

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Häkkinen, Ville

Title: The use and abuse of parliamentary concepts in Hungarian parliamentary debates, 1920–27

Year: 2020

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © 2020 International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamen

Rights: In Copyright

Rights url: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

Please cite the original version:

Häkkinen, V. (2020). The use and abuse of parliamentary concepts in Hungarian parliamentary debates, 1920–27. *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, 40(2), 229-244.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02606755.2020.1771532>

The use and abuse of parliamentary concepts in Hungarian parliamentary debates, 1920-27¹

Ville Häkkinen

Department of History and Ethnology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT

During and after the First World War, discourses calling for constitutional reform pervaded Europe. The break-up of the continental empires, the emergence of the new nation-states, and the western calls for democratization collectively gave rise to transnational debates about parliamentarization and parliamentary government. However, in the diverse and contingent post-war political environment, at the same time these ideals were given profoundly nation-specific meanings. They were implemented in the process of nation-building in equally diverse national contexts. This article analyses the use and abuse of the parliamentary concepts and their vernacular redescriptions in Hungarian parliamentary debates in the years 1920, 1923 and 1927. In those instances, the concepts of parliamentarism were constantly redescribed in order to construct and maintain the legitimacy of the counter-revolutionary regime.

Introduction²

During and after the First World War, discourses calling for constitutional reform pervaded Europe. The break-up of the continental empires, the emergence of the new

¹ This article originated in the 70th conference of the ICHRPI in Vienna in 2018. The author remains thankful to the organizers of the conference for the opportunity to present these findings in this special section.

² For the empirical parts, this article is based on the author's doctoral thesis. See: V. Häkkinen, 'From Counterrevolution to Consolidation? Language of nation-building in the Hungarian parliamentary debates, 1920–1928', (University of Jyväskylä, PhD thesis, 2019).

nation-states, and the western calls for democratization gave rise to transnational debates about parliamentarization and parliamentary government. However, in the diverse and contingent post-war political environment, at the same time these ideals were given profoundly nation-specific meanings. They were implemented in the process of nation-building processes in the equally diverse national contexts.³

In the early 1920s, Hungary stood at the crossroads of those concurrent and entangled developments: after having faced the defeat in the First World War, the domestic revolutions of 1918–19 and the peace treaty of Trianon,⁴ the Hungarian counter-revolutionary government was also forced to comply with the Western demands of parliamentarization. Rhetorically, the counterrevolutionary government retorted to the historical-political valuation of the nation's 'ancient constitution'; according to the Hungarian self-understanding, the Golden Bull of 1222 was a constitutional document comparable to the Magna Carta,⁵ and the institution of the Hungarian Diet dated the parliamentary tradition back to the Middle Ages. However, the first-standing Hungarian-language legislature had only been established after the *Ausgleich* of 1867 and it was this dualist-era parliament that was actually used as the basis of the parliamentary procedure of the 1920s. Contrary to the demands of modern parliamentarism, it included the wide prerogatives of the Speaker and other restrictive practices used to constrain parliamentary dissent.⁶

³ P. Ihalainen, *The Springs of Democracy — National and Transnational Debates on Constitutional Reform in the British, German, Swedish and Finnish Parliaments, 1917-1919* (Helsinki, 2017); J. Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich, 2014).

⁴ Hungary had experienced a liberal-democratic revolution in 1918, a socialist revolution in 1919 and an anti-communist counterrevolution in 1919; as a result of the domestic tumult, Hungary was only able to appear in the Paris Peace Conference in 1920, when the territorial claims of the successor states had already become a *fait accompli*. The Treaty of Trianon finalized the process, in which the pre-war Greater Hungary was reduced to one third of its former territory and population. This socio-political trauma collectively contributed to the spirit of retribution against the Communists as well as revisionism of the Trianon treaty in the coming decades. I. Romsics, *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest, 1999); M. Zeidler, *Ideas on Territorial Revision in Hungary, 1920–1945* (Boulder, 2007).

⁵ L. Kontler, *Millennium in Central Europe. A History of Hungary* (Budapest, 1999), p. 77.

