

**Mnemonic Frontlines: Hungary's Foreign Policy Challenge to the European Union's
Normative Order through Ontological Security**

“Who controls the past controls the future” – Orwell

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Vienna, 21st of May 2025

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ABSTRACT

This thesis suggests that Hungary's contemporary deviation from the European Union transcends the legal and mirrors a profound effort to construct collective memory and identity. By deploying the concept of ontological security augmented with mnemonic security, it crystallizes how the Orbán government composes and directs historical narratives as instruments of foreign policy. Focusing on three mnemonic motifs – Trianon as a foundational trauma, Christianity as civilizational pillar and sovereignty as existential safeguard – the study traces a discursive trajectory from 2010 to 2023. Utilizing critical discourse analysis of prime-ministerial speeches and legislation the research identifies three analytical phases. From 2010 – 2024, domestic memory consolidation established a systematic national self-narrative. Between 2014 – 2016, the migration crisis occasioned a securitization of history, framing “Brussels” as an ideological adversary. From 2017 – 2023, Hungary asserted an alternative “Old Europe”, coalescing with like-minded EU parliamentary factions to advocate confederalism embedded in Christianity and sovereignty. The findings reveal that memory politics in Hungary functions as both a defensive bulwark – securing the state's sense of self against positioning as an outsider to hegemonic European values – and an offensive apparatus – legitimizing an illiberal vision of Europe. The dual deployment of memory signals the insufficiency of conventional integration theories, bringing to the fore the performative role of historical narratives in supranational conflict. By elucidating the interplay between contestation and ontological security, the thesis contributes a novel interpretive framework to European studies and international relations. It raises urgent questions about the security of the European project predicated on shared remembrance when member states' mnemonic regimes diverge.

Table of Contents

Copyright Notice	ii
Author's declaration	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
INTRODUCTION	6
CHAPTER ONE LITERATURE REVIEW	9
1.1 Memory Politics and the European Union: Regimes, Tensions, and Asymmetries.....	9
1.2 Euroscepticism within the field	10
1.3 Ontological and Mnemonic Security: A Theoretical Convergence	12
CHAPTER TWO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	15
2.1 Ontological Security in International Relations	15
2.2 Mnemonic Security and Strategic Memory Use	17
CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY	21
3.1 Methodological Approach and Analytical Framework	21
3.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria	23
3.3 Limitations and Reflections.....	24
CHAPTER FOUR CONTEXT	27
4.1 Memory as Identity Infrastructure in Hungary, Introductory Framing.....	27
4.2 Trianon, 1956 and the Politics of Historical Trauma	27
4.3 Christianity and Civilizational Identity Before the EU	31
4.4 Sovereignty as Ontological Anchor in Hungarian Political Discourse	33
CHAPTER FIVE ANALYSIS	35
5.1 2010-2014 Memory Consolidation and Identity Anchoring.....	35
5.2 2014-2016 – Ontological Security and the Politicization of Migration	39
5.3 2016–2023 From Defensive Memory to Normative Challenge: Hungary's Symbolic Recasting of Europe	44
5.4 Analytical Synthesis: Ontological Security and Hungary's Memory Politics.....	48
CONCLUSION	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY	56
APPENDIX.....	66

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared the following about Hungarian politics:

Christian democratic politics means that the ways of life springing from Christian culture must be protected. Our duty is not to defend the articles of faith, but the forms of being that have grown from them. These include human dignity, the family and the nation – because Christianity does not seek to attain universality through the abolition of nations, but through the preservation of nations (Orbán 2018).

In this speech delivered at Tusnádfürdő, Romania Orbán's statement solidified a phenomenon that has been evolving in Hungarian political discourse for years, the reimagining of Hungary as a moral bastion of Europe. By positioning Christianity beyond the scope of private affairs and as a cultural bedrock of national identity and sovereignty Orbán reframed Hungary as the final defender of civilizational order in a Europe that in his view in its liberalism has lost its way. The speech marked a decisive moment in which memory of an Old Europe entrenched with identity and foreign policy converged. This thesis examines how the Hungarian government uses memory politics in foreign policy discourse to contest the European Union's normative identity. It will specifically investigate how historical memory of trauma, sovereignty, and cultural belonging is used as a political tool in Hungary's interactions with the EU, and how this strategy aids the government's ultimate goal to project a competing idea of what Europe should be. By standing on the shoulders of giants in the scholarship the thesis will focus on the central question of:

How does the Hungarian government use memory politics in its foreign policy discourse to challenge the European Union's normative identity?

This question arises from the fact that much of the literature on intra-European conflict has focused on legal infractions and democratic backsliding (e.g. Kupchan 2012; Kelemen 2020; PECH and SCHEPPELE 2017) but there is a growing recognition that the tensions between the European Union and member states like Hungary spill over those bounds into a new realm taking on a more metaphoric nature. This thesis builds on this emerging body of academia that foregrounds the role of historical narratives and memory regimes shaping political behavior within the EU (Mälksoo 2015; Subotić 2015; Berenskoetter 2014). What distinguishes this study is its shift in emphasis away from treating the Hungarian-EU conflict as a straightforward institutional deviation toward interpreting it as a deeper contestation over historical legitimacy and the agency to define European identity itself. By focusing on Hungary's memory politics as a form of foreign policy discourse, this thesis contributes to the growing scholarly conversation about how symbolic and historical narratives shape relations and security within the European Union. It does not seek to argue that Hungary's government is unique in implementing this strategy, not that contestations of memory within the EU are entirely new phenomena. Rather, it will aim to suggest that inspecting the Hungarian case through the lens of ontological security creates value as it reveals how memory is projected outward to articulate an alternative vision of Europe. This thesis is not written with the intention to introduce a radical theoretical innovation but rather to offer nuanced and a unique look bringing together strands of literature like memory studies, identity politics, and ontological security theory that prior have been treated separately. The relevance and value of the ontological security lens will be articulated throughout later chapters.

In order to inspect how Hungary's memory politics operates as a tool of foreign policy that challenges the EU's symbolic foundations the thesis will deploy qualitative discourse analysis of official speeches, and policy statements published by Hungarian officials between the time period of 2010 and 2023. The analysis is divided into three distinct but connected phases: the consolidation of national memory narratives (2010–2014), the discursive rupture caused by the 2015 migration crisis, and the subsequent projection of Hungary's alternative European vision (2016–2023). This timeline allows the research to track how memory related tropes – Christianity, sovereignty and national victimhood – are elevated to the field of foreign policy discourse by the Hungarian government with the goal of redefining Europe from within.

Before mapping the broader literature in the field, a brief structural breakdown is imperative. This first part introduced the research questions and situated it within wider debates on European Identity and internal contestation. Chapter 1 reviews the relevant literature on EU memory politics, national mnemonic frameworks and the link between memory and security. Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical framework this thesis operationalizes focused on ontological and mnemonic security distinguishing between internal and external dynamics. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, reasoning source selection and the deployment of discourse analysis. Chapter 4 offers a brief historical context necessary to understand Hungary's key memory tropes of Trianon, Christianity and sovereignty prior to 2010. Chapter 5 delivers the empirical analysis tracing the evolution of Hungarian memory politics throughout the three phases. Lastly, Chapter 6 will synthesize findings and conclude implications while speculating about the future of European memory politics.

CHAPTER ONE LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Memory Politics and the European Union: Regimes, Tensions, and Asymmetries

The European Union since its inception has positioned itself as a community guided by law, a common will to prosper and shared history. After the devastations of World War II out of which the Union itself was born the integration was bound together by the moral imperative of *Never Again*. Emphasis on reconciliation, antifascism, and a post-sovereign vision of unity built on the rejection of the evils of war and totalitarianism (Assmann 2008; Mälksoo 2009). This narrative around the foundation of the EU is what scholars refer to as the EU's cosmopolitan memory regime. It refers to a framework that promotes the idea of pluralism, human rights, and a higher supranational belonging as normative pillars upholding the common European identity (Sierp 2020; Bachleitner 2023). The cosmopolitan memory regime initially drew on the horrors of the Holocaust and the collective trauma of fascism as its central moral axis, but it had to adapt to new narratives over time. The 2004–2007 enlargement exposed internal tensions as post-communist states brought competing narratives of repression and occupation (Mälksoo 2009; Mano 2019). The enlargement forced the EU to reckon with the memories of the new member states, making room sometimes reluctantly for the competing narratives of suffering. The end result was a memory regime under pressure still committed to moral universalism, but now also navigating internal tensions over whose past should be remembered and in what ways. Scholars have observed this uneven process by which the EU has integrated but essentially also marginalized these diverse mnemonic claims. For instance, Mälksoo (2015) takes note of how the moral centrality of the Holocaust created a de facto hierarchy of memory that rendered other traumas from Eastern Europe secondary in nature. Sierp (2020) observes that while formal resolutions have acknowledged

communist crimes, they have done so without thoroughly restructuring and altering the EU's narrative foundation. The disjointedness has created what some term a mnemonic asymmetry or a structural imbalance in historical suffering (Subotić 2019). The integration of memories of communism into the EU's broader mnemonic framework has been called into question not because the EU outright denies those histories but because its moral grammar was not originally drafted to accommodate them (Bachleitner 2023; Mano 2019). It led to growing tension from within as some member states began to reassert alternative versions of Europe's past that do challenge the post-sovereign and pluralist ethos of the cosmopolitan regime.

