

“Je Me Souviens”...Historical Memory on the Stage of Central European Politics

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Abstract

Sixteen years after the wave of the revolutions that toppled half a century of communist rule in Central Europe Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Hungary are members of the European Union with fully consolidated democratic regimes. Yet their domestic political scenes are still split along the ethnic lines and latent ethnic conflict is palpable within as well as across the borders. This paper focuses on one of the main factors that feed the continuing ethnic tensions in politics, and that is the manipulation with historical history by the political figures. National elites often use references to the events in ethnic groups' past as ready-made weapons against representatives of other ethnic groups, or as a lure to attract voters within their own community. My research shows, that the level of awareness and interpretation of events and eras highlighted in historical memories of this or that ethnic group varies by nationality, but also by the function of belonging to the ranks of national or local elite. 'Common' people, simply put, seem to have more pedestrian priorities than linking ancient histories to current political squabbles.

In this brief paper, Kusá looks at the theoretical background of ethnic mobilization under the elite leadership, and tools utilized to further political agendas, with a focus on the manipulation with historical memory. To deeper illustrate these tensions, a case study from southern Slovak town of Komárno is examined.¹

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Picture. No.1: Commemoration of 150th Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of March 1848 by the ethnic Hungarians in the southern Slovak town of Komárno

Introduction

“They came on their ugly furry pony horses, pillaging our villages, slicing stomachs of pregnant women open with their knives.... “

...That was a statement of a Slovak nationalist politician Ján Slota, Member of the Slovak Parliament, during his speech that had to do with Hungary and Hungarian minority in Slovakia. “They” naturally referred to the Hungarian predecessors, Avars and Huns, who entered the Central European region more than one thousand years ago². We could have also recently read in the European media “of the geese whose honking woke the army when Vienna was under siege from the Ottoman Turks” around the time when chunks of America were still being discovered in connection to debates about Turkey’s accession to the European Union. There are more subtle and peaceful messages, too. Québec has provided me with inspiration for the title of this thesis: „Je me souviens“. It is the state motto, inscribed, among other places, on Québécois license plates. This simple statement, “I remember, I recall”, harks back to the distant motherland and claims it as part of its own heritage.

² This reference is natural in popular use. Historical research proves no direct connection between Huns that dispersed throughout Europe after Attila’s death in 495, or Avars, arriving into Europe a few centuries later. It is a reference likewise present in Hungarian national imagination, where this claimed heritage is glorified as a sign of higher civilization of conquerors and rulers.

We are used to inflammatory remarks that draw historical parallels from our politicians or in the media. What drives public figures to dive deep into the past and pluck these references in order to throw them into the pot of current political issues? How successful are they in stirring masses through politics of memory? How do the ethnic mobilization attempts contribute towards perpetuation of ethnic conflict in Central Europe?

I have set out to explore these questions in my dissertation thesis of the same title as this short paper. Thesis analyzes four contributing factors towards ethnic mobilization by political elites. These include saturation of the political agendas with ethnic issues in dependence on the historical path of national formation. Different turning points inflicted the historical consciousness of the studied countries and thereby their national imagination. Another factor in play is the role of domestic and international institutions and of the media. Ethnic heterogeneity is often single-handedly blamed for ethnic conflict. Research however shows that tensions arise in ethnically homogeneous areas alike. The last factor in play is the formation and composition of elite groups in studied countries after 1989, level of elite circulation and political values and attitudes they adhere to. In the space below, I will focus on the theoretical background of the politics of memory in connection to ethnic identity, and illustrate some of the points on the basis of research carried out in southern Slovakia in the summer of 2003.

Historical Memory within the Framework of Ethnic Identity

What makes historical memory such a potent tool at times, stirring masses of people towards a shared sentiment, mobilize them towards action, sometimes driving them to mass violence? What makes it so personal, that it touches the core of our beings and brings out emotions of pride or righteousness, even willingness to die for a cause, or anger, hate, resentment, fear, or rage? Let us look at the theories of ethnic identity and instrumentalize its elements at work during the process of ethnic mobilization carried out by the political leaders. Special attention is paid to the role of emotions which link private identities of citizens to the national agenda and thus provide a handle which skilled political leaders can grab to warm their own soup.

