime minister spoke first at the opening of a visitor centre honouring József Mindszenty, a persecuted archbishop freed during the revolution, and next year at a historic castle symbolising Hungarian Christianity, with a Holy Trinity statue in the background. Only in 2024, when a serious political and mnemonic contender emerged in the form of the Tisza Party, did Orbán move the commemorations back to Budapest to Millenáris Park, near sites of memory from 1956.

Three strategies were adopted to create a narrative, accommodating both the dominant right-wing interpretation of the 1956 Revolution and the anti-war message. First, to keep the right-wing image of the revolution, a particularising narrative frame was adopted (see Brubaker and Feischmidt 2002, 707-709). On the one hand, it had a localising dimension, as the prime minister extensively praised the popular participation in Zala County and Veszprém in 1956, highlighting prominent figures with local ties such as Árpád Brusznyai, a non-communist revolutionary and József Mindszenty, both of whom align with the right-wing interpretation. On the other hand, the particularising narrative contained ethnicising elements. As Orbán declared, "for them, the lesson of 1956 is that we must fight for Ukraine—and indeed in Ukraine. For us, the lesson of 1956 is that there is only one thing we can fight for: Hungary and Hungarian freedom" (Orbán 2024). This framing sidelines the international dimensions of the revolution, such as its origins in the October 23rd march held in solidarity with the Poznań uprising, recasting it instead as an exclusively Hungarian national struggle.

The second strategy was that the goals of the 1956 revolutionaries were reinterpreted, and new moral lessons were extracted from the October events to align with the Hungarian government's neutralist-pacifist position on the Russo-Ukrainian War. This narrative is best captured by Orbán's statement two weeks before the 2022 commemorations, asserting that the '56-ers "undertook a revolution and a struggle for freedom to enforce a ceasefire and peace negotiations" (Orbán 2022a).[5] This rhetorical framing presents a contradiction: while it reinforces the notion that "Hungarians are a freedom-loving and freedom-fighting people" (Orbán 2024), it is simultaneously used, most starkly by the prime minister's political director, to criticise Ukraine's response to the invasion. As he put it in an interview, "based precisely on '56, we probably would not have done what President Zelensky did 2.5 years ago, because it is irresponsible, because one can see that he took his country into a war of defense" (Barnóczki 2024).[6] Thus, the commemorative speeches simultaneously celebrated Hungarian bravery and resistance, while also framing peace and non-engagement as the core lessons of 1956, resulting in a normalising narrative of the Russian aggression.

The third strategy, in line with the government's longstanding anti-Western rhetoric, was promoting revisionist interpretations blaming the West for the 1956 revolution's failure and drawing direct parallels between the EU and the Soviet Union. In 2022, Orbán asserted that Hungary "could have succeeded if the West had not betrayed us" (Orbán 2022b). By 2023, the parallel was made more overt: "in our lives today, we see things that remind us of Soviet times. […] Moscow was a tragedy; Brussels is a bad contemporary parody" (Orbán 2023). In 2024, this rhetoric intensified, with the emergence of a strong opposition contender. Orbán claimed that "Brussels bureaucrats have led the West into a hopeless war" and drew direct comparisons

[5] All translations from Hungarian are by the author.
[6] The most influential figure in Fidesz's politics of memory, the director of the House of Terror, Mária Schmidt, also made a very misleading statement regarding the crushing of the revolution: "The invasion was carried out by Soviet troops, including Ukrainians. Based on the decision by the Ukrainian Khrushchev" (Schmidt 2022). First, she singles out the Ukrainians from the multi-ethnic Red Army without any basis, much like Blaha. Second, Khrushchev was an ethnic Russian.

between the communists who suppressed the 1956 uprising and today's Hungarian opposition, stating that "in 1956 it called on Moscow's leaders, today it calls on Brussels' leaders" (Orbán 2024).

THE PRO-EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE IN HUNGARY

After the outbreak of the war, efforts to develop a counter-narrative about '56 faced two key constraints. First, since the regime change, left-wing and liberal political forces have failed to cultivate a coherent politics of memory (see Kiss 2018), leaving them without a solid framework to challenge the government's interpretation. Second, following the opposition's defeat in the 2022 election, they lacked a credible, unifying power capable of conveying a compelling alternative message, despite featuring charismatic civic actors who actively stood up for Ukraine. Therefore, the biggest counter-commemorations in 2022 and 2023 were organised not by parties but by the civil society, focusing on a movement launched earlier to campaign for the reform of the education system. The revolution served as a background symbol in both the performative and narrative elements of the events, one taking place at a significant site of memory, and participants repeatedly voiced their disagreement with the government's interpretation of 1956, chanting the revolution's slogan ("Russkies, go home"). However, these events were more accurately characterised as protests for the cause of education than as commemorations of the 1956 Revolution.

In 2024, however, the entire Hungarian memory regime was upended by the arrival of a new political aspirant, Péter Magyar (see Galavits and Szabó 2025), who successfully responded to both constraints formerly impeding the creation of a viable counter-narrative. Notably, Magyar became a mnemonic warrior and embraced the tradition of 1956, bolstering the pro-European democratic stance.

Three strategic and cultural choices proved decisive in constructing this new counter-narrative. First, in terms of performative elements, he organised a commemoration on October

23, that explicitly centred on the 1956 revolution, drawing on vivid symbolic props. Speeches were delivered at two key sites of memory in Budapest, the second located not far from where Orbán spoke earlier that morning. However, unlike the government's event, Magyar's commemoration featured not only participants of 1956 but also a Polish representative. Given the historical connections, Polish guests have traditionally taken part in Fidesz's official commemorations, which changed due to the government's position on the war. In addition, numerous displayed props—such as vintage vehicles—evoked the memory of '56. Among the most prominent acts of symbolic reproduction, Magyar's party, the Tisza Party, adopted the 1956 symbol of the national flag with a hole as its political emblem.