1.2 Euroscepticism within the field

While memory scholars like Mälksoo (2021) and Subotić (2019) emphasize mnemonic asymmetries within the EU's structure, political scientists such as Holmes (2020), Vachudova (2020), and Kutter (2020) have identified broader ideological and identity-based resistance from post-communist states. Though the latter do not frame their work around memory explicitly, their findings reveal that narratives often grounded in national history and cultural trauma play a central role in legitimizing this divergence. The EU's symbolic framework became more pluralistic after the enlargement prompting a different line of academic inquiry to research and explain growing internal recalcitrance to the Union not emerging from the field of memory studies but from a scholarship on Euroscepticism, illiberalism, and the political behavior of post-communist member states. This body of work shifts focus away from memory as such and pertains more to institutional, ideological and identity-based resistance to EU integration (Bohle, Greskovits, and Naczyk 2023; Vachudova 2020; Börzel, Dimitrova, and Schimmelfennig 2017). While many of these scholars do not use memory explicitly as a lens they identify forms of boundary-drawing that overlaps to a

great extent with the mnemonic discourse. A number of scholars have taken under examination governments like Hungary's and have cultivated a *normative divergence* from the EU by deploying more traditionalist and sovereigntist frames. They tend to position themselves as defenders of an older but purer European identity against an overly liberal and post-nationalist one (Holmes and Krastev 2020). Vachudova (2020) takes note that the act of defiance is not only rhetorical in nature but increasingly takes on an institutional form as illiberal actors seek to reorient EU norms from within. The above-mentioned scholars all echo similar arguments made by memory scholars; however, they often stop short of examining how memory itself operates as the terrain upon which this contestation unfolds. Simultaneously, literature focused on identity contestation in EU politics has highlighted the role narratives play in legitimizing divergence from the mainstream. Kutter (2020), for instance, portrays how references to cultural decline, Christian heritage and civilizational mission are rallied to put forward an *alternative Europe* that stands in stark juxtaposition to the EU's cosmopolitan self-image. This rhetorical construction of a parallel normative order has been on the rise in member states with right wing leaderships. Their political discourse has recast the EU as not simply flawed but a departure from Europe's authentic historical trajectory.

This thesis builds on both sets of scholarship by arguing that memory politics forms the discursive domain upon which national resistance is negotiated. Rather than viewing Euroscepticism and memory politics as separate spheres, it positions them as mutually reinforcing where metaphorical marginalization within the EU's cosmopolitan memory regime fuels the construction of alternative historical visions.

1.3 Ontological and Mnemonic Security: A Theoretical Convergence

Previously memory has been widely researched and recognized as a politically charged resource but more recently a growing body of scholarship has begun to examine its entanglement with the question of security. When the word security is mentioned, it is not in a traditional military sense, but security as a foundation for identity, legitimacy, self-understanding in the field of international relations. The convergence of memory studies with the emergent ontological security theory provides a unique lens to look at how states use history not only to remember but to survive symbolically. The theory of ontological security was first introduced by Jennifer Mitzen and later elaborated on and expanded by Felix Berenskoetter as well as Filip Ejdus (Mitzen 2006; Berenskoetter 2014; Ejdus 2020). Ontological security refers to the idea that political actors like states seek security not only through territorial integrity or economic prowess, but also through the continuity of their identity over time. For it is this continuity, this stable sense of “self” that allows states to act with integrity and pertinently on the global stage. Threats to ontological security do not necessarily take the form of tangible danger, but rather of biographical disruptions, the events and moments that call into question the story a state tells about itself. Therefore, memory becomes a crucial factor here. As Ejdus (2020) and Subotic (2019) argue memory offers a narrative resource through which political actors can repair identity ruptures, mobilize cohesion and resist perceived threats to the imagined self. When state actors feel their foundational narratives are challenged either by external criticism, internal crisis or institutional expectations they may respond with what Subotic refers to as strategic memory management (Subotić 2015). It means reasserting selective histories in order to defend and protect the sense of self. What is truly singular here is that this is not simply about nostalgia or

mythmaking, it is a securitizing move undoubtedly aimed at stabilizing the political identity of the state, at times at the expense of other states or structures.

In post-communist Central and Eastern Europe this process can be best examined. The collapse of the Soviet Empire left many states with profound mnemonic disorientation, as previous very strong legitimizing narratives (resistance, socialism, antifascism) disappeared. In this vacuum of ideology came to the fore what Maria Mälksoo (2009;2015) terms as mnemonic security dilemmas or situations in which competing memory regimes struggle over legitimacy and moral authority. These dilemmas are not contained within domestic borders, but instead increasingly spill over and into regional and international settings. In particular, the EU, where collective memory is both institutionalized and contested. Mälksoo's (2009;2015) concept of mnemonic securitization or rather the treatment of memory as an existential value that must be defended builds on ontological security theory while adding a distinct emphasis on the discursive and normative dimensions of memory politics. It explains how narratives and trauma, victimhood or heroism can become issues of security not just internally but externally as well. It can be used to challenge other memory regimes or to project influence. This theoretical convergence is particularly valuable in analyzing cases where memory politics is not only domestically ingrained but also leveraged as a tool of foreign policy. The literature also points toward a significant conceptual innovation: that memory is not a simple reflection of identity, but a mechanism for sustaining it under conditions of change, pressure, or crisis. Memory, in this view, becomes both resource and battleground mobilized to secure the future of political selves. This theoretical convergence enables the analysis of memory not as passive inheritance but as an

active, strategic tool of statecraft particularly in contested institutional environments like the European Union.

After mapping the scholarship of memory politics, identity formation and expressive contestation within the European project as well as examined the emerging role of security logics in narrating and defending state identities, this thesis will now turn to outlining its conceptual framework.

The next chapter will detail how theories of ontological and mnemonic security will guide the analysis. It will also elaborate why this specific lens is instrumental and offers a unique analytical traction for understanding how historical narratives are constructed and mobilized, and have become central to the foreign policy postures of certain member states. In doing so, it connects abstract theoretical insights with the empirical strategies that will underpin the case study of Hungary.

CHAPTER TWO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Ontological Security in International Relations

States can bear more resemblance to individuals than one might first realize. They are not only concerned with material security and strategic interests but also seek to sustain a coherent sense of self that stands the test of time. In international relations this notion has been captured by the concept of ontological security, first adapted from sociological theory into IR by Jennifer Mitzen and later refined by Felix Berenskoetter and Filip Ejdus (Mitzen 2006a; Berenskoetter 2014; Ejdus 2020). Elaborating more on the concept, ontological security refers to the confidence actors have in the continuity and stability of their self-identity. It is not just about feeling safe but about *being* in a way that feels recognizable, a way that carries meaning and is uninterrupted. Unlike conventional notions of security that focus on external threats to sovereignty or borders, ontological security concerns are offset by disruptions to the narrative structures that hold a political identity together. These disruptions may arise from moments of crisis, social rupture, or interactions with other actors who deny or challenge the state's self-image. Under such conditions, political actors often respond not with force, but with words, narratives – memories. These allegorical repertoires and selected histories appeal to the foundational myths that re-anchor the threatened identity (Subotić 2015; 2019; Ejdus 2023).

With the theoretical framework this thesis distinguishes between two dominant strands of ontological security theory. The first one is the internalist approach which emphasizes how states maintain self-identity by reproducing coherent autobiographical narratives. They tell themselves who they are through consistent patterns of behavior and denotative practices (Berenskoetter

2014). This strand focuses largely on domestic political stability and the internal deep centering of political identity. The second approach is the externalist one. As previously mentioned, the founding mother Mitzen (2006) views ontological security as something that is intrinsically relational. Identity is stabilized not exclusively through self-narration but through *recognition by others*. In the externalist view, ontological insecurity arises when there is dissonance between how a state views itself and how it is perceived or treated by the international community. The externalist approach to ontological security is especially useful for understanding states that experience de-legitimation or normative alienation in supranational settings (Mitzen 2006).

Memory is a quintessential factor in both strands but more so in the externalist view. As Maria Mälksoo (2009;2015) and Jelena Subotic (2015) argue, states often rely on curated historical narratives to re-establish coherence when the identity is under threat. This is what Mälksoo conceptualizes as mnemonic securitization. It means the discursive framing of historical memory as something existentially important and something that needs to be defended from distortion. The operationalization of mnemonic security thus brings into focus a specific dimension of ontological security, precisely how collective memory functions as both the terrain and the instrument through which actors stabilize the self. Focusing on mnemonic security in this way allows us to initiate an important analytical move: memory is not just a reflection of identity but a mechanism in itself to secure it. States do not simply remember objective facts and events; they remember in a strategic manner. They use the past as a resource to assert continuity, to justify political stances, and to resist perceived external encroachments. This is particularly salient in international organizations like the European Union, where multiple memory regimes coexist and sometimes have the tendency to clash. Mälksoo (2015) terms this dynamic mnemonic pluralism which she describes

as a condition wherein no single memory narrative enjoys full hegemony, and thus actors are forced to compete over whose version of the past gains normative traction.