⁶ B. Cartledge, *The Will to Survive. A History of Hungary* (London, 2006), pp. 19–22, 65–6, 98, 154; Romsics, *Hungary*, pp. 55–6, 207–8, 256; Zs. Boros and D. Szabó, *Parlamentarizmus Magyarországon*,

On the other hand, in the early 1920s, the composition of the parliament had changed remarkably in relation to the pre-war years; over half of the parliamentary members were new and the parliamentary culture was still in the making, interruptions were common and at times even the Speaker was not aware of the correct procedure.⁷ This became an asset for the government party, as the open nature of the debate allowed for *ad hoc* –resolutions to be made for the benefit of the government, concerning for example the discipline in the House. Occasionally, the government members were allowed to heckle and obstruct the opposition, but when opposition members rose to the defence, they were instantly reprimanded with disciplinary action. The minister responsible was usually given the last word on the matter in question, to conclude the debate and to conveniently dismiss the opposition arguments to the best of his ability.⁸

Political life *per se* flourished; during the 1920s, usually over ten parties had representation in the Hungarian Parliament. However, the power remained in the hands of the government party, the so-called Unity Party, since 1922 until the Second World War.⁹ The depoliticizing tendencies appeared equally within the parliamentary debate; the rhetorical connection of contemporary political processes to the fundamental values of the nation was a conscious tool of limiting the possible choices and interpretations within the deliberative process. The elitist nature of the Hungarian polity contributed to the use of depoliticizing language.¹⁰ The concepts of political mobilization and popular empowerment remained alien to the counterrevolutionary elite, who

1867–1944 (Budapest, 2008), pp. 340–342; L. Püski, ‘Választási rendszer és parlamentarizmus a Horthy-korszakban’, in I. Romsics (ed.), *A Magyar jobboldali hagyomány, 1900–1948* (Budapest, 2009), pp. 80–81.

⁷ See, for example, the debate on 26 February 1920, *Nemzetgyűlési Napló* (Protocols of the plenary sessions of the National Assembly, hereafter NN) I/1920, p. 49; debate on 21 September 1920, NN V/1920, p. 481.

⁸ Kontler, *Millennium*, p. 350.

⁹ Christian Agrarian, Smallholder and Civic Party / *Keresztény-Keresztyén Földműves-, Kisgazda- és Polgári Párt*, usually referred to as Unity Party / *Egységes Párt*. Romsics, *Hungary*, p. 183.

¹⁰ See, for example, M. Th. Greven, ‘Dimensions of Politics – A Critique of the Common Onedimensional Concept of Politics’, *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 5, (2001), p. 101.

rhetorically ascribed negative connotations to democracy and party politics.¹¹ Concepts such as politics, political and democracy were highly suspicious; they were often used in combinations as ‘mass democracy’, ‘one-sided party politics’, ‘demagogy’, ‘awkward political situations’ or even ‘blind rule of the raw masses’ that connected them to unwelcome phenomena; at the level of shared experience, the negative valuation of democracy was directly linked to the failure of the liberal Károlyi government that reigned from 31 October 1918 until 21 March 1919, and the subsequent Communist coup.¹² For the government, political participation must not mean mobilization of the masses, but a proper, regulated act of election, through which the nation promptly delegated the power to its enlightened statesmen.¹³ As a result, the politicians themselves felt no political responsibility to citizens, but historical responsibility towards the organic concept of nation.

Nevertheless, the Hungarian Parliament in the early 1920s was an arena in which the counterrevolutionary government needed to rhetorically legitimize its decrees. Technically, the process was clear due to the supermajority of the government party, yet the presence of opposition often led to passionate debate, within which the core concepts of parliamentarism were actively applied, questioned, reinterpreted and redescribed rhetorically.¹⁴ This article analyses three instances of such debates from the years 1920, 1923 and 1927. In all instances, the concepts of parliamentarism were constantly redescribed in order to construct and maintain the counterrevolutionary regime. What is interesting, in the latter two cases, is that the opposition engaged in debate in order to

¹¹ Boros and Szabó, *Parlamentarizmus*, pp. 173, 284–285; I. Romsics, *István Bethlen: A Great Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874–1946* (Boulder, 1995), pp. 44–5.

¹² B. Trencsényi, *The Politics of ‘National Character.’ A study in interwar East European thought* (London, 2013), pp. 118–19.

¹³ The election law of 1922 declared the ballot open in rural constituencies, which allowed the landowner magnates – as the trusted collaborators of the regime – to exert pressure on the agricultural workers to vote for the Unity Party. Boros and Szabó, *Parlamentarizmus*, pp. 239–42; Püski, ‘Választási rendszer’, pp. 73, 78; Romsics, *Hungary*, p. 183.

¹⁴ L. Püski, *A Horthy-rendszer* (Debrecen, 2006), p. 268.

renegotiate the content of the bills to better correspond with the transnational discourses of constitutionalism and parliamentarism, but the opposition was repeatedly silenced through the abuse of the House rules.

When parliamentary life recommenced after the revolutionary hiatus in 1920, the concept of constitutionalism was reinterpreted as comprising ‘the ancient Hungarian form of government’, where the organic conceptualization of nation was elevated over the ‘purely formal’ values of democracy and parliamentarism.¹⁵ Thus, the rhetorical legitimization of the interwar authoritarian regime and its downplaying and suppression of parliamentary culture, were consciously constructed from the very beginning of the first post-revolutionary parliamentary season. In 1923, the debate shows how the institution of parliamentary question hour was abused by the government in an attempt to downplay an uneasy question of political prisoners, and how the parliamentary scrutiny of the government was rhetorically rendered ‘offensive’. The third case from 1927 concerns the historical-political canonization of the 1848 revolution, in which the government ventured to appropriate the ideals of democracy and parliamentarism and redescribe them to support the contemporary power structure.