Second, on the narrative level, Magyar drew a sharp contrast between Fidesz's past and present positions on '56, delivering a strong criticism. Addressing Orbán, he asked: "Our country is led today by a man who back in 1989 still demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops, like the heroes of 1956, but now desecrates the legacy of 1956 with almost every action and word [...]. Where has the 'Russkies, go home' gone, Mr. Prime Minister?" In the same argument, he highlighted parallels between the 1956 Revolution and the war in Ukraine: "We still have leaders who blame members of another people when they are attacked by the same Russians who tortured and murdered hundreds of Hungarian freedom fighters in 1956" (Magyar 2024). Thereby, the politician essentially adopted Viktor Orbán's old right-wing nationalist interpretation of 1956. However, probably not to become a target of government attacks like the opposition before the 2022 elections, he visibly avoided an open call to support Ukraine based on the '56 events.

Third, Magyar articulated his interpretation of the revolution, rooted in the traditional pro-West, right-wing nationalist narrative but enriched it by a unifying and inclusive perspective. On one hand, he emphasised that the 1956 Revolution was a struggle for national sovereignty that affirmed Hungary's historical place in the West. On the other hand, he

presented an inclusive vision of the revolution's heroes—from grassroots revolutionaries to Imre Nagy—transcending ideological and sociological divides and embracing all who identify with Hungary: "Is it possible to describe in one word [...] the thousands of heroes who had been divided by an entire world before the revolution? It is possible. They were patriots" (Magyar 2024). Therefore, Magyar expanded the traditional right-wing interpretation by framing it as a national revolution uniting all segments of society, from workers to the intelligentsia, from the right to the left, thereby enabling all Hungarians to identify with it. This strategy can be understood from the position of being the strongest opposition party, whose goal is to rally as many people as possible.

Overall, both competing narratives are rooted in the right-wing nationalist interpretation of the 1956 revolution, but both have undergone modifications. The dominant narrative represented by Fidesz follows the sovereigntist-pacifist line, which seeks to emphasise the nationalist nature of the revolution through prominent figures while also stressing the importance of peace in the current wartime context, thus reinforcing the pro-Kremlin line. The line represented by Péter Magyar is largely based on the traditional right-wing interpretation, in which the struggle for national sovereignty is emphasised alongside belonging to Europe while avoiding openly endorsing Ukraine. However, it is complemented by recognising all historical figures who supported the revolution as equals.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined how the Russian aggression against Ukraine has altered the commemorative practices and narratives surrounding two national holidays in East Central Europe: the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The analysis revealed that the war significantly impacted both cases, intensifying pre-existing fractions among mnemonic actors. This influence is evident both performatively—in the fragmented nature of the commemorations—and narratively—in the emergence of two opposing interpretations: the sovereigntist-pacifist and the pro-European democratic stances. In both instances, these narratives drew on established local traditions of interpretation and evolved in direct response to the war in Ukraine.

The sovereigntist-pacifist approach is linked to influential populist mnemonic actors such as Smer in Slovakia and Fidesz in Hungary. This narrative rests on two key elements. First, both local versions are rooted in nationalist traditions that underpin their sovereigntist character. In Slovakia, this manifests as red nationalism, inherited from the state socialist era, which emphasises the communist and Soviet roles in the uprising and frames fascists as the principal enemy. In contrast, Hungary's version is grounded in right-wing nationalism, drawing on ethno-nationalist and sovereigntist currents. It highlights the nationalist aspects of the 1956 revolution and celebrates the freedom fighters. Second, both narratives adopt the pro-Kremlin pacifist-neutralist rhetoric concerning the war in Ukraine, placing blame on the West and Ukraine itself. In historicist terms, this is reflected in interpreting the events as primarily aiming for peace or a ceasefire.

The pro-European democratic stance is supported by liberal and centrist mnemonic actors in Slovakia, as well as by the nationalist populist challenger to Viktor Orbán, Péter Magyar, in Hungary. Despite ideological differences, these narratives converge in their strong pro-European orientation, condemnation of Russia's aggression, and portrayal of the historical

events as expressions of the people's desire to belong to Europe. However, the democratic dimension of this narrative diverges across contexts. In Slovakia, it is rooted in a civic-liberal tradition that emphasises human rights and calls for the support of Ukraine, while in Hungary, it draws more heavily on nationalist-popular foundations, avoiding expressing a clear supportive stance towards the Ukrainians.

The findings present three key implications regarding the politics of memory in East Central Europe. Firstly, contemporary divisions over historical interpretations often remain rooted in 20th-century competing narratives (e.g., socialist, nationalist, liberal), which mnemonic actors instrumentalise and redefine according to their interests. Secondly, historicising narratives continue to reproduce the mythical divide between East (now exemplified by Russia) and West (represented by the EU), attributable to East Central Europe's position on the Eastern periphery of the EU. Lastly, the findings align with the theory of new nationalism and its effects on the politics of memory (Maissen 2021). Notably, populism has significantly influenced mnemonic actors, with populist strategies prompting a drastic rewriting of traditional national historical narratives through revisionist historiography.

By the fourth decade after the regime change, neither history nor efforts to rewrite it ended; rather, they appear to be thriving. Given the growing polarisation in historical interpretations and the rise of revisionist historiography, professional historians are edging ever closer to once again being completely out of control in shaping communities' understanding of their past.

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