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Hungarian identity from a historical perspective

Identity can be translated and explained as a consciousness of one's own identity: who we are, where we have come from, and as a form of collective consciousness: some sort of sense of belonging to a community. It is the subsistence of what keeps us together and what makes us different from others. Belonging somewhere is always part of the process of defining ourselves, but at the same time it is part of forming of a collective consciousness. The smaller the community which one has to fit into, the easier it is to develop the consciousness of togetherness, but this feeling is inversely proportional to the size of the community. At the moment homogenous nation states do not exist in Europe.

Thinking of the nation in terms of decentralization, the acceptance of diversity, respect towards the distinct differences, recognition and sharing of values is the basis of any type of union, hence the European Union. National identity is revalued in this atmosphere because this is how contribution to the community's values can be identified. Decentralization dismantles a homogenous nation state, but it gives greater value to national specialities. This is the context in which I will discuss.[1]

Hungarians arrived to Europe from the East in the 9th century. The seven Hungarian tribes led by Árpád settled in the Carpathian Basin. At the time of the settlement the religion of the Hungarians was Eastern Paganism, not Western Catholicism. Paganism, mythology, the divine qualities of the tribal leaders and alliance of tribes were all part of the cohesive forces between Hungarians. At the end of the 10th century Géza the leader died and he made sure that his son István would be supported by the lords, doing this by making them swear an oath. According to unwritten pagan law Lord Koppány announced his claim for the throne. The supporters of the old regime and of tribal freedom lined up behind him, in whom resistance was also increased by the fact that István was backed by foreign nationalities, mainly Germans. It wasn't only the choice for next ruler of the Hungarian people that was being threatened by the dispute between István and Koppány, but also the question of whether the Hungarian state will continue to exist at all. After the victory of István, he sent a deputy to the Pope, who granted him benediction and the crown. With this Hungary also joined those nations whose religion was Christian more specifically orienting towards western Christianity. The sovereign Christian Hungarian Kingdom was formed and joined Western Europe. István received a crown for his significant role in spreading Christianity, but it is important to note that this is not the crown which is known as the official crown today (and will be mentioned later on) that bears the regalia. The coronation ceremony took place at Christmas in the year 1000 in Esztergom. The place and time is symbolic and to this day a very important factor in the idea of togetherness of Hungarians.

[1] György Schöpflin: *Az identitás dilemmái. Kultúra, állam, globalizáció*. Attraktor, Máriabesnyő-Gödöllő, 2004; László Kiss J.: *Nemzeti identitás és külpolitika Közép- és Kelet-Európában.* Teleki László Alapítvány, Budapest, 2003.

The Árpád dynasty, which was named after the monarch who led the settlement of the Hungarians, ruled the Hungarian Kingdom for three hundred years. During this time Hungary became a significant and important country in Europe. It achieved international prestige which was shown by the interest of prestigious rulers in marrying Hungarian queens, and the Hungarian kings marrying German, French, Spanish and Italian princesses. The Kingdom of Hungary in that period carried considerable authority shown by the fact that nine of the members of the Árpád-house were canonized and a significant number of descendants ended up abroad in Portugal and Ireland for example. István the founder of the state was canonized 40 years after his death. August 20th, the day of the ceremony is the Hungarian national holiday. Europe in this period was reigned by numerous kings and family members from the Árpád house who were saints, which indicates a total identification with Western Christianity, an early form of European integration. It is not a coincidence that in the chronicles of Western Europe (the French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese) a recurring theme can be found in great numbers: the fight of knights to win the chance of proposing to a Hungarian queen. According to sources from those times the godlike nature of the rulers of the Árpád house was shown by them having not five but six fingers, which were taken as a godly sign by Christians. The strong connection between Christianity and medieval Hungary is also highlighted by the existence of a convent, the Pálos, which was established by Hungarians.

