

**Illiberal uses of collective victimhood narratives in Hungary**

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Sara Romai

Supervised by Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova

## *Research Objectives*

Throughout the summer I took part in the project entitled ‘Illiberal uses of collective victimhood narratives in Hungary’ with the objective of exploring the understanding and interpretation of victimhood in Hungary, particularly as victimhood emerges in historical memory and remembrance and is intentionally put forth in current political narratives.

## *Methods*

This research was conducted through four focus group discussions with five to six participants from four distinct regions of the country. All participants were university students at different levels of their studies ranging from BA to PhD courses. Additionally, each group had an approximately equal distribution of STEM and SHAPE majors as well as male and female participants. Secondly, media analysis was used to explore this subject further, taking a sample of 15 articles from both hvg.hu and Blikk ranging from 2014 to 2024 that included one of six key words relating to victimhood: “áldozat,” “szocializmus” (socialism), “Trianon,” “megemlékezés” (remembrance), “Soros-terv” (Soros plan), and “menekült” (refugee). Finally, there was a fieldwork component to the research focusing on physical memorials in the city centre of Budapest along with one exhibition relevant to victimhood at the Holocaust Memorial Center.

## *My Role*

I worked as a research assistant to Dr Hronesova and in this role took part, as an observer, in four focus group discussions, conducted a media analysis task on two Hungarian news outlets and completed a brief fieldwork task in Budapest. As part of the focus group discussions held over Zoom, I was present in the background as a Hungarian speaker and point of contact. Following these discussions, I received and transcribed the recordings into English. Finally, I wrote an approximately two-page summary of each focus group discussion reflecting on how victimhood resonated with participants.

With regards to media analysis, I combed through articles containing one of the six keywords in the relevant time frame, which had been expanded from the initial key-search for “victim” by building on topics brought up in the focus group discussion. I then chose 15 articles from both hvg.hu and Blikk which, based on their title, discussed an identifiable victim or victims, were directly relevant to Hungary and were related to the topics discussed during the focus groups. Additionally, together the 15 articles had to constitute an equal spread across the timeframe as much as possible.

Finally, as part of the fieldwork I visited Kossuth Square and Liberty Square in Budapest and took photographs of all the memorials and statues in the area. I used this material to create a timeline considering how victimhood is reflected through the memorials that surround the Parliament building. Additionally, I attended the permanent exhibit at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest and reflected on the role of victimhood here.

## *Main Findings*

### *Focus Group Discussions*

Each of the four focus group discussions was guided by a list of questions touching on the participants' perception of Hungarian history, historical victimhood, Hungary's international standing as well as the country's relationship to the European Union. Generally, within groups participants' opinions tended to converge, however, multiple perspectives were always represented and there were instances of more substantial disagreement. Questions interrogating the historical victimhood of Hungary elicited the most diverse response. Some participants, and one group in particular, strongly agreed that Hungary had indisputably been a victim throughout much, if not most, of its history. In contrast, other participants either pointed out that Hungary had been a victim of its own bad leadership or conceded that Hungary is generally perceived to be a victim but argued that they do not personally agree with this assessment. Those who had a more critical assessment of Hungarian victimhood seemed to recognize political connotations, dismissing the narrative on that ground.

Victimhood resonated most strongly amongst the majority of participants as victimhood at the hands of the political system. This was vocalized to varying degrees amongst different groups, one group for instance was very critical of the political regime but did not significantly characterize themselves as direct victims of it. Other groups, however, explicitly named the political regime when asked whether they had ever felt like a victim and repeatedly spoke of the system as the victimizer.

Finally, participants were asked about various narratives of victimhood put forward by the political regime relating to immigration, the war in Ukraine, George Soros and the European Union. Although each group's approach varied on different topics, the large majority of participants completely rejected the proposition of Hungarian victimhood in each situation, often by highlighting inconsistencies in each narrative. On the question of immigration, responses did at times attribute some degree of validity to a potential of victimhood, with one group in particular expressing a fear of immigration.

### *Media Analysis*

In completing a brief media analysis on two separate platforms, Blikk and hvg.hu, I was able to explore how these outlets echo, reject and expand on themes of national victimhood in varied ways. Generally speaking, notions of victimhood are often present with regard to a chosen topic, however, victimhood is not as commonly explicitly discussed. Articles relevant to victimhood, those containing one of the keywords searched for, could largely be divided between historical and political victimhood. Themes of historical victimhood, most strongly in relation to Trianon but at times Socialism as well, are discussed more openly and often as historical fact. Trianon in particular was discussed both by Blikk and hvg.hu as an indisputably tragic event for the nation through a lens of remembrance and commemoration. Political victimhood on the other hand, or

victimhood as presented in government rhetoric in relation to Soros and migration, was approached quite differently by both media outlets. These narratives were almost entirely absent from articles in hvg.hu, however when they were mentioned any notion of victimhood was firmly rejected due to the strongly political nature of such an argument. On the other hand, while Blikk did not adopt the mentioned narratives as its own, numerous articles did report on political statements of this nature with very little to no context added, thus echoing the narrative presented by the relevant politician. On the topic of migration, Hungarian victimhood did come up multiple times in Blikk articles, mostly in reports of crimes committed by refugees in Hungary. This seemed striking as in contrast, any article discussing refugees as victims dealt with events overwhelmingly outside of Hungary.