In the present research, ontological and mnemonic security will be used to interpret the symbolic and discursive strategies through which identity is maintained or contested. This framework does not reduce foreign policy to identity alone; rather, it shows how identity when existentially important can shape strategic behavior, especially in discursive realms like the EU.

2.2 Mnemonic Security and Strategic Memory Use

To apply the conceptual tools of ontological and mnemonic security in this thesis, it is first and foremost important to clarify what constitutes observable evidence of identity-related insecurity. Drawing on the externalist strand of ontological security theory this research understands insecurity not as a deviation from objective stability but as a narrative disturbance. Referring to a moment in time in which a political actor feels misrecognized, morally marginalized, or excluded by a normative framework it must by design still engage with. Within this framework, discursive acts like speeches, policy documents, and official declarations become key sites via which identity is both asserted and defended (Mälksoo 2015). This is where mnemonic security adds analytic precision. By looking at how historical memory is deployed in official discourse, we can detect instances of mnemonic securitization, where the past is framed as heritage and as a value that must be preserved against erosion or co-optation. These discursive acts often involve references to trauma, sacrifice, victimhood, or moral exceptionalism, all narrative stereotypes that stabilize identity in moments of vulnerability. The empirical chapter of this thesis will examine how such

tropes are activated in Hungary's interaction with the European Union, particularly in moments of normative contestation or institutional crisis thereby threatening EU cohesion (Ejdus 2023).

An important point of departure is to mention that this thesis does not treat the state as a unitary actor with a single, all-encompassing identity. As the critics of ontological security have noted there is a large risk in attributing emotions such as fear or insecurity to entire states especially when these sentiments may reflect the agenda of specific governing elites (Epstein 2013). Taking the well-aimed critique into account this research explicitly centers the role of discursive agents, especially political leaders and allied intellectuals, who actively shape and communicate state identity.² Later on, in the analysis the Hungarian case will be examined, and discursive agents will include the Prime Minister, and ideologically affiliated institutions such as think tanks or historical commissions. Their speeches, interventions and metaphorical practices form the data through which identity contestation can be analyzed. Utilizing the external strand of ontological security further allows this research to more precisely engage with recognition dynamics in supranational settings.

As a final note for this section, it is imperative to address a few more points of limitations for utilizing ontological security. A second point of criticism lies in the ambiguity of empirical indicators. Ontological insecurity is considered a latent condition, not always clearly or directly observable. It must be deciphered from patterns of speech, behavior, shifts in representation (Steele 2014; Berenskoetter 2014). Exactly because of this flexibility this framework is both powerful and vulnerable, scholars must beware of reading too much into indicative acts or conflating rhetorical performance with existential unease (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020). Accordingly, this thesis

² Engaging with internal contestation of the politics of memory within Hungary is beyond the scope of this thesis.

works with a historically grounded discourse analysis, directly informed by contextual knowledge and triangulated sources ensuring that the theory of ontological security is not projected where it may not exist. Last but not least, it is apt to acknowledge that ontological security theory has its tendency to overemphasize narrative continuity as a stabilizing norm, at times neglecting the strategic use of ambiguity or the construction of hybrid identities. While the theory rests on the premise that actors seek biographical harmony, there is growing recognition that political leaders may intentionally disrupt or reconfigure their narratives for tactical purposes (Croft 2012; Krolikowski 2008). This paradox is entirely applicable to the case study of this thesis, the observed facts can be attributed to a wider scheme of political maneuvering rather than a pure belief in the propagated values. Additionally, the assumption of linear identity maintenance risks overlooking moments where rupture and re-narration or fragmentation are deliberately put into service for political means rather than signaling insecurity (Hom and Beasley 2021). Therefore, this thesis acknowledges these nuances by treating ontological security as one interpretive lens among others, most effective in this analysis because identity contestation is explicitly foregrounded in discourse and supported by sustained patterns.

Despite these limitations, the benefits of applying ontological security theory to the Hungarian case supersede the drawbacks. The framework offers a uniquely productive lens for identifying nuances of the interrelation of memory and foreign policy. Understanding symbolism, a supranational setting could be seen as a highly elusive feat, however, ontological security allows it to be slightly more tangible, enough so to recognize and point out certain patterns in European diplomacy. When treated with theoretical caution and empirical rigor as this thesis sets out to do, this lens offers an explanatory depth that outweighs conceptual vulnerabilities unveiling how state narratives matter in directing the international and supranational order they inhabit.

CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodological Approach and Analytical Framework

This thesis is based on an extensive corpus of primary sources, including speeches by the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (2010-2023), and policy documents and commemorative texts released by the government. These sources were chosen because they provide a representative and institutional expression of the construction of Hungary's foreign policy identity toward the European Union. The materials were obtained from the Hungarian government's official website (kormany. hu), European Parliament documents and EU institutional repositories.

This thesis employs a qualitative methodological framework based on critical discourse analysis (CDA). Discourse is understood not as language, but as a site where meaning, identity, and power are constructed and contested. This approach is particularly suited for examining how memory and identity are ordered by political elites in emblematic struggles over legitimacy and recognition. The choice of discourse analysis is guided by the theoretical premise of ontological and mnemonic security as both emphasize language as a site of existential and expressive meaning negotiation. Instead of treating speeches and official documents as strict reflections of policy this approach will allow to understand them as interventions, performative acts that ultimately seek to stabilize narratives of selfhood in response to perceived normative dissonance. Discourse in this framework is not neutral; words and events carry certain connotations that require a nuanced lens like ontological security to decipher. The world is structured by underlying assumptions, tropes and frames that reveal how actors imagine themselves and others (Fairclough 1992; Hagmann 2007). The goal is not to catalogue themes but to deduce how collective memory and identity are activated

in official communication with special respect to moments of tension or rupture. This falls into place with the understanding of memory as a strategic weapon utilized to create and reinforce ontological security in a cyclical manner (Mälksoo 2015; Subotić 2015).

The benefit of discourse analysis in this thesis rests on three main pillars. The first being that it enables close contextual engagement with the analyzed material to prove that they are part of national identity construction (Milliken 1999; Hansen 2011). Second, it is a reliable method to examine how historical events like Trianon or 1956 are selectively remembered and arranged in Hungary's foreign policy discourse with regards to the EU (Kubik and Bernhard 2017; Mälksoo 2009). Third, discourse analysis allows for the detection of patterns associated with ontological insecurity, including narrative disruption, attempts to restore biographical continuity, and heightened demands for recognition and status (Gustafsson 2015; Steele 2014; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018). Rather than testing a hypothesis, this research seeks to interpret the logic behind Hungary's discursive behavior. It is an abductive inquiry, grounded in theoretical insights but guided by the empirical material itself. This means that while the framework of ontological and mnemonic security informs the analysis, the interpretation remains open to emergent themes and alternative explanations.

The following sections will elaborate on the data selection process as well as the interpretive strategy used in analyzing discursive patterns. Additionally, a reflection will be added to include the strengths and limitations of this approach in the context of this thesis.

3.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The dataset comprises official speeches, institutional statements, and documents produced by Hungarian government officials between 2010 and 2023 which are listed in the appendix in the order of mentioning. The primary selection criterion was relevance to identity discourse, capturing instances where memory, history, or European belonging were thematically central.

As briefly mentioned earlier, in the section above this thesis draws on a carefully curated body of primary data between 2010 and 2023. The key rationale for choosing this timeline is to capture the evolution of Hungary's mnemonic discourse and foreign policy under the Orbán government and how its engagement with the EU unfolded.³ The Hungarian primary sources this thesis relies on pertain to speeches delivered by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at national commemorations (e.g., Trianon anniversaries, March 15th, October 23rd), particularly from the Fidesz party delegation. These materials directly reflect the mnemonic scripts, motifs and historical references mobilized by Hungary's elite leadership to curate and articulate the national self when communicating with or about the EU. Particular attention is paid to rhetorical patterns that frame Hungary as a civilizational bastion, emphasize Christian heritage, and portray the EU as either a normative threat or a site for reasserting national pride and memory. As a brief methodological note, it is important to underscore that in order to fully understand the recurring national tropes—such as narratives of victimhood, civilizational exceptionalism, and Hungary's self-stylization as the guardian of Christian Europe—this thesis begins with a short contextual overview. Therefore, the analysis will

³ The reason for highlighting the Orbán government is its notably adversarial relationship with the European Union. See Bod, P. Á. (2023). Return of activist state in a former transition star: the curious case of Hungary. *Post-Communist Economies*, 36(2), 262–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631377.2023.2273694>

be properly contextualized to portray how identity constructions and mnemonic patterns were already embedded in Hungarian political discourse prior to 2010.

Additional data is drawn from communications by ideologically affiliated think tanks such as the Századvég Foundation and the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, which function as intellectual extensions of the ruling elite. These organizations produce public-facing reports and host conferences where the themes of sovereignty, historical grievance, and European cultural decline are repeatedly emphasized, often mirroring government narratives.