Faith in the holiness of the Hungarian Crown started to develop under the ruling of the Árpád house. Jesus's mother, the Virgin Mary is Hungary's patron saint. The doctrine of the Crown reached its last form in the 19th century when due to the aftermath of the French Revolution nationalism and questions of identity become important issues in European countries. The Hungarian Crown is one of the symbols of the Hungarian State. From the 12th till the 20th century only those persons were considered legitimate Hungarian kings who were enwreathed with the Holy Crown. The basis of the Hungarian constitution, the country's jurisdiction and legal system was the Holy Crown. A similar concept still exists today in connection to the English Crown, which also has legal bearings. During his reign King St. István made August 15th, the day of Virgin Mary's ascension, a holiday, called Nagyboldogasszony Day. At the end of his life István offered the country to the Virgin Mary on this day. This offering is one of its kind and the notion of "Regnum Marianum" emerged in the public law of Hungarian history, according to which Hungary is the land of the Virgin Mary.

After the extinction of the Árpád house at the end of the 14th century Zsigmond of the French Luxemburg dynasty took over the Hungarian throne. King Zsigmond who was Hungarian, German and Czech king, and Emperor of the German-Roman Empire was one of the most significant rulers of the late middle ages. Under his reign he found it important to build up Visegrád and Buda to western standards and to serve as protection against the Ottoman Empire. His contribution to Hungarian history was highlighted by his work in constructing the Hungarian fortress system. Towards the end of the 14th century the Ottoman Empire moved on to the Balkan Peninsula. King Zsigmond wanted to drive the Turkish out of the whole of Europe. He managed to gather an army of crusaders but suffered total defeat from the Turkish at Nikapolis (modern day Bulgarian). As means of defence the Hungarian Kingdom developed a system of fortresses with Nándorfehérvár (present day Belgrade) as the center of the

system. The Kingdom gained the reputation of protector of Christianity from eastern invaders. After the death of Zsigmond this image was made even stronger by the Hungarian Kingdom descendents of the Hunyadi family, János and Mátyás Hunyadi. János Hunyadi became governor of Hungary in the absence of a king. His lifetime ambition was to protect his homeland and to crush the Ottoman rule. His chain of military successes led them to believe that the Turks could be forced out of Europe. In the middle of the 15th century with his crusaders consisting of soldiers and peasants Hunyadi achieved a great victory at Nándorfehérvár against the Sultan's forces of superior numbers. Since that day to honour the great victory and according to the Pope's decree bells are pealed at noon all over Europe. Hence Hungary being the protecting bastion of Christianity at the time.

The other member of the Hunyadi family, Mátyás I is called Mátyás the Just in everyday language. Hungarian tradition considers him to be one of the greatest Hungarian kings who has been the inspiration for numerous folktales and myths. He created a centralized law system and raised a large royal army. Several legends were based on The King's Black Army of Hungary of mercenaries. He conquered Czechoslovakia, Moravia, Silesia, Vienna and made Austria's provinces part of his kingdom after strengthening the southern borders of his land. King Matthias became one of the richest rulers of the renaissance era. He set up a humanistic court in Buda and Visegrád, coequal to the courts of Italy. His library was famous world-wide and contained 2000 to 2500 volumes. After his death the Hungarian Kingdom weakened and became easy prey for the Ottoman Army. Hungary split up in to three parts. The central area became a Turkish province, and the western and northern provinces were ruled by the Habsburg king. The eastern province of Transylvania became independent.

One of the important elements of the defensive against the Ottoman Empire was the system of castles that was constructed by Zsigmond. The most eminent soldiers and poets of the fights against the Turkish were Bálint Balassi and Miklós Zrínyi. Balassi was a great figure of the second part of the Hungarian renaissance. He was one of the first classics of Hungarian literature and poetry who wrote his works not in Latin but Hungarian. Miklós Zrínyi was born to a Croatian noble family. According to family tradition, he was fighting a constant battle with the Turkish to try and protect his land. He drove them out of the Muraköz and he tried to protect Hungary, Transylvania, Carinthia and Steiermark. He regarded himself primarily a soldier, and a poet only beside the mark. Notwithstanding this, he is one of the most important figures of the 17th century Hungarian baroque literature. His work can be called a form of national duty in the best possible sense. His main work is The Peril of Sziget written in Hungarian where he records the success of the military achievements of his great grandfather against the Turkish occupants. The Habsburgs were the ones in the end who managed to get rid of the Turks from the Kingdom of Hungary.

