

Turanism as a political myth in the context of the Hungarian politics of memory

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ABSTRACT: The article aims to analyze how the Hungarian myths of (Central Asian) origin and other Turanist narratives are instrumentalized by the Hungarian government for political purposes. The research focuses on Hungarian political discourses of the Fidesz government between 2010 and 2022, which reflect the use of Turanist myths as part of a political strategy. The article's central question is how and for what purposes national myths of origin and the idea of Turanism are instrumentalized in contemporary political discourse in Hungary. More specifically, the article examines how Turanist narratives interact with other memory discourses in Hungary, and what the functions of the political myth of Turanism are in the Hungarian government's discourse. The study engages with the theoretical background and conceptual framework of politics of memory and political myth, and it aims to contribute to the general analysis of the emergence of political myths and their functions in politics.

KEYWORDS: Hungary, Turanism, politics of memory, political myth

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Hungary's newly elected Fidesz government, backed by its two-thirds majority, announced the country's new foreign policy strategy, the Eastern Opening¹, that

¹ Between 2010 and 2014, two differing approaches to Hungary's Eastern engagement coexisted within the state administration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the leadership of János Martonyi, advanced the concept of a "Global Opening," aimed primarily at diversifying Hungary's foreign trade and mitigating its overreliance on the European Union. In contrast, the concept of "Eastern Opening" pro-



is, the intensification of political and economic ties between Hungary and “the East”, namely Russia, China, Turkey, and the countries of Central and East Asia. Since then, the Hungarian government’s gradually strengthening ties with Eastern states have coincided with a gradual deterioration in its relations with the European Union. The Fidesz government’s engagement with the East and its political and economic consequences have been the subject of both political debates and academic inquiry. While several studies have explored the foreign policy and economic dimensions of Hungary’s Eastern Opening (e.g., Végh, 2015; Jacoby & Korkut, 2016; Rácz, 2019; Greiling, 2023; Schmidt & Glied, 2024), this article aims to contribute to scholarly discussions by analyzing a different, under-researched aspect, namely, the “Eastern Opening” of Hungarian memory politics. The study’s main aim is to examine how the myth of the Hungarians’ Eastern origins is instrumentalized for political purposes, against the background of the country’s foreign policy shift towards the East.

Fidesz’s foreign policy vision, the Eastern Opening, brought not only new diplomatic and trade connections but also new narratives about the East, and Hungary’s position between East and West. Eastern connections play a peculiar role in Hungary, as, according to the Hungarian myths of origin, the Hungarian people originate from the Central Asian steppes and share kinship with Eastern nomadic tribes. The myths of Asian origin are present in the discourses on national identity, as well as reflected in Hungarian culture, memory discourses, and heritage (Kürti, 2016). However, the political instrumentalization of the myths about the Hungarians’ Eastern roots is not a new phenomenon, dating back to the 19th century and the idea of Turanism.

Turanism—a perceived ethnic, cultural, and linguistic relation among Turanian peoples²—dates to the 19th century. The term itself derives from the historical region of Turan, a

moted by Viktor Orbán and Péter Szijjártó (then serving as State Secretary in the Prime Minister’s Office) emerged amid a domestic political climate increasingly defined by tensions between Hungary and the EU. As a result, the Eastern Opening came to be widely interpreted not merely as an economic strategy, but as a form of political reorientation, positioning Eastern partnerships as a potential alternative to the West. However, even Orbán’s often-cited 2014 speech in Băile Tuşnad did not present Russia and China as geopolitical alternatives, but rather praised their illiberal governance models, without questioning Hungary’s membership in either the EU or NATO (Rácz, 2019).

² Turanism is an umbrella term encompassing several branches, which differ based on the nations identified as Turanian. As Ablonczy underlines, Turanism in Hungary during the 19th and 20th centuries has never favoured only Turkic relatives: Finns, Estonians and Bulgarians were also part of this imagination, besides the peoples of Central Asia, the Japanese, and even the peoples of China and India (Ablonczy, 2021, p. 231). The emphasis on Turkic and Central Asian partnerships became more prominent with the promotion of Turanism by Jobbik. As articulated in their 2010 political programme, [Hungarians] “have not exploited the potentials latent in the fact that to this day the Turkic peoples of Inner Asia unquestionably consider us to be relatives” (Jobbik, 2010). In the discourse of Fidesz, the Eastern origins of Hungarians and references to potential kinship are instrumentalized in cultural diplomacy towards various Eastern nations (e.g. China) (Moreh, 2016). However, with Hungary joining the Turkic Council, since 2018 the notion of shared kinship has been mainly employed towards Turkic partners.

perceived ancestral homeland of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, where Hungarians are believed to have originated, alongside other modern Turkic nations. Turanism first emerged in Hungary in the 1850s, as a linguistic theory about a Turanian language family and the potential Turkic origin of the Hungarian language (Vámbéry, 1882), opposing the more widely accepted theory of its Finno-Ugric origin. It was highly contested, even in its own time (Schmidt, 1925). Turanism, as an idea, however, quickly grew beyond a linguistic theory and transformed into a cultural-political movement searching for the Hungarian language's and nation's roots in the East. Based on the perceived Turkic kinship and linguistic relations, Turanists advocated for strengthening Hungary's ties with Eastern countries. Hungarian Turanism was the most influential at the fin de siècle and the beginning of the 20th century (Balogh, 2022). As Ablonczy notes, three key historical factors shaped the emergence and development of Hungarian Turanism. First, searching for languages linguistically related to Hungarian was central to early Turanist thought. Second, the rise of pan-political movements (such as pan-Slavism and pan-Germanism) attracted and alarmed Hungarian elites. Third, the imperial ambitions of these elites, who sought to expand Hungarian cultural, economic, and political influence into previously unexplored regions.

