

Common fate of the Visegrád peoples

Resemblances of tradition and mentality

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Received: 13 December 2021; Accepted: 7 January 2022

Summary

The study is a comparative overview of the mental traditions of the Visegrad nations. Based on the circumstances of modern nationhood, there is a wide zone on our continent, roughly between the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic and the Black Sea, where this modernisation process has taken place in a similar way. Here, the goals of the nation-state could be formulated in terms of dynastic empires. Cultural nation-building played a particular role in our region. In an area made up of a colourful mosaic of languages and religions, the sense of threat was predominant, as can be seen from the national self-images expressed in the national anthems. The prejudice with which competing nationalisms viewed each other is instructive. In the 20th century, our region had to live through two periods of totalitarianism, which is a significant difference compared to the western countries of the continent.

Keywords: between West and East, national identity, prejudice, communal memory

Visegrádi sorsközösség

Hasonló hagyományok és mentalitás

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Összefoglalás

2021. február 15-én emlékezhettünk meg a visegrádi együttműködés 30. évfordulójáról. Azon a napon írták alá az egyezményt Csehszlovákia, Lengyelország és Magyarország vezetői az akkori három ország szorosabb kapcsolatáról. Azon a történelmi helyen, ahol 1335-ben a cseh, a lengyel és a magyar király egyezettette külpolitikai és gazdasági célkitűzéseit. A szovjet befolyási övezetből kikerülve a demokratikus átmenet során magától értetődő volt, hogy az új geopolitikai helyzetnek megfelelően országaink kísérletet tesznek politikájuk összehangolására. A tanulmány a visegrádi nemzetek mentális hagyományainak összehasonlító bemutatására tesz kísérletet. Sok évszázados tapasztalataink szerint ez az a térség, melyet a történelem a Nyugat keleti határvidékére helyezett. A modern nemzetvé válás körülményeit figyelembe véve pedig létezik kontinensünkön egy széles zóna, nagyjából a Balti-tenger, az Adria és a Fekete-tenger között, ahol hasonló módon ment végbe ez a modernizációs folyamat. A nemzetállami célokat itt azonban állami függetlenség hiányában, dinasztikus birodalmak keretében lehetett megfogalmazni. Különös szerepe volt térségünkben a kulturális nemzetépítésnek. A nyelvek, felekezetek színes mozaikjaiból álló területen meghatározó volt a veszélyeztetettség tudata, jól láthatjuk ezt a himnuszokban megfogalmazott nemzeti önképekből. Tanulságos, hogy milyen előítéletekkel szemlélték egymást a vetélkedő nacionalizmusok. Ami a közösségi emlékezetet illeti, lényeges mozzanat, hogy a XX. században két totalitarizmust kellett térségünkben átélni, ez pedig jelentős különbség a kontinens nyugati országaihoz képest. Öt fejezetben kívánjuk bemutatni sorsközösségünk hagyományait, mentalitásunk hasonló vonásait. Először a himnuszok tükrében: érzékeltetve a nemzeti önképnek drámaira festett vonásait. Akkor érthető ez, ha ismerjük a nemzetvé válás sajátos útjának közép-európai sajátosságait, hiszen a körülményeknek, a gyakran kedvezőtlen adottságoknak meghatározó szerepük volt a nemzeti identitás jellegének kialakításában. Miután egymással versengő nemzeti mozgalmakról volt szó, gyakran előítéletek is kialakultak közöttünk, ezek hátterét, fölépítésük logikáját föltétlenül érdemes megismerni, csak így lehet ugyanis fölszámolni az együttműködést akadályozó tényezőket. A négy visegrádi országban mindmáig jelentős a közösségi emlékezet szerepe, erősebb a törté-

neti tudat, mint kontinensünk nyugati felén. Önazonosságunk fontos alapját jelenti a klasszikus (XIX. századi) nemzeti irodalom. Benne születtek meg a történelmi események és személyek mítoszai, az irodalom alkotóinak nemegyszer meghatározó szerepük volt a történelemben, beleértve a kommunista korszakot, valamint az 1989–1990-es demokratikus átmenetet.

Kulcsszavak: Nyugat és Kelet között, nemzeti identitás, előítéletek, közösségi emlékezet

Introductory remarks

On the political map, the Visegrad countries can be seen side by side, and if we look at geopolitics, our specific position between the West and the East has long been, and remains, a defining fact of our history. On more than one occasion, we have had to fight for our country's freedom between two great power blocs. An eloquent example of this was the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944, when the Poles liberated a large part of their capital from the German invaders, while on the other side of the Vistula the Red Army waited for two months, guns at their feet, until the Wehrmacht finished off the Polish forces. The fact of our historical common destiny is indisputable. One needs only look back at the events of the Second World War and the period that followed. From the second half of the 1930s, our region was exposed to the expansionist ambitions of the German Reich, and in 1944 and 1945, the two totalitarian powers fought their decisive battle on our soil. The devastation was the greatest in Europe in the wide strip of land between the Baltic and the Black Sea, with the greatest number of victims and soldiers killed (Timothy Snyder's monograph provides convincing evidence of this), topped with the forced displacement and resettlement of hundreds of thousands and millions of people after the end of the war, and the cruelty of the Stalinist era of Communist dictatorship. It is therefore a little odd that when people of our countries are mentioned there is mild resentment and indication that trauma is a dominant element in our collective memory. Many facts of the past bind us together, although differences cannot be ignored. There have also been differences in our social history (in the extent of civilisation) and we have often been confronted with conflicting interests in the purpose of the modern nation.

On 15 February 1991, the leading politicians of the Central European region agreed on their future cooperation at Visegrad, bringing Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary closer together. The agreement was signed at a symbolic site where in 1335 the Czech, Polish and Hungarian kings reconciled their political and economic interests. This was after the historic turning point of 1989 and 1990, i.e., the fall of communism, when our countries were no longer part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. In the new situation, the way forward could be sought more effectively together. Thirty years on, the cooperation itself, the Visegrad Group, known since the break-up of Czechoslovakia as the V4, with its occasional ups and downs, can be seen as a sig-

nificant achievement. Especially compared to the tensions and conflicts that characterised the relations between Czechoslovakia and Hungary or Poland and Czechoslovakia between the two world wars.

We are talking about East-Central Europe as clearly defined in his monograph by the German historian Joachim von Puttkamer (2010). It is this concept that separates us from German-speaking Western Central Europe. Looking at the changes in the second half of the 20th century, we can say that today the Visegrad countries represent Central Europe. The consequence of this geopolitical in-between has often been that we have been subjected to expansion to the West and to the East. States and borders have changed frequently and unpredictably in this area over the centuries. This has created a certain frontier, endland consciousness and a constant sense of danger. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the four nations joined the civilisation of Western Christendom. It is a richly diverse mixture of cultures, languages and religions. Broad interstices have also been born in these borderlands, with a rich network of cultural transfer phenomena, in Polish–Czech, Polish–Slovak, Czech–Slovak, Slovak–Hungarian contexts. The process of civilisation and modern nationhood development took place differently here than to the West or East from us. Even in the 20th century, the rural tradition and the rural roots of the majority of society were still strongly felt. It is no coincidence that both the political and cultural worlds were so influenced by the mentality of the nobility and the peasantry.

Below, I would like to shed light on the dimensions, sometimes only the outlines, of our common destiny in five aspects:

- What do our national anthems tell us?
- The path of the modern nation
- How do we see each other?
- Our communal memory
- Identity in culture

I. What do our national anthems tell us?

Milan Kundera first wrote in his 1983 essay (*The Kidnapped West*): “A Frenchman, a Russian, an Englishman does not ask whether their nation will be preserved. Their national anthems speak of greatness and eternity. But the Polish anthem begins with the line: ‘Poland is not yet lost...’”

The national anthem is often seen as a symbolic sign of a country or nation. Obviously, the community has cho-

sen a text that is an authentic reflection of its self-image. In Central Europe, it must not be forgotten that for a long time, state and nation were not identical. At the time of the ‘awakening’ of the modern nation, at the beginning of the 19th century, the nation-state could only be an objective, a plan. The ‘building’ of the modern nation was primarily a cultural process. Symbols that reinforced belonging and identification were indispensable for this. Thus the national anthem as a song and poem that became a symbol of the community also contributed to this process. The national anthem was introduced relatively late into the group of the most important national symbols (coat of arms, national colours), and in more than one place there were several songs/poems competing for this title; it usually took some time before the community in question accepted this or that poem as a symbol or national anthem. Our starting point is the text of the currently officially accepted anthems of the four countries. We must also take into account the changes in the texts, which may have carried a particular message, as we shall see in the case of the Polish and Slovak anthems, for example. The texts will be analysed in terms of content rather than aesthetics, regardless of the genre tradition of the national symbol in question (the vast majority of these poems do not meet the requirements of the literary genre, the Hungarian case being rather an exception). It is worth taking into account the circumstances in which the poem in question was written, the identity of its author, and the context of the historical and nation-building process, with regard to the particular stage of each national movement.