### *Fieldwork*

My task in fieldwork consisted of two parts: documenting monuments or memorials around the city relating to victimhood and visiting the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest. I initially researched and compiled a list of all monuments relating to Hungarian victimhood around the city centre. However, in doing so I first recognized that many of these were located near each other, for the most part near the parliament building and therefore decided to focus on memorials in this approximate location. Furthermore, once I arrived to see and photograph the monuments I had chosen, I noticed that at two precise locations, Kossuth Square and Liberty Square, they were presented to the public amongst a couple of older monuments as well as reconstructions of former monuments in that space. While many of these did not directly reference victimhood, I chose to include them in my fieldwork and compiled each monument I visited at these two precise locations into one timeline. This timeline seemed to support a narrative of the juxtaposition of national victimhood to former national glory, that had been physically and symbolically constructed starting from 2013. The most physically impressive memorials I found were dedicated to the remembrance of national tragedies, such as the revolution of 1956 and the Treaty of Trianon, while recent reconstructions celebrated former statues too great Hungarian politicians and revolutionaries.

During my visit to the Holocaust memorial centre, I was able to delve into an aspect of Hungarian victimhood that is more rarely discussed, and in particular, was very differently discussed during the focus groups. The most striking aspect of this exhibition was the contrast it provided to what appears to be the general view of Hungary's role in World War II, one that was echoed in focus groups. The general consensus when asked about this period was that the Hungarian state was not necessarily in a position to oppose Nazi German, and moreover that Jewish victimhood occurred after and due to the German invasion of Hungary in 1944. In contrast to this view, the Holocaust Memorial Center's exhibition clearly and consistently names the Hungarian state as the victimizer, not just of the Jewish population but Roma people and other minorities, both before and after the German invasion, providing ample evidence to support this assertion.

### *Key Takeaways*

Overall, throughout this project, I became more familiar with various research methods both through practice and observation. In particular, I had the opportunity to observe the process of setting up and conducting four focus group discussions, to conduct my own media analysis along set guidelines and to take part in a limited amount of fieldwork.

With regard to the focus group discussions, I had the opportunity to observe the process of finding the right participants for each group, and in this way got a sense of the structural elements of this research. Moreover, in observing each focus group discussion I learned from the moderator's role in steering the discussion without influencing any participant's contribution, particularly given the high volume and often political nature of questions. Following the focus group discussions, I was responsible for transcribing and then translating each discussion. This was something I had never done before and therefore was able to try various approaches as well as work together with AI tools to complete the work in a way that is both the most accurate and efficient it can be. Finally, I had the opportunity to summarize and thereby somewhat analyze each discussion, allowing me to consider each focus group through various lenses while further familiarizing myself with the participants' talking points.

Following the focus group discussions, my task was to conduct a small-scale media analysis on two platforms: Blikk and HVG.hu. Here the initial plan was to find articles containing only the keyword "victim" (áldozat in Hungarian), however, due to both the subject matter of articles and the particularities of each page's search function this procedure only yielded one or two relevant articles in the given timeframe. Therefore, I had the opportunity, with guidance from Dr Hronesova, to create a list of keywords based on themes and questions discussed in the focus groups and develop a clearly defined procedure for selecting articles that could be recreated with identical results.

Finally, I conducted a brief fieldwork task in Budapest, firstly looking at monuments and memorials around the city centre and secondly visiting the Holocaust Memorial Center to further explore one aspect of victimhood memory in Hungary. In this process, I learned not only to gather evidence in a different form but also to consider a familiar space and a familiar topic through a new lens. Additionally, in exploring memorials and monuments around the city centre, I found that my work became more immediately relevant to the research topic when I was intentional about location (in this instance Kossuth and Liberty Square), particularly when that location had significance given its proximity to the parliament, rather than looking for memorials relating to victimhood throughout the city centre generally.

### *Overall Impression of the Programme*

Through my research in the Laidlaw Scholars Programme I was able to study a topic, the role of victimhood in Hungarian identity, that I had been interested in for a longer period. This research gave me to opportunity to consider the cultural and political landscape that I grew up in and am

greatly familiar with from an academic viewpoint. In doing so it allowed me to step outside of my own perspective and consider research questions from diverse angles. Moreover, being given both analytical and more quantitative tasks in approximately equal measure, I gained familiarity with different aspects of the research process and learned to conduct research through various methods as well as in different environments. Finally, the variety of tasks and longer timeframe of my work allowed me to gain a more holistic overview of the project in Hungary and especially to consider my own research tasks in more depth.