Furthermore, several historical events occurred that turned the attention of Hungarians to the East: among others, the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, and the articulation of Hungarian economic and political objectives towards the Balkans and the Middle East (Ablonczy, 2021; see also Kopyś, 2018). Turanists aimed to identify the Eastern ancestral homeland of the Magyars, explore kindred nations, and leverage these connections to form new alliances and assert cultural and economic influence by invoking ethnic kinship (Ablonczy, 2016; 2021). After World War I, Turanism assumed a strong anti-Western character, reinforced by the trauma of Trianon. With the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Hungarian Kingdom lost 2/3 of its former territories with the formation of nation-states.³ According to the narrative of the time, Hungary has been “betrayed by the West”, therefore must turn (back) to its “real allies”, its kin-nations on the East (Farkas, 1993, p. 864). The influence of Turanism, however, weakened after World War I as it could not respond to societal needs, and the integral fragmentation of its organizations (Balogh, 2022). During this time, Turanist circles fell under radical influences. Turanism became connected to and associated with Hungarian fascism and anti-Semitism, due to which some of its previous proponents turned away entirely from the movement (Ablonczy, 2016). After World War II and with the advent of Communism, Turanist organizations ceased to function. Several of the leading promoters of Turanism either died during the war or emigrated shortly afterward (ibid). Turanism, however, did not disappear entirely; it lived sporadically in the form of émigré

³ The Treaty of Trianon (1920), which resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the former Hungarian Kingdom's territory and population, remains a central trauma in current Hungarian memory discourses. See also Toomey, 2018; Feischmidt, 2020.

literature and occasional domestic publications via informal channels (Farkas, 1993). In the 1990s, Turanism began gaining popularity among members of the nationalist subculture (Kürti, 2016; Kowalczyk, 2017), but it remained limited to rather marginal groups for a long time. Given this paper's limitations, the focus will be on Turanist narratives in contemporary Hungary.

Since 2010, there have been renewed references to Turanist narratives in Hungarian right-wing political discourse (Moreh, 2016), accompanied by an increased interest in the Hungarians' origins (Ablonczy & Borbás, 2024). References to Turanism, moreover, are not only present in the government's discourse but are promoted by a set of recently emerged government-funded cultural, political, and academic institutions and organizations, and are even reflected in the newly issued textbooks in Hungary. Despite recent scholarly interest in Turanism, a gap remains in analyzing Turanism through the lens of memory studies. Existing scholarship has focused mainly on the historical evolution of Turanism (Szendrei, 2010; Ablonczy, 2016), its role in foreign policy (Jaeger, 2019), and its use by the far-right party Jobbik (Akçali & Korkut, 2015; Kim, 2016; Kenes, 2020). Yet just a few studies examine how Turanism functions within Hungary's politics of memory, that is, how it shapes collective memory and national identity, and how it is utilized to achieve domestic political aims (Balogh, 2022; Ablonczy & Borbás, 2024). The central question of the research is how and for what purposes national myths of origin and the idea of Turanism are instrumentalized in contemporary political discourse in Hungary. More specifically, the article examines the functions of the political myth of Turanism in the Hungarian government's discourse and its interaction with other memory narratives. The research adopts a top-down perspective, focusing on government actors. The research period covers the timeframe of 3 Fidesz government terms (2010-2022). The study is based on the qualitative-interpretive methodology of critical discourse analysis. The discourse analysis focuses on selected political speeches and media interviews of Viktor Orbán and Fidesz politicians.⁴ The article aims to contribute by applying the concept of political myth to the study of Turanism.⁵

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Politics are products of the cultural context, including various imaginations and interpretations of social realities embedded in collective memory. For the construction and cultivation of collective identities, such as national identity, societies need shared nar-

⁴ The analyzed corpus consists of 24 speeches, including commemoration speeches and declarations from the meetings of the Organisation of Turkic States. Due to the limits of this paper, only selected quotations are included. The studied political actors are: Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Speaker of the National Assembly László Kövér, Minister of Human Resources Miklós Kásler, and Fidesz MP Sándor Lezsák.

⁵ The study is part of the author's PhD dissertation, in which the discourse-historical approach is applied to the analysis of governmental discourse.

ratives about the past, present, and future (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Smith, 2000). One of the main concepts tied to collective memory is national memory. Renan argued that national remembering is evoked and forged according to the present needs (political interests) of national elites (Renan, 1990 [1882]). Collective memory in a nation-state operates by selecting and producing national history narratives that state actors want their constituencies to remember. These narratives offer explanations for past events and their connections with the present and justify and legitimize political actions (Smith, 1999). Therefore, constructing and spreading desirable memory narratives is crucial for the state and the political elites in order to enhance their legitimacy. The political instrumentalization of memory narratives is called the politics of memory. The term recently became a buzzword both in memory studies and political science; however, it still lacks a clear conceptualization and coherent theoretical framework (Bernhard & Kubik, 2016; Verovšek, 2016). However, a common scholarly standpoint is that, compared to other forms of memory, such as the broadly understood collective memory, political memory is related to a political agenda.

Furthermore, the politics of memory refers to the processes, practices, and policies in which memory is utilized for contemporary political purposes (Bernhard and Kubik, 2016). Drawing on Lebow and colleagues, the politics of memory in this paper will be understood as the deliberate and strategic manipulation, construction, and utilization of collective remembrance within the realm of political discourse and governance (both on a national and international dimension) for present-day political purposes (Lebow et al., 2006). This process involves selecting, interpreting, and presenting historical events or narratives to serve specific political objectives, often aiming to legitimize authority, shape national identity, or reconcile/reignite past conflicts within a society (Sierp, 2006). Power dynamics are inherent in memory politics, as not all actors have the same power in constructing memory (*ibid*).

Another dimension of the politics of memory is introducing policies and establishing institutions that produce and disseminate the state's memory narratives. The politics of memory affects cultural policies and the agenda of cultural institutions. In this regard, distinguishing state politics of memory from other forms is crucial. The state has the capacity to dominate prevailing memory practices related to historical matters, such as public commemoration rituals, the establishment of museums, memorials, and places for remembrance.⁶ The state also has the financial, organizational, administrative, and/or bureaucratic resources to shape official memory (Törnquist-Plewa & Kowalski, 2016). Political elites in power are endowed with a wide range of administrative means to dominate communication channels and implant the "official" interpretation of history into the collective memory. Since other political groups constantly challenge the governing elite in the quest for power, political contest also translates into a competition for mnemonic

⁶ On state commemorative practices in a Central Eastern European comparative perspective, see for example Bernhard & Kubik, 2016; Törnquist-Plewa & Kowalski, 2016; Miklóssy & Kangaspuro, 2022.

dominance (Miklóssy & Kangaspuro, 2022).

It is essential to underline that collective memory entails not only real historical events, but as well imagined or constructed ones, where the commemoration of imagined past leads to invented traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Myths play a prominent role in the construction of collective memory and national identity: they function to present the world as continuous, and set permanent, ahistorical values, through which not only the events of the past, but current realities ought to be interpreted (Kołakowski, 1989; Bell, 2003). According to Smith (2000), the myth of common descent is crucial in constituting a group (*ethnie*) over the *longue durée*. By invoking common ancestry, myths establish a direct link between the present and the past and impose moral guidelines and obligations for collective action in the future, providing ontological security (Smith, 2003; Bouchard, 2017). Political myths provide an interpretative framework of social changes and unforeseen events by relating them to known, mythicized frames of reference, which may, but not necessarily, be rooted in real historical events (Chlup, 2020). According to Tismăneanu, “the principal function of political myths is to unify the public discourse and provide citizens with an easily recognizable source of identity as a part of vaguely defined ethnic (or political) community”, thus a myth’s aim is not to describe, but to imagine a reality under present political interests (Tismăneanu, 1998, pp. 6-9). Myth is a tool within the realm of politics, playing a role in constructing and reinforcing collective identities, values, and ideologies within societies (Schöpflin, 1997). Political myths often generate a shared understanding of the past and present, fostering a sense of belonging and cohesion among members of a society or political community. Schöpflin posits that myth “is about perceptions rather than historically validated truths (insofar as these exist at all), about how communities regard certain propositions as normal and natural and others as perverse and alien” (Schöpflin, 1997, p. 19). Political myths may be instrumentalized to create narratives that explain the position and power of authority and legitimize political action (Bell, 2003; Bottici, 2007). Contemporary scholars (e.g., Ágh, 2016; Chlup, 2020) argue that in Central Eastern Europe, a transition took place in the mid-2000s from the former modernization (Westernization) narratives to a more traditional (national) narrative, through references to a historically given collective national identity. Turning to national myths in political rhetoric could also be seen as a response to what right-wing populist politicians see as the Western (left-liberal) disempowerment of nations and nation-states (Akçalı & Korkut, 2012). Myths speak to emotions rather than to reason. As such, they are powerful tools for politicians in communicating and reinforcing political narratives, evoking positive emotions such as nostalgia and pride, or negative emotions such as feelings of loss of status or sovereignty, resentment towards perceived historical enemies (Schöpflin, 1997; Bottici, 2007; Bouchard, 2017). Thus, myths may have strong mobilizing power.

THE REEMERGENCE OF TURANISM UNDER THE FIDESZ ADMINISTRATION

Politicized memory narratives and symbolic politics have long been integral to Hungarian politics. After the collapse of Communism, a “search for a usable past” took place in the newly independent states of Central Eastern Europe, supporting the revival of national myths, symbols, and narratives (Feischmidt, 2020, p. 130). The politics of memory has constituted a central pillar in Fidesz’s political strategy, which was already present during their first term in power (1998-2002). Between 1994 and 1998, Fidesz moved from a liberal party to a centre-right, conservative stance; thus, taking a role in shaping national memory narratives was instrumental to their politics. Within the memory politics of Fidesz, three central themes can be identified, related to the historical events of the 20th century: the memory of 1) the Treaty of Trianon (1920), 2) World War II and the rule of Admiral Miklós Horthy, and 3) the 1956 revolution. These historical events are both important for the construction of Hungarian collective (national) memory, as well as becoming mythologized.

The scope of this article does not allow for an analysis of these memory narratives.⁷ However, a common feature of these memory narratives is their utilization in the memory politics of victimhood. Toomey characterized the period of the late 2000s and early 2010s as marked by a “victim discourse which sought to explain Hungarian history as being a series of (externally imposed) disasters” (2018, p. 88). As a response to perceived (as well as constructed) external threats, the Fidesz government instrumentalizes a discourse of a “freedom fight” against foreign powers, namely, “Brussels” or “the globalists” (see also Ágh, 2016). Fidesz politicians instrumentalize historical narratives and the mechanism of victimization in order to present themselves as the only legitimate actors to represent Hungarian interests both domestically and internationally, while simultaneously aiming to de-legitimize opposition challengers as anti-national. As Benazzo concludes, “the ultimate goal here is to present Fidesz as the best legitimate political actor that can restore Hungary’s sovereignty, liberate the country from oppressive external encroachment, and carry out the nation’s will” (Benazzo, 2017, p. 199). Accordingly, she argues that the politics of memory cannot be seen as independent or detached from Fidesz’s overarching political project, which seeks to position the party as the sole force capable of advancing national interests and safeguarding Hungarian independence, allegedly under threat (ibid). In the early 2010s, however, with the rise of the extreme-right, anti-establishment Jobbik party, Fidesz saw the threat of a challenger from the right side of the political spectrum. The extreme-right party Jobbik began to use Turanist ideas, linking them to their anti-Western claims (Kim, 2016; Korkut, 2017; Kenes, 2020). One of the most vocal proponents of Turanism was Gábor Vona⁸, leader of Jobbik, who held close diplomatic

⁷ On the Hungarian politics of memory, see also Ágh, 2016; Benazzo, 2017, Pető, 2021.

⁸ Gábor Vona, president of Jobbik from 2006 to 2018, has been a vocal proponent of Turanism and an eastward-oriented foreign policy. Despite his withdrawal from Jobbik, he remained a supporter of

ties to Turkey and who defined Eurasianism as a traditionalist response to Euro-Atlantic values (for details, see Korkut & Akcali, 2015). In its campaign programme, Jobbik proposed strengthening relations with Turkic states as a foreign policy priority. For Jobbik, Turanism was an opportunity to present an alternative to the Westernization and Europeanization processes taking place in Hungary. However, amid Hungarian domestic political developments, Jobbik moved from the far-right to a moderate conservative position (the party split in 2018⁹). This also meant softening Jobbik's anti-Western positions, which Fidesz took over.

Initially, from political actors, only the far-right Jobbik explicitly supported Turanist narratives. In the 2010s, however, Turanist references have gradually moved from the fringes of political discourse to the mainstream. In 2012, the Fidesz government began supporting the Kurultaj festival financially. The Kurultaj—Tribal Assembly of the Hun–Turkic Nations, is held in Hungary every two years since 2008, and invites Hungarian and international guests, including official representatives of “nations with Hun and Turk consciousness” (Kurultaj, 2010a) or “nations that share the genetic traits and culture with Hun–Turkic tribes” (Kurultaj, 2010b).¹⁰ Turanist narratives, however, came to the forefront in 2018, when Hungary joined the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (today the Organisation of Turkic States) as an observer member. The Turkic Council (est. 2009) was “constructed on the four main pillars of common history, common language, common identity, and common culture” (Turkic Council, official website). On the occasion of accession, Prime Minister Orbán stated: “Hungarians consider themselves to be the late descendants of Attila, they are based on the Hun-Turkic origin, their language is related to the Turkic languages” (OV 2018 T). The statement met with surprise and contestation from the Hungarian media and intellectual circles since no genetic connection between Huns and Hungarians was scientifically proven, and linguists agree that Hungarian belongs to Finno-Ugric, not Turkic languages.

Nevertheless, Orbán repeated this narrative one year later (OV 2019 T). Regardless of their factuality, Eastern connections play a peculiar role in Hungary, and the myths of Asian origin are present in the discourses on national identity, as well as reflected in Hungarian culture, memory, and heritage, and promoted by the nationalist sub-culture (Kürti, 2016). Since the late 2010s, however, the origin of Hungarians has become increasingly politicized, as will be demonstrated below, by intertwining memory politics and foreign policy in Hungary.

Hungary's joining of the Turkic Council not only strengthened diplomatic ties with Turkey and Central Asian nations but also intensified the promotion of the Turanist nar-

Turanist ideas, and in 2021 published a book on Turanism: *Átokból áldás—A turanizmus üzenete a 21. században* [From Curse to Blessing—The Message of Turanism in the 21st Century].

⁹ In 2018, the most radical members of Jobbik left the party and established a new far-right party, *Mi Hazánk* [Our Homeland].

¹⁰ According to the festival's website, it is visited by around 200 000 visitors.

native: Viktor Orbán made references to it several times. The analysis of Viktor Orbán's speeches (2010-2022) reveals that references to the Hungarians' Asian origin, kinship with Turkic peoples, and cultural proximity are primarily used when Hungary's leader addresses Eastern partners (heads of state, members of the Turkic Council, diplomats, guests arriving at the Kurultaj festival). Upon joining the Turkic Council, Orbán has emphasized that:

Hungary has always monitored the cooperation of countries with a Turkic identity. It preserves its language, culture, traditions, respects, and nurtures its Turkic roots in the modern world. (OV 2018 T)

In March 2019, on the 7th Summit of the Turkic Council, Orbán declared that today's Hungarians "have Kipchak blood", and that all Turkic tribes and Hungarians are descendants of Attila the Hun. He added that Hungary "is Christian Turkic lands." (Orbán cit. Buyuk, 2019).¹¹ Although these statements could be seen as diplomatic pleasantries directed at the leaders of Central Asian nations, the emphasis on Eastern origins and distinctiveness from Europe may also be understood as an attempt to redefine Hungarian identity for a domestic audience (Buyuk, 2019). Accordingly, references to Hungary's Eurasian origin can also be found in speeches by Orbán and other Fidesz politicians when addressing Hungarian audiences. While Turanist narratives may initially only seem like a useful rhetoric in legitimizing Hungary's foreign policy of "Eastern Opening" and rapprochement with Turkic partners, they also provide a domestic narrative that challenges Hungary's pro-Western and pro-European orientation by evoking anti-liberal and EU-sceptic attitudes. These narratives often concern the question of national sovereignty, preservation of national culture, or the issue of gender, as addressed by the Fidesz government's political rhetoric. László Kövér, Speaker of the Parliament, delivered a speech at the Kurultaj festival, warning of a "threat to gender, family, religious and national identity, [threat of] falsifying history" to which only national and cultural self-determination is a cure (Kövér, 2018). Thus, Turanist references became increasingly linked to the illiberal, anti-Western rhetoric of the Fidesz government. During a visit to Kazakhstan, Orbán stated that:

We are politically equal in the European Union, but we are different in terms of origin. When we go to Brussels, we have no relatives there. But when we go to Kazakhstan, we find relatives, close people. [...]. It's a rather strange feeling that a person has to go East to feel at home. (OV 2015 T)

According to historical geopolitical metanarratives present throughout Central Europe post-1989, "The West" has been standing for the ideal (idealized) self-image of the nation, while "the East" has been for the dangerous Other from whom nations of Central Europe strived to be differentiated (Melegh, 2006). According to the narrative of Fidesz,

¹¹ About the coexistence of the Christian Bulwark and Turanist narratives in Hungary, see the analysis of Balogh, 2022.

however, the Western norm-following of Central European countries is challenged, and values attached to the East and the West, as well as Hungary's national belonging, become reframed, even reversed:

Hungary is often referred to in Europe as the westernmost people of the East. This was formerly intended as an insult, in which a kind of contempt was expressed. However, because of the fantastic successes of your [Turkic] countries, thanks to the economic and political development of your countries, we must now see it as a praise when we are called the people of the East. (OV 2018 T)

Similar narratives are articulated by other Fidesz politicians as well, for example by Sándor Lezsák, who is the patron of the Kurultaj festival:

World political events are more predictive than ever the turmoil of the Western world, its sometimes seemingly chaotic state and contradictions, but the Eastern world, which has found its historical roots, is on the rise. We Hungarians recognized this process decades ago, and we still need to further strengthen our bridge role between the two worlds. (Lezsák, 2020)

As the quotes above illustrate, references to Eastern cooperation have become increasingly tied to narratives about the decline of the West. Simultaneously, memory narratives employed by the Fidesz government present "the West" as an oppressor or a perpetrator. Illustrative of this are the Trianon commemoration speeches of Orbán:¹²

The West raped the thousand-year-old borders and history of Central Europe. They forced us to live between indefensible borders, deprived us of our natural treasures, separated us from our resources, and made a death row out of our country. Central Europe was redrawn without moral concerns, just as the borders of Africa and the Middle East were redrawn. We will never forget that they did this. (OV 2020 H)

Just as it has been in the case of Jobbik, the Turanist narrative for Fidesz is just as much about the critique of the West as the praise of the East.

THE DISSEMINATION OF TURANIST NARRATIVES UNDER THE ORBÁN GOVERNMENT

As discussed above, the politics of memory entails the dissemination of memory narratives through various channels and institutional frameworks. Since Fidesz's Eastern Opening in 2011, attempts to institutionalize the Hunnic-Turkic identity of Hungarians have become noticeable on multiple levels. A set of recently promoted turanist narratives emerged in political, cultural, and academic institutions and organizations, sponsored

¹² See also Toomey, 2018; Feischmidt, 2020.

by the Hungarian government. The main institution directly linked to Turanism carrying out (among others) academic activities is the Hungarian Turan Foundation (Magyar Turán Alapítvány). The Hungarian Turan Foundation describes itself as “an organization that is able to operate independently of research institutes, brings together their experts in a common forum on the various fields of Hungarian prehistory research (history, archaeology, anthropology, genetics, ethnography, linguistics)” (Kurultaj, 2020). The term Turan is used by the foundation “to show that it is not only researching the history of the Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin, but also the migration of the Hungarians outside the Carpathian Basin, in international cooperation with the scientific institutes and specialists of different countries (especially the related peoples)” (ibid). The Foundation organizes the above-mentioned Kurultaj festival, hosts conferences, publishes articles, and considers its task to present scientific results to the non-expert public and establish contacts with various organizations of the Turkic kin-nations (ibid). In 2020, according to a new government bill signed by Orbán, the Hungarian government supported the Hungarian Turan Public Foundation by 700 million HUF between 2020-2021, for “their work in preserving national identity,” even though the Kurultaj festival was cancelled in 2020 and 2021 due to the Coronavirus pandemic (Ablonczy & Borbás, 2024, p. 23). These steps indicate that Turanism as a political myth is directed not only towards Turkic partners but also to the domestic audience and is part of the discourse through which the Hungarian government constructs legitimacy domestically.

The most contested aspect of Turanism is its proposition about the origin of the Hungarian language. Politicians of the Jobbik party have openly called for the reevaluation of the “Finno-Ugric narrative” on the Hungarian language’s origin, which Jobbik representatives considered a politically motivated theory to hide the real origins (and real glory) of Hungarians (Ablonczy & Borbás, 2024). Orbán’s statement suggesting that the Hungarian language is related to Turkic languages was considered by scholars as a stance against the scientific position on the Finno-Ugric origins of the Hungarian language, and met harsh criticism from Hungarian academics, including members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Mende, 2018; Türk, 2018). In recent years, however, the Fidesz government has pressured the Hungarian academic community to recognize the Hungarian-Turkic kinship in some form officially. Part of this effort was the establishment of the Institute of Hungarian Research¹³ in 2019¹⁴. The Institute (from 2019 until June 2025) belonged un-

¹³ The first director of the Institute of Hungarian Research was Gábor Horváth-Lugossy, a lawyer without academic background in prehistory research. Under his leadership, several scandals emerged concerning the professionalism and quality of work at the institute. In 2023, Miklós Kásler became the director, initiating staff changes that marked the beginning of a consolidation (Ablonczy & Borbás, 2024). The Institute of Hungarian Research has since undergone a restructuring of its research organization, including a leadership change and a shift toward more focused and professional research. As of July 2025, the director of the institute is Gabriella M. Lezsák, an archaeologist and research fellow at the HUN-REN Institute for Humanities Research.

¹⁴ The institute was likely inspired by Jobbik’s 2010 proposal to establish an Institute of Hungarian Prehistory (Ablonczy & Borbás, 2024, p. 13).

der the supervision of Miklós Kásler, former Minister of Human Resources (2018-2022). Kásler, a renowned oncologist and former Director General of the National Institute of Oncology, is famous for his strong interest in Hungarian prehistory. He frequently spoke about the questions of Hungarian origins. Kásler, on an exhibition on Hungarian prehistory, stated that defining the identity of Hungarians 150 years ago “only on a linguistic basis” was a “scientific policy decision”, and is insufficient (Pálffy, 2020). According to the Minister, “the legends and chronicles of the Hungarian tradition show quite clearly that the “Scythian-Hun-Hungarian kinship is continuous” (Kásler cit. Pálffy, 2020¹⁵). In 2020, the government commissioned new textbooks, reinterpreted Hungarian prehistory, and emphasized the Eastern roots of Hungarians. The new textbooks, which suggest a Hun-Hungarian relation, met harsh criticism for lack of evidence from the Association of History Teachers (Kolozsi, 2020): “(...) The books practically falsify history at many points: in many cases, they use myths and legends as a primary, historically authentic source, or use debatable theories as facts, while not mentioning important, recognized facts.” (HVG.hu, 2020.)

The idea of Turanism, however, does not function solely in the realms of identity, culture, and linguistics but has its political implications, particularly when it comes to international relations and foreign policy.¹⁶ The Turkic Council has built up a network of related and affiliated organizations, among others the International Turkic Academy, the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, and the Turkic Business Council, in which Hungary now actively participates. The intensifying of Turkic-Hungarian relations has also been visible through the frequent high-profile diplomatic visits and the opening of a new Hungarian Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2019. The most significant step in strengthening Hungary-Central Asia relations was establishing a new political institution, the Representation Office of the Turkic Council, which was opened in Budapest in October 2019. The opening of the office met harsh criticism from the Hungarian opposition and the media, due to the conditions and financial implications of the agreement, as well as what they saw as the Hungarian government’s rapprochement with non-democratic states, while Hungary’s worsening relations with the EU (Német, 2019). In 2020, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade named the Turkic States Strategic Partners of Hungary.

FUNCTIONS OF TURANISM AS A POLITICAL MYTH WITHIN THE HUNGARIAN POLITICS OF MEMORY

Since 2010, Fidesz has built its political image and communication centered around the concept of the nation (in its nativist form) and framed the party as representing national

¹⁵ All Hungarian quotes, where original English transcriptions are not provided, were translated by the author.

¹⁶ The analysis of foreign policy aspects falls outside of the scope of the current study. For details, see Rácz, 2019; Balogh, 2022; Greilinger, 2023; Schmidt & Glied, 2024.

interest (Ágh, 2016). Therefore, one of the main functions of Turanism is to reinforce identification with the Hungarian nation and strengthen national identity within the electorate. The Turanist political myth enhances national belonging by evoking the feeling of pride in Hungarian origin. Positive narratives provide a foundation for a nation's collective identity. At the same time, stories of past glory and achievements help establish a common historical trajectory that links individuals to a broader, meaningful community (Anderson, 1993). Highlighting moments of glory can help a nation recover from a perception of collective guilt or humiliation, reshaping its self-perception. The analysis of Hungarian memory narratives during the 2010-2022 period presents a deficit of positive, empowering, and unifying narratives about the Hungarian nation (except that of the Christian Bulwark¹⁷, which is not unique to Hungary). After the fall of the Communist regime, the memory of the heroes of 1956 has been the central narrative of national heroism and resilience. However, after Hungary's rapprochement with Russia (Végh, 2015), and especially after 2018, this narrative gradually fell into the background (Benazzo, 2017). Memory narratives about Trianon and the Second World War represent national tragedy and loss, and the memory of Admiral Horthy¹⁸ is too divisive for the Hungarian public to fulfill the potential of a positive memory narrative. The narrative around Stephen I., the establishment of the Hungarian statehood, and the adoption of Christianity served as a positive reference point that both the post-1989 right and left acknowledged. However, since the 2015 refugee crisis, the Hungarian left-liberal opposition began to utilize the narrative around St. Stephen to highlight that Hungary has for most of its history been a multi-ethnic state, and that St. Stephen promoted the welcoming of newcomers as he believed a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual state is stronger.¹⁹ The opposition contrasted this reference with the Orbán government's strong anti-immigrant, nativist stance. The lack of empowering narratives about the national past may have prompted Fidesz to search for new memory narratives. In a survey conducted by the Political Capital think tank, the most successful historical event seen by the Hungarian public was the era of conquering the homeland [Honfoglalás] (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung – Political Capital, 2019). Given the general interest in Hungarian prehistory and Jobbik's gradual shift toward the centre and its abandonment of Turanist narratives, Fidesz saw an opportunity in adopting Turanism as part of the politics of memory (Ablonczy & Borbás, 2024). Linking the success of the Hungarian state and nation-building by St. Stephen with the heritage of Hungarian nomadic-warrior tribes could serve as a new memory narrative, which expresses national strength, glory, and resilience.

The political myth of Turanism represents a narrative of national exceptionalism. It gives new meaning to Hungarian prehistory: rather than viewing the nomadic tribal culture of early Hungarians as primitive or backward, Turanism reinterprets it as a

¹⁷ On this narrative see Balogh, 2022.

¹⁸ See Pető, 2021.

¹⁹ This is reflected in the literary work *Admonitions* (Libellus de institutione morum) summarizing King Stephen's principles of government for his heir, Imre.

symbol of national grandeur and historical significance. Smith highlighted the importance of national myths in explaining the beginnings or origins of national collectives (2000, 2003). Myths of national origin are similar to sacred myths as they refer to the “beginning of times,” the golden age, or the holy foundations of the collective. While the Hungarian tribes’ migrations and settlement in the Carpathian Basin have been acknowledged in official memory narratives, after the change of regime, the “beginning” of Hungarian history was usually expressed with the beginning of the Hungarian statehood with St. Stephen and the adoption of Christianity. This event symbolized Hungary’s belonging to Europe, which coincided with the political goals of the transition era, that is, a return to Europe. Little attention was paid to the history of Hungarian tribes before establishing statehood, which were considered barbaric and backward (Kürti, 2016). The political myth of Turanism redefines this beginning by providing a new reference point rooted in the history of Hungarian tribes. According to this narrative, a distinct Hungarian ethnic or cultural consciousness existed even prior to Hungarian statehood. Moreover, it emphasizes that Hungarians managed to preserve this identity over time, despite being surrounded by larger ethnically diverse groups. This narrative addresses sentiments of ontological insecurity, fostered by government rhetoric, according to which Hungarians, as a small nation, will always need to fight for their survival. As Orbán states:

The Hungarian is a special creature. It stands alone in the world. [...] there will always be Slavs, Germanic, Anglo-Saxons, Latins, and Arabs. But whether there will be a Hungarian, which is not an Indo-European people, whose language is not spoken by anyone, which has no cultural affinities, at most somewhere in Central Asia, but stands alone here, and whether it will survive depends on its language and its culture, which is based on this language. (OV 2020 Hb)

The idea of potential Turkic kin eases some of the ontological insecurity of being alone in Europe (another deep-rooted narrative in Hungarian culture). When the national collective is perceived to be under threat, or even in danger of disappearing, mythical narratives about the perseverance of the national collective through the ages become alluring. The exceptionalism of the Hungarian nation, which is supposed to grant its survival, has been expressed by Orbán on several occasions when talking about Hungarian history:

Instead of wandering, [Hungarians] chose settlement, instead of loose tribal alliances, they chose a centralized state, instead of nomadic beliefs, they chose Western Christianity. They conquered presumably far more numerous local peoples, shattered invading Western imperial armies, crushed internal rebellion, and embarked on a breathtaking process of nation-building. What times, what greatness, glory and unparalleled achievement! (OV 2020 Hc)

As Orbán's quotes demonstrate, one of the main functions of Turanism as a political myth is to construct and reinforce a distinctive national identity and to reinforce identification with the Hungarian nation within the electorate. By asserting that Hungarians share a cultural and historical kinship with Central Asian peoples, or even the Huns, Turanism offers an alternative to the European-oriented narrative that ties Hungary to the West. The notion of uniqueness is central to Turanist discourse, as it differentiates Hungarians from their immediate neighbors and the broader European community. This exceptionalist idea supports nationalist rhetoric that emphasizes Hungary's uniqueness and autonomy within Europe (and aligns with Fidesz's rhetoric on national sovereignty). Turanism provides symbolic capital that elevates Hungary's status from the "periphery of the West" (Melegh, 2006) to an important bridge between East and West. This rhetoric can be harnessed to consolidate domestic political support.

The Fidesz government also utilizes the political myth of Turanism to promote social cohesion, albeit in an exclusionary, nativist form. As the Turanist myth is a narrative about ethnic origin, it aims to appeal to ethnic Hungarians, regardless of political or even geographical divisions (including trans-border Hungarians). At the same time, narratives emphasizing shared ethnic origin exclude from the nation parts of Hungarian society who do not share this ethnic belonging or cultural traits, such as refugees, immigrants, or minorities (especially the Roma). Turanist narratives also serve a compensatory function. This is most evident when contrasted with the memory narratives about Trianon. The central function of the political myth of Turanism is to illustrate the resilience of the community. The 1000-year-old history of national perseverance compensates for the ontological insecurity symbolized by Trianon. This compensatory narrative addresses the psychological wounds (national humiliation, loss of prestige) by evoking a grand and ancient heritage, reassuring Hungarians of their enduring significance despite the geopolitical setbacks of the 20th century. In a powerful Trianon commemoration speech held in 2020, Orbán tells the story of how Hungarians came to the West, fought their enemies, and survived to this day. The early beginnings of the Hungarian people once again underline their exceptionalism:

We see hundreds of wandering tribes of the great steppe disappear and perish in the dust of history. We see that we Hungarians have neither disappeared nor perished, but have established our homeland in the ring of Latin, Germanic and Slavic peoples, preserving our unique quality. We opened our hearts to Christianity, heard the word of God, heeded it, and made it the foundation of our state.
(OV 2020 H)

The grandiose vision of warrior tribes, coming from the Central Asian steppe and settling in the Hungarian plains, among ethnically different peoples, maintaining their uniqueness, but adopting Christianity, is a perfect example of a myth of origin. Anthony Smith lists several components of ethno-national myths of descent, such as 1) myth of temporal origins, 2) myth of location and migration, 3) myth of heroic age, 4) myth of decline,

and 5) myth of regeneration (Smith, 1999, pp. 63-68). Orbán's Trianon commemoration speeches follow this model very closely. As Orbán states in another speech:

To this day, we do not understand the source of knowledge [of the ancient Hungarians], their nation-building culture, their talent for statecraft, and the profound, uplifting seriousness of their spirit. We do not know where it came from, but we know that in times of crisis, when pushed to the edge of destruction, our country repeatedly carves its own path, rises again, grabs the collar and assembles the Hungarians who emerge from who knows where, and once again there will be greatness, glory, and an astonishingly thriving country. (OV 2020 Hc)

Turanist narratives have a strong future-oriented element, such as political myths, by presenting guidelines for the nation's path ahead. The myth of Turanism not only fosters a sense of pride in the past, but also provides hope for the restoration of national greatness. Furthermore, it breaks with the past humiliation, outlines a new beginning, and calls for mobilization.

Another core function of political myths is to provide political legitimacy, including the "legitimacy of collective identity, the legitimacy of a new order, or the legitimacy of political actors in a pluralistic society" (Meyer, 2008). In this regard, Turanism as a political myth supports the government's broader anti-Western and EU-sceptic position. The idea that Hungary should have an alliance with Eastern states, or at least position itself between East and West and reject Western norm-following, resonates with an electorate disappointed in the social and economic outcomes of democratic transition and Western integration (Korkut & Akcali, 2015). In this regard, Turanist narratives not only complement existing memory narratives but also add a new layer. While Fidesz's narratives about Trianon and 1956 blame the "West" for "betraying" Hungary, they do not promote alignment with Eastern powers. Turanism, however, explicitly advocates for expanding Hungary's international leverage by cooperating with Turkic, or in a broader sense, Eastern states. This narrative expands previous memory narratives by providing a mythological framework that situates Hungary within a wider, non-Western cultural tradition.

As discussed above, Turanism also has a foreign policy dimension that aligns with Fidesz's political ambitions, particularly with the strategy of Eastern Opening. Regarding foreign policy and diplomacy, the primary function of Turanism as a political myth is to build connections with Turkic states. A well-crafted memory narrative may strengthen a nation's brand, making it more appealing for international cooperation, tourism, trade, and business partnerships. In this context, Turanist references, such as common roots, kinship, and historical ideas of Eastern alliance, legitimize Fidesz's orientation towards Turkic states in international relations. Evoking Turanist ideas may have been deemed necessary to justify to the Hungarian public the new strategic partnership with Central Asian countries, with whom (apart from Turkey) Hungary previously had little international cooperation. By strengthening ties with non-Western countries, Turkic states,

Russia, and China, Fidesz can expand Hungary's international connections outside the traditional Euro-Atlantic sphere. This geopolitical strategy allows Hungary to pursue new economic and political partnerships.²⁰ Whether Turanist narratives positively impacted the perception of Turkic states by the Hungarian public remains to be seen. International moves, such as joining the Turkic Council as an observer, helped to create the image promoted by the Hungarian government that Hungary is an actor not only in Europe but also in the global context. Pursuing non-Western alliances reinforces the image of the Fidesz government's domestic sovereignty.²¹ This corresponds to the political ambitions of Viktor Orbán, who sought political challenge in engaging as an actor in international politics after achieving hegemony domestically.

CONCLUSION

When analyzing Turanist narratives in Hungary, we can conclude that Turanism evolved from being a rather marginal narrative on the far-right to a fully-fledged political myth instrumentalized and institutionalized by the Fidesz government. Turanism gained prominence in the mid-2000s, promoted by the far-right party Jobbik, as a counter-narrative to Hungary's Euro-Atlantic alliance. Since 2018, we can observe how the Fidesz government adopted this rhetoric and leveraged the idea of Turanism according to its political strategy. With Hungary's joining the Turkic Council in 2018 and naming the Turkic states as Hungary's strategic partners in 2020, Turanist narratives evolved from a political myth to an institutionalized foreign policy agenda. Simultaneously, new government-funded academic institutions and cultural organizations promote Turanist narratives to the Hungarian public. Furthermore, references to the Hungarian nation's Eastern origin and kinship with Turkic peoples is instrumentalized in relation to Hungarian collective identity: the mythicized and homogenized "East" represents an authentic culture, national sovereignty, and a more conservative, national, and patriarchal worldview, where according to the government's rhetoric, Hungarians [should] "feel at home", in contrast to the Western liberal socio-political model (Korkut, 2017).

The success of Fidesz cannot be understood solely through economic factors; its dominance in Hungarian politics is also rooted in the effective instrumentalization of memory politics. Viktor Orbán and his party have strategically instrumentalized historical narratives and political myths (such as Trianon, 1956, and WWII) to shape national identity and mobilize support, as well as to gain legitimacy by presenting themselves as defenders of the Hungarian nation, defined in narrow ethno-nationalistic terms. The article demonstrated how Fidesz has incorporated Turanist narratives into its discursive repertoire. Domestically, Turanism as a political myth legitimizes the government's

²⁰ The tangible economic results of which, however, are debated (Rácz, 2019; Greiling, 2023).

²¹ This aspect, however, is better exemplified by Hungary's relations to Russia. See Végh, 2015; Schmidt & Glied, 2024.

foreign policy orientation towards Turkic states. Moreover, by emphasizing Hungary's supposed historical and cultural ties to the East, Turanism contributes to shaping domestic identity narratives, reinforcing nationalist discourses, and constructing anti-Western sentiment. Turanist narratives are furthermore instrumentalized in "culture wars," rejecting the perceived cultural imperialism of Western liberal values. Turanism fulfills its mythomoteur function by enabling identification with the national collective, which Orbán and the Fidesz government claim exclusive authority to represent. The incorporation of Turanism thus complements Fidesz's broader nationalist project, which seeks to assert Hungary's independence from Western cultural and political influence. By promoting the idea of a kinship with Central Asian peoples, Turanism offers an appealing narrative on Hungarian prehistory, as well as a symbolic alternative to Western-oriented identity frameworks, and helps legitimize Hungary's Eastern orientation for a domestic audience.

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