Methodologically, this article is based on the study of political language and parliamentary debate; how the core concepts of parliamentarism were applied and operationalized within the parliament itself,¹⁶ especially how the parliamentary conventions as well as the boundaries of parliamentary conduct were constantly redefined and reapplied during debates. Studies on the interwar Hungarian Parliament as a political

¹⁵ A similar conservative conceptualization of an organic *Volksgemeinschaft* over the ‘western’ conceptualization of politically active citizenry was central in the German post-war discourse. Ihalainen, *Springs*, pp. 436–8.

¹⁶ See e.g. P. Ihalainen, C. Ilie and K. Palonen, ‘Parliament as a Conceptual Nexus.’ In P. Ihalainen, C. Ilie, and K. Palonen (eds), *Parliament and Parliamentarism. A Comparative History of a European Concept*, (New York, 2016); Ihalainen, *Springs*; C. Ilie, ‘Parliamentary Discourse and Deliberative Rhetoric’, in Ihalainen, Ilie and Palonen, *Parliament*; O. Pekonen, *Debating “the ABCs of parliamentary life”: the learning of parliamentary rules and practices in the late nineteenth-century Finnish Diet and the early Eduskunta* (Jyväskylä, 2014).

arena are relatively rare. In Hungarian historiography and the scholarly conception of politics the significance of the parliamentary debate of the era is minor. According to the dominant interpretation, the fact that parliament had no concrete power over the government meant that the political debate there was ‘mere rhetoric’ without true political relevance, whereas ‘real’ decisions were made elsewhere.¹⁷ In an international perspective, the same argument has been used to challenge the importance of parliamentary debate in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian systems, and along with it, the analytical feasibility of studying them.¹⁸ On the contrary, this study looks at parliament as the arena for debate and permissible criticism, in which language is able to reveal the means of policy-making and the construction of government legitimacy as well as the opposition’s attempts to challenge them.¹⁹

‘Ancient constitution’ versus revolutionary fervour, 1920

When the Hungarian Parliament convened for the first time after the revolutionary hiatus²⁰ in February 1920, the first bill in agenda was entitled ‘Law concerning the restoration of constitutional life and the provisional organization of the authority of the Head of State’.²¹ The counterrevolutionary government argued in this bill that the Hungarian nation was a millennial entity, which had time and again withstood the onslaught of foreign oppressors and, through the leadership of patriotic statesmen, always risen from the ashes. After the war and the revolutions had decimated the country and

¹⁷ See, for example, Kontler, *Millennium*, p. 350; Romsics, *István Bethlen*, p. 265.

¹⁸ Cf. K. Palonen, ‘The Parliamentarisation of Elections. A Redescription of the Relationship Between Two Concepts’, *Redescriptions* 14, (2010), pp. 133-56.

¹⁹ See also Püski, *Horthy-rendszer*, p. 268.

²⁰ The dualist-era Parliament had dissolved itself on 16 November 1918. While the Hungarian Assembly of Soviets (*Tanácsok országos gyűlése*) had briefly sat between 14 and 23 June, 1919, in the post-revolutionary atmosphere it was seen as completely illegitimate and not a part of the continuum of the Hungarian parliamentary history, see below.

²¹ ‘Törvény az alkotmányos élet helyreállításáról és az államfői hatalom ideiglenes rendezéséről’, Law I/1920, *Nemzetgyűlési irományok* (Bills and motions of the National Assembly, hereafter NI) I/1920, pp. 3–8. This and all translations hereafter are by the author.

caused the enormous territorial losses, Hungary was again faced with existential peril. According to the said historical-political narrative, the conservative leaders saw themselves as exactly such statesmen with a historical mandate to restore order.

This narrative was intended to delegitimize the preceding revolutionary governments and equate them with the historic breaks in the national tradition, such as the Ottoman conquest in the 16th century or the darkest years of Habsburg absolutism in the 18th and 19th centuries. The debate over the bill shows how the traumatic, personalized experiences of the revolutions, as well as the spirit of retribution inspired and legitimized the brief legislation that nominally complied with the discourse of democratic reformism but in practice established an elitist power structure that would stay in force until the Second World War.

