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BULLETIN

Memory and Politics: The Importance of the Treaty of Trianon for Hungary

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4 June marks the centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon, the most important historical event of the 20th century for Hungarian politics. In the public's perception, it is still a lively and traumatic history. The source of this is, on the one hand, the violation of the national community by the treaty, which has left deep marks on the social consciousness of Hungarians, and, on the other hand, the memory of the Trianon is fuelled and used for political purposes in both Hungary and neighbouring countries.

In line with the treaty legally ending the First World War for Hungary, signed on 4 June 1920 at the Grand Trianon Palace in Versailles, the territory of Hungary decreased by two-thirds (from 282,000 km^2 to 93,000 km^2), and its population by 57% (from 18.2 million to 7.9 million). Of the nearly 10.5 million inhabitants of the separated lands, there were about 3.2 million Hungarians (30.5%). As a result of the provisions of the treaty, Hungary become poor in raw materials. It lost numerous modernising cities and industrial centres, and with them a large part of the middle class. A temporary revision of the borders and doubling of the country's territory to the detriment of Czechoslovakia and Romania took place between 1938 and 1940 as a result of two Vienna Awards signed with the help of German and Italian diplomacy. In addition, in 1941, Hungarian troops occupied the border territories of Yugoslavia. The 1947 Paris Peace Treaties restored Hungary's borders as fixed by the Treaty of Trianon.

Trianon's Memory in Hungary. Trianon still raises emotions across Hungarian society. It has been present in the public discourse since the system change in 1989. However, it has been cited more often since 2010 when the Parliament of Hungary established 4 June as Trianon remembrance day (officially, National Cohesion Day) and facilitated obtaining Hungarian citizenship for people with Hungarian ancestors. Probably, this is the explanation for the increase in the last few years of the percentage of Hungarians claiming that "the Trianon decision can never be accepted" (up 10 percentage points, to 54%). On the other hand, the treaty's assessment has not changed: two-thirds of Hungarians consider it unfair, but less than 20% hope to revise the borders. These studies confirm that the ubiquitous images of "Greater Hungary", that is, within pre-Trianon borders, in the Hungarian public space are rather a reflection of sentiments of society rather than specific territorial demands.

According to Hungarian scientists, one of the sources of this lasting trauma is that the treaty de-constructed the modern national consciousness that had formed in the 19th century. Thus, emotions are aroused not only by the enormous material losses but also by the loss of the state in the shape in which it had existed in this consciousness since the time of St. Stefan, the first king of Hungary. There is no dispute among Hungarian historians as to the reasons for adopting a treaty with such provisions. Among them, they mention the erroneous minority policy, the loss of World War I by Austria-Hungary, and the chaotic internal situation of Hungary at the turn of 1918–1919. In turn, arguments in certain press pointing to specific groups as guilty of creating the Trianon treaty (e.g., the political left or Jews) and supporting revisionist thought, are rejected by the scientific community. Despite that, in recent years historians advocating such views have contributed to the discourse of the Fidesz government.

Trianon in Hungarian Politics. Rationalisation of Trianon by society was impossible because of the use of the topic for political purposes since the treaty was signed. The radical revisionism of the authorities in the interwar period was replaced by silence in the years of socialism. After 1989, the topic of Trianon became an instrument for the right to stimulate nationalism, while the left failed to develop any alternative interpretation. The attitude towards the Hungarian minority has also been politicised. Support for this minority has not been the only goal of Hungarian governments. Objectives included

political gains, including in the form of votes, for example, by backing particular representatives of local elites.

The political responsibility of the Hungarian authorities for the fate of compatriots living outside the country was strengthened by constitutional provisions in 2011, on the initiative of the Fidesz government. "Uniting the nation across borders" is part of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government programme. The understanding of the nation as a community encompassing all Hungarians is also emphasized in Hungary's new National Security Strategy of April 2020.

Building the Trianon cult is an element of the Fidesz government's memory policy. Creating a nationalist narrative about the need to rebuild the nation on an ethnic basis serves the mobilisation of the electorate. It rejects the perspective of most historians that the fall of historical Hungary was inevitable because of the aspirations of national groups living in its territory to gain their own statehood. This is demonstrated, for example, by the new Trianon monument, erected near the parliament for the centenary, on which all localities belonging to Hungary in 1913 are mentioned, regardless of their ethnic composition. This puts, for example, the loss of Zagreb, where Hungarians constituted only about 10% of the population, equal to the loss of the ethnic Hungarian villages of Szekerland in Romania.

The myth of Trianon also serves to justify to voters the way Hungarian European policy is conducted. Emphasis of unfair treatment of Hungary by the EU and other anti-Western rhetoric alludes to revisionist propaganda used by Hungarian authorities in the 1920s, namely that Hungarians were betrayed by Western powers they had been protecting for centuries against invasions of eastern peoples.

Trianon in Relations with Neighbouring Countries. Hungary's bilateral relations with its neighbours are influenced both by the policy of these countries' governments towards the Hungarian minority—until 1989, aimed at the homogenisation of ethnically mixed areas, by, for example, resettlement or hindering access to education in the native language—as well as the approach of the Hungarian authorities. Disputes with Slovakia arising, among other reasons, from the prohibition of dual citizenship by its citizens are not solved, rather ignored because of prioritising Visegrad (V4) cooperation by both sides. Igor Matovič's government, established in March, has announced the abolition of this regulation. Relations with Ukraine have been strained since 2017, but after the start of the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky, the high-level dialogue has intensified. Hungary has, in turn, arranged relations with Serbia because of the political closeness of Orbán and President Aleksandar Vucić and the rather small Hungarian minority living mainly in the multinational Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

Romania is a special case because of the more than 1.2 million Hungarians living there. According to its constitution, this state is a "single and indivisible nation-state". Both this fact and the traditional opposition of the Romanian elite mean that taking up the subject of the autonomy of Szeklerland, an area where Hungarians constitute over 70% of the population, as a political programme has no chance of success. At the same time, autonomy, similar to the models adopted in the EU, is supported by almost all political forces in Hungary. Therefore, the relations of this minority with the Romanian state are marked by mutual distrust. It is deepened by nationalist gestures from the governments of both countries, exacerbating the situation of minorities.

Conclusions. The Hungarian society's emotional approach to the effects of Trianon does not mean supporting revisionism. Although official memory policy refers to this idea and uses it for internal political purposes, it does not translate into a political programme to change current borders. This is also confirmed by the new Hungarian security strategy, which underlines Hungary's respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. The experience of millions of Hungarians after Trianon—the necessity to leave the fatherland or live in minority—did not contribute to the formulation of Fidesz policies more favourable to refugees or the Roma minority.

Because of the few million Hungarians living in states neighbouring with Hungary, the memory of Trianon will affect bilateral relations with these countries for a long time. However, the nature of these relationships largely depends on current political interests, not the policy towards the Hungarian minority. Evidence of that is the very good Hungarian-Slovak relations, the improvement of which was largely facilitated by V4 membership.

Currently, Hungary has the worst political relations with Romania among its neighbours. There are no prospects for improvement, as both sides use this dispute in domestic politics. Also, there are few positive examples of Hungarian-Romanian institutional cooperation in Transylvania. However, this does not preclude multilateral cooperation in Central Europe, the strengthening of which Hungary has declared as a goal. For both Hungary and Romania, pragmatic cooperation is a necessity because of the importance of bilateral economic relations—Romania is Hungary's third-largest market while Hungary is Romania's fourth-largest export market.

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