In the 19th century similar to other Western European countries, self- and national identity became an important issue in Hungary. This is when Ferenc Kölcsey wrote the Hungarian anthem. Linguistic and literary reform movements gained importance. One of the driving forces of these movements was Count István Széchenyi. He founded the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, he had the highly symbolic Chain Bridge constructed, which was the first bridge to provide a connection between Buda and Pest which lie on

opposite sides of the Danube. He started steam boating and the program for the regulation of rivers, he introduced the banking system, supported the construction of ships and he organized the Nemzeti Kaszinó. At this time, the middle of the 19th century, Hungary was characterized by a busy and bustling social life. The aim of the national elite was social reformation and economic development. Lajos Kossuth becomes the leader of the political reform movement. His goal was to create an independent nation-state. Hungarian artists and writers, among them one of the greatest Hungarian poets Sándor Petőfi, stirred up the nation. The revolutionary wave that spread across Europe helped the uprising of the Hungarians who were demanding reforms. The uprising broke out on the 15th of March 1848, which is another of the Hungarian national holidays. Hungary and Transylvania were united and the takeover of the Habsburg throne was declared. This caused an imbalance among the powers of Europe. The neighbouring countries were not ready to accept this and Russia's tsar offered to help the tsar of Austria. The Hungarian army suffered total destruction.

In the First World War Hungary stood on the losing side. The victorious powers wanted to protect Europe from the communist Russia coming from the east. Central Europe had no need anymore for a Habsburg Empire. This factor met with the nationalistic tendencies of the nations that the Monarchy consisted of. The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the peace treaty which was signed in the Grand Trianon castle established the borders of Hungary, Austria, Romania and the newly formed Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The former Kingdom of Hungary lost two-thirds of its area and the population decreased from 21 million to 8 million. Thus a majority of Hungarians ended up in foreign countries. Hungary became a small country. The treaty was viewed as a trauma by the Hungarians of the time. In the Second World War the country was on the losing side again. After the Germans, the country was taken over by the Soviet Red Army. With the help of the Soviet artillery the Hungarian communists came to power and introduced a Soviet type of dictatorship. The members of the political opposition were either thrown into prison or executed, the churches were persecuted, their schools were closed, and the aristocracy and bourgeois were forced to evict their homes. On October 23rd 1956 the Hungarian people's uprising against the extreme political oppression was led by Imre Nagy. The Hungarian Revolution lasted 12 days after which it was halted by Soviet tanks. In the process of punishment more than 200 people were executed, one of them being the democratically elected Hungarian Prime Minister Imre Nagy. At the end of the Cold War, on October 23rd 1989, the Republic of Hungary was proclaimed and thus the Change of Regime. This date is the third Hungarian national day.

What can Hungarians be proud of? Hungarian scholars and the internationally well-known Hungarian scholarly profession for example. 16 Nobel prize winners were of Hungarian origin. One can mention doctor Albert Szent-Györgyi or the writer Imre Kertész. Although he didn't receive a Nobel Prize for it, the Bíro, which was contrived by Imre Bíro, is used worldwide. The telephone switchboard was invented by Tivadar Puskás in the 19th century. The name Puskás takes us on to one of the greatest football players, Ferenc Puskás. The mathematician János Neumann's work was important in the design of the first computer. It is worth mentioning Ernő Rubik the inventor of the Rubik's cube. But Hungarians can be proud of several contributors to the world of art,

for example the painter Mihály Munkácsy, the French-Hungarian Vasarely and last but not least István Szabó Oscar-winning filmdirector.

Some foreigners view Hungarians as a sad and gloomy nation. There is a saying "Hungarians cry even when celebrating" which reflects this idea. It is true that the Hungarian national anthem's music and intonation is one of the more gloomy ones in Europe. With this in mind, I still think that Hungarians are cheerful, hospitable and open. They are tolerant and welcoming, these characteristics being reinforced by the teachings of Saint István. Since the forming of the state several nations have mixed in Hungary. We are proud to be Hungarian but at the same time proud to be part of Europe. István the 1st being the symbol of the forming of the state and its 1000 years, Lajos Kossuth being the symbol of revolution and reform, Imre Nagy being the symbol of freedom in the collective Hungarian consciousness. According to the introduction, getting to know and sharing values is the basis for any kind of alliance or union, and thus it is the basis for the European Union.

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