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## **Multifaced Hungarian Kin-State Activism in Szeklerland: Rebuilding the Last 'Nation' Through Restorative Nostalgia and Lieux de Mémoire**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the cultural dynamics of Fidesz's kin-state policies achieved in Romania between 2015 and 2020, particularly in the enclave of Szeklerland. In recent years, Fidesz's external policies constructed a transborder "synthetic home" connected to Hungary by memory spaces. Consequently, this study investigates how the ethnocultural reproduction and redefinition of the Hungarian heritage in Romania has evolved under these influences. To understand Fidesz's ethnic parallelism, this article studies Fidesz's overseas financial assistance for Hungarian cultural heritage and the actions of long-distance Hungarian nationalists from Romania. By analysing the lieux de mémoire from Szeklerland and the activities of political agents, this paper reveals how public spaces are nationalised under a Hungarian identity. This paper also shows that the dialectic of lieux, in the case of minorities separated from their homeland, features both a restorative process and commemorative rhetoric of a positive past. Finally, this paper reveals that lieux de mémoire are instrumental when synthetically reconstructing the lost home through religious and nationalist revivals.

**Keywords:** *kin-state policy; memory sites; Szeklerland; Romania; minorities;*

## Introduction

Kin-state policies have redefined the ethnopolitics of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) after the fall of communism. After some post-communist countries entered the European Union (EU), most wanted to reconnect with their ethnic kin from neighbouring countries. Hereafter, scholars studied the development of kin-state policies (Butler, 2007; Horvath, 2008; Waterbury, 2008). The effects of the new kin-state policies changed the ethno-demography for most CEE countries (Dumbrava, 2017, 2019) and reconfigured the ideas of nationalism (Jajecznik et al., 2015). For example, several countries on the EU's periphery engaged with kin-state policies. Romania pursued a somewhat expensive dual-citizenship policy in the Republic of Moldova, which eventually drew criticism from the EU (Culic, 2013; Udrea, 2015). In the Baltics, Russian kin-state policies transformed the role of Russian minorities and their participation in democratic procedures (Agarin, 2017; Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019). Similarly, the transformation of kin-state politics brought extensive legislative changes in the Balkans – a milieu haunted by the spectre of interethnic war (Caspersen, 2007; Petsinis, 2013). Notwithstanding the positive aspects achieved by ethnic minorities in the post-EU accession period (Mole, 2012), kin-state politics can cause destabilising effects vis-à-vis interethnic relations and diminish good neighbourly relations (Liebich, 2019).

Nevertheless, as kin-states reach across the border to expand the acquisition of citizenship and financial help to ethnic kin, scholars identified the emergence of the phenomenon of majority-minorities (c.f. Csörgő, 2002; Knott, 2015b, p. 833). For instance, such dynamics can be encountered in the ethnic historical enclave of Szeklerland in Romania. Therein, the ethnic kin bonded through what scholars argue to be “kin-state's transborder nationalism” (Csörgő & Goldgeier, 2001, 2004), with particular effects for the everyday life amongst the people of an enclave. Such developments have been theorised in the literature as *everyday nationalism*, as it is something with which ordinary people engage (Knott, 2015a, p. 2).

Conceptually, everyday nationalism in transborder settings revolves around national identity, as it seeks to “understand familiar expressions of national culture and sources of identification” (Edensor, 2002, p. 187). Aside from local customs, language, and identity, everyday nationalism, according to Skey (2011, pp. 11–33) is reproduced in the everyday practices and experiences of nationhood. Specifically, Skey contends that, through spatial, temporal, cultural, political, and self/other, the nation is expressed in terms of territory,

articulated through daily rituals, and provides a sense of difference between people. As symbols and rituals confirm the community's identity, the memories and mythologies which are attached to those items of everyday nationalism reproduce the nation.

Brubaker et al. (2018, pp. 91–97), reviewed the importance of monuments, statues, and ceremonial rituals as expressions of ‘triumphalist Hungarian nationalism’ in Transylvania before 2011. This study aims to build on this by offering a contrasting perspective of Hungarian nationalism reflected in the mnemonic artefacts built during the reign of Hungary's hegemonic party of the last decade, Fidesz. No other country has developed its kin-state activism more than Hungary in this period (Pogonyi, 2017a). These developments have been achieved under Fidesz, which has emerged as a mnemonic regime maker (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014). Its activities have been tailored to capitalise on Hungary's traumatic relationship with the past. The transition of Fidesz from a centre-right party to a nationalist-populist one (c.f. Palonen, 2018; Waterbury, 2020) has, to a degree, also been abetted by memory politics (Toomey, 2018).

After instrumentalising the memory of Communism domestically (Benazzo, 2017), Fidesz shifted towards highlighting the memory of Trianon both domestically and abroad (Feischmidt, 2020). These changes brought transborder Hungarians back into Hungarian politics and revived the nexus between Hungary as an external homeland, the neighbouring nation-states (Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Ukraine), and the Hungarian minorities (Brubaker, 1996). In time, Fidesz's kin-state policy shifted from citizenship to redefining the Hungarian cultural heritage. Both mechanisms aided Fidesz when building a Hungarian parallel world abroad (Kiss, 2015). Consequently, it helped Fidesz gain several seats during two parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2018.

Unlike scholarship that focused on citizenship policies (Pogonyi, 2017b, 2018), this article profiles Hungarian kin-state activism in Romania through the prism of Hungarian cultural heritage. Thus, the study asks how do kin-states (alongside all their other issue areas – education, culture, etc.) get involved with supporting ethnic kin's lieux de mémoire to foster a synthetic reconstruction of the lost homeland? The thesis refers to the manner in which Hungarian kin-state activism synthetically reconstructs the lost ‘home’ through a mixture of memory places that convey religious and nationalist revivals.

The study adopts a mnemonic perspective provided by the school of the sociology of memory. The latter draws on the works of Svetlana Boym's concept of *restorative nostalgia* (2001) and Pierre Nora on *lieux de mémoire* (1989). Henceforth, lieux de mémoire are used in

this paper interchangeably as *memory spaces* or *places* to avoid conceptual misperception. Following Nora, spaces are “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (1997, p. 7). Specifically, the spaces analysed are monuments, cemeteries, museums, statues, anniversaries, institutions, natural landscapes, and traditions due to their iconic importance for a group's memory (Berkes, 2018, p. 48). Related to the collective memory of communities, such places foster a collective remembrance of a lost period, territory, and of a golden age. The community reflected by Nora is the Hungarian community in Romania whose remembrance of a Greater Hungary is determined by spaces that narrate a nostalgic story during their everyday lived experiences.

Restorative nostalgia refers to “the desire or the promise of an agent to rebuild a lost home” (Boym, 2001, p. 14). Nora and Boym’s theories help this paper to consider how Fidesz has restored the collective remembrance of the Hungarian minorities via artifacts and commemorations that hark back to the Greater Hungary period. Put briefly, restorative nostalgia is here understood as the platform upon which spaces are given specific dialectics of remembering to suit the needs of an agent. Such mnemonic actions and policymaking have granted Fidesz a monopoly over local politics. This study argues that Hungary’s shift from pursuing citizenship policies to preserving the Hungarian cultural heritage has strategic importance. The process aims to cast Fidesz as the mnemonic hegemon that synthetically rebuilds the lost home to regenerate the special moments before 1920.

The article has three goals. *The first aim is to understand how Fidesz's policies have gradually changed the mnemonic narratives in the Hungarian communities from Romania.* The study proposes as its empirical case the enclave of Szeklerland – one which maintains a special meaning in the Hungarian folklore (Szedlacsek, 2015). Thus, by analysing the places from Szeklerland, this study identifies different narrative patterns endorsed by the Hungarian government. Fidesz's transnational memory is aided by what this study sees as *long-distance nationalists* (Anderson, 1992; Skrbiš, 2017). The latter are defined as ethnic kin whose demands and sets of practices are interrelated with the historical narratives and political processes of its kin-state vis-à-vis the belonging in an ancestral nation (Schiller, 2005, pp. 570–571). Some examples of this are the president of the Kovászna county council, Tamás Sándor, or the former pastor and Fidesz-listed MP from Romania, László Tőkés. These long-distance nationalists narrate Fidesz's hegemonic version of history and establish, by implication, the party as the legitimate actor in Szeklerland, outclassing other political elites.



*The second aim refers to restorative nostalgia.* Memory is a process dependent on incorporating symbols that narrate a selective history. This article sheds light on how restorative nostalgia is included in spaces to narrate the space and time of Greater Hungary, i.e., Fidesz's exported lieux de mémoire.

*The third aim is mnemonic polarization brought by the kin-state's focus on specific mnemonic policies.* Abroad, "disputed memories" between the majority and minority (Giordano, 2008) and "polarization of memory cultures" (Pető, 2017, p. 43) create tensions and conflicts (Knott, 2015b, p. 830). Because of these processes, I argue that policies that deal with spaces and restorative nostalgia can produce controversies. Specific places, which exclude history's objectiveness, instead rely on seeding emotions into new hegemonic narratives. Such processes lead to a polarisation of memory cultures and increase the social cleavages between the majority and minority.

This paper contributes to the literature on memory studies, kin-state activism, and everyday nationalism in CEE with a fresh interpretation vis-à-vis the role played by mnemonic artefacts in what this study calls 'the synthetic reconstruction of the nation'. By investigating Fidesz's mnemonic reproduction of memory in Szeklerland, this work compares the narrative patterns employed in these artefacts with other studies relating to Fidesz's right wing and populist hegemony (Brubaker et al., 2018).

Structurally, this paper considers six key aspects. First, this study looks at how kin-state activism (Pogonyi, 2017b; Waterbury, 2010) and its change to memory politics (Feischmidt, 2020). To determine the aim of kin-state activism, Brubaker's definition of kin-minority (1996) and Smith's take on the nation (1999) are explored. Second, this paper explains how restorative nostalgia (2001) and spaces interrelate in order to grasp the mnemonic purposes of Fidesz's concept of 'nation/lost home.' Third, this study explains the mythologised importance of Szeklerland in Fidesz's memory politics and then describes the sequence of how the party is synthetically reconstructing the lost home via religious and nationalist processes. Lastly, the conclusions of this study are presented.

### **1. Kin-state activism and ethnic kin**

Kin-state activism has been scrutinised through different lenses in CEE (Pogonyi, 2017b; Waterbury, 2008, 2010). Given its territorial redistribution after the world wars and communism, CEE is a fertile milieu for kin-state activism, nationalism, and national identity-building. In CEE, Hungary is considered the kin-state pioneer (Pogonyi, 2017a). *Kin-state*

*activism* is defined by Waterbury (2014, p. 36) as “actions to engage and protect the so-called ethnic kin-communities in neighbouring or nearby states.” Elsewhere, Waterbury (2010, p. 10) groups kin-state action into three categories: “political-legal (diplomatic advocacy), cultural (funding external kin community organizations and developing educational and cultural institutions), and symbolic (offering full or limited forms of citizenship).”

This study focuses on the cultural aspect of kin-state activism and its implications for local politics. Kin-state politics, policies, and activism are synonymous, but for the sake of conceptual clarity, this study utilises *kin-state activism* to incorporate its holistic dimension. Correspondingly, when speaking about kin-state activism, it is necessary to comprehend what *kin-minority* entails. Thus, in the words of Rogers Brubaker, a kin-minority is:

not simply a group that is given by the facts of ethnic demography. It is a dynamic political stance, [...] with three characteristics that state (1) the public claim to membership of an ethnocultural nation different from the numerically or politically dominant nation; (2) the demand for state recognition of this distinct ethnocultural nationality, and (3) the assertion, based on this ethnocultural nationality, of certain collective cultural or political rights (1996, p. 60).

Similarly, but restricted to the notion of minority, Kymlicka (1995, p. 19) defines it as “distinct and potentially self-governing societies incorporated into a larger state.” Although some sources have used “external minorities” (Wolff, 2002), this study adheres to Brubaker's conceptualisation, as it mirrors Hungary's historical past and its recent kin-state activism. Kin-minority will be referred hereafter as *ethnic kin*.

Furthermore, much of Hungary's procedures have focused on “the expansion of mobilization resources supportive of minority's political goals” (Waterbury, 2017, p. 228). Scholars who have analysed the political transition of Fidesz claim that the incentive which propelled the party to the forefront of Hungarian politics is its yearning to “restore the national unity broken from the 1920 Trianon Treaty [...] and to redefine the Hungarian nationhood” (Pogonyi, 2017a, pp. 83–86). Literature on kin-state activism suggests separating this concept according to a tripartite typology: *nationalist*, *geopolitical*, and *normative* (Sabanadze, 2006, p. 248). Thus, Hungary would fit into the *nationalist* classification, as its undercurrents (e.g., bonding with transborder Hungarians, use of nationalist symbols, the undoing of Trianon, etc.) are generated by its domestic and transborder proactive politics.

In terms of mnemonic policies, Trianon is an integral part of Hungarian politics

(Miklóssy & Nyssönen, 2018). Fidesz's kin-state activism has been influenced by the above memory, “as the issue of Hungarian minorities abroad has been perceived as a living and fundamental subject deserving full interest” (Benazzo, 2017, p. 210). Consequently, Fidesz shifted its policies by “officially embracing the Trianon trauma after 2010” (Feischmidt, 2020, p. 132). Since then, the Hungarian government behaved like a “memory regime” (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014) and endorsed projects that deal with the memory of Trianon (Pető, 2017). Having successfully fostered a new hegemonic narrative concerning Hungary's history domestically, Fidesz looked abroad to replicate the process and establish itself as the political hegemon in the areas of ethnic kin. The new mnemonic policies and financial measures made Fidesz “the best legitimate political actor that can restore Hungary's sovereignty” (Benazzo, 2017, p. 199), albeit a synthetic reconstruction of the Hungarian nation.

Therefore, it is important to ask whether only the financial aid provided by Fidesz reaped the electoral benefits or if it was also the mnemonic component that gained the trust of the ethnic kin. If so, how does kin-state activism become involved with supporting the ethnic kin's cultural heritage? First, I identify the spaces (e.g., churches, places of pilgrimage, etc.) as an essential element in Fidesz's restorative nostalgia in order to understand these dynamics. Following this, I examine the mythological components of the ethnic kin incorporated into the nation-building process. Below, I look at the concept of places and argue that its dynamics are essential in the interrelation between kin-state and ethnic kin. These underline the meaning-makings of the national myth of Greater Hungary, i.e., the lost home.

## **2. Lieux de mémoire and restorative nostalgia**

History is no longer recollected in a tangible place. Instead, it is assembled by memory sites. Nora formulated the concept of *lieux de mémoire* (1986). The space is “the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (Nora, 1989, p. 7). Memory gives meaning to a specific representation of history in the present. For Nora, memory is a living phenomenon generated by a given society. Nora argues that memory “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (1989, p. 8). For this article's scope, the dialectic property of remembering is relevant. This article uses memory and remembrance concomitantly to avoid confusion, as both are the same process (c.f. Rigney, 2018).

This study envisions memory as a flourishing and perpetual process, whereby “the public indulges in remembrance, or for those who have no personal memory of that period, in the construction of memory” (Carrier, 2000, p. 38). By constructing memories, the process binds specific groups to a story (Berkes, 2018, p. 47). While being collectively remembered, the values of a given memory are spread and preserved around a community (Nora, 1989, p. 7). In this process, the importance attributed to memory provides dialectic significance to something material. For example, Resnik (2003) argues that Holocaust sites have shaped national memory in the education system in Israel. Elsewhere, Ochman (2010) showed that Soviet war memorials affected Poland's identity processes, and Derderian (2002) profiles post-colonial Algeria as a *lieu de mémoire*.

Nonetheless, there is a distinction worth mentioning between memory and space (c.f. Legg, 2005). While memory “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (Nora, 1989, p. 7), the places are the “embodiment of memorial consciousness” (1989, p. 12). That is why Wood defines spaces as “quintessentially symbolic (whatever form they assume), a product of human or temporal agency, and comprise the bedrock of a community's symbolic repertoire” (1994, p. 124). It is these spaces that, while offering “cultural support for a particular collective memory” (Carrier, 2000, p. 39), its dialectic and identity purposes underline a “commemorative rhetoric” that laments a lost home (Hutton, 1993, pp. 4–5).

In connection, Boym (2001, p. 18) claims that *restorative nostalgia*, through its agents, aims to reconstruct the lost home, often associated with religious or nationalist revivals. Boym's argument echoes the illiberal politics of populists such as Viktor Orbán of Hungary. Such restorative populists, who are willing to look back to the past when building their spaces, are “mythmakers and architects, builders of monuments and founders of nationalist political projects” (Applebaum, 2020, p. 74). Hence, Feischmidt (2020, p. 131) agrees that “memory propels new forms of nationalism.” Nostalgia conveniently constructs a restorative dynamic for a space that gives sense to historical continuity, which was otherwise discontinued by historical factors (Carrier, 2000, p. 42).

In the realm of political studies, Anthony Smith also argues that, when configuring a nation's sense, it is important to look at “the role of the past in the creation of the present” (1999, p. 180). The place's mnemonic significance defined the identity of the kin by connecting and sometimes transferring the historical past symbolically into the present. Nora argues that “every social minority, every established group [...] learned the need to go in search of its own

origins and identity” (1989, p. 15). Once the ensemble of collective memories defines the shared identity of the minority, the group embarks on the restorative and protective processes of the memory, either by building sites or writing about the history of the group. Hence, “it is not by accident,” argues Berkes (2018, p. 48) that “especially national and ethnic minorities defend a privileged memory and more generally their identity through lieux de mémoire.”

Thus, in order to recollect memories important for their collective identity, one can look at the spaces as institutional settings, made by a particular minority or in partnership with a kin-state. The place’s purpose is for both the minority and the kin-state to remember a specific history. For many minorities in CEE, the twentieth century changed everything as soon as the twilight of great empires became a reality. Consider the Trianon treaty from 1920 and its effects on Hungary's population (Macartney, 1968). Those who were once residents of their respective nations later become minorities in other countries, separated from their homeland. In this context, the construction of spaces provided a connection to the positive past, unaffected by traumas that implied a nation's partition. Scholars consider Trianon as the “lieu de mémoire for the Hungarian nation” (Feischmidt, 2020, p. 136). Others (c.f. Kovács, 2016; Menyhért, 2016) attest that the Trianon is a national trauma in the Hungarian consciousness.

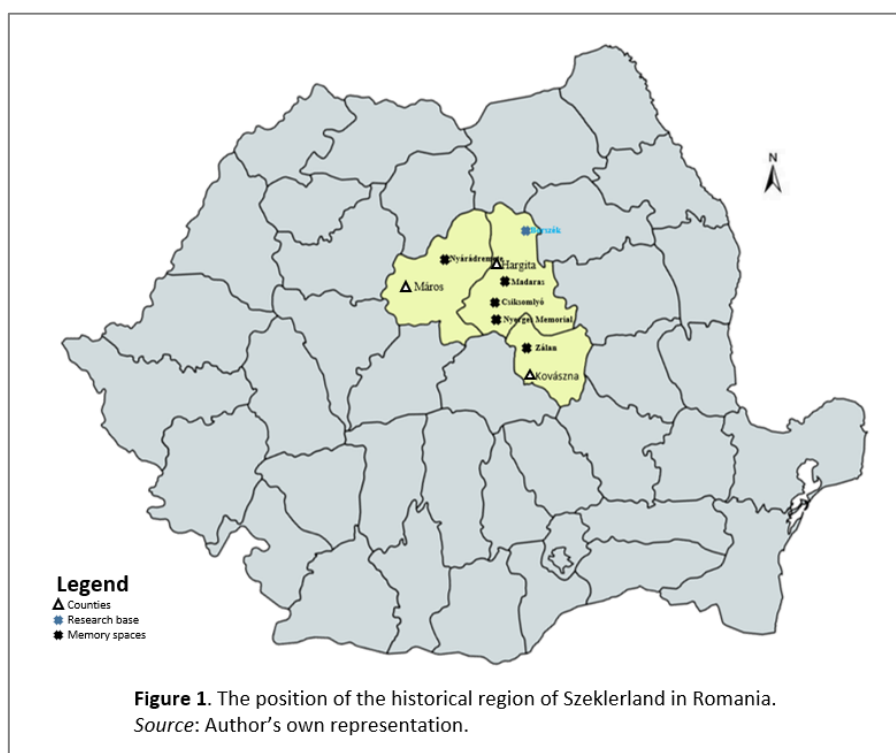
Overall, memory practices shape CEE’s state politics. To better emphasise the role of memory within Fidesz's kin-state activism, this study suggests the region of Szeklerland as an appropriate milieu. Therein, Fidesz's kin-state activism cultivated a sense of Hungarian identity to combat decreasing demographics, assimilation by the host country, and preserve its electorate. But before discussing this, I will briefly outline the methodology of this study.

### **3. Methodology**

This study combines mixed data collection methods and analyses in this anthropological endeavour. The information gathering for this study was conducted in three counties in Szeklerland (i.e., Máros, Kovászna, and Hargita<sup>1</sup>) between September and November 2020. In addition, during the first trip to the region, I conducted participatory observation at the Szeklerland Festival (8-18 October 2020) and around Szeklerland to see how people interact with their mnemonic milieu. In total, approximately seven hundred kilometres were traversed between the three counties to investigate memory sites, and around 100 pictures were taken during the trips.

Participatory observation served as the primary tool when gathering material during my trips across the Szeklerland. In addition, I conducted several informal discussions with the

locals in their naturalistic day-to-day environment. The base of my operations was Borszék, a peripheral town in Harghita county (see Figure 1, which also shows some memory sites). I drove throughout the localities where memory sites were built or renovated during Fidesz's tenure. A catalogue with tourist sites of these three counties made by the county councils served as the blueprint. In this regard, important remarks could be made about the parameters used when selecting places for this study.



Thus, most memory spaces existed in Szeklerland prior to Fidesz becoming a political hegemon. Memory spaces such as statues, museums, places of pilgrimage and churches like Csiksomlyó (see Figure 1) were preserved in time by the ethnic kin and already had a vital role in the communities. Later, many existing and new places were amplified by the Orbán regime. To these spaces, Fidesz later added new mnemonics to stimulate the remembrance – i.e., Greater Hungary – that it wishes to be associated with its ideological platform. However, there are also other spaces selected herein that were constructed entirely during Fidesz times, such as the Zalan monument, which incorporates all of the mnemonic elements added to or used in previously constructed memory spaces. Overall, Fidesz added new elements or constructed new spaces in settings such as churchyards, village squares, or institutions where collective remembrance occurs and the mental narrative reconstructs the lost home, the same mnemonic endeavour with which Fidesz wants to be associated.

Moreover, this study has drawn on multiple conversations with ethnic Hungarians to inquire about the nature of the sites and their overall meaning for the community. These conversations and the author's general observations serve as the backbone of this research. However, because of COVID-19 and the high incidence of cases in the three counties in November, this research was interrupted in December 2020.

Methodologically speaking, to assert the main thesis of this project, i.e., that the synthetic reconstruction of the lost home is achieved through religious and nationalist revivals, this study used documents from the Bethlen Gabor Foundation vis-à-vis church reconstructions from 2015 to 2020 to understand which parishes in Szeklerland benefited from the funds. Analytically, based on the framework advanced by Rigney (2018) of qualitative datasets that encompass the social context, this study has adopted an interpretative analysis whereby the foci – i.e. ethnic minorities – live alongside places constructed on their behalf by agents or at their behest.

As with other recent studies (Pinho dos Santos, 2021), this investigation faced challenges related to the researcher's nature in Szeklerland. This, ultimately, can be categorised as one of this research project's weakness. The researcher's Romanian ethnicity was, in some cases, problematic, as some people refused to talk and even asked, "Why are you researching Szeklerland?". However, as these attitudes were expected, several strategies were considered to mitigate the overall limitations of this research. First, Hungarian language ability was developed in order to communicate with the locals. Second, the researcher often enlisted the help of the mayoral office or that of the local librarians for introductions to their community. For instance, the researcher had to disclose the study before a commission before the mayor of Borszék offered his endorsement. Knowing that some localities from Szeklerland might be sceptical of academic studies, this investigation did not disclose its purpose unless trust between the locals and the researcher was established. Usually, such trust was consolidated after longer periods of accommodation in several communities across a region that is so cherished by its people. But what makes Szeklerland important for Hungarian kin-state activism? Next, I consider the mythology and history of this region.

#### **4. Szeklerland: the mythologised space**

The Szeklerland region comprises three counties, i.e., Máros, Kovászna, and Hargita, predominantly inhabited by ethnic Hungarians. At Trianon in 1920, along with Transylvania, it became part of Romania. Ever since, the Trianon treaty has become a hotly contested topic



for all parties involved in the triadic nexus (Brubaker, 1996). Historically, within the framework of this nexus, the agencies of all representatives manifested their own set of demands and claims which clashed over the belonging of Transylvania; and, in other words, Szeklerland. For instance, after Romania became a communist satellite, its nationalism crystalised during the Ceausescu regime (Verdery, 1991). Romanian nationalism perceived Transylvania and Szeklerland as part of its ancestral land dating back to the Roman conquest of Dacia.

Conversely, Hungarian right-wing nationalism rejected Romania's claim over its ancestry, claiming that the Árpád clan conquered the Carpathian basin and integrated the region in the early Principality of Hungary (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century) and later in the Kingdom of Hungary (10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century) (Kowalczyk, 2017). Additionally, nationalist symbolism devised during this time, i.e., the Turul bird, strengthened the mythology of belonging in the Hungarian consciousness (Ádám & Bozóki, 2016; Bozóki, 2017). The symbolism of the bird of prey claimed Hungarian dominance over the shadow, i.e., land, cast by the open wings.

In contrast to the two main actors, the Szeklers regarded Hungary as “a tool for instrumentalizing local autonomy within Romania” (Szedlacsek, 2015, p. 41) in the aftermath of Trianon and communism. Historically, Szeklers were the frontier's guards, which “entitled them to receive special privileges” (Biborka, 2020, p. 26). After Trianon, they became the “largest and most politically mobilized national minority in Eastern Europe” (Knott, 2015b, p. 832). Later, their ancestral mythology became even more important to the increasingly nationalist-populist party Fidesz. Overall, the dynamics between these forces constitute a milieu in which mnemonic claims can be a source of conflict, especially in the age of national populism (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

After Fidesz dominated Hungarian politics by exploiting the memory of communism in 2010-2011, the party adopted Trianon as its nation-building leitmotif (Benazzo, 2017). Much of the Hungarian mnemonic repertoire and policies are focused on regions lost in 1920 “to recover the national unity through a re-enactment of a mythical past” (Feischmidt, 2020, p. 132). The enclave holds a special place in Hungarian right-wing mythology as these were “the first settlers to colonise Transylvania before the Magyar conquest” (Szedlacsek, 2015, p. 42). Likewise, the right-wing nationalists proclaimed that the true and pure Hungarian identity can still be encountered in this mythical area (Kurti, 2001). Therein, cultural sites and the keeping of rich tradition still narrate the past.

In the realm of political science, Anthony Smith called such practices “sites of cultural resistance” (1993, p. 66). The latter are symbolic and artistic practices that challenge the dominant interpretation of history and mythology by constructing a different understanding of a disputed space. For example, the Úzvölgy cemetery from Bacau county is a contemporary disputed space by ethnic Hungarians and Romanians who have different understandings of the space that commemorates World War I soldiers. Returning to the past, after 1920, both the status of the Szeklers and the symbolism of their places were kept alive by memory artifacts (Szedlacsek, 2015). Over a century, the Szekler identity was preserved by monuments and memorials inside churches and plaques in villages due to fear of repression (Bucur, 2010). After communism, scholars argue that as soon as the practice of cultivating memory sites was augmented, minority claims increased, especially under Fidesz (Bochsler & Szöcsik, 2013; Szedlacsek, 2015).

Such nationalist practices might have echoed Fidesz's policies. No sooner had the party cloaked itself as an illiberal actor than the mythology and memory sites were incorporated into the nation-building programme of Fidesz (Feischmidt, 2020). Such constitutive elements might have resonated with the populist-nationalist platform of Fidesz, which already fostered a mentality that promised a future which would look like the past, especially for the displaced Hungarians. Karen Barkey (2000) suggests that ethnic kin are considered and used as proof of the national myth. The historic status and situation of Szeklers and the rest of the Hungarian minorities might have justified Fidesz's nationalism as part of its state policies towards providing and taking care of its displaced minorities.

However, according to Waterbury (2021, p. 45), Hungary's “policy justification for providing funds for economic and [cultural] development strengthened the identity of the Hungarian living abroad [...] fewer people would leave from the linguistic and ancient territory.” This is why the alleged shift from citizenship to cultural policies attempted, as this paper argues, to build Fidesz's space – i.e., the lost home of Greater Hungary – on what could be the platform of restorative nostalgia. In the words of Boym, “the past became ‘heritage’” (2001, p. 40), and the means to protect the heritage of the last home is through religious and nationalist revivals. Next, this study will look at how the kin-state's lieux became replicated through religious and nationalist revivals.

## **5. The incentives to reconstruct the lieux, the lost home**

One of the cornerstones of nationalist-populist movements is the revitalisation of the past when

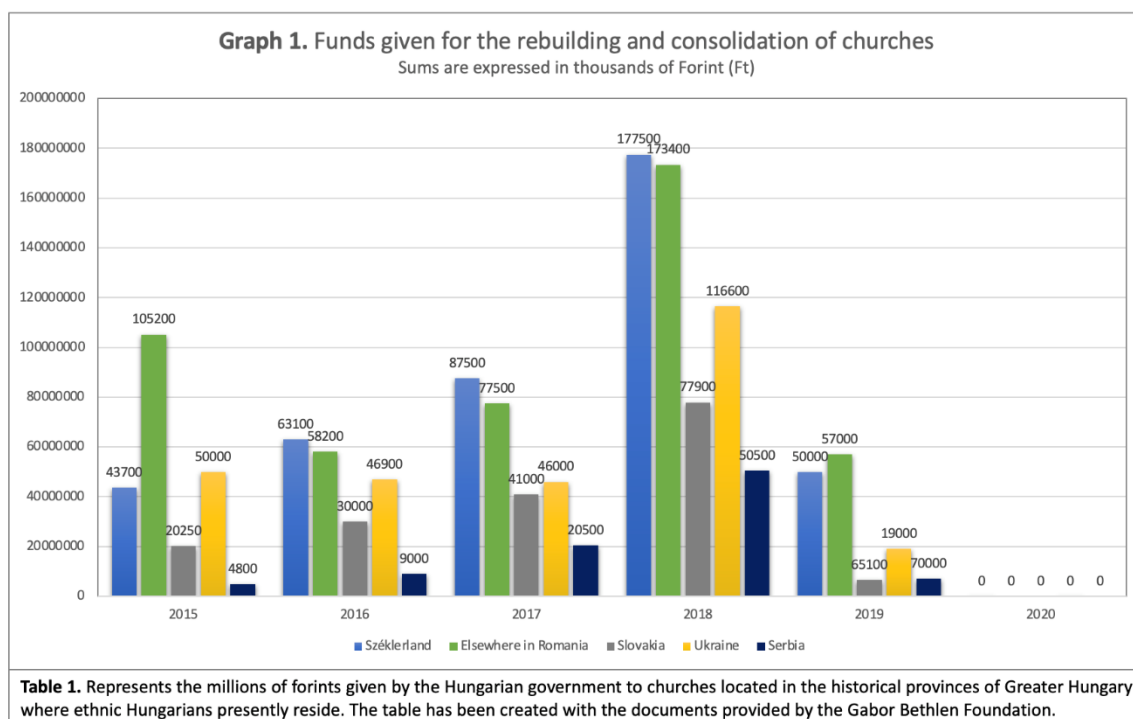
shaping the social fabric of the present and future. The main tenet behind Fidesz's strategy is summarised by the words of Boym, "the return to origins [...] it is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding" (2001, p. 14). Thus, the means to reconstruct the places is through religious and nationalist revivals that outline national memory and national identity. The interest in reconstructing the space lies at the crossroads of what Nora argues as being "where memory crystallizes at a particular historical moment, a turning point where the consciousness of a break with the past" (1989, p. 7). Thus, for Fidesz's political project, the representation of time and space is vital because "memory [forms] in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists" (Nora, 1989, p. 7). Consequently, this paper will now look at the religious and nationalist revivals to outline how Fidesz's sense of history is preserved via spaces.

### ***5.1 The religious revival***

Between its victories in the 2014 and the 2018 elections, Fidesz progressively invested in Hungarian cultural heritage, especially in the rebuilding and consolidating of churches from the Carpathian basin. Not considering the religious denomination of the ethnic Hungarians, the funds were attributed to Catholic, Protestant, and Unionist parishes. While the bulk of funds were given to parishes from Hungary, hundreds of millions of forints were given to districts from neighbouring countries, primarily to Romania.

As shown in Graph 1, the overall funds show a gradual increase in money given to parishes from the neighbouring countries. If, in 2016 and 2019, the funds dwindled, in 2015, 2017, and especially in 2018, the funds increased significantly. However, as indicated by Graph 1, the reduction of funds does not occur in Szeklerland in the years mentioned above, rather showing a gradual increase in funds in 2015-2018. In 2019, the funds for Szeklerland decreased almost to the level of 2015. In 2020, the Bethlen Gabor Foundation only distributed six billion forints to parishes from Hungary; hence the numbers for diaspora are zero. Some explanations may provide context to this issue; in late 2019, Fidesz divested its investments to the entrepreneurial and agricultural sectors in Transylvania by vastly subsidising young ethnic Hungarian entrepreneurs (Akos, 2020). Moreover, Fidesz's finances focused on reducing the decreasing Hungarian demographics by providing substantial family support schemes. Consequently, GDP in Hungary decreased, as it was also impacted significantly by the COVID-19 crisis (The World Bank, 2022).

Returning to the chart, Szeklerland – primarily composed of Protestant and Unionist parishes, unlike Catholic Transylvania – received 421,800,000 forints (Ft), approximately 1,193,000 euros in funds from the Hungarian government. Although dwarfed by the funds given to parishes from Transylvania in 2015, 2016, 2017, and especially in 2018, the funds allocated to Szeklerland are higher than elsewhere in Romania. One reason for this allocation might be Fidesz’s consideration for Hungarian homogeneity in Szeklerland, compared to cities like Kolozsvár, where ethnic Hungarians coexist with ethnic Romanians and are a minority. Therefore, by investing more in the enclave, Fidesz has not only increased its political foothold, but also conveyed its commitment to preserving Hungarian cultural heritage in places where Hungarians are the majority.



In 2018, the funds given to Szeklerland reached their highest peak, i.e., 177,750,000 Ft, approximately 500,000 euros. Also noticeable are the increases for the other locations where ethnic Hungarians reside. Altogether, in 2018, the funds attributed to Romania alone are approximately 1,000,000 euros. These substantial investments could be the result of two events and could correspondingly be interpreted twofold. First, on 8 April 2018, Hungary held its parliamentary elections, which Fidesz won by a landslide. The Hungarian diaspora secured 96% of the vote for Fidesz, whereas the opposition received below 1%. Compared to 2014, the greatest achievement was to fragment the trust of the diaspora in the opposition and secure for all parties, including Jobbik.

Second, the significant budgets allocated to parishes in 2018 coincide with Romania's centenary – the moment in history when Romania acquired Transylvania. Thus, while 2018 marks the host country's centenary, the kin-state sought to contest the history and oppose the significance of the event by supporting the Hungarian cultural heritage to diminish the effects of the trauma. A century after the minority has been separated from the kin-state, both the former and the latter find meaning in the spaces that safeguard the memory of the time both used to inhabit. Namely, the kin-state actions mark “the nostalgic desire to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time” (Boym, 2001, p. 13). The 2018 expenditures from Szeklerland, and other parts, might be Fidesz's attempt to reinvigorate the selective memory that pins down its version of history. Thus, selective memories become one of the leitmotifs of “kin-state transborder nationalism” (Csergo & Goldgeier, 2001, 2004). For Fidesz, synthetically reinstituting a future that will look like the past of the lost home, i.e., *Greater Hungary* is dependent on elements of a nationalist revival that complements the religious one.

## 5.2 Nationalist revival

Greater Hungary is a recurrent theme in the nationalist process of Fidesz. For instance, Orbán has published pictures of the Greater Hungary map on his Facebook account several times (Walker, 2020), irking Hungary's neighbours. These discourses were interpreted as Hungarian revisionism (Barberá, 2020). Fidesz employed the map as part of its restorative nostalgia. Its nostalgia is what Boym argues to be “longing for a place and yearning for a different time” (Boym, 2001, p. 15).

Thus, the restorative nostalgia, according to Fidesz, is embodied by the representation of Greater Hungary – a model that depicted time and space anew, which bypassed the *fait accompli* of history. The institutionalised character of Fidesz's memory is symbolically reversing the fading nature of Trianon's centenary (c.f. Feischmidt, 2020). Fidesz revitalised its nation-building process through a mixture of commemorative actions and places that reconstructed the time and space in the present according to its version of history – one seeking to become hegemonic.

Edkins explored state-backed memory processes and traumatic events (in Legg, 2005, p. 496). Edkins revealed that state-backed mnemonic strategies aim to commemorate specific periods while also proposing a dominant memory. By extending this analysis towards Fidesz's *modus operandi*, one can acknowledge that Fidesz wanted to appear as a symbolic nation-



builder, redrawing the borders of the Hungarian nation according to its perceived sense of history. Fidesz relied on both existing and new places to replicate its hegemonic historical account for its nation-building process. Both repaired the finality of history for the ethnic kin, commemorated the historic place that now separated ethnic kin from the homeland, and promoted Fidesz's hegemonic status as the contemporary Hungarian nation-maker.

Thus, this study proposes a tripartite taxonomy for the nationalist revival when looking at the spaces altered by Fidesz's symbolism or that were built or renovated during its time. First, I look at the *sacred character of the place* and provide arguments about how the nationalist revival is intertwined with the Church's property and service. Second, I look at the *mythological character of the space* to underline the need for meaning-making of Hungarian national identity. Third, I look at the *mnemonic aspect of the place* and argue that its purpose is to mitigate the trauma and provide a remedy by narrating the story before the trauma in the everyday life of the people. Overall, the tripartite taxonomy of places reveals how space and time are bundled together to augment the ethnic kin's everyday nationalism.

#### 5.2.1 *The sacred character of the space*

Chronicled in 1333, Csiksomlyó became a pilgrimage site in 1567, after the Szeklers defeated the Hungarian forces who tried to convert them to Catholicism from Protestantism on the Saturday before Pentecost. Since then, the Szeklers have attributed their victory to the Virgin Mary. Long before Fidesz emerged, Csiksomlyó was the most important space of remembrance for the Szekler identity. After Fidesz appeared in politics, the symbolism of the place was



**Image 1** – The Chapel of the Holy Crown opposite the Cathedral of Csiksomlyó seen from the neighboring hill. Source: author

coincidentally altered by Fidesz's mnemonic elements. These narrated another story that overlapped the meaning of the space with Fidesz's perspective on history and belonging.

Across from the cathedral, which is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, there is a monument on a small hill that counters and exploits the religious symbolism of Csíksomlyó to narrate another history. Though unknown to many until recently, the small rounded dome which overlooks the valley is supported by wooden beams, specific to Szekler tradition, upon which the sun and moon symbols (which appear on the Szekler flag) are carved. Inside the dome-shaped site, there is a statue of the Virgin Mary with an iron crown on her head. There, the Virgin Mary is seated on a stone outlining the shape of a Greater Hungary map.

Called the Chapel of the Holy Crown, the site is dedicated to commemorating the space and time of Greater Hungary alongside the grounds of one of the most important Szekler places, i.e., the cathedral. The space, built on Church property, evokes what Boym argues a restorative nostalgia that is “reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time” (2001, p. 51). The place's narratives create a sense of continuity between the national past and future as its “everyday practices generate the sense of



**Image 2** – Inside the Chapel of the Holy Crown depicting a shrine of the Virgin Mary on a Greater Hungary map.

Source: author



nationhood” (Knott, 2015a; Skey, 2011). Likewise, its new role is to counter the symbolism of Csiksomlyó which commemorates the martyrdom committed by Hungarian forces against resisting Szeklers. The added elements seem to counter the narrative by amending the remembrance process with elements that position the space within the historical framework of Fidesz.

Therein, the selected memory of the national past was frozen in time at 1920, when Hungary was split, and the symbolism of this place kept alive the leitmotifs of the lost nation. Attaching to the space’s mnemonic design in the grounds of the Church, “it nourishes recollections that may be symbolic, [it] installs remembrance within the sacred” (Nora, 1989, pp. 8–9). The sacred character of the space validates the nation’s unified character, thereby countering the symbolism of Csiksomlyó. This place represents a combination of historically significant events and symbolically charged objects. Both embody what Brubaker calls “a sense of continuity of the Greater Hungary lieux “ (2004, p. 187). Likewise, the interrelation between church and kin-state interventions continues in specific spaces that link Hungarian ancestry with the kin-state’s image.

#### 5.2.1.1 Hungary’s inclusion in the religious narratives of the transborder space

Throughout my trip, I came across many churches whose symbolic and mnemonic importance have been reconditioned by the kin-state’s intervention, highlighting their presence as “a source of identification” (Edensor, 2002). Interestingly, with the help of frescoes, these ancient sacred spaces voice the history of the early Hungarian kingdom and the legend of the famous Hungarian king Ladislaus I. Recently, many of these fortified churches have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, as a result of the kin-state’s financial and diplomatic support. For example, the fortified Unitary Church Homoródkarácsonyfalva in Kóvácsna county received 3,000,000 Ft in 2017 and the Catholic Church in Kezdiszentlelek/Sanzieni, Kóvácsna county, received 7,500,000 Ft in 2018. All historic spaces that benefited from the kin-state involvements hold active religious services and communal gatherings. All spaces visited during the field trip displayed the Hungarian flag on the altar (see Images 3 and 4). The same display of Hungarian symbols in spaces where the remembrance of the Kingdom of Greater Hungary and King Ladislaus I was observed, among many others, at the Unitary Church in Énlaka, the Fortified Reformed Churches in Székelyderzs and Zabála (which received 600,000 Ft in 2016) and the Catholic Church in Gelence, which are all in Kóvácsna and Hargita counties. During the fieldwork, I observed that the intervention of the kin-state is

predominantly active in rural areas, where the demography of the community is decreasing and where the population is generally aged.



**Images 3 and 4** show the altars of Kézdiszentlélek and Homoródkarácsonyfalva churches from Kovászna and Hargita that received kin-state funds and display the Hungarian flag.

Source: author

Therein, the kin-state associates its presence with the ancient symbolism and the mythology of the spaces. The close association between the church and the kin-state when revamping the spaces in Szeklerland is impacting the community, who are able to notice who is consolidating the Hungarian cultural heritage. In the words of Attila, a local who mentioned several important ancient places to me, “while viewing the frescoes, one can experience the

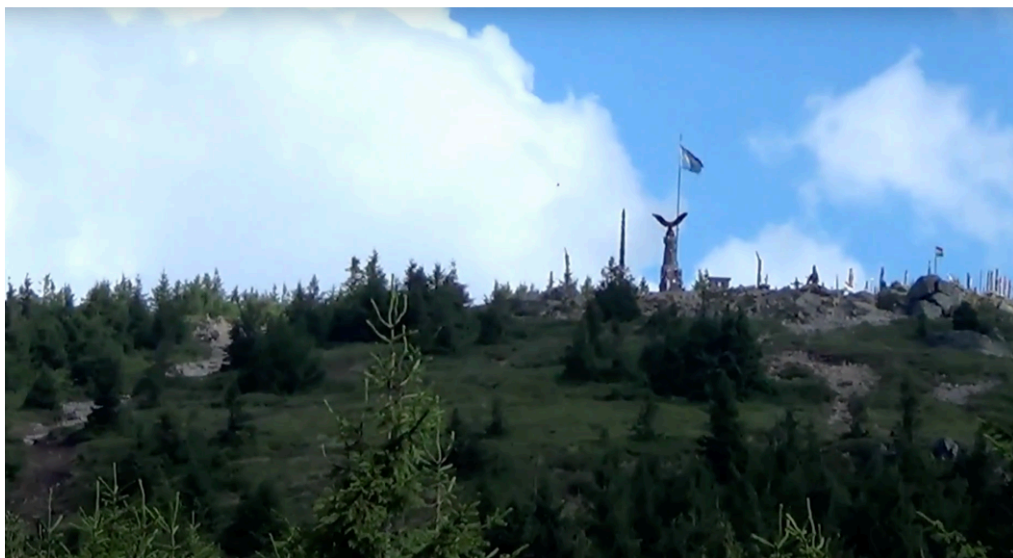
history”. Likewise, while Hungarians reconnect with the narratives of the story, they also associate it with the efforts of the kin-state who abetted and preserved the cultural site. Yet it is not only in churches where the people can associate the symbolism and mythology of the space with the kin-state, but also at pilgrimage sites.

#### 5.2.1.2 Kin-state interventions in pilgrimage places

In Hargita there is an important religious sanctuary for pilgrimage which was developed in 2018 (see Image 5). The holy mountain of the Szeklers from Madaras was completely rebuilt in that year and opened to the public thereafter. Composed of 64 headstones that symbolise the 64 Szekler counties, the approximately 350-square-metre monument is adjacent to the Madaras mountain (1801 m). Previous archives studied before the visit to the site just showed the Szekler wood-carved column alongside the headstones.

After 2015, the site received donations from villages in Hungary that facilitated the construction of another watchtower with the Turul bird, a sacred mythological bird in the Hungarian consciousness. Moreover, the plateau on which the site was rebuilt highlights other Szekler and Magyar symbols: the sun and the moon (which appear on the Szekler flag), the outline of Greater Hungary, the Hungarian flag, and the royal coat of arms.

On top of this, some tombstones were decorated with the Hungarian flag. The same procedure was discovered in Borszék and in other adjacent localities, albeit with the Szekler flag. Such practices could be correlated with the information presented on the tombstones. For example, some of the birthdates were before 1920, the date when Transylvania was assimilated by Romania at the Trianon negotiations. In most localities that were visited in 2020, it was



*Image 5 – Image of the Madaras site rebuilt in 2018. Source: author*

observed that Hungarian and Romanian cemeteries were separated several metres apart (see Images 8 and 9).

Until recently, the Szeklers utilised the Hungarian flag to underline their national identity because the Romanian state had banned the Szekler flag in 2013. However, in the last decade, usage of the flag increased, especially after the Hungarian parliament replaced the EU flag with the Szekler one. Some argued that Hungary's act considered Szeklerland as its own county and as part of its 'transborder nationalism' of resurrecting the nationhood (Pogonyi, 2017a).

Despite being controversial, I nevertheless noticed the Szekler flag on public buildings during festivities. For instance, during the 2020 Szekler Festival which was restricted by COVID-19, libraries and museums raised the Szekler flag on their buildings for a short period. Most, however, removed it after the festival ended. Moreover, the few merchants who showed up during COVID-19 sold Szekler flags in the fairs. When asking Istvan, a mechanic from Borszék, why the flag was removed after the festival, he told me that "celebrations are the only time when the Szeklers are not fined or go to court, [...] the police ignore it".

Thus, domestic legislation that targets ethnic identity symbolism is indirectly facilitating a closer relation between the kin-state and ethnic kin since the latter uses the former's symbolism and narratives to designate its identity, despite being different. So instead of seeing spaces that recognise the rich Szekler culture and identity, the kin-state indirectly or directly alters the structural narratives and local symbolism with its own, thereby changing the "practices of the daily rituals" (Knott, 2015a). The purpose of the kin-state is to instil a selected new history which underlines the populist role Fidesz plays in restoring the Hungarian golden age.





**Image 6 and 7** – The Greater Hungary map present on the site and some headstones designed with the Hungarian flag.  
Source: author.

Anchoring the selected history of what the literature argues as “landscape” (Smith, 1999, p. 151), kin-state activism revitalises the spaces of Greater Hungary. In the process, kin-state activism may have rejuvenated the memories that fashioned the ethnic kin beliefs, across time, of embodying a different national identity than the one shared with the host country. To achieve this, Fidesz needed the space built in Szeklerland to replicate its hegemonic history, accentuate the role of the space in its nation-building programme and outline a future-looking perspective via restorative nostalgia. In the literature of restorative nostalgia, the process is achieved through “collective pictorial symbols and oral culture [and] an individual narrative that savours details and memorial signs” (Boym, 2001, p. 51). Once embedded within the character of the



space, both features narrate the same mythology that memory is keeping alive so that ordinary people can engage with it in their everyday nationalism (Knott, 2015a, p. 2).



**Image 8** shows the grave of someone buried in Borszek in 1920 covered in the colours of the Szekler flag. **Image 9** reveals the separation of the Hungarians (below) and Romanians (upper right) in villages. Source author.

For instance, the same leitmotifs were discovered when visiting the third most important pilgrimage site: Nyerges Memorial complex, Hargita county. Similar to Madaras, a new site



was constructed between 2017 and 2019 near the initial monument, which tells the story of a group of Szekler soldiers who were killed by imperial Russian troops in 1848 (see images 10 and 11). A hundred metres from the initial monument, across the street, a traditional Szekler door invites the viewer to ascend. While climbing the stairs, the viewer is flanked by funerary pillars upon which Hungarian flag ribbons are tied. On the hilltop, the presence of Szekler carved wooden soldiers highlights the entrance to the site. Therein, dozens of funerary pillars and crosses upon which Hungarian-flag ribbons are tied mark the remembrance of the fatidic event. The middle of the space is bisected by a narrow stone alley which invites the visitor to circle the site. In the centre, the Hungarian and Szekler flags and the map of the Greater Hungary are attached to funeral crosses. Thus, the mythology assigned to spaces from Szeklerland revives the selective history proposed by the kin-state, provided that the lieux are manifold. The more places in view, the better the memory narrates the story and the “sources of identification” with the kin-state (Edensor, 2002, p. 187).



**Images 10 and 11** show the new Nyerges Memorial complex, Harghita county. The new space reveals Hungarian and Székler flags, Greater Hungary maps on cruces.  
Source: author



### 5.2.2 *The mythological character of the space*

One memory place that narrates the mythology proposed by Fidesz is the Turul bird. Feishmidt calls it as part of an “old mythology for a new nationalism” (2020, p. 136). Despite previously being a symbol of the far-right and irredentism (c.f. Ádám & Bozóki, 2016; Bozóki, 2017), Fidesz is now promoting it as the symbol of Hungarian unity.

Throughout the talks with people from Borszék at the local tavern, I was often told about how important the Turul bird is for all Hungarians and their national consciousness. Depicted as a falcon or hawk with its wings open, the bird stands as the banner of the Arpád clan, the first clan to conquer Transylvania in the ninth or tenth century. The bird of prey symbolises the conquest of new lands, while the open wings represent the space occupied by the Hungarian nation. Istvan, the mechanic from Borszék, told me during October 2020 that “despite being pagan, the Turul bird reminds the people of their Hungarian ancestry/origin whenever they look at it.” So it was no surprise to discover that many Turul birds were constructed or reconditioned between 2015-2020. More than 35 representations of Turul bird are present in Romania. Most of them were built before 2010 and Fidesz; and before the celebration of the thousand-year-old conquest of Transylvania by the first Hungarian tribes. However, I was told by one landlord whose guesthouse I rented that many statues have been reconditioned in recent years in Kovaszna and have become part of commemorative events which are actively engaged with by the local community.

Throughout the trips, it was revealed that on top of the many Turul monuments already constructed in Romania, several more were added from 2015 to 2020. Amongst these, worth mentioning are the ones from Máros and Kovászna; particularly, the Nyárádremete monument, which was renovated between 2016-2018 (see Image 12). As it turns out, Nyárádremete received 12,000,000 Ft funds for its parish in 2018. Moreover, in Fehéregyháza, on the commemoration of the anniversary of the death of Petőfi Sándor, Hungary’s national poet, a Turul bird and a commemoration plaque were added to the site in 2016. Similarly, another Turul bird was constructed in 2020 in Zalán to commemorate Trianon. When speaking with some locals from Zalán township, I was told that the Turul bird is a “testament to Hungarian origin.” The renovation of monuments, particularly the Turul, is a recurrent action for Fidesz. In 2019, media reported that several communities from Hungary received funds from the Hungarian national fund to renovate the Turul monuments (Atlaszo, 2019).



**Image 12** – The monument from Nyárádremete was renovated in 2016-2018. Unlike archival pictures from 2012, the renovated space incorporates the map of Greater Hungary (bottom) under the epigraph that states 1100 years since we are here. Source: [vt.ekemvh.ro](http://vt.ekemvh.ro)

Another meaningful space that was renovated in 2017 – after receiving in 2016 approximately 8,000,000 Ft for the local parish – is the Siculicidium monument, Madéfalva, from Harghita county. Known as the Szekler massacre from 1764, this space marks the martyrdom of militias who died when facing the Habsburg imperial forces. Each year, the community re-enacts the

brave deeds of the soldiers in a commemorative event nearby. Local military garrisons and volunteers create a theatre-like event for the community to experience. After that the commemoration leads the people to lay wreaths at the bottom of the monument.

However, the commemorative process has experienced some alterations in recent years. Previous archives did not show the additional elements nearby the mnemonic space which are now present. For instance, during my visit in late November 2020, the monument displayed a huge Hungarian flag beneath the Turul bird. This flag is a new addition to the monument. When asking the locals about the monument, one woman, Katalin H., told me that this space has been part of a tourist itinerary for Hungarian tourists, hence the flag has been displayed in recent years. The existence of tourist itineraries was confirmed by the two landlords, whose guesthouses (*panzio* in Hungarian) I rented during my fieldwork. They told me that their businesses are aided by the constant influx of Hungarian tourists visiting the thermal and mineral resorts. Outside of their treatments, the Hungarians also travel around the region and visit the local museums, churches, and monuments. Thus, the presence of added kin-state elements on mnemonic spaces may indicate that the places may seek to shape not just the local people's history but also that of the Hungarians who venture in the historic territory that Fidesz is synthetically reconstructing. The association between the Hungarian cultural heritage and the remembrance which the space commemorates is being achieved in conjunction with the new elements of the kin-state.

The association between the Turul bird and new mnemonic elements might be intentional for Fidesz's kin-state activism, for it may propose a restorative nostalgia that aims to "return to origins" (Boym, 2001, p. 13). This could provide continuity for its selective history with which it wants to be associated. Hence, Fidesz is not solely adapting existing spaces but also seeking to build new ones which narrate a selective history that the party is pushing. One



**Images 13** shows the Siculicidium Memorial (Madéfalva), Hargita county. The space reveals added Hungarian leitmotifs present in other places, Hungarian flag and funerary ribbons.

Source: author

such memorial built in conjunction with the Budapest Trianon monument is the Zálán space.

### *5.2.3 The mnemonic nature of the space: where history stopped, and memory continued*

Although the degree of symbolism between the sacred and the space is significant for validating kin-state activism, its mechanism is incomplete without the political facet that long-distance nationalists may attach to the space's character. On 4 Jun 2020, Hungary commemorated 100



years since the Trianon treaty lost two-thirds of its territory to its neighbours. In Budapest, the Hungarian government opened the Monument of National Solidarity, also visited by the researcher of this study.

In Romania, on 4 June of that year, the president of the Kovászna county council, Tamás Sándor – the agent depicted in this study as the long-distance nationalist – gathered local media to open a wooden monument depicting the map of Greater Hungary near the village church in Zalan. The commemorative process was widely disseminated on Sándor's Facebook page (see Image 14).



**Image 14** – Tamás Sándor standing on June 4, 2020, at the unveiling of the Zalan Monument. Source: Facebook

The event was simultaneously with the opening ceremony of the Monument of National Solidarity from Budapest (Thorpe, 2020). The site's architecture symbolises 100 years since almost 13,000 localities were lost by Hungary to its neighbours, especially to Romania. Again, the space of Greater Hungary is incorporated into the sphere of the sacred. However, besides the alignment between the sacred and the lieux, its political facet gives the memory site its character.



**Image 15** – The Zalan monument, which incorporates the map of Greater Hungary, the Hungarian cross, the Hungarian and Székler flag, and the Turul bird. Source: author

Both the Trianon Memorial and the wooden map of Greater Hungary are what Boym contends to be “intentional monuments, [which] recuperate a single moment in history made exemplary for the purpose of the present” (2001, p. 166). Thus, while both are aesthetically different, the purpose of these memory sites is the same, i.e., upholding history confined to a specific time prior to Trianon. The spaces encapsulate all the 13,000 localities, including the counties of Szeklerland, which constituted Greater Hungary.

The monument from Zalan showcases a transitional space that invites the ethnic kin, on commemoration day, to reflect on the prospect of a selective memory that returns both the territory and the ethnic kin to what Anderson has coined as an “imagined community” (2006). Such a monument, yoked under the arm of long-distance nationalists, has not only “relativized the distance” (Skrbiš, 2017, p. 2) between the territory and the nation but also turned “intimate longing into belonging” (Boym, 2001, p. 469) and restored the symbols of the Hungarian cultural heritage.





**Image 16** – Depicting the wooden monument from Zalan with other Hungarian symbols and paraphernalia. Source: author

The nature of the Zalan monument echoes the commemorative process of selective memory that continues in the present as opposed to the history which stopped in the past. That is why long-distance nationalists are keen not to allow history to deform the character of memory constituting the collectiveness of the Hungarian nation in Szeklerland. The Zalan monument is not a spontaneous political activity supported by long-distance nationalism; rather, the site is a project looking towards the future when claiming the homeland under the guise of shared historical and national symbols that distinguish the ethnic kin from the host country.

However, such practices, subject to idiosyncratic interpretations, can be objects of “disputed memories” between the majority and minority (Giordano, 2008). This can lead to a “polarization of memory cultures” (Pető, 2017, p. 43) that can create tensions and conflict, as seen during the incident from Úzvölgye from the Hargita county when Romanians and ethnic Hungarians clashed at the gates of the cemetery – each group claiming the history for



themselves (Digi24, 2019). Because of these processes, this study argues that policies that deal with lieux and restorative nostalgia can produce controversies in transborder settings. Certain lieux, which exclude history's objectiveness, instead rely on imbuing emotions into new hegemonic narratives. Thus, monuments like the one from Zálán can be objects of dispute. Feishmidt contends that “the recent return of the iconography and discourse of revisionism to the public realm suggests that Hungarian society turns to historical symbols in situations of uncertainty” (2020, p. 141). That may be true. Regardless of its interpretation, the Zálán monument is a multi-layered space that shapes everyday practices of ordinary people.

## **Conclusions**

This article has provided an overview of Hungarian kin-state activism under Fidesz. The study showed how Fidesz shifted to memory politics to combat low demographics, assimilation among ethnic kin, to preserve its electorate, and to boost its nationalist-populist appeal abroad. This paper has shown how much the cultural and mnemonic side of Hungarian kin-state activism has changed from other Hungarian governments since Fidesz took over as the new hegemon (see Brubaker et al., 2018).

Unlike other examples of kin-state processes, such as the Russian identity in the Baltics (Mole, 2012; Pettai, 1995), Balkans (Petsinis, 2013) or Turkey's procedures of establishing organisations in the Balkans to extend its political sphere (Köksal, 2010), the example of Hungary is different. Hungary's unique concoction of an ethnic conception of nationhood and memory issues have redefined the kin-state apparatus success abroad.

Following Feishmidt's study, this article also argued that the rehabilitation of the memory of Greater Hungary has become the centrepiece of Fidesz's take on history, especially amongst Hungarian ethnic kin (2020). The conceptual lenses used in this study have proven useful to understand the shift of Fidesz's kin-state activism to memory politics across the last decade to shape everyday practices. In this light, this paper argues it is possible for Fidesz to have first implemented mnemonic policies domestically and then incorporated them in the case of transborder ethnic kin to capitalise politically and ideologically as part of a ‘everyday nationalism’ platform (c.f. Knott, 2015a; Skey, 2011).

The analysis also concluded that the role of long-distance nationalists like Tamás Sándor from the sphere of politics abetted the identity politics and history promoted by Fidesz in Romania. Indeed, the actions of long-distance nationalists like Tamás may have replicated Fidesz's synthetic reconstruction of the lost home through an array of religious and nationalist

revivals. The investigation revealed how Fidesz's perspective is represented in Romanian ethnopolitics, alongside representations of victimhood and depiction of traumas. Overall, the trauma of Trianon is best described as the fundamental crisis that conferred to the ethnic kin the historic injustice which Fidesz wants to symbolically remedy. Once again, the analysis of this study is, along with others (c.f. Feischmidt, 2020), pointing to the success achieved by Fidesz after the party instrumentalised the mnemonic issue of Trianon into its domestic and foreign policies.

Moreover, the analysis showed that Fidesz's kin-state activism and its emphasis on mnemonic spaces can be incorporated into a threefold taxonomy: *the sacred character of the place, the mythological character of the space and the mnemonic aspect of the place*. Overall, this study showed that these lead to a construction and replication of history determined by a populist hegemon. Especially in the case of Szeklerland, this study revealed that the nostalgic character of space is anchored in religious and nationalist processes. Attested as Fidesz's most important space, i.e., Greater Hungary, this study argued that the memory reconvened through place, since the party shifted the policies of kin-state activism, is future-oriented and polarising. The example of Greater Hungary across Szeklerland revealed the view of Fidesz on history and how the party sees the space of the Hungarian nation.

Based on the results of this investigation, this paper proposes one further investigative avenue that would provide an in-depth understanding vis-à-vis the mechanisms of Hungarian kin-state activism – a study that would analyse the electoral strategies used by Fidesz during the 2022 parliamentary elections to mobilise the diaspora. With this, it will be possible to understand what past kin-state policies Fidesz may utilise to mobilise its transborder electorate.

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## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> This paper chose not to use the bilingual denominations – that is either the Romanian and Hungarian, or the Romanian names – of towns and villages, instead opting for the Hungarian names, as this study more closely reflects the lives of ethnic Hungarians from Romania and their external homeland, Hungary.

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