

LIDLAW SUMMER RESEARCH: ILLIBERAL USES OF COLLECTIVE VICTIMHOOD NARRATIVES IN HUNGARY

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 field work task in Budapest.

FOCUS GROUPS

Each of the four focus group discussions were 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. Questions interrogating the historical victimhood of Hungary elicited the most diverse response with some participants agreeing that Hungary had indisputably been a victim throughout much of its history while others pointed out that Hungary had been a victim mainly of its own bad leadership. Victimhood resonated most strongly amongst the majority of participants as victimhood at the hands of the political system, as some groups explicitly named the political regime when asked whether they had ever felt like a victim and repeatedly spoke of the system as the victimized. Finally, participants were asked about various narratives of victimhood put forwards 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..

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 regards 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. Political victimhood on the other hand, or victimhood as presented in government rhetoric concerning Soros and migration, was approached quite differently by both media outlets. These narratives were almost entirely absent from articles in hvg.hu, while Blikk often reported on political statements of this nature with very little to no context added, thus echoing the narrative presented by the relevant politician.

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. Each group had an approximately equal distribution of STEM and SHAPE majors as well as male and female participants. In media analysis my task was to take 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 center of Budapest along with one exhibition relevant to Hungarian victimhood at the Holocaust Memorial Center.

FIELDWORK

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, which supported a narrative that juxtaposed the 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 1956 and Trianon, while recent reconstructions celebrated former statues too great Hungarian politicians and revolutionaries. During my visit to the Holocaust memorial center, 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. This exhibition strikingly contrasts the general consensus that the Hungarian state was not in a position to oppose Nazi Germany, and that Jewish victimhood occurred after and due to the German invasion in 1944. It 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.



Kossuth Memorial



Trianon Memorial



1956 Memorial