The texts of the hymns of the four Visegrad nations were written during the crucial period in the birth of the modern nation, between 1797 and 1844 to be precise. It is probably no coincidence that, chronologically speaking, the Poles had the first modern anthem. In a sense, it was a response to the country’s third and complete division in 1795. Józef Wybicki’s (1747–1822) famous ‘Battle Hymn’ (as it was known in the 19th century), written in northern Italy, called the soldiers of the Polish legion organised in support of Napoleon to fight for the restoration of Poland. The starting line of the *Dąbrowski-mazurka*: “Poland is not yet lost”, has become a symbol in itself. As a poem, it can almost be read as a recruitment song, in the broader group of folk hymns (on the pattern of the original French *Marseillaise*). Born into a landed gentry family, Józef Wybicki was a prominent politician and was considered by his contemporaries to be one of the leading writers. In this sense, he can be compared to Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838), both in terms of his origins and his political activities.

The creation of the Hungarian Hymnus cannot be linked to such fateful historical events as the Polish national poem. The poet put it down on paper in 1823, when a certain political movement was felt in the country, with the counties protesting in succession against arbitrary royal decrees. In the literary tradition of the

genre, Kölcsey’s poem follows the pattern of hymns in praise of God, in which the subject of the poem is also the spokesman of his own community before God. The poem was written for a new year, an account of the nation’s history, and despite all misleading explanations, it is not gloomy, as it expresses faith in a better future.

The poems, later chosen as the national anthems by the Czechs and Slovaks, were written at a time of a rising tide of nationalism in Central Europe. In December 1834, the Czech-language performance at the famous Estates Theatre in the heart of the city was a novelty in German-majority Prague (the first performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* was held there). It was a folk play, a sentimental *Biedermeier* song by Josef Kajetan Tyl (1808–1856), “Where Is My Home art thou, my country?”, a praise of Bohemia, which was a great success on the stage from the first performance, showing the beauty of the native landscape. The author’s social background linked him to the bourgeois lower middle class, and as an editor and writer he was an important figure in the Czech national movement. In January 1844, protesting reflexes prompted the Romantic poet and Slovak student of peasant origin Janko Matúška (1821–1877) to write the verse “Lightning over the Tatras”. This national awakening poem, which began with the sound of a folk song, was prompted by the suspension of Ľudovít Štúr, a leading figure in the Slovak national movement, from his post as assistant teacher at the Pressburg/Pozsony (Slovakian: Bratislava) Lyceum by the Hungarian Lutheran Church for his pan-Slavic sympathies. The young people, loyal to their teacher, sang the poem to the tune of a folk song. For a long time, even the identity of the author was unknown, but Matúška’s poem became the second part of the national anthem of Czechoslovakia in 1918.

There are significant differences between our national anthems in terms of genre and subject matter, but what is it about them that shows common destiny and similarities? Their main message is facing the possibility of national tragedy. The ‘topos’ of the storm refers to this, in some form or other, in all four poems.

The Slovak national anthem begins with this telling image:

*“There is lightning over the Tatras,
Thunderclaps wildly beat,
Let us stop them, brothers,
For all that, they will disappear,
The Slovaks will revive.”*

(Translator unknown)

According to romanticism, the sacred mountain of the Slovak nation is the Tatras, with the homeland of the people underneath, and according to a national myth, it has been their homeland since ancient times. The poem evokes a revolutionary mood.

The original title of the Polish hymn: “Song of the Polish Legions of Italy”. The opening lines of the first verse read:

*“Poland has not yet perished,
So long as we still live.
What the foreign force has taken from us,
We shall with sabre retrieve.”*

(Translator unknown)

The outbreak of the storm, like a divine warning, separates the glorious centuries of Hungarian history from the time of national tragedies in Kőlcsey’s poem:

*“But our sins your wrath provoked
as our deeds you pondered;
flashes through the Heavens burst
as in rage you thundered”*

(Translation by Watson Kirkconnell
and Earl M. Herrick)

In the second verse of the Czech national anthem, there is only a subtle hint of the possibility of national tragedy, and a rather hopeful conviction: *‘strength triumphs over destruction’*.

It is also worth mentioning the two dimensions of the texts. One is the reference to the defining events of communal memory, the other is the representation of the homeland as an ideal landscape. The Polish and Hungarian hymns have a historical dimension in their evocation of communal memory. Wybicki cites the example of the hero of the Swedish wars of the 17th century, Czarnecki Hetman, and the memory of Kościuszko’s triumph in Raclawice in 1794. And Kőlcsey juxtaposes in the Hymnus the glorious and tragic chapters of our past: from the conquest of Hungary to the triumph of Matthias in Vienna, the Tatar invasion and the Turkish destruction. The most important geographical topos of the homeland is present in each national anthem: the rivers and mountains that have become national symbols, the Vistula, the Tisza and the Danube, the Tatra and its peak, the Krivan.