Historical memory forms a part of our ethnic consciousness. That consciousness is in ethnology understood “as a feeling of originality of an ethnic group. This feeling of originality and uniqueness can be based on scientifically

founded facts, but may also be grounded in myths that cannot be proved by science or are false. Strong emotional charge is an ever-present feature of such imagination” (Kaľavský, 2001:1).

Ethnic consciousness is composed of four elements: ethnonym, collective aspirations, social norms and customs, and historical memory. They all have potentially strong emotional charge, especially in time of perceived danger or threat. Ethnonym, or the name that the ethnic group claims, is an important part of an awareness of a group, especially if their existence is doubted or threatened. There is a strong emotional attachment to the label, and it always comes as rooted in the territory of homeland (*Heimat*) – whether real, or imagined one (Maalki, 1996). Ethnic groups are united through a common aspiration to continue their existence as a unique, original group. Many have dispersed throughout the human history. Emotional bond to their imagined entity,³ as well as benefits that membership in ethnic community brings for individuals are instrumental in a group’s will to survive. Traditions, customs, social norms, cultural values and ‘way of life’ serve as a tool to identify a group of people, demarcate their physical and imagined boundaries in the world. These boundaries, concept brought about by Fredrik Barth (1969), are a fluid construct. Ethnic groups are not stagnant entities; they interact over these boundaries, yet keep their distinctiveness *despite* their permeability. Whereas the collection of social norms helps ethnic groups to transmit *positive* messages about themselves outwards (food and clothing, culture, traditions...), historical memory most often demarcates the group *negatively*, against other ethnic groups. It entails a selection of historical events deemed important to the group, even if their perception and evaluation by its members differs radically. Historical memory focuses on historical injustices committed against the ethnic group by others, struggles against invaders, defense of homeland, historical missions of a nation, etc. It justifies the existence and a right to self-determination of a group, and as such is a powerful trigger for emotions.

Historical memory is selective, and purposeful. Its goal is to unite, differentiate ‘us’ from ‘them’, gloss over the unflattering parts, and exaggerate and mystify the good ones. Thus it is an entirely different animal from the ‘real’ past, which ‘honest’ historiography strives to uncover. “Its relationship to the past is like an

³ Benedict Anderson describes nations as ‘imagined political communities’ that are limited in scope and sovereign in principle. As a community it provides a sense of belonging and comradeship, even if there are deep economic inequalities among its members (Anderson, 1991: 6).

embrace.... ultimately emotional, not intellectual”, said American historian Bailyn (In: Blight, 2002). Blight describes academic history as a secular exercise, striving to achieve maximum objectivity, while historical memory is like a church, where the nation and great stories about its heroism and suffering are put on a pedestal and worshiped as Deities. If anyone doubts them, things may become combustible.

Identity is not only assumed through socialization into community, but also ascribed by others. Traits and actions attributed to an ethnic group become personal. Just as stereotypes and prejudices about qualities of members of some ethnic groups can be perceived as personal threats and insults, so can different perceptions of historical events launch feelings of antipathy. Memory is thus a ready-made tool that provides an intimate link between individual and society that is readily usable to move people towards beliefs or actions. Memory of suffered injustice reaches remarkably far into history, hundreds, sometimes even more than a thousand years back. They stack up on top of each other, packing up like snowballs, that politicians readily throw at each other when matters of ‘national importance’ are debated. It becomes all the more potent, if an ethnic group finds itself in a socially or economically marginalized position against another (or perceives it so), or feels discriminated or threatened by the other group’s rhetoric or action (Rotschild, 1981). These are often highlighted by the leaders in a historical light, stressing how “this has always been so”, and can and often do serve as launching pads for mass emotions of fear, hatred, resentment, or in extreme cases of violent conflict, rage (Petersen, 1996).

Historical memory has been discovered as a tool and used by politicians ever since the era of national revival movements, when ethnic and national identity became a moving force in politics. It has been instrumental in times of the breakdown of Empires and creation of small nation-states after the First World War, as well as in justification of the communist dogma after the Second World War. The post-1989 era has only seen an upsurge in national imagining and spinning.

Politics of Memory on a National Level



Picture 2: Return of the Huns to the Hungarian Parliament, unsuccessfully applying for a status of national minority. April 2005 (© BBC)

Central Europe, where ethnic groups thrive in abundance and share a complicated and long past, offers a fertile soil for historical memory manouvres and exercises. Looking at Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Hungary, leaders in each exhibited great skills in flaring ethnic tensions to get people to rally around the flag, and ultimately cast their votes for their political party. Whether it was the separation of Czech and Slovak Republics, territorial arrangements in Slovakia, or Hungarian Status Law (law on the benefits to the ethnic Hungarians residing in neighboring countries), political parties got extra mileage out of fanning the flames of sentiments related to recent and distant past clashes and painting them in ethnic colors (dissertation thesis analyzes these and other case studies in depth). The Velvet Divorce of Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993 is among the most vivid examples o.f the politics of memory at play.

After the fall of communism, both Czech and Slovak national elites struggled to assert the position of their nations within Europe. National identity had to be reconstructed, and to a large extent even re-invented. Both turned to their past to seek linkages and justifications for steps towards self-determination. Czechs and Slovaks, however, sought friendship with very different animals from their past. Czechs built on the message of Masaryk's democratic ideals from the first interwar republic, while Slovaks viewed this era suspiciously, with the memory of the Czech 'Pragocentrism'⁴ and the refusal of the Czechoslovak government to grant Slovakia a right to self-determination in a federation or an autonomy. Instead, Slovaks sought legacy⁵ in the

⁴ Pragocentrism was a term used by the Slovak leaders to denote the tendency of the Czech representation to rule the country from a strong unitary center, Prague. Slovak elite had qualms with Pragocentrism ever since the creation of the first republic in 1918.

⁵ This claimed heritage is a controversial and complex one. Though perhaps only the Slovak National Party would claim the heritage of the war period Slovak Republic fully, along with the persona of its

puppet fascist Slovak state, existing in an area when the Czech lands were occupied. For the Czechs, this was the darkest era in the Czech 20th century history. Czechs turned to the positive experience of the rise against the Stalinist rule in the late 1960s in Czech and Slovak public and cultural life, while Slovaks were contended by the gift of a status of federation and enjoyed an era of “growth and security” that followed the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968, establishing the rigid totalitarian regime of ‘normalization’. This “failure to find a decent past” together, as Igor Lukes coins the situation (Lukes,1995), led to the choice of separate paths for the future, which was not reciprocated by the sentiment of majorities on either side of the new border.

In the confused atmosphere of rampant that had anti-Czech, anti-Hungarian, anti-Semitic, and even anti-Western traits nationalism in the years prior to the Velvet Divorce, the Slovak representation raised many issues that seemed frivolous, escalating into what popularly became known as the ‘hyphen war’ about the spelling of ‘Czechoslovakia’. Slovak delegates claimed that the term Czechoslovakia was discriminatory to the Slovaks, who are commonly mistaken for Czechs abroad. Claims were naturally backed by recalling the myths of one thousand year long suffering of the Slovaks under the Hungarian yoke, only to be replaced by the Czech yoke in 1918. Federative Assembly finally settled on the “Czech and Slovak Federative Republic”. Slovak Prime Minister Mečiar constantly led a policy of blackmail, threatening Czechs with a possibility of secession, until the Czech Prime Minister Klaus called his bluff and startled him by accepting the proposal of separation. The divorce was decided on the top political level without participation, but also without physical protests of the Czech and Slovak public. Over half of respondents in public opinion surveys voiced their desire to remain in common state and/or to have an opportunity to decide its fate in a referendum (Nemcová, 1992). It was instead decided on the top of the political pyramid. On January 1993 the two nations started a new period in their history and had to figure out their identity anew.

Historical memory has been nurtured especially by the fringe nationalist leaders of all present ethnic groups. It comes into play most significantly before the general election, or during debates on important legislative changes that have some impact on inter-ethnic relations. In Slovakia, such was the case with the Act on the Official State Language, Act on the Use of Languages of National Minorities,

President Jozef Tiso responsible for wide-scale anti-Semitic measures, all parties and most leaders do recognize at least its partial validity as the first form of official Slovak statehood.

Territorial Arrangement that redrew districts to lessen the percentage of ethnic Hungarians, and numerous others.

Sometimes the calculated attempts to stir masses' feelings or support on the basis allegiance towards shared historical memory also fails. Such cases are instructive to uncover the true political agendas behind these emotion-targeting exercises. Hungarian political scene recently produced an obscure example of that. A group claiming to be the descendants of the Huns, has collected a petition with signatures of some 2,500 people and approached the Hungarian Parliament to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group, a national minority in September 2004 (Thorpe, 2005). Huns have dispersed across half of Europe after their leader, Attila the Hun, died in 495. There are no chronicles and no way to trace the origins of the people all the way back to this group. Yet here they were, demanding their right to be recognized, counting, no doubt, on public backing. After all, Huns are popularly claimed as Hungarian predecessors in the national imagination. Motivation of the group seems to have been purely pragmatic, however. Hungary has passed a law on ethnic self-governments, whereas each official national minority, achieving certain numbers in the locality of their residence, qualifies for government funding for the support of culture and education. The Huns were laughed out by the parliamentarians, 17 out of 21 members of the Committee for Human Rights and National Minorities voted against their bid, 4 have abstained. They did not fare much better with the public, becoming the major source of amusement for many weeks.

Historical Memory in the Public Life in Southern Slovakia.

Struggle for self-determination does not only take place on a national level. Ethnic groups exert their territoriality⁶ – control over material, as well as symbolical resources – in the places of everyday life. From names of the streets, through monuments, statues, plaques, we label places and claim historical heritage as ours. In areas where two or three ethnic groups live side by side, such struggles can take on a particularly exhibitionist nature.

I conducted the field research for my dissertation thesis in May – August 2003. It focused on the issues of politics of memory on a local level – in two

⁶ David Sack coined the term of territoriality as “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area (1986:19)

medium-sized towns of the ethnically mixed Slovak south. Both towns consist of a majority of ethnically Hungarian inhabitants (over 60% for Komárno and over 70% for Štúrovo) and, being close to the state boundaries, have a turbulent history of being tossed between Hungary and Slovakia a number of times in the 20th century. Research consisted of interviews with the mayors of Komárno and Štúrovo, representatives in the municipal governments, teachers, local leaders, members of non-governmental and cultural organizations, media, as well as with random people. Interviews were complemented by a survey on political and institutional matters that flared up ethnic tensions that used historical memory within the Slovak and Hungarian (in Slovakia as well as/or in Hungary) populations and were floating in the public debate at the time of the field research.

117 questionnaires were collected for the survey. Respondents were divided into elite (representatives of the municipality government, teachers, priests, local opinion leaders, etc.) and random sample. The vast majority of the respondents were either of Hungarian or of Slovak ethnicity. Other demographic indicators – gender, age, income, how long have they lived in the town, and education, were taken. Elite and ethnicity were factors I was most interested in observing, assuming both would have significant impact on the level of agreement with statements put forth by the survey. Survey is divided according to the chapters of the dissertation. One part inquires about reactions to institutional changes, another about actions of elites and attitudes towards them. Third part touches on historical memory directly, testing reactions of approval or disapproval to the statements about the past of the two communities. Since it is impossible to reproduce the results of the entire survey here, let us focus on the approval rate of the respondents with the statements on historical events or eras deemed important in both Slovak and Hungarian historical memory.

Statements presented to the respondents touched on the common history of Slovaks and Hungarians in the region, as well as generally. While there were statements that received similar reactions from all groups of population, some received very diverse answers.

The single largest polarizing factor was that of ethnicity (see Table 1 below). Most of the participants concurred that the Hungarian political elite in Slovakia is more aware of Hungarian history and falls back on it more frequently and comfortably than the Slovaks who lack legacy of long-term statehood prior to 1993. They likewise agree that Hungarians have not fully accepted the dissolution of the Hungarian

kingdom after the First World War. Second World War was followed by the policy of Beneš Decrees – laws stripping Germans and Hungarians of Czechoslovak citizenship for three years that prepared the ground for later transfers of these populations out of the country. While the majority of the both ethnic groups thought that these decrees should be officially nullified, or at least not be upheld by the government, most Slovaks thought this issue is a by-gone and should be let by-gone. Hungarians thought so significantly less.

Other questions that split the sample of the respondents on the basis of ethnicity were also related to crucial events of eras in historical memories of the two ethnic groups. The first concerned the era of Magyarization – forceful elimination of Slovak and other non-Hungarian languages from official use and abolition of cultural and educational institutions of these ethnic groups after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. 85% of the Slovaks in Komárno and Štúrovo thought this to be the worst era in the Slovak history, while only 38% of Hungarians considered it that bad. The two groups also didn't agree on the statement on the 'thousand year long oppression' of the Slovak nation by Hungarians. Over half of the Slovak respondents opined that due to the 'Hungarian yoke' Slovaks are entitled to claim the dominant position in their own country. Only one quarter of Hungarians agreed. They have also not found a consensus on the openness of the Slovaks in their dialogue with the Hungarian minority. Three quarters of Hungarians believed that Slovaks were never open to such a dialogue, compared to a little over forty percent of the Slovaks.

Another important factor, which strengthened the differences in answers to some of these statements, was the factor of membership to local elite. While on its own, elite vs. random population did not disagree on the above statements statistically significantly, elite group did have more extreme opinions on the statements (leaning more towards full agreement or disagreement). Statement on Magyarization was an exception. In this statement, there was a stronger negative correlation between ethnicity and agreement on the statement, whereas such a correlation was not statistically significant at all among the elite group. Elite members were, however, more inclined than random sample to think that Slovaks were never opened to compromise, where the correlation between ethnicity and level of agreement did not prove statistically significant in the latter group. Same was true for the statement that Beneš Decrees were just a payback for the harms caused by Hungarians and Germans

to Czechs and Slovaks in the past. While random sample did not think much of the statement, elite members believed it true at a significance level of 0.009.

Table 1: Percentage of those that fully or partially agree with the statements below. (‘No opinion’ was treated as a missing value)

Statements	% of total population	N	% of Hungarian respondents	N	% of Slovak respondents	N	Chi square	Pearson's R
Hungarians are more conscious of their history than Slovaks	77.8	77	77.3	58	79.3	19	.74	-.025
**Magayrization was the worst era in Slovak history	50.6	38	38.2	21	85	17	.000	-.34
*After thousand years of oppressions Slovaks deserve to be in a dominant position in their own state	34.1	29	25.8	16	56.5	13	.05	-.28
Hungarians have fully accepted the dissolution of Hungary after the World War I	27.4	23	27.2	18	27.8	5	.07	-.08
* Hungarians were always in a position equal to that of other minorities in Slovakia	34.3	34	28	21	54.1	13	.8	-.23
*Slovaks were never willing to lead and open dialogue and to compromise with Hungarians	67.1	61	74.3	52	42.8	9	.025	.31
Cohabitation of Slovaks and Hungarians here in southern Slovakia was always without problems	65.4	66	61.8	47	76	19	.3	-.17
We should draw a line behind the past and not come back to it	61.2	60	54.2	39	80.8	21	.1	-.24
Validity of Beneš Decrees should be officially confirmed	28.6	22	22.3	12	43.4	10	.25	-.22
Beneš Decrees should be fully nullified	74.4	55	81.9	45	52.6	10	.066	.3
* These events (BD) have to be understood within the context of the World War II	67.9	55	59.7	34	87.5	21	.026	-.3
Beneš Decrees were a fair payback for the wrongs committed by Hungarians and Germans in the past	11	9	8.2	5	19	4	.06	-.235

* The significance level for the chi-square statistic is less than 0.05

** The significance level for the chi-square statistic is less than 0.001

We cannot draw conclusions from the indications based on the elite variable, however. While it still is informative and makes the initial thesis stronger, the sample was not representative, and the size of the Slovak elite group was disproportionately

small. Most of the administrators, teachers, representatives... in the two towns is are ethnic Hungarians, which meant inclusion of but a handful of Slovak opinion leaders into the pool of respondents.

Among other contributing factors towards the difference in opinions were age, gender, and how long the respondent lived in his/ her town. Women, older people, and those living in their town longer, proved to be more optimistic in respect to the Slovak-Hungarian relationships and more accommodating of the other ethnic group.

Struggle for the Public Mind Through the Public Space. Unveiling of the Statue of Cyril and Methodius in a Southern Slovak Town of Komárno.



Picture 2: Unveiling of the Cyril and Methodius statue at Matica Slovenská in Komárno on 12th July, 2003 © M. Drozd, TASR

Hungarians and Slovaks normally share public spaces in the Slovak south, where they live in proximity for centuries. Many are fully bilingual and claim a double Slovak and Hungarian identity. Komárno seats Hungarian cultural and educational associations, such as Csemadok, a branch of the Hungarian Economic University, Collegium of János Sellye, as well as Slovak ones - Slovak high school, or Matica slovenská (Matica) – The Slovak Heritage Foundation. Peaceful cohabitation in Komárno was abruptly interrupted last summer, when a petty squabble about a statue brought the attention of entire Slovakia and Hungary onto it. Slovak leaders – local and national alike, fenced against the enemy – the local Hungarian representatives holding a vast majority in the municipal government - with laments about centuries of historical injustices perpetrated against the dove-like Slovaks and demonstrated their anger with the refusal of Hungarians to accommodate the humble

request to place a statue of two Byzantine emissaries, symbols of the imagined Slovak ancient homeland⁷. Average Komárnians were hardly affected by the quarrel in any practical sense. Most just avoided the spectacle altogether. But the leaders of Matica and of the municipal government played the battle out in the media as if everybody's life depended on it.

The quarrel about the Cyril and Methodius statue began some 11 years ago. When general Klapka, the Hungarian national hero of the 1848 revolution, made his return onto a pedestal on the main square, Matica wanted to place a statue of the Byzantine emissaries Cyril and Methodius in front of the public's eye. Matica had good reasons for it. It was created on August 4, 1863, marking a millennium since the introduction of Christianity brought by the Byzantine brothers. Historic research documents that it is possible that the missionaries passed into Slovak territories through Komárno. Dušan Čaplovič, an MP for SMER and a historian by trade supported Matica's claim in a personal interview:

“Cyril and Methodius passed through Blatnohrad and Kocel's areas, and along the Danube. We know everything only from narrative sources. But there were two ways to cross Danube at that time. One was in Komárno, that was the shortest pass... the other went around the whole of Danube and crossed from Tisa side. So there are good premises, but it is not proven.”

Vladimír Turčan (In: Krekovič, 2005: 36–42) is of a different opinion. Since Cyril and Method traveled from Thessalonica via route that is not known today, it is open to mythological creativity. Crossing Danube in Komárno is just a demonstration of that. „There is no registered archeological locality which could support this projection. Furthermore there is not even evidence of Komárno being integrated within Great Moravia“ (Ibid., 37). There is, however, written evidence that the emissaries were planning to return to Thessalonica via Venice, which would indicate they would be more likely to use the Devín ford way instead of the more distant Komárno. In any case Matica insisted on the statue and approached the municipal government about it.

Municipal government did not have much enthusiasm for the project. The two sides could not arrive at a decision where to place the statue. The sites proposed by Matica were either already taken, or unsuitable for technical reasons, the sites proposed by the town representatives did not seem dignified to Matica. They included

⁷ Konstantin (later admitted to holy orders as Cyril) and Methodius were invited by Prince Rastislav of the Great Moravian Empire to bring Christianity to the people. Great Moravia, despite the fact that it included only small portions of today's Slovakia, is portrayed in Slovak national imagination as the ancient homeland of the Slovaks.

a distant public park near public toilets, or an abandoned military church in a dilapidated condition. Statue was ready, but neither side was willing to step back to accommodate the other. After years of the back and forth, when the 140th anniversary of Matica's birth was approaching, its leaders decided for a unique solution. Matica opted to mount the statue onto their own building, which allowed them to forego the necessity to obtain town's official permission. Date was set for the 5th of July 2003 and Matica proceeded with great resolve.

Municipality government summoned the city police to halt the installation. After a minor skirmish, Matica proceeded with the mounting. Later Matica sued the local government for limiting its freedoms. Town representatives, on the other hand, slapped a million and a half SK fine on Matica for not having obtained a building permit in advance.

The unveiling of the statue, taking place on the 12th July, was more grandiose and more controversial than anyone had imagined. The complot of coincidences that carry various symbolic and historical meanings shows almost all key scars on the face of the history of this region and country. Celebration itself was well attended. 16 buses brought six to seven hundred people from all over Slovakia. Among the present were clergy, leaders and members of Matica, top representatives of political parties with nationalist leaning – Slovak National Party (SNS) and Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HzDS), but also of centrist-populist SMER and ANO, and the Christian Democrats, who were supporting Matica in its quest to place the statue of emissaries in Komárno over the whole 11 years. There were groups of men and women in folk costumes, members of the Senior Club, as well as youth in jeans. Disturbance came in the form of a few skinheads roaming around, along with a pack of youngsters in uniforms resembling the Arrow Crosses, Slovak counterpart to Hitler's SS guards during the interwar Slovak state. Members of this group, called Slovenská Pospolitost', claim not to have neo-Nazi leanings and refer to themselves as Slovak nationalists. They marched to the border crossing to deliver the message of the unveiling as they understood it: "Slovakia begins here!"

The space where the emissaries' statue was placed is symbolically extremely rich. The myth of the thousand years long existence of the Slovak nation personified



Picture 3: Symbols of three eras from the Slovak historical memory share space around Matica slovenská in Komárno

in the bearers of Christianization of the Slovak lands crosses paths here with the message of the national revival of the Slovaks against the oppressing Hungarians through the building of Matica slovenská. Some ten or twelve meters in front of the building towers the statue of Milan Rastislav Štefánik, leader of the Czechoslovak legions in the World War I and one of the founders and cabinet members of the first Czechoslovak republic. It was placed there by the same Matica in 1990.

All on the soil of a city that played a crucial role in the Hungarian revolution of 1848, of which we are duly reminded by the statue of general Klapka on a nearby Klapka Square. If that isn't enough, the same Cyrilo-methodian tradition was claimed by the interwar fascist Slovak state, which found its admirers at this celebration in the uniformed men of the Slovenská Pospolitosť.

The celebration and the conflict between Matica and the city hall was downplayed by most as petty stubbornness of local representatives, but deeper national stereotypes seeped to the surface through interviews. Here is what the mayor of Komárno, and the chair of Matica slovenská in Komárno had to say on the subject:

Tibor Bastrnák, Mayor of Komárno:

“Local politics is not about major historical trauma. It is about everyday things. Unless Matica Slovenská comes with a provocation. This was not about history. It was a problem of communication;. Matica carried it in the confrontational manner from the beginning, from the position of power; you know those were different times then. And the self government probably did not react the best way either. Then it became such an issue that it was difficult for anyone to step back. Many lies and half-truths were told. I have been in this office for seven months, not once was I visited by anyone from Matica about this issue. We tried to find a solution in the past few months, but even much more influential people than I could not change their mind. Matica in Komárno and in southern Slovakia does not fulfill the mission for which it was created. It just serves the purpose to *be* here. That is why there were maybe 50 people from Komárno, rest was brought by buses from elsewhere. Slovak history to them is not to give them meaning, but to create sensations that will be written about.”

Mária Kobulská, Matica slovenská in Komárno:

“What concerns my opinion, there is a surge in Hungarian plaques denoting houses where Kossúth⁸ slept one night, where someone was born, etc. Komárno, with its location on the Danube crossing point, is certainly a town of memorials. The city is of a different opinion about our solution, we will leave it to the court. It is a pity, and it lacks dignity that we argue about such petty details when our

⁸ Louis Kossúth, one of the leaders of the Revolution of 1848.

Constitution guarantees a right to develop one's cultural heritage. Why are we not allowed to enjoy that right?"

The unveiling of the statue was not the end of the saga, which very much continues in Komárno, as well as elsewhere, to this day. In February, the city of Rožňava (Rozsnó) unveiled a statue of Louis Kossuth, the controversial Hungarian revolutionary hero from 1848. The Slovak National Party immediately protested that this statue desecrates the memory of Ľudovít Štúr, the Slovak national revival hero.

Komárno became abuzz on the 5th of July this year as well. Among the usual participants commemorating the entry of Cyril and Methodius to our lands this year—Matica leaders and members, representatives of clergy and political parties, handful of believers and some passer-bys, it (already traditionally) saw the uniformed members of the Slovenská pospolitosť. However, in 2005 they were not the only inflammatory group to be watched by the police there. About 40 Hungarian short-haired youths showed up as well, and started a word fight with the Slovak nationalists. The two groups had to be cordoned off by police forces. Matica and Pospolitosť denounced the Hungarian group as a fascist provocation. Matica went as far as to suggest that the fourty youths are a sign of the: „Fascist hailing, chauvinism, instigation of border revisions, celebration of Great Hungaria from the side of the young Hungarians... and that it serves as a proof of what the basis of part of the Hungarian national and international party politics is about... Matica denounces their misuse of the St. Cyril and Methodius holiday as a dark spot on Slovak-Hungarian civil relations, revival of irredentism in the Slovak south, incitement of unwanted provocations, misuse of ecumenical cyrilo-metodian message for fanning the flames of nationalist passions.“ (Matica slovenská webpage). Gabriela Kobulská, chair of Matica in Komárno opined that the Slovak uniformed men behaved well, merely wanting to pay respect to the two key figures in Slovak national history. „ [Slovenská pospolitosť] is a serious organization...it is one of the few associations that feels with the Slovaks.“ (SME, 7.7. 2005) While the Hungarian youth yelled „Ria, Ria, Hungaria,“ and called the Slovak participants the “Beneš bootlickers“ who will be pushed out of the rightful Hungarian territory, the Slovak youth replied „Hungarians behind Danube! Hungarians behind Ural! Slovakia is ours!“ Articles on the Pospolitosť website refer to Hungarians as ‘ugly Huns’ and dismisses them as neo-Nazis hooligans. After three of the Hungarian visitors were arrested by the police for hailing and stealing a wreath

from in front of the Štefánik statue, Pospolitost' held a minute of silence „for all the victims of Hungarian rage“.

Mainstream Slovak and Hungarian media responded as one would expect. The Slovak dailies paid attention mainly to the three arrested Hungarians. Hungarian daily Népszabadság and Magyar Nemzet wrote about the Slovak nationalists in uniforms resembling the Hlinka guards, hurling insults at Hungarians, Jews, and the Roma. (SME, 6.7. 2005).

Cyril and Methodius statue started off on the wrong foot. It has been a combustible issue in Komárno over the years and will likely remain so. The Matica – municipal government squabble was mirrored into the relations of political parties on the national level immediately. HzDS⁹ and SNS¹⁰ were accusing SMK¹¹ of intolerance and discrimination. In May 2005, MP for ĽS-HzDS Katarína Tóthová has issued a statement conveying deplorability of the Slovak Parliament's dismissal of her motion to put the government report on the agenda whether or not the *causa* of the non-placement of Cyril and Methodius statue in Komárno by the municipal government is a case of ethnic intolerance. Tóthová was puzzled that „MPs for Slobodné fórum and Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), who profess Christian principles and ethnic tolerance did not vote on this issue“ (Vyhlásenie poslankyne...: 2005). KDH was indeed active in the matter of the statue placement throughout the years. In 2000 it has blocked SMK's application for membership in the European Democratic Union purely because of the issue of the Komárno statue (Repa: 2000).

Cyril and Methodius, emissaries that are valued for bringing education, Christianity, culture of peace and tolerance into Slavic lands brought very little of that to Komárno. Their statue became a local as well as national battle ground of historical memory and expression of territoriality. It now symbolizes stubbornness of political elites to find a practical solution and peddle their own agendas, attempting to incite ethnic antipathy among their constituencies. Locals, however, luckily seem to have more pedestrian priorities. None of the asked thought that the statue will influence the relationship of local Slovaks and Hungarians, or will overall worsen the relationship of the Slovak and Hungarian nations. The dispute found much sounder resonance on

⁹ Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko (Movement for Democratic Slovakia)

¹⁰ Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party)

¹¹ Strana maďarskej koalície (Party of Hungarian Coalition)

the national political sphere, where numerous political parties used it as the aforementioned packed snowballs in their own political fights.

Conclusion

It may seem logical to expect that the entry into the European Union would alleviate some of the inter-ethnic tensions within and among studied countries. But nothing so far indicated that it would be so. Hungarian right focuses on rhetorically re-claiming Hungarians living on the territories once belonging to the Greater Hungary, today neighboring states, Slovak politicians respond by drumming on war drums, calling on Slovaks to stand up against traditional Hungarian irredentism and tendencies to oppress the weaker and usurp what's not theirs, Czechs dig their heels in deep into their concept of a historical state to justify present standpoints and actions towards its neighbors and towards the EU. Purposeful ethnic mobilization may be targeting a wider array of scapegoats, who are at hand due to the process of the EU enlargement. The 'other' is now being sought not only in the immediate geopolitical area, but also among immigrants, Turks, Muslims, or any other, currently popular intruder. Politics of memory thus only received a boost in its wings size, giving ever more space to imagination, interpretation, and borrowing. It will be interesting and instructive to follow this development and compare it with the period of time leading to the EU accession. That will, however, have to be the task of some future text.

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Tibor Bastrnák, mayor of Komárno, (15. 7. 2003)

Július Hrala, activist (informant, June, July 2003)

Gabriela Kobulská, Head of Matica Slovenská in Komárno (14.7.2003)

Michal Mácza, historian (17.7.2003)

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