The data will be subjected to a historically informed discourse analysis, attentive to rhetorical structure, thematic consistency, and shifts in narrative framing. The goal is not to categorize content, but to interpret how political actors construct identity through memory, and how they respond to perceived moments of misrecognition or normative challenge. Through this analysis, the empirical chapters will illuminate the mechanisms of mnemonic securitization and ontological identity maintenance at play in Hungary's engagement with the EU.

3.3 Limitations and Reflections

A key limitation of discourse analysis lies in its susceptibility to interpretive bias. The analysis depends heavily on the researcher's contextual knowledge and theoretical positioning, which can influence what is emphasized, omitted, or inferred from the data (Boz 2010). While discourse analysis excels at uncovering patterns and implicit meanings, it does not provide measurable causality or easily replicable results, which makes it vulnerable to critiques from more positivist methodological traditions (Gee 2010). Furthermore, there is a very real challenge in capturing

strategic silences or moments when actors deliberately omit or sidestep historical references in certain contexts. These silences, though potentially meaningful, are harder to code and analyze systematically (Milliken 1999). Second, while ontological and mnemonic security frameworks provide a conceptual lens for identifying the emotional and symbolic stakes of identity politics, they offer limited guidance on empirical measurement. Ontological insecurity is not easily quantifiable; it must be inferred from discursive cues, such as repeated invocations of trauma, perceived misrecognition, or abrupt shifts in identity narratives. This raises epistemological challenges around how to distinguish genuine anxiety from routine political rhetoric. Scholars such as Croft (2012) and Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020) have noted that there is often a blurred line between performative storytelling and authentic biographical anxiety. To mitigate this, the analysis in this thesis is grounded in historically contextualized close readings and triangulated with secondary literature to avoid simplistic or speculative interpretations. Third, the thesis necessarily centers the discursive practices of dominant political elites—especially those in power. This introduces a risk of reifying elite discourse as representative of the national self, thereby marginalizing counter-narratives and dissenting voices. As Epstein (2013) and Subotić (2015) have shown, political elites often monopolize the language of trauma, memory, and identity to pursue instrumental ends. Therefore, while this study focuses on Fidesz-affiliated actors and the narratives they promote, it does not claim to capture the entirety of Hungarian identity politics. Instead, it presents a study of hegemonic memory production—of how one specific set of narratives has been foregrounded within foreign policy discourse. Lastly, discourse analysis can be temporally and thematically limited. It concentrates on what is being said, the manner in which it is being said. Discourse operates within broader socio-political fields hence we need to understand it as part of a dialectic process (Boz 2010). While this thesis does not examine audience

reception or mass opinion, it remains attentive to how discourses are positioned within institutional settings such as the European Union, where allegorical resonance and normative contestation are central to political negotiation (Boz 2010).

Despite these limitations, discourse analysis remains a particularly inclined method for examining the entanglement of memory and security in Hungary's interaction with the EU. It allows for a theoretically informed yet empirically grounded approach that can detect how political narratives are deployed not to persuade or justify, but to secure a coherent self in the face of perceived normative pressure. When interpreted cautiously and situated historically, this method enables insight into the architecture of foreign policy—a terrain where history, identity, and power collide.

CHAPTER FOUR CONTEXT

4.1 Memory as Identity Infrastructure in Hungary, Introductory Framing

In Hungary memory fulfils a different purpose than just being a cultural resource, it is a political infrastructure. The country's collective remembrance of trauma, sovereignty and the threat of national continuity has shaped its self-understanding for over a century. These memory practices are not static archives but dynamic repertoires, mobilized and rearticulated in response to perceived existential challenges. From the post-Trianon interwar years to the aftermath of Soviet domination, Hungary's historical identity has been forged in loss, punctuated by efforts to reclaim dignity and continuity. These themes of national trauma paired with Christian civilizational belonging and sovereign autonomy form the backbone of the country's metaphorical landscape. This prelude provides a historically grounded overview of Hungary's core memory tropes prior to their engagement with the European Union. It demonstrates that these discourses pre-date EU membership and were already deeply embedded in the domestic narrative structure. The empirical chapters that follow will show how these themes were later connected to the European project in increasingly confrontational ways. But first, it is essential to understand how they were constituted and instrumentalized within Hungary's own national discursive field.

4.2 Trianon, 1956 and the Politics of Historical Trauma

Few events cast as long a shadow over Hungary's national psyche as the Treaty of Trianon. The Treaty was signed in 1920 as part of the post-World War I peace settlements, and it ordered the

dismemberment of the Kingdom of Hungary. It reduced its former territory by two-thirds and gave those territories to neighboring states. This left over three million ethnic Hungarians outside its newly drawn borders. While considered justified at the time as a geopolitical necessity by the Allied Powers, the treaty quickly became and remains to this day a foundational trauma in Hungarian historical consciousness (Feischmidt 2020). In the interwar period, the slogan “Nem, nem, soha!” (“No, no, never!”) echoed through public discourse, symbolizing a collective refusal to accept the territorial losses as final. This affective memory of grievance was not a backward-looking lament; it formed the ideological backbone of Hungary’s interwar political identity, built on cultural defensiveness and historical redress (Lynn 2010). Even after World War II and during the socialist period, Trianon retained salience albeit repressed in official discourse, it survived in cultural memory, family stories, and national historiography.

While the trauma of Trianon left a lasting impression of external victimhood and territorial loss, the memory of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against Soviet occupier forces introduced a much more immediate and ambivalent symbol of internal resistance and betrayal, one that would become equally central to Hungary’s post-communist memory battles. As Anna Seleny (2014) argues the event had the potential to become a unifying image of national resistance but instead 1956 emerged as a deeply contested site of political meaning. Competing interpretations fractured the public narrative with a range of political actors vying to claim the revolution’s legacy to legitimize their own visions of the Hungarian state. Liberal and left-wing groups emphasized the democratic aspirations of the revolution narrating it as a precursor to the negotiated transition of 1989 while nationalist forces increasingly reinterpreted it through a lens of betrayal and martyrdom remembering the revolution as a thwarted struggle for national sovereignty (Seleny 2014). This

polarization intensified over time and lead to a highly intense set of 2006 anniversary events marred by protests and violent police responses. Seleny (2014) also notes that with the way it unfolded the possibility of a shared commemorative language had all but collapsed, transforming 1956 from a potential cornerstone of democratic memory into a political weapon wielded in Hungary's ongoing culture wars, creating tangible de-securitization internally. This fragmentation of memory would later become a foundational element of the Fidesz-led memory regime.

It was after 1989, however, that the memory of Trianon was reactivated with renewed political force. In the post-communist search for identity and continuity, Trianon appeared as a key mnemonic touchstone. It was institutionalized through illustrative acts such as the establishment of the Day of National Cohesion (June 4) in 2010, which commemorates “the unity of the Hungarian nation across borders” (kormany.hu 2012). Government-affiliated historians, such as those in the Veritas Historical Research Institute, emphasized the moral injustice of the treaty and its role in Hungary's historical victimhood narrative. The Institute was established in 2013 by the Orbán government, and it is a state-funded body whose task is producing “truthful” reinterpretation of the 20th century Hungarian history, in particular the Horthy era and the communist period. Critics argue that Veritas promotes a revisionist narrative that downplays Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust and recasts authoritarian regimes as deeply dedicated to preserving sovereignty (Pető 2021). Overseen by the Prime Minister's Office, Veritas functions as a part of a broader memory regime alongside other institutions like the House of Terror that all aid the state in consolidating a state-aligned historical identity (Seleny 2014). Returning to Trianon, in this framing, it is not merely a historical loss cited on the pages of history books, but it is a living wound and a call to protect the nation's cultural and spiritual borders. What is significant here is

the narrative arc: Trianon is not framed as an isolated tragedy but as the beginning of a longer story of betrayal, abandonment, and resistance. In Hungarian nationalist memory to this day, the treaty is viewed as a betrayal by the Allied Powers, who ignored Hungary's appeals for self-determination and punished it disproportionately for the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This sense of injustice was compounded by the belief that ethnic Hungarians were left stranded in neighboring states by the international community, vulnerable to assimilation or discrimination. These grievances are intricately woven into national historiography and political discourse transmuting Trianon into more than a diplomatic settlement. It became a symbolic rupture and a foundational wound (Just and Morgado 2023).

In the 1990's and early 2000's memory actors including political parties, historical commissions and newly established civil society organizations sought to establish parallel but competing historical lineages. One of those actors was the reformists and liberals like the Hungarian Democratic Forum or MDF, the Alliance of Free Democrats or SzDSz as well as historical institutions like the 1956 Institute who all advocated for a pluralistic memory regime anchored in reconciliation (Csipke 2011). On the other end of the political spectrum emerged more nationalistic forces, most notably here Fidesz under the leadership of Viktor Orbán. They began cultivating a more exclusive, morally dichotomous narrative based on notions of martyrdom and perfidy. Between 1992 and 2010, several key mnemonic projects took place including rehabilitation and the reburial of Imre Nagy as well as the selective silencing of socialist contributions during the Pan-European Picnic commemorations which signal how there was a growing polarization around the ways in which Hungary's past should be remembered (Meijen and Vermeersch 2024).

This story is vital for understanding how Hungary's later confrontation with the European Union framed as a struggle for recognition or survival draws deeply on this established well of grievance, a precedent for Western abandonment. As we will see in the empirical analysis, Trianon is often mobilized not only to critique the past but to justify contemporary acts of resistance to supranational constraint.

4.3 Christianity and Civilizational Identity Before the EU

Alongside the memory of Trianon, Christianity occupies a central place in Hungary's national self-image. Unlike Trianon, which symbolizes rupture, Christianity serves as a narrative of historical continuity and civilizational anchoring. What lies at the core of the significance of Christianity is that it serves as an emblematic marker of Hungarian belonging to a perceived higher moral and cultural order or an "authentic Old Europe". This imagined "Old Europe" is entrenched in a common Christian heritage and a storied tradition of resilience, forged through resistance to external incursions and culminating in the assertion of cultural sovereignty (Veszpremy 2023; Hanebrink 2004). Hungary's association of national identity with Christianity can be traced back to its foundation. The canonization of Saint Stephen (István), Hungary's first Christian king, solidified the mythos of Hungary as a Christian bulwark at the edge of Western civilization, protecting it. This myth has been repeatedly rearticulated over the centuries, particularly during moments of external pressure whether Ottoman invasion, Habsburg domination, or Soviet occupation. Christianity, in this narrative, becomes the symbolic shield and justification for Hungary's "special mission" in Europe (Klaniczay 2002). In the post-communist period, this reservoir was reinvigorated with the return of religious language to public and political life. Under Viktor Orbán's first government (1998–2002), several initiatives reflected a conscious effort to

embed Christian symbols and narratives into state memory. The House of Terror Museum, opened in 2002, while primarily dedicated to the fascist and communist past, frames Hungary's suffering under totalitarian regimes as a struggle to preserve its Christian moral order (Wells 2025). Similarly, the reconstruction of Heroes' Square as a central site of national commemoration subtly reinforced a Christian civilizational narrative, portraying Hungary as an enduring spiritual entity (Papp 2021).

The symbolism of the Holy Crown of Hungary, reinstalled in the Parliament building under Orbán's leadership, further embodies this narrative. The crown is not only a religious artifact but a constitutional symbol of Christian monarchy and national sovereignty. These two concepts are increasingly intertwined in Hungarian state rhetoric. As Jan-Werner Müller (2016) notes, such uses of religious history are not simply nostalgic but function to claim cultural legitimacy and moral authority, particularly in opposition to secular, liberal conceptions of Europe. By the time Hungary joined the European Union in 2004, Christianity was already deeply embedded in its repertoire of motifs. What is crucial to understand for the purpose of this thesis is that these themes of Christianity as identity, tradition, and resistance are not invented in reaction to "Brussels" or the EU. They were already deeply sedimented in Hungary's political culture and institutional memory. What the empirical chapters will show is how these narratives were later reoriented: no longer just expressions of national self-understanding, but instruments of discursive struggle over what Europe is—and who gets to define it.

4.4 Sovereignty as Ontological Anchor in Hungarian Political Discourse

If Trianon embodies historical trauma and Christianity represents continuity, sovereignty is the glue that binds these two narratives together in Hungary's national identity discourse. Sovereignty in Hungary is experienced and narrated as an existential necessity, a guarantor of ontological security in a world perceived as morally volatile and historically unjust. As Gábor Halmai (2017) observes, debates about constitutional sovereignty in post-communist Hungary have never been merely procedural; they are laden with meaning, bound to questions of who speaks for the nation, and under what historical authority. After the fall of communism, Hungarian political discourse witnessed an intense rearticulation of sovereignty. This event was two-fold, it meant freedom from the USSR and at the same time the chance to restore national agency. This was initially associated with democratization and EU accession. However, once inside the EU, the dominant narrative began to shift. Especially under Viktor Orbán's leadership, sovereignty has been redefined in defensive, even confrontational terms: not just self-rule, but freedom from imposition by liberal institutions, whether supranational (the EU) or ideological (globalism, multiculturalism) (Ágh 2014). Orbán's rhetoric often couches sovereignty in historical terms. In his 2011 address on the new constitution, he described the Hungarian state as the following:

Yes, we know the wonderful manifestations of the Hungarian spirit, the thousand-year Christian state organization, the valiant protection of Europe, Rákóczi's liberation movement, the nation building by Széchenyi, the '48 and '56 revolutions, our world famous scientists, artists and athletes. The Hungarian spirit is what gave numerous new things to the world. After every historic tribulation, it was the strength of the Hungarian

spirit that was able to put the country back on its feet. (Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation Address 2011)

This constitutional framing combined with the signifying reinstallation of the Holy Crown in the Parliament casts Hungarian sovereignty as not purely juridical but sacred. It is portrayed as the product of a long historical struggle, from resisting Ottoman occupation to surviving Soviet control, now extended into resisting liberal European homogenization. Institutions such as the Századvég Foundation and Veritas Historical Research Institute have further solidified this sovereignty narrative by producing historical-political content that frames Hungary's modern role as a civilizational actor, standing against both Eastern domination and Western relativism. As András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs (2021) argue, Fidesz's political strategy has fused sovereignty discourse with cultural essentialism, mobilizing history to justify policy autonomy as well as a reimagined European order embedded in national values.

This turn to sovereignty as a narrative of resistance prepares the ground for the empirical analysis that follows. While Trianon and Christianity supply the emotional building blocks, sovereignty acts as the ideological mechanism that conjugates them. What the next chapters will exhibit is how these narratives, initially formulated within Hungary's domestic field, are projected outward into the European arena as tools of contestation and under the aegis of strategic identity.

CHAPTER FIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 2010-2014 Memory Consolidation and Identity Anchoring

The period from 2010 to 2014 marks the foundational phase in the Orbán government's discursive strategy of transforming memory into an instrument of foreign policy. This phase did not yet involve open conflict with the European Union; rather, it focused inward, on consolidating a distinct national identity derived from historical trauma and Christian heritage. These themes already embedded in Hungarian memory culture were elevated to new prominence in the early 2010s through multiple channels such as institutional reform, legislation, and rhetorical framing. This chapter argues that during this phase, the Hungarian government laid the groundwork for what would become a fully externalized mnemonic foreign policy. The emphasis was on ontological security through internal coherence: affirming who Hungary was, what it had suffered, and how it defined itself in relation to both past and future. The European Union was not yet cast as an adversary, but the foundations for such a framing were being established (Jakab and Sonnevend 2013).

Upon returning to power in 2010 with a constitutional supermajority, Viktor Orbán's government initiated a sweeping transformation of Hungary's symbolic and institutional landscape. The adoption of the 2011 Fundamental Law (constitution) was a central moment in this identity consolidation.⁴ Its preamble, titled the "National Avowal," proclaimed Hungary to be "a part of

⁴ While officially labelled a constitution the 2011 Fundamental Law faces wide criticism for lacking democratic legitimacy typically required of constitutional founding documents as it was adopted without broad political consensus and instead was a result of the unilateral process of the Fidesz parliamentary supermajority. See Halmai, Gábor, *Unconstitutional Constitutional Amendments: Constitutional Courts as Guardians of the Constitution?* (2012). 2 Constellations, 2012, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2577887>

Christian Europe” and described the state as “a political community with a thousand years of continuity.” It memorialized the “suffering of our ancestors” and presented Hungary as a nation restored to its former glory after 1989 (Ministry of Justice 2011; Jakab and Sonnevend 2013). Alongside constitutional reform, the Orbán government introduced laws and institutions to formalize its historical narrative. The Day of National Cohesion, established in 2010 to commemorate the Treaty of Trianon, recast Hungary’s greatest trauma as a unifying symbol across borders. The government also founded the Veritas Historical Research Institute (2013) to “objectively” present Hungarian history—a move widely interpreted as an attempt to centralize historical interpretation under government-aligned narratives (Berend 2022). These institutions served to canonize a memory regime structured around Hungary’s martyrdom and civilizational mission.

The emblematic acts were consistently reinforced in Orbán’s speeches, where themes of spiritual clarity, cultural sovereignty, and historical mission were accentuated. In a 2011 address during a major national demonstration known as the Peace March, Orbán described the state of the continent in contrast to Hungary’s vision:

Europe has not yet decided where to stand. In Brussels, they do not yet know whether to step on the brake or instead on the accelerator, if they should turn the steering wheel left or right. Europe’s western and eastern rivals lack neither confidence nor common sense. In contrast, the EU doubts itself, and instead of common sense, relies on ideologies. Yet Europe today needs a simultaneous combination of courageous resolve, common sense and the uplifting of hearts. Europe should recognize that without nations it has no heart, and

without Christianity it has no soul. A special thank you to the Peace March, which made a stand for this vision of a European Hungary. (Prime Minister's Office 2012)

This speech stands as an example of Orbán's use of emotionally charged language and moral binaries.⁵ He positions Hungary as possessing the clarity and courage Europe lacks and ties it directly to its Christian national identity. Therefore, he constructs Hungary as a model and an antidote to the European condition. This notion is an early version of what later becomes a fully-fledged externalized challenge to the EU's liberal-democratic architecture. Utilizing Mälksoo's (2015) framework of mnemonic securitization this period can be further understood as the domestication of memory into a discursive shield. Breaking that down, history is not recited in a passive manner but enlisted to anchor identity and to serve as a backbone for political legitimacy. The rhetorical invocation of "soul," "heart," and the crisis of ideological Europe points to the externalist strand of ontological security (Mälksoo 2009). Hungary defines itself in contrast to a Europe that has forgotten what it once was. In this sense, memory becomes a forward-facing weapon, aimed at reshaping the order of Europe.

By 2012, the foundational elements of Hungary's new memory regime were in place: a revised constitution emerging from Christian tradition, commemorations emphasizing historical trauma and national unity, and institutional actors tasked with preserving and producing ideologically aligned interpretations of history. What followed in the years leading up to the 2014 elections was

⁵ The Peace March or Békemenet is a series of mass demonstrations organized by pro-government civil groups and intellectuals in support of the regnant government. See Bozóki, A., & Hegedűs, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization*, 25(7), 1173–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664>

not an open break with the European Union, but instead a careful but clear discursive recalibration. One of the key emblems during this period was sovereignty as moral obligation. In official speeches, government documents, and the rhetoric of affiliated think tanks, sovereignty was framed less as legal independence and more as cultural guardianship. Hungary, as it was suggested, had a civilizational duty to protect its values of Christianity, tradition, and nationhood against past occupiers and the subtle pressures of ideological conformity within the EU and all that it brought with itself. This logic was echoed in Orbán's now-routinized use of historical analogy: Hungary had stood against the historical challengers, now it must resist moral relativism and bureaucratic liberalism (Sadecki 2022). In 2012 a pivotal moment occurred on March 15, 2012, during the commemoration of the 1848–49 revolution, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared: *"The political and intellectual programme of 1848 embodied the idea that 'we will not be a colony'" (MTI 2012).* With this statement it is clear how there is a deliberate positioning of Hungary's stance within a continuum of resistance against foreign domination. By drawing parallels between the 19th-century struggle against the Habsburg rule and contemporary tensions with the European Union, Orbán framed EU criticisms and interventions as modern iterations of external control. The rhetoric served to galvanize national sentiment, portraying Hungary as a nation perpetually defending its sovereignty against encroaching powers. The invocation of 1848's legacy provided a potent symbol for resisting perceived infringements on national autonomy, particularly in the face of EU demands concerning constitutional and judicial reforms (KORNAI 2015). During this time, the government also ramped up cultural productions that aligned with its historical messaging. State-funded media frequently aired documentaries and panel discussions on Trianon, the 1956 Revolution, and Hungary's Christian roots. The Veritas Historical Research Institute increased its public visibility, producing research that emphasized national continuity and

victimhood while minimizing complicity in darker historical chapters such as the Holocaust or collaboration with authoritarian regimes (Hornok 2024). These discursive strategies represent what Subotić (2015) refers to as “strategic memory management” or the selective curation of the past to support the present political project.

Importantly, this was also a period where EU criticism of Hungary’s domestic policies especially the 2012 constitutional amendments and curbs on judicial independence began to escalate. But Hungary’s response was not framed in defensive legal terms. Rather, it deployed discursive sovereignty: criticisms were interpreted not as legal objections, but as attacks on Hungarian values, culture, and history. Here we see the beginnings of externalist ontological insecurity: misrecognition by the EU provokes not withdrawal, but narrative doubling-down (Mitzen 2006). In sum, the years 2010 to 2014 mark a quiet yet significant shift: from domestic consolidation of identity through memory politics to a discursive estrangement from European norms. This shift was not yet confrontational but was unmistakably teleological. Hungary had begun to tell a story in which it no longer simply belonged to Europe, rather it remembered Europe differently. This difference, subtle at first, would crystallize into open contestation in the years that followed.

5.2 2014-2016 – Ontological Security and the Politicization of Migration

Between 2014 and 2016, the Hungarian government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán scaled up efforts to position national sovereignty as a form of ontological security, a concept referring to the need for a stable sense of self in the face of external uncertainties (Mitzen 2006). The erection of the German Occupation Monument on Szabadság tér in 2014 offers a prominent depiction of how

the Hungarian government uses a memory project to assert national sovereignty through a preferred, often untruthful narrative. The monument is of Archangel Gabriel (representing Hungary) being attacked by a German imperial eagle reframes the 1944 Nazi occupation as an external imposition suffered by the state. Hence, absolving Hungary of moral responsibility for its role in rounding up and deporting its own Jewish population. Critics condemned the monument as a deliberate and severe distortion of history that externalizes blame and denies Hungarian complicity. Within the context of the Fidesz government's memory regime the monument is a site of statement of massive control, an explicit attempt to reassert Hungary's moral sovereignty revising the nation as a passive victim of foreign powers rather than an active collaborator. This phenomenon is in parallel with the government's project of ontological and mnemonic security where instead of facing uncomfortable truths in the self's history that would distort the intended national image it forges its narrative to solidify the decorously righteous self (Erőss 2016).

The European migrant crisis provided yet another credible contextual ground for this strategy. It allowed the government to position itself as the defender of Hungary's cultural and historical identity against perceived external threats. In early 2015, the government launched a "National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism," a public survey that linked migration directly to security threats. The questions were criticized for their leading nature, establishing a direct connection between migratory phenomena and security concerns.

The questionnaires containing 12 questions and a letter from the Prime Minister have been mailed to all citizens aged over 18—altogether 8 million people—from early May, and expected to be returned by the deadline of July 1. The idea of the consultation triggered

widespread criticism on behalf of advocacy organizations and researchers. Public statements were issued, and demonstrations organized...Others highlighted that the questionnaire lacked any professional and ethical standards, therefore it was not suitable for any in-merit consultation, but could contribute to the already high xenophobia and intolerance toward immigrants. (European Website on Integration 2015)

This excerpt from the European Commission's website coupled with the National Consultation Questions (that are no longer publicly available) showcase how it functioned as a discursive endeavor aimed at reinforcing Hungary's national self-conception amidst perceived existential uncertainty. The government's narrative portrayed Hungary as a nation under siege, drawing parallels between contemporary migration and historical invasions. The language and structure of the consultation delivered to over eight million citizens strategically conflated migration with terrorism, bypassing nuance in favor of emotionally charged associations. This framing constructed a boundary between an imagined, morally upright Hungarian nation and a threatening, undifferentiated "Other." As such, the consultation exemplified what is described as a strategy of ontological security-seeking: projecting external dangers to reassert internal unity (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018).

In his March 15th, 2016, speech, Prime Minister Orbán articulated a substantive ideology laden narrative depicting migration as an active threat to the "Old Europe" and its historical Christian tradition through the lens memory and sovereignty:

Europe is not free, because freedom begins with speaking the truth. In Europe today it is forbidden to speak the truth. A muzzle is a muzzle – even if it is made of silk. It is forbidden to say that today we are not witnessing the arrival of refugees, but a Europe being threatened by mass migration. It is forbidden to say that tens of millions are ready to set out in our direction. It is forbidden to say that immigration brings crime and terrorism to our countries. It is forbidden to say that the masses of people coming from different civilizations pose a threat to our way of life, our culture, our customs, and our Christian traditions. It is forbidden to say that, instead of integrating, those who arrived here earlier have built a world of their own, with their own laws and ideals, which is forcing apart the thousand-year-old structure of Europe. It is forbidden to say that this is not accidental and not a chain of unintentional consequences, but a planned, orchestrated campaign, a mass of people directed towards us. It is forbidden to say that in Brussels they are constructing schemes to transport foreigners here as quickly as possible and to settle them here among us. It is forbidden to say that the purpose of settling these people here is to redraw the religious and cultural map of Europe and to reconfigure its ethnic foundations, thereby eliminating nation states, which are the last obstacle to the international movement. It is forbidden to say that Brussels is stealthily devouring ever more slices of our national sovereignty, and that in Brussels today many are working on a plan for a United States of Europe, for which no one has ever given authorization (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister 2016).

Migration was thus cast not as a humanitarian emergency but recontextualized as an existential confrontation with historical displacement. The framing resonates with familiarity of recurring

tropes of cultural siege, lost sovereignty constantly referring back to the themes in the memory of Trianon, 1956 and the country's long history of perceived malicious intent from the West. What stands out in Orbán's rhetoric is the use of memory as both a moral authority and a strategic weapon. The immigrant is portrayed as an agent in an orchestrated attempt to rewrite Europe's "religious and cultural map," to "eliminate nation-states," and to dismantle a "thousand-year-old structure" (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister 2016). It is used as a temporal anchor and a normative ideal embedded in an unrecoverable past. Furthermore, Orbán's message suggests that the present crisis is not something of an unprecedented nature but a continuation of a series of earlier aggression on national identity much like the Ottoman occupation, Nazi domination and Soviet control. The refugee hence is morphed into a contemporary cipher for earlier historical threats activating the mnemonic securitization process that justifies extraordinary political responses in the name of safeguarding an imagined civilizational continuity.

The aforementioned national consultation was accompanied by a nationwide billboard campaign with messages such as *"If you come to Hungary, you cannot take away Hungarian jobs!"* or *"Did you know? Brussels wants to settle down a town's worth of illegal aliens in Hungary (BBC 2015)."* They mark a critical rupture in Hungary's post-accession trajectory, an inflection point where domestic identity politics moved into overt conflict with the normative framework of the European Union. This moment crystallized multiple strands of Hungary's evolving political narrative into a sharp discursive break: migrants were not simply represented as demographic or economic concerns, but as ontological threats to national selfhood. The campaign's language asserting that "Brussels wants to settle down a town's worth of illegal aliens in Hungary" and that migrants would "take away Hungarian jobs" (BBC, 2015) did more than articulate policy grievances. It transformed anxiety into identity work, reconstituting Hungary as a vulnerable yet virtuous

community under siege. This is precisely where ontological security theory becomes indispensable once again: it helps explain not just the state's defensive posture, but the psychological imperative behind its rhetorical strategies. The government's response was not an aberration it was a patterned, theoretically coherent attempt to restore symbolic stability in the face of what was perceived as identity erosion. The EU, once framed as a guarantor of democratic belonging, now became a vehicle of alien imposition (Mitzen 2006a). Thus, the consultation represents a dual turning point: first, as a moment of identity rupture where national coherence was reasserted through exclusion; and second, as a point of discursive escalation where Hungary positioned itself in open metaphorical opposition to the EU's liberal cosmopolitanism. It is this double movement, internal repair and external defiance that renders the ontological security lens not just useful, but essential.

5.3 2016–2023 From Defensive Memory to Normative Challenge: Hungary's Recasting of Europe

The years after the migration crisis saw a marked evolution in Hungary's discursive posture that has not returned to its pre-2010 state. The range of Hungary's foreign policy stretches from defensive resistance to assertive ideological challenge. If the 2015 consultation represented a moment of ontological rupture, the period from 2017 onward was characterized by the external projection of a stabilized identity. Hungary no longer framed itself as a nation under siege; it now presented itself as a moral compass for Europe in the face of the decaying liberal, multicultural West. This phase reflects what Mitzen (2006) describes as an externalist strand of ontological security-seeking: having re-secured its sense of national self internally, Hungary turned outward

to seek recognition for that identity on its own terms. This shift is most clearly articulated in the speeches of Orbán and his affiliated institutions:

All I can say, politely but firmly, is that Hungary deserves better than this. So, it's no wonder that in the country now the mood is not for a change of government, but for a change of opposition. But for a moment let's take them seriously and make it clear that we are people who think that the last hope for Europe is Christianity. Today when European people talk about Christianity – and this distinction is important – they are primarily thinking of its culture and their way of life. This is why, according to opinion polls and analyses, 78 per cent of people in Hungary want us to preserve our Christian culture and our Christian traditions.

[...]

The great old European nations in Western Europe have become immigrant countries. Day by day their cultural foundations are being transformed, the population raised in a Christian culture is declining, and the major cities are undergoing Islamization. And I have to say that I cannot see the political forces with the will and ability to stop these processes – let alone, *horribile dictu*, reverse them. (About Hungary 2018)

Such language was not abstract moralism; it was deliberately situated against the EU's integrationist logic. The message was clear: Hungary would no longer accommodate the EU's cosmopolitan memory regime it would challenge it. This new discursive mode was reinforced by the increased international activity of institutions like the Mathias Corvinus Collegium and the Századvég Foundation, both of which hosted conferences and produced publications explicitly

promoting an alternative civilizational vision for Europe (MCC Danube Institute 2020; Századvég Foundation, n.d.). A central trope during this period was that of “Old Europe” versus “Brussels.” While “Brussels” became shorthand for technocracy, moral relativism, and historical amnesia, Hungary aligned itself with a mythologized “Old Europe” embedded in Christianity, cultural continuity, and the sacredness of the nation-state. A revealing dimension of Hungary’s narrative strategy is its careful lexical volition: while the campaigns targeted the European Union’s institutions and values, they consistently used the term “Brussels” rather than the “EU” itself. This was not inadvertent. Despite increasing tensions with EU institutions, public opinion in Hungary has remained broadly pro-European, with Eurobarometer surveys regularly showing majority support for EU membership. Directly vilifying the “EU” would have risked alienating domestic constituencies and undermining the legitimacy of the government’s position. By contrast, the term “Brussels” functioned as a proxy abstract, bureaucratic, and emotionally distant allowing the government to critique supranational interference without directly defying the European project as such. This discursive maneuver corresponds with the ontological security framework: it allowed the state to maintain a coherent sense of national self, threatened by faceless, ideological intrusions, while preserving the stability of EU membership in the national psyche. In this way, “Brussels” becomes not just a geographic shorthand but a strategic signifier of misrecognition enabling the projection of threat without rupturing Hungary’s deeper identity narrative as a European nation (Szell 2025; European Union 2023).

In this period between 2017 and 2023, the Hungarian government further intensified its discursive scheme via linking immigration and gender politics to one another in the context of supranational governance and civilizational decline. The refugee motif became progressively intertwined with

other perceived cultural threats, most notably the LGBTQ+ rights, under the umbrella of what Orbán's government termed as the erosion of "Old Europe". In this "Old Europe" family values are added to the pre-existing themes as the antithesis to everything the LGBTQ+ community entails. This vision is set in an intended contrast to a morally relativist liberal "Brussels" depicted as enforcing ideological conformity and jeopardizing the continent's civilizational core (Lehotai 2024). Orbán's speeches echo this distorted paradox:

But let's not pass over the proven fact – already admitted by the Left – that foreign states, organizations and Brussels itself gave them money in order to defeat us. From the bastion of victory it is good to joke that this was the worst investment of Uncle Georgie's life, and that it is an indication of the Brussels bureaucrats' judgment that they bet all their money on a lame horse. But let's not joke about it. Let's take the facts seriously, because otherwise we will end up not being chivalrous, but being suckers. Let's face the bald truth. Foreigners wanted to buy the future Hungarian government – and the country – by the kilo. Those magic micro-donations! And there were politicians, indeed the whole Left, who bought into it. This is not a joke. If it had worked, there would be tens or hundreds of thousands of migrants in Hungary today. Budapest would be in the same state as the cities of the West: plagued by pro-terrorist migrant protests and gang warfare. Gender activists of indeterminate gender would be running riot in state schools and kindergartens, competing for our children (Cabinet Office Of The Prime Minister 2023).

At the 2023 Party Congress immigration was no longer discussed as an isolated issue but as part of a more expansive "culture war". In this war gender politics, multiculturalism and migration all

serve as agents of ontological destabilization. This amalgamation was unquestionably utilized in Hungary's 2021 anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, which associated non-heteronormative identities in media and education to child protection thereby securitizing not just physical borders but symbolic boundaries of the nation (European Parliament 2021). The law mirrored rhetoric used during the migration crisis, just as migrants had been framed as infiltrators threatening Europe's identity, LGBTQ+ visibility was cast as a foreign ideological encroachment eroding Hungary's traditional (family) values (Hodun et al. 2022).

This framing falls in line with Fidesz's extensive foreign policy vision, which posits Hungary as the sentinel of an "alternative Europe". Within the European Parliament Fidesz has allied itself with like-minded forces, including the Identity and Democracy (ID) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups. These are all platforms that collectively reject deeper integration and cultivate the "Europe of Nations" model (European Parliament). The rhetoric of a "Europe of Fatherlands", initially popularized by Charles de Gaulle and was revitalized by Orbán to endorse a looser confederation of sovereign states confined together by a common Christian heritage instead of liberal universalism (WARLOUZET 2011).

5.4 Analytical Synthesis: Ontological Security and Hungary's Memory Politics

The preceding chapters have followed the transformation in the Hungarian government's foreign policy discourse toward the European Union. What began as a process of national identity consolidation evolved into an externalized memory regime deployed to contest the EU's normative foundations. Through analyzing official discourse from the government between 2010 and 2023 this reflection has demonstrated how Hungary's expressive language instilled by trauma, Christian civilizational identity and sovereignty has moved from internal anchoring to outward projection to

stabilize and securitize the nation's continuation. The aim of this final section of the analysis is to synthesize these findings and reconnect them to the theoretical framework of ontological security.

The empirics have showcased that Hungary's utilization of memory politics follows a temporal and strategic evolution divisible into three phases. From 2010 to 2014, the government of Viktor Orbán engaged primarily in mnemonic consolidation at the domestic level. This took place through constitutional reform and the institutionalization of commemorative practices with the help of cultivating state-aligned historical research institutes. These building blocks for what came next allowed Hungary to be embedded in a triad of indicative themes articulated in this thesis. While the European Union was present in the discursive background it was not yet constructed as a central adversary. Instead, the primary aim was ontological stabilization through inward-facing narrative coherence to tell a consistent story about Hungary's past and future, anchored in loss and moral clarity.

The next phase spanning from 2014 to 2016 marks a critical inflection point. The migration crisis triggered what can be seen as a moment of symbolic rupture. The Hungarian government's approach to the migration crisis as an EU Member State was to recast migration as an existential threat to the nation's and the region's cultural and historical selfhood. Through discursive instruments such as the National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism and emotionally charged billboard campaigns the state projected an image of Hungary under siege. The offenders in this framing were not only migrants but an ideologically liberal European Union complicit in eroding national identity. In this period the securitization of language and memory narratives is clearly mirrored. The EU became more than a governing body, it became a representative force that Hungary defined itself against.

In the final phase of this analysis, from 2016 to 2023, Hungary's foreign policy discourse matured into an assertive posture. Having founded a coherent narrative of self and cultural mission the government increasingly positioned itself as a nation resisting Europe's liberal order as well as being a normative alternative to it. In this phase Hungary no longer demanded accommodation, it offered judgement. It framed its narrative stating that Europe has lost its roots, it had become a post-Christian almost anarchic-like space. Hungary by contrast claimed the mantle of "Old Europe", the true Europe that possesses cultural heritage and moral clarity. The critique or judgement was often directed not at "the EU" per se but at "Brussels" which is a linguistic sleight of hand. It is a sophisticated discursive maneuver from the government's side, it allows Hungary to exist as both an insider and outsider, European and exceptional, using memory as a bridge and a barrier.

The trajectory mapped across the three empirical phases are all viewed through the theoretical lens of ontological and mnemonic security. Hungary's discourse tracked over time reveals how the state in a perceived situation of threat and danger within the European Union weaponizes memory politics to defend and stabilize itself. In line with the externalist strand of ontological security theory, identity in this context is not only self-generated but also constructed in relation to how others approach a state's self-narrative. The Hungarian government's intense emphasis of strategically selected themes can be interpreted as a discursive response to this perceived normative marginalization. Memory is hijacked to reassert Hungary's identity in defiance of an EU framework seen as incompatible with historical self-understanding. It is where mnemonic security conceptualized by Mälksoo (2006) and Subotić (2015) add value to the research. The language of heroism and victimhood turns into a form of symbolic armor, protecting the national self from what is framed as ideological intrusion. Especially during and after the migration crisis

memory is a highly securitized issue. In this sense, the government's use of memory is a textbook case of mnemonic securitization: identity under perceived threat, defended through the offensive mobilization of selective, emotionally potent historical narratives (Mälksoo 2015; Subotić 2015).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to canvas and critically engage with the Hungarian government's use of memory politics in its foreign policy discourse to challenge the European Union's normative identity. Through a detailed discourse analysis of political speeches spanning from 2010 to 2023, it has shown that Hungary's approach and interaction with the EU is not reducible to legal disagreement or policy bifurcation. Instead, it seems to have more layers beneath the surface, and peeling those layers back, a struggle over who defines European identity is exposed. The Hungarian case demonstrates that memory, far from being a passive reflection of the past, has become an active and strategic instrument of foreign policy, one through which states can both defend and reimagine themselves (Assmann 2008).

The focus of this reflection is ontological security as a perceptive lens, which offers a *sui generis* framework for interpreting memory politics. It is a response to what the Hungarian government understands as a condition of distorted recognition within the European Union (Sadecki 2022). The EU is structured around a cosmopolitan memory regime that is born out of antifascism, pluralism and post-national belonging. It is a site that offers little space for narratives that emphasize victimhood at the hands of Western powers, or that position Christianity as a civilizational anchor (Hanebrink 2004). Hence, it is deductible that Hungary's divergence is existential in nature. By crafting and projecting an alternative mnemonic order it is actively proposing a different idea of what Europe was and how it should become. But what does this memory regime *do* for the Hungarian government? First, it provides internal cohesion. In a country with a political landscape marked by volatility and external pressure memory offers a stabilizing architecture through which national identity can be secured. Second, it legitimizes illiberalism not

as a deviation or a pejorative phenomenon but as restoration, the means through which to return to moral and historical truths allegedly abandoned by liberal elites. Lastly, and most crucially, it enables the government to translate ontological insecurity into normative agency. Hungary is not retreating from Europe, rather it is recasting Europe in its own historical story. This act of discursive repositioning reveals a central insight of this thesis that mnemonic security once obtained internally can be projected outward as a form of authority.

At the same time this strategy invites a deeper reflection on its long-term viability. Can a memory regime so reliant on polarization and sustained grievance remain efficacious without risking exhausting its narrative power? Its success depends on a continuous sense of siege, the prevalence of external threat that keep the memory narrative emotionally charged and politically viable. This in itself presents a paradox: the regime seeks stability, but it must remain in a state of chaos and agitation to justify its own continuity. In the long run, this strategy risks exhaustion domestically and internationally. It may also provoke backlash from within the EU, which has happened as the it perceived Hungary as a legal outlier and normative challenger. This notion leads to a more consequential and broader question: *How serious a challenge does Hungary pose to the European project?* Hungary may seem like an isolated case, an island resisting the tide of European integration, however, this would be a misreading of the situation itself. Hungary's defection from the EU memory regime signals a deeper structural vulnerability within the Union, precisely, its inability to accommodate pluralistic histories without undermining its own foundational narratives. The EU has built its post-war identity on a selective but potent version of the past. This narrative has served as the moral compass of European being and integration across a prolonged timespan. However, in more recent years, in the Hungarian case since 2015 it is facing a different kind of dissent from a broader family of political actors who are at the core also Euroskeptics

(Halmai 2017). Indeed, Hungary may not be a single outlier but a *harbinger*. Similar denotative strategies can be observed in Poland under the Law and Justice Party, which has also invoked tropes of martyrdom and Christian exceptionalism in its discourse (Jaskulowski and Majewski 2023). Moreover, Italy under Giorgia Meloni echoes deeply similar civilizational themes blending nostalgia with cultural protectionism (Ortiz Cabrero and Sierp 2024). In France, unsettled memories keep resurfacing such as memory wars over colonialism and the puppet state of Vichy that complicate the universalist self-image of the Republic (Scullion 1999; Laforcade 2006). These are not hermetically isolated phenomena, rather they suggest that each state faces a set of decisions to make when remembering history and through the lens of ontological security we are able to better see what tips the scale when it comes to certain decisions. This happens in parallel with the cosmopolitan memory regime in Europe that in some cases leads to a renegotiation of the terms of legitimacy. In this context, memory becomes a new battle ground for Europe's future, not just about what way is the European way but how is Europe remembered.

The EU response to this question has been to a large extent bound to procedural actions. Focused mainly on the rule-of-law mechanisms, funding conditionalities and institutional censure (Fromont 2024). While these tools matter, they are wholly ill-equipped to address the nuanced dimension of the crisis. It is lacking in a robust mnemonic strategy, a way of engaging with divergent historical narratives without defaulting to moral hierarchy or institutional punishment. In the possible case of the EU remaining trapped in its existing memory grammar, it risks reinforcing the very feelings of misrecognition that fuel defection. Whereas, opening space for memory pluralism without collapsing into relativism, may yet be the remedy to preserving the cohesion of a shared European identity. To ensure clarity, it is not a call for mnemonic relativism, nor a naïve embrace of every national narrative. It is, however, an invitation to take seriously the emotional and symbolic

structures that underpin political identity in Europe. Memory politics, as this thesis has attempted to show, is not marginal. It is not to be sidelined because of its intangibility. It is constitutive, it is ubiquitous. It forges that way states understand themselves, how they perceive others, and how they act in international forums. In the case of Hungary, it has enabled the articulation of an entire foreign policy structure stemming not from economic interests or geopolitical calculation, but historical imagination.

Ultimately, the Hungarian case raises a fundamental question for the European project: whether a union can endure when its foundation of shared memory begins to disintegrate. If the answer is no, then Hungary's challenge may well mark the beginning of an unraveling not just of policies or treaties, but the very fabric of Europe. If the answer is yes, then it will require the EU to rethink its symbolic security architecture, move it beyond a thin cosmopolitanism toward a deeper more resilient, uniting identity.

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APPENDIX

The documents analyzed or used throughout the body of the thesis, especially in the analysis include speeches, declarations, legal texts, national consultations and billboard signs.

Document title	Type	Delivery date
Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp	Speech	July 28, 2018
The Fundamental Law of Hungary	Legal text	April 25, 2011
Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation address	Speech	February 7, 2011
Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech in Budapest on October 23	Speech	October 23, 2012
PM Orbán says Hungary will not be a colony	Speech	March 15, 2012
Hungary: Government's national consultation on immigration and terrorism creates widespread debate	National Consultation	May 31, 2015

Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on 15 March	Speech	March 15, 2016
Hungary's poster war on immigration	Billboard signs	June 14, 2015
Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address	Speech	February 18, 2018
Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 30th congress of the Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance	Speech	November 18, 2023