The legitimacy of the counterrevolutionary regime constructed in 1920 was contingent upon the repudiation of the legitimacy of the revolutionary governments of 1918–19. The revolutionary years, first the unstable phase of the Károlyi government and then the arbitrary rule of the Communists, coupled with the Red Terror, were a traumatizing experience for the old elite, both socially, culturally and politically. They had seen their traditional and established position vanish overnight, to be replaced by ‘the blind rule of the mute masses.’²² Additionally, they saw that the revolutionary ordeals had been caused by the *fin-de-siecle* liberalism in the Hungarian politics, the ‘wasteful management’ and the ‘weakening of the bourgeois elements’²³ that had paved the way for leftist intrigues. Thus, all the losses had been caused not only by the war, but also by the political weakening of the nation in the preceding decades, which in turn was attributed to the dysfunctional parliament. As Gyula Andrássy, a former members of the

²² ‘...nyers tömegeknek vak uralmá[t].’ István Bethlen’s inaugural address in 1921, I. Bethlen (ed by I. Romsics), *Válogatott politikai írások és beszédek* (Budapest, 2000), p. 121.

²³ ‘Könnyelmű gazdálkodás ... A polgári elemeknek gyengesége.’ Károly Huszár, 16 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 3.

pre-war parliament, reminded the House, it had been the partisanship, the political stalemates and the continued obstruction that had crippled the institution.²⁴ Such perceived parliamentary weakness should now be counterbalanced with strong government and the position of the Regent.²⁵

György Szmerecsányi, a former Liberal turned Christian nationalist, went as far as to rhetorically political liberalism and civil liberties to corruption, as those had subsequently been abused by the revolutionaries:

In this House, on these benches, when the question about the freedom of the press arose ... I was always among the first to rise in its defence and raise my voice on its behalf. But I apologize, the abuse of freedom of the press, which was one of the reasons of the national catastrophe, can no longer be tolerated [...].²⁶

Speaking of his personal experience of and personal disillusionment with liberalism, Szmerecsányi thus demonstrated the rhetorical construction of conditional liberty; that civil rights were no more fundamental, they had to be suspended due to their abuse, and could only be returned after thorough consideration and upon the assurance that they would never again be used for agitation.

²⁴ Gyula Andrassy, 27 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 73–75. Ironically, Count Andrassy himself had been a textbook example of the ‘pre-war petty politicking’, including parliamentary obstruction and party defections, but at the moment not personally touched by the critique, as he was an ardent supporter of the counterrevolution. L. Lengyel & Gy. Vidor, *Nemzetgyűlési Almanach 1922–1927* (Budapest, 1922), pp. 6–12; Gy. Vidor, *Nemzetgyűlési Almanach 1920–1922* (Budapest, 1921), pp. 2–6.

²⁵ Admiral Miklós Horthy (1868 – 1957), the last commander-in-chief of the Austro-Hungarian Navy and the subsequent commander of the Hungarian counterrevolutionary (White) army in 1919–20, enjoyed unquestioned respect in the counterrevolutionary circles and was virtually the only credible candidate for the position of the Regent, and was duly elected on 1 March 1920. Horthy eventually came to hold the office until 1944, yet he rarely intervened in daily politics. D. Turbucz, *Horthy Miklós* (Budapest, 2014).

²⁶ ‘Ebben a házban ezekről a padokról, amikor a sajtószabadságról volt szó ... mindig egyike voltam az elsőnek, aki annak védelmére keltem és érte szót emeltem. De bocsánatot kérek, a sajtószabadsággal való az a visszaélés, amely egyik oka volt az ország katasztrófájának, tovább nem tűrhető.’ György Szmerecsányi, 23 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 28.

The dismay for the revolutions and the revolutionaries was brought to very concrete level, namely, to the parliamentary chamber itself. Due to the fact that the Assembly of Soviets had briefly convened in the very same chamber in 1919, Prime Minister Károly Huszár interpreted that as defilement that had to be cleansed:

On the 15th of June, from this very same lectern, the president of the so-called Soviet Republic [...] said that their class regime could only be created if the old one is terminated and all the old organs demolished. He literally said: “We shall banish the millennial constitution forever and, by so doing, bring satisfaction to the hearts of millions and millions of proletarians.” Such disgraceful words have not been uttered ever in any nation’s Parliament [...] and we shall cleanse this House and this Hall of such disgrace [...].²⁷

At the time the rhetoric of cleansing had a very concrete meaning. It had been used to justify the White Terror against the revolutionaries, and now it was being used to exclude the Liberals and the Social Democrats from parliamentary work. Quite effectively, as we remember that the Social Democrats had more or less voluntarily withdrawn from the 1920 elections, and after they returned to parliament in 1922, they were constantly attacked for being un-patriotic and dubious sympathizers of revolution.²⁸

²⁷ ‘Ebből az elnöki székből június 15-én az úgynevezett Tanácsköztársaságnak az elