

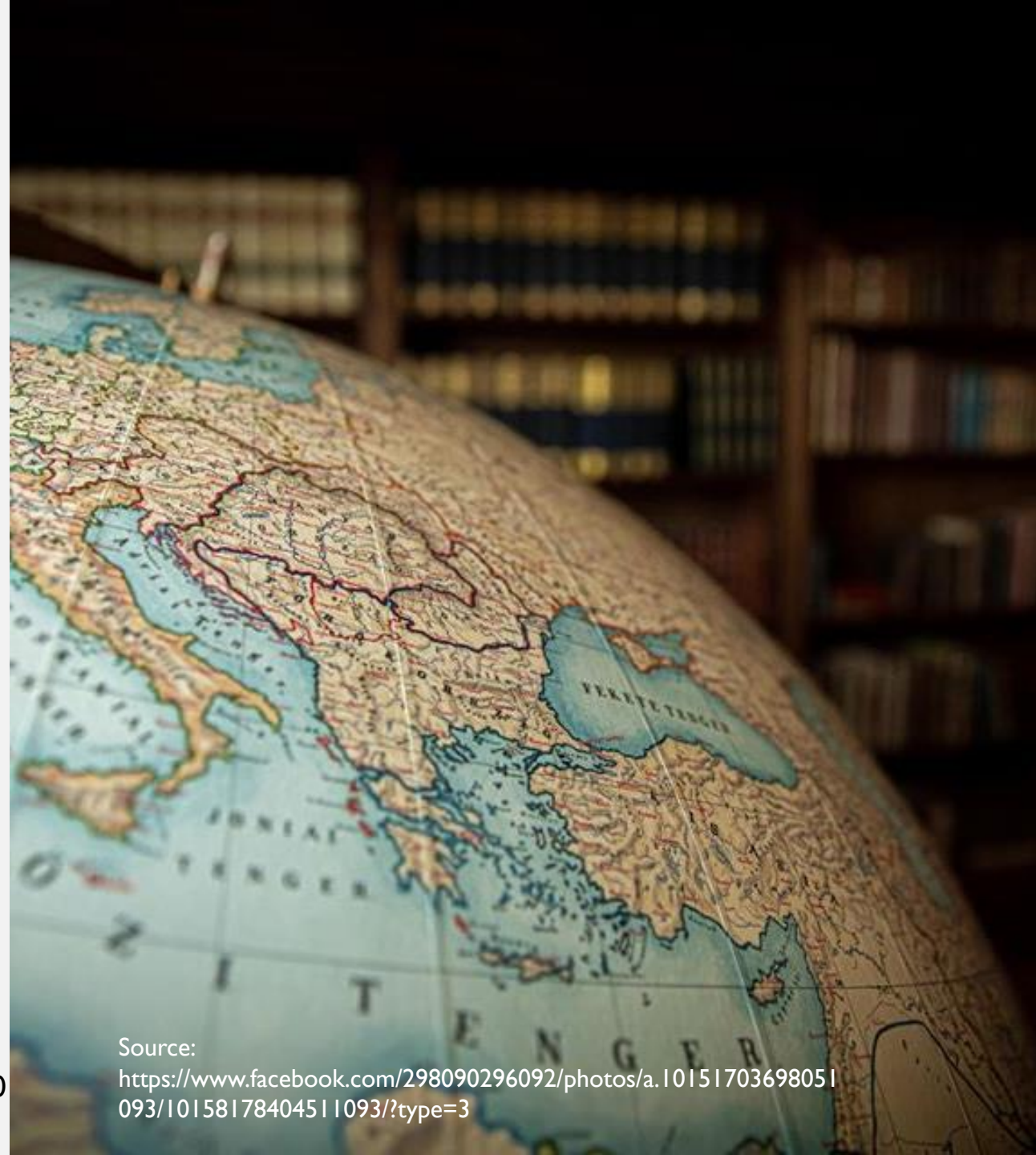
THE POLITICISATION OF  
COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICES IN  
EASTERN EUROPE:  
THE CASE OF THE TRIANON  
CENTENARY IN ORBÁN'S HUNGARY

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# RESEARCH TOPIC

- **Advertised topic: Politicisation of commemorative practices in Eastern Europe**

**Objectives:** *ESR5 will investigate commemorative practices in Central Europe [Hungary], South East Europe and the post-Soviet area with a view to identifying similarities and differences in the ways in which politicians and historians interpret the events being remembered [instrumentalizations of memory by populist incumbents]. The ESR can choose to focus on the memory of World Wars I [treaty of Trianon] and II, the annihilation of Jews and Roma, post-war migration, or communism and postcommunism.*

**Expected results:** *The research will demonstrate, through the study of commemorative practices, how different meanings can be attached to single historical events [various narratives about Trianon] for social and political purposes and show how these practices are 'packaged' for popular consumption [analysis of speeches, monuments, cultural productions etc.], thus helping explain the role and function of memory in contemporary politics [eg. legitimizing power], particularly in the rise of populism [Hungarian case].*

# MILESTONES

- Research Design
- Literature review
- Mid-term Review Chapter: Treaty of Trianon and its place in Hungarian politics and collective memory in 1920-2010
- New Chapter: Politics of Memory in Orbán's Hungary: The Case of the Centenary of the Treaty of Trianon in 2020
- Policy Paper: Navigating the Difficult Past. How to Deal with the Memory of Trianon?

# EVOLUTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

- Informed by the literature on politics of memory (Olick and Robbins 1998, Müller 2002, Bernhard and Kubik 2014, Verovšek 2016), culture of defeat (Schivelbusch 2004), nostalgia (Boym 2001), irredentism (Kornprobst 2008), CEE/Hungarian memory culture (Pakier and Wawrszyniak 2013, Seleny 2014, Ungváry 2017), Trianon case (Zeidler 2006, Gyáni 2012, Ablonczy 2015, Egry 2020, Feischmidt 2020)
- Scope of the research: more focus on the 2020 commemorations of the centenary itself
- Empirical material: various manifestations of the (mostly) official memory policies (speeches, political declarations, articles, exhibitions, memorials, videos, billboards, cultural productions etc.), collected through fieldwork and from online sources
- Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic: more online sources, as the commemorations also partly moved online.

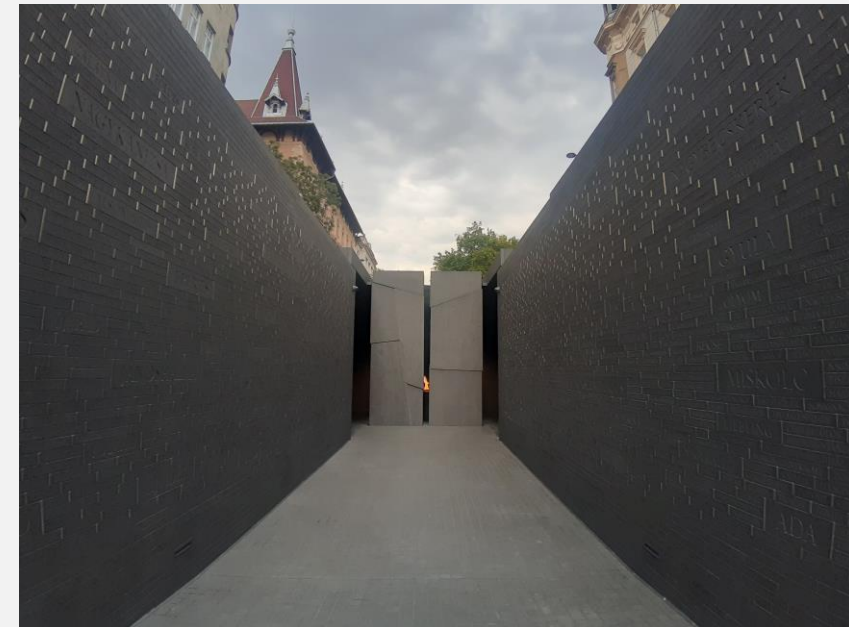
# TRIANON IN THE ORBÁN'S ERA

- Trianon as part of a bigger project of transforming the state and the announcement of a “new era” in 2010: introducing an official day of remembrance on 4 June, distributing citizenship and voting right – demonstrating agency and a sense of rupture with the post-1989 liberal order in the country
- Fidesz navigates between various expectations, opportunities and constraints, as well as calibrates the memory policies to the political narratives of the moment.
- Three main framings of memory of Trianon identified through a systematic analysis of the centenary commemorations: 1. Tragedy, victimhood and injustice; 2. Source of strength and perseverance; 3. Revisionist/Reconciliatory



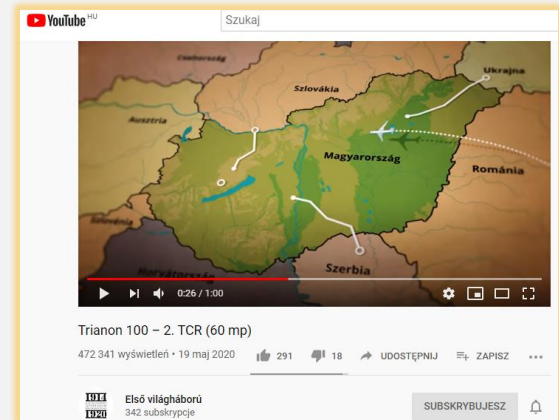
# I. TRAGEDY, VICTIMHOOD, INJUSTICE

- **Uniqueness of the Hungarian tragedy:** “the verdict [in Trianon] was obviously a death sentence. History has not recorded a nation that could survive such a loss of blood.” (Orbán, 16 February 2020)
- **Chain of Hungarian victimhood** (link between Trianon, Second World War and Communism): “suffering became the common thread of national history” (Egry, 2020: 128-129).
- Mortuary symbolic of the Memorial of National Unity (“Trianon memorial”): underground stone ramp (reminding of a tomb), tables with names of towns (as commemorative plates of the deceased), eternal flame (like by the tombs of the Unknown Soldier), soil from the 64 counties (as ashes of the „dead body” of the Greater Hungary).
- **Injustice:** hubris, arrogance and shortsightedness of the victors of the First World War, dictating the borders without considering the will of the people (“Trianon diktat”)
- **Perpetrators:** not so much the neighbouring nations, focus on the guilt of the Western empires: “the West raped the thousand-year-old borders and history of Central Europe” (Orbán, 6 June 2020) - the vanquished prefer to focus on being defeated by a large and powerful coalition of states, rather than single belligerent country (Schivelbusch, 2004)



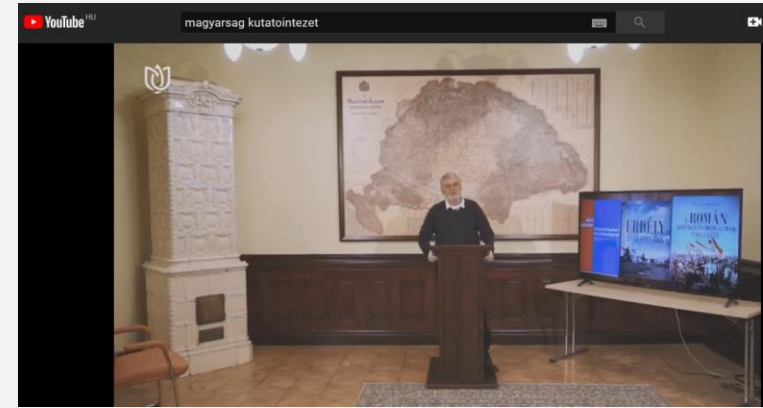
## 2. SOURCE OF STRENGTH AND PERSEVERENCE

- Novelty: seeing Trianon and the ensuing period of 100 years as a source of national strength and pride: “there is no other nation of the world that could have endured such a period of one hundred years” (Orbán, 20.08.2020)
- One of the key innovations of the populist right-wing politicians in CEE was to complement narratives of grievance and injustice with a sense of optimism and to insert “self-confidence into the otherwise gloomy traditional mentality.” (Enyedi 2020: 3)
- Interpretation of the “Trianon Memorial” suggested by their authors: the visitor first descends to the “tomb of historical Hungary”, then circle around in darkness around the granite structure with the eternal flame at its lowest point to finally return upward see the light again and emerging contours of the monumental building of the parliament, symbol of Hungarian strength (catharsis)
- “Remedy” for Trianon: the concept of the “National Unity” beyond the borders, “virtual reintegration” of the nation (citizenship, voting rights).



### 3. REVISIONISM OR RECONCILIATION?

- During the centenary, the reconciliatory and revisionist rhetoric intertwined
- Use of revisionist symbolic: maps/contours of the “Greater Hungary” (party meetings, Orbán’s cabinet, social media, press etc.)
- Mainstreaming of the far-right revisionist figures (eg. Ernő Raffay) and conspiracy theories about Trianon (leading role of Freemasonry)
- References to irredentist slogans and ideas in Orbán’s speeches: “I believe in one homeland” – quote from an interwar irredentist prayer “For the resurrection of Hungary” (Orbán, 16 February 2020)
- Central European cooperation (hostile neighbourhood then, thriving region now): “the biggest achievement is that we put an end to the 100 years of solitude” (Orbán, 9 January 2020).





# CONCLUSIONS

- More nuanced picture of the politicization of the past, involving both top-down and bottom-up processes
- Responding to popular sentiments: exploring the topics earlier marginalized by the mainstream; the incumbent party shows agency and a sense of direction by offering new interpretations (repackaged for the wider audience) and remedies (even if only apparent).
- Imposing own narratives: no public consultations, scarce public debate
- Adjusting them to the political goals of the moment: cherry-picking (context essential)
- Outcome: thematically eclectic, at times contradictory memory policy of a populist incumbent - a patchwork of various concepts and narratives. calibrated according to various goals, not simply adopting the nationalist narratives about the past.