The Czech national anthem, which consists of just two verses, is a celebration of the Czech landscapes of paradisiacal beauty:

*“Water roars across the meadows,
pinewoods rustle among crags,
the garden is glorious with spring blossom,
Paradise on earth it is to see.”*

And in Kőlcsey’s Hymnus, Hungary is presented with the image of a Canaan flowing with milk and honey:

*“With your winds of Kúnság plains
You waved wheat a-plenty,
in the vineyards of Tokaj
you poured your nectar amply.”*

(Translation by Watson Kirkconnell
and Earl M. Herrick)

II. The path of the modern nation in our region

The story of the emergence of the modern nation in East-Central Europe differed significantly from both the Western version and the emergence of the imperial Russian identity. Above all, the circumstances were different. One possible delimitation of our wider region can precisely be based on the process of nation-building. We are talking about the territory and the peoples living east of the German-speaking area and west of the Russian area. The process of nation-building that began at the end of the 18th century found large dynastic empires in this zone of the continent (Habsburg Empire, Ottoman Empire and Tsarist Russia). The idea of the modern nation inevitably came up against imperial borders. Nation-builders or nation-rousers had to define their goals against those existing empires. They wanted autonomy within them or to oppose them. Let us think of the Polish national movement, how impossible the restoration of the Polish-Lithuanian state (before the partition in 1795) seemed to be, since it would have had a major effect on the interests of the Habsburg and Tsarist empires and Prussia. The Western European model (where the citizens of the state were considered members of the nation) was very difficult to apply here. It is no coincidence that the Herderian concept of the nation, that each people has a unique spirit (‘Volkgeist’), expressed primarily in his mother tongue and culture, has had such an impact on thinkers in our region. Very simply, the new political community of the nation in the West had an existing state framework. And in Russia, under the Tsarist autocracy, an imperial nation was formed on a Orthodox and Slavic basis, where Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians were considered as one nation. In our ‘intermediate’ province, on the other hand, the process of becoming a nation had to take place without an independent state.

According to a significant number of scholars of nationalism, the modern nation was born of bourgeois development, in other words, it belongs to the phenomenon of modernisation, the result of the transformation of an agrarian society into an industrial society. From another point of view, the fundamental aim of nationalism was the coincidence of political (state) borders and cultural (linguistic-ethnic) borders. How many conflicts, wars and border changes this has caused in our region!

After all, there were many regions where different language-speaking ethnic groups with different cultural traditions lived on the same territory. Perhaps nowhere in Europe was there such a variety of peoples living together and living side by side. The idea of the modern nation has often meant exclusivity. In the second verse of the Czech national anthem, the subject of the poem states: "Among Czechs is my home!", when at least one third of the population in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia had German as their mother tongue. The idea of a Hungarian-speaking state was to some extent part of the idea of the Hungarian nation-state, just as the first draft of Slovak territorial autonomy (in 1861) did not take into account the fact that there were a large number of Hungarians and Germans living in the region.

There is a strong tradition in the study of Anglo-Saxon nationalism, which distinguishes between the Western (English, French, American) and the Eastern (east of the Rhine, in Central Europe and Asia) models. According to the Western model, the nation is a community of rights for all citizens, whereas the Eastern model presupposes cultural-linguistic collectives. This model reflects the idea that there is an advanced, democratic ('civic'), rational and universal notion of nation, and, in contrast, a backward and particularist ('ethnic') version. Western Europe and East-Central Europe in comparison. This dichotomy has long dominated Western thinking about the problems of the nation. More recently, the specificities of East-Central European development have been taken into account in a much more sympathetic way. As far as the general Western perception of nationalism is concerned, the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust have clearly contributed to its negative image.

The experience of our region is summarised in a nuanced monograph by Miroslav Hroch (*Hroch 2005*), a Czech-born author. Taking recent research findings as a basis, it can be said, with some simplification, that the modern nation has a dual nature: political and cultural, and these two dimensions have interacted in the process of nation-building. Both factors have played an important role in nation-building. In Central Europe, however, the political dimension (state borders) often does not correspond to the cultural one. Here, the state is either larger or smaller than the area in which the community speaking the same language lived or lives. In East-Central Europe, nation states have not emerged that are in all respects similar to those in Western Europe. And the imitation of Western models, particularly French, has often led to discrimination against linguistic and cultural minorities. Nation-state objectives were often pursued at the expense of each other and of the minorities living together. The history of the movements, revolutions and wars of 1848–1849 is a telling historical example of mutual conflicts. As a matter of course, national aspirations were partly turned against each other. An instructive feature of these conflicts was that movements for their own nation-state often turned to a centre of great power to

secure their interests. In September 1848, Josip Jelačić, the governor (Ban) of Croatia, attacked Hungary, which was fighting for independence, with his troops in the name of the Habsburg monarch. In 1867, the Hungarian elite made a deal with Vienna and then prevented Franz Joseph from being crowned also King of Bohemia. During the peace treaties of 1920, the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were also granted significant Hungarian ethnic territories by the Entente powers. The way in which the Nazi German Empire exploited the conflicting interests and nationalism of the Central European nations in 1938 and 1940, and later the Soviet Union in a similar way in its sphere of influence, speaks for itself.

III. How do we see each other?

The creation of a modern nation involves the development of a community's self-image. According to social psychology, the definition of an 'us-group' (community) usually required a 'them-group', in relation to which we are different. These others may be a competitor, or a group against which we must assert our autonomy. The collective self-perception of the national self-image (autostereotype) is intended to reinforce group cohesion and is mutually determined with the image of ourselves as others (heterostereotype). Central European national movements have often sought to define their own self-identity within the same imperial framework, sometimes in phase lag with respect to each other. For the Polish national movement the Germans and Russians were the 'they-group', hence the original text of Wybicki's anthem (verse IV): "*No Russian, German, / If we draw our swords*". The Hungarian nation-building had to reckon with the Habsburg Empire, and contemporaries may have read it as an encouraging message in Kölcsey's Hymnus: "*And under Mátyás' grave army whimpered Vienna's proud fort*". The relationship to the common country and to the Hungarians was a decisive issue in the self-definition of the national communities that were forming in the same country. The national self-image of the Croats, the Romanians and the Slovaks was, in no small measure, created in relation to that of the Hungarians. Slovak writer Vladimír Mináč wrote in his 1965 essay *Here Lives a Nation*: "The Hungarians are the Destiny of the Slovaks" (*Mináč 1980: 83*). Often the contrast between perceived or real national characteristics was typical. If the Hungarians are conquering horsemen, the Slavs are the peaceful farmers for whom Herder predicted such a great future.

The "images" of nations coincided in Central Europe. The desire for freedom, for example, can be found in the national self-image of both Hungarians and Slovaks, with the difference that the Hungarian picture shows a face with a moustache, the heir to the order-noble ideal of freedom, while the Slovak shows a bare-mouthed brother who, as a serf, was seeking to assert his rights to

freedom against the lord with the moustache. Knowledge of the world of national stereotypes in Central Europe is important for understanding the mutual prejudices of the Visegrad nations. These prejudices are usually interrelated. In our case, too, these prejudices may be based on differences in civilisation, religious or denomination differences, different types of settlement (town-village), geographical-local differences. In these cases, mutual prejudice is expressed as a kind of opposition – a binary opposition. Of course, the types of opposition can be related to each other, and the prejudices generated by order differences can be reinforced by, for example, civilisation or religious differences. In Transylvania, for example, the image of Hungarians and Romanians was shaped by both religious and order differences.

In Central Europe, we also find the Western–Eastern prejudice slope that exists in other parts of the continent, according to which the West generally looks down on its Eastern neighbour as less developed and less civilised. In a sense, it is a difference between a rich world and a poor world. This prejudice slope is constant, for example, the way Germans look at Czechs, Czechs look at Slovaks and Slovaks look at Ukrainians. For about a thousand years, one of the fault lines in European civilisation has evolved between the Western and Eastern versions of Christianity. The Visegrad nations are located on the western side of this dividing line, but in transitional areas they are in contact with the Byzantine milieu (mainly in Poland and Slovakia) and with the cross-border part of their ethnicity (Poles and Hungarians – in Ukraine, Belarus, and Serbia, Romania and Ukraine). Order-based prejudices include the opposition between noble and peasant, citizen and peasant, and citizen and noble. The images that social groups have of each other have been fixed over long centuries. It was in the process of becoming a modern nation that these prejudices took on a national dimension.

Where national identity had noble roots, the nobility played a dominant role at the forefront of the national movement, and it was against them that the nation-builders of other languages and cultures, from serf and peasant backgrounds, naturally developed their national self-image. We are, so to speak, a nation of huts, and they of palaces. Just as the Slovaks looked upon the Hungarians, so they could then represent social justice in the cause of the nation. The representatives of the Hungarian national movement, on the other hand, tended to treat the Slovaks with condescension. A key factor in the Czech national movement's self-definition was its relationship with the more developed German world. They sought to draw on popular and petty bourgeois traditions, and on this basis formed the image of a plebeian and democratic Czech nation. This essentially bourgeois Czech self-image contrasts with the Polish or Hungarian self-image of the nobility. From the point of view of the appropriated democracy of the Czechs, the Hungarians and the Poles belonged to the feudal world,

and in the light of their prejudices, the Poles and the Hungarians are often less progressive, and more reckless and frivolous. On the other hand, the Czechs seemed to be uncompromising and petty, inclined to serve the imperial centre. The urban citizen often sees the peasant as a narrow-minded man, hostile to change and development. The peasant, in turn, distrusts the city, where everything is alien to them and where unpredictable dangers may threaten them. This ancient prejudice is 'ethnicised' in the images of Czechs and Slovaks of each other, for example. In some respects, the favourable image of Poles and Hungarians of each other (especially knowing that for centuries the two countries were bordering each other) is a special case in European comparison, a fact that was reinforced by the freedom movements of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Mutual prejudice was to some extent inevitable on the road to nationhood. It is futile to believe that in our 'enlightened' age they can be eliminated once and for all in the European Union. After all, they are part of our cultural heritage, and it would be better to expect that they can be compensated for in some way, that by mutually acknowledging the national images and prejudices that have been formed in the past, and by contrasting them, their relativity becomes clear. However, tenacious prejudices are not eternal. Favourable circumstances, new positive experiences can weaken and change them. Three decades of cooperation between the Visegrad countries reinforce the possibility of a positive turnaround. For example, in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Hungarians and Poles had a rather negative image of the Czechs. These prejudices have changed radically, especially since 1968. The common destiny and the similarity of history have become more and more decisive. The Czech literature and cinema of the 1960s contributed greatly to the development of a positive image of the Czech people. The split of Czechoslovakia was a peaceful process, and since then both Czechs and Slovaks have made relations with each other a priority. Despite the conflicts of Slovak and Hungarian nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, the perception of each other has become more favourable. Recent opinion polls show that in recent years Slovaks have a more favourable perception of Hungary.

IV. The power of memory in the third Europe

The French and Polish versions of Jenő Szűcs's famous book (*The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An outline*; 1983: 55) were published under the title "Three Europe". In the 9th and 10th centuries, thanks to the efforts of the Czech Přemysl, the Polish Piast and the Hungarian Árpád dynasties (Christianisation, foundation of the state), the three countries were extended to the "Europa Occident" (Western Europe) and the basic elements of Western structures gradually took root. In

other words, we are living in Europe for a millennium. St. Adalbert (the second Bishop of Prague), who can also be considered a common place of remembrance for the Visegrád nations (Somorjai 1994), had an unparalleled merit at the beginning. He supported the cause of our countries with the German Emperor and Pope Sylvester II. He visited Hungary, spent a long time in Poland, and was martyred on a missionary journey in 997. His cult has been alive among the Visegrád nations since the Middle Ages.

A sharp line separated this area from the Eastern Europe zone. From the 14th century onwards, urbanisation also began, albeit at a slower pace and on a smaller scale. Attempts at imperial integration of the region were made as early as the Middle Ages and the early modern period. This was the ambition of the prominent representative of the Czech Přemysl dynasty, Ottokar II (1253–1278), who was stopped at the Morava Field by Rudolf Habsburg and King László IV of Hungary. The dynasty of Anjou established significant regional cooperation in the 14th century (including the now symbolic 1335 meeting of the kings in Visegrád), and in 1370 a personal union was established between Hungary and Poland. In the second half of the 15th century, King Matthias had empire-building ambitions, seeking above all to forge closer links with the developed Central European provinces (Silesia, Moravia, Bohemia, Austria). The Lithuanian-Polish Jagiellonian dynasty's integrationist vision can be seen as a significant attempt, since at the end of the 15th century they could claim the Czech and Hungarian crowns as their own. Imperial integration was then achieved – for a good four centuries – by the Habsburg Empire.

The 16th century brought a major change, when the advance of the Ottoman Empire transformed this eastern belt of the West into a southern border region, and social development moved somewhat away from the Western pattern with the refeudalisation (second serfdom). An imaginary borderline at the Elbe/Leitha rivers became stronger. The social history of our modern times is characterised by a relatively significant nobility, with broad small and middle noble groups, compared to the West, with the exception of the Czechs, and also by the existence of a considerable semi-peasant–semi-bourgeoisie, groups with free status (Cossacks, Gorals, Szeklers, Jas-Cumans) and territorial autonomies. It was as if all this meant that Central Europe, considered a 'ferry' (Endre Ady's metaphor for Hungary), had then moved eastwards. A specific image of our history can be summed up in a metaphor by the Polish writer Stanisław Jerzy Lec: "In the West we are looked upon as East, in the East as West". The political situation also changed significantly, with the Kingdom of Hungary losing its independence after the battle at Mohács (1526) and the Kingdom of Bohemia a century later after the battle at White Mountain (1620). The Polish-Lithuanian noble republic, however, was in its golden age, with István

Báthory, the king of Hungarian origin, succeeding in significantly suppressing Russia.

It is no coincidence that the *antemurale christianitatis*, or the *Bastion of Europe* topos, is so strong in our historical memory. It has been perpetuated in countless versions – with varying degrees of intensity – in the cultures of all four nations. Is it a coincidence that we find a new interpretation of this topos in the context of 1956, 1968 and 1980? As a tragic version of the border situation. The other shows a recognition of the advantages of the intermediate situation: the common topos of the bridge with the possibility of mediation between West and East.

Even at the time of the inevitable contradictions of modern nationhood, there were thinkers and politicians who sought the possibility of cooperation between the peoples of East-Central Europe. With some exaggeration, it could be said that the forerunner of the 1991 Visegrád Agreement was the Hôtel Lambert in Paris, where in May 1849 Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, a prominent leader of the Polish emigration, invited László Teleki, a delegate of the Hungarian government, and František Rieger, a representative of the Czech liberals, for a meeting. The idea of a broad confederation of states to defend the sovereignty of the peoples of the region against Russia and Austria was raised. Among the large-scale Central European confederation plans, it is worth mentioning the Hungarian Miklós Wesselényi's pamphlet "Oration on the matter of the Hungarian and Slavic nationalities" (1843) and the Czech František Palacký's 1848 draft or the Hungarian Lajos Kossuth's vision of the Danube confederation (1862). After the end of the First World War, Józef Piłsudski, who played a key role in the creation of an independent Polish state, planned extensive cooperation (Intermarium) in the area between the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic and the Black Sea. While in exile during the Second World War, Slovak politician Milan Hodža published a book about a planned federation. This is how he described his goal: "The security of Europe cannot rest on Western democracy alone. Its construction needs another reliable pillar. And this is Central Europe." (Hodža 1942: 237).

"Memory is our force, all of us from that other Europe..." said Czesław Miłosz at the Nobel Prize ceremony in 1980. For decades, in the Central European part of our continent, every effort has been made to rewrite the memory of our communities. There is therefore an undeniable difference between the memory of Western Europe and that of Central Europe. The main reason for this difference is that we have to face the past of two totalitarianisms at the same time, both Nazism and Bolshevism. The end of the Second World War meant both liberation and the beginning of a different kind of tyranny. The characteristic of our history, or histories: thinking of a different but so similar national narrative, is a lack of continuity, that is, it cannot be told as a straight line story. Time and again, it has been inter-

rupted by disaster, the independence was lost, our revolutions, our struggles for freedom were subjugated. The memory of hopeless battles against overwhelming odds has left a deep mark. In an interview in Budapest, the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert said with some irony: “I am interested in the losers, because in their defeat one can find something of value of their own /.../ History is written by the victors, not by the vanquished. I want to give voice to the defeated.” (Herbert 1980).

V. Identity in the culture of the Visegrad nations

Literature played an exceptionally important role in the creation of the modern nation in Central Europe. “Home was literature, obeying the laws of rhetoric and poetics rather than those of politics.” – wrote Czech literary historian Vladimír Macura (Macura 1994: 48). There was no Polish state in the 19th century, but there was a highly influential Romantic literature, and it is fair to assume that the work of Mickiewicz and his fellow poets contributed significantly to the creation of an independent Poland in November 1918. Even after defeated wars of independence they have managed to keep hope alive. The list can be extended at will to include Czech, Hungarian and Slovak authors of great influence. Literary works played an exceptional role in creating and spreading a sense of national identity.

Our cultures and literatures have lived in symbiosis with the Western world from the Middle Ages onwards, and the borders of humanism, the Renaissance and the Reformation coincided with the eastern borders of our countries. The Latin language and the classical heritage were dominant in all four cultures. One of our common traditions, in which the Czechs differ somewhat from the Poles, Hungarians and Slovaks after the Baroque era, is the cult of the Virgin Mary, who is also revered as the patron saint of the nation. Born at the end of the 13th century, the Polish hymn to the Virgin Mary Bogurodzica (Mother of God) was considered the ‘song of the fatherland’ and was part of the liturgy for the coronation of kings. The name *Queen of the Polish Crown* was later coined. The tradition of *Patrona Hungariae* was alive in the Kingdom of Hungary from the Middle Ages, and in 1927 Pope Pius declared *Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows* the patron saint of Slovakia.

In the 19th century, a national literary canon was established, with heroes and works that became symbols, most of which are still required reading. Some writers and poets are themselves a national symbol, as the Polish Mickiewicz, the Hungarian Petőfi, the Czech Božena Němcová or the Slovak Janko Kráľ. Our region is the birthplace of a particular kind of European literary romanticism, with rebellious individuals in search of themselves, struggling to find answers to the questions of their community’s destiny. Among the heroes we find characters representing social and national emancipa-

tion: János Arany’s Miklós Toldi, the Slovak Andrej Sládkovič’s bachelor of Detva, or the Czech Božena Němcová’s Grandmother. Gradually, the narrative of history created by literature has become a dominant feature of community memory. In the last decades of the century, with a wider readership, literary historicism provided powerful images of glorious events in national history. Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *Flood* (1886) recounted the heroic defence of Częstochowa against the Swedish besiegers, Czech writer Alois Jirásek recorded the battles of the Hussite heroes in his novel *Against All* (1893), and Géza Gárdonyi in his *Stars of Eger* (1899) elevated the defence of the castle in 1552 to the pantheon of national memory. Different historical periods are brought to life in these works, and not only the panoramic historical picture drawn in these works is similar, but also the nation-building intentions. The logic of the stories and the heroes, who have been transformed into mythical figures, can even be seen as interchangeable.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, literary modernity brought with it the self-critical destruction of national mythologies, while at the same time rebuilding them on other foundations – in major works such as those of the Polish playwright Stanisław Wyspiański, the Hungarian poet Endre Ady or the Slovak poet Ivan Krasko. It contains gestures of rebellion, a sense of the inescapability of the historical fate and social commitment. For a long time, Central Europe was a rural world, its small towns provincial in character. The vast majority of society, with the exception of Bohemia (Czech Land), belonged to the peasantry. It is surely no coincidence that the great literary epic of the European peasantry, the novel *Peasants* (1904–1909), was penned by the Polish writer Stanisław Władysław Reymont. Understandably, the crises and war tragedies of the 20th century continued to perpetuate a sense of danger, a threatening vision of national destruction. A peculiar mixture of hopes and desires, illusions and scepticism. A wealth of evidence could be drawn from all four literatures. I will quote only from a publicistic writing by Karel Čapek (Place for Jonathan, 1932): “The small nation has modest means, limited opportunities, few persons and means to choose from. All that it has achieved is half-miracle and heroism. All its successes have been born in spite of small opportunities, under great tension.”

The intellectuals of the Visegrad countries were in a special situation during the communist era. They expected a solution to serious social tensions, but they did not know the nature of Soviet totalitarianism. At the same time, the intellectual resistance and the “betrayal of the literati” could be considered credible. In each of these countries, there has been a ‘capture of reason’ (as Czesław Miłosz called it in his inimitable analysis of the ways of power: *Zniewolony umysł*, 1953). Writers and intellectuals played an important role in the historic years of resistance to the dictatorship – 1956, 1968 and 1980–

81. It was typical, for example, that writers' organisations, created on the Soviet model, were at the forefront of the intellectual-political struggle in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. But art also represented the resistance in all three countries by its own means. Film and literature in particular. In the 1960s and 70s, filmmakers from all three countries rose to the international forefront (Jiří Menzel and Miloš Forman from Czechia, Andrzej Wajda, Jerzy Kawalerowicz and Krzysztof Zanussi from Poland, Miklós Jancsó from Hungary, Juraj Jakubisko from Slovakia). The Central European version of absurdist literature mocked the dictatorship in the works of authors such as the Czech Bohumil Hrabal and Milan Kundera, Sławomir Mrożek, Tadeusz Różewicz from Poland and István Örkény from Hungary. The arts, constantly struggling with censorship, have created a greater or lesser field of freedom. Literature sent important coded messages about the part of reality denied by the propaganda of power, the lack of freedom. The writers' authority in society was as high as in the 19th century. It is no accident that in the 1980s so many writers were involved in opposition movements in all three countries. Their works and statements were credible in the historical time when they were able to face public opinion. A long list of names could be drawn up, but it is perhaps worth mentioning those who played an important political role during the democratic transition. Among the Czechs, first and foremost Václav Havel, a major symbol of resistance during the Polish martial law: Zbigniew Herbert, the Hungarians Sándor

Csoóri and György Konrád, and the Slovak poet Ľubomír Feldek. Without them, the 1989–90 turnaround would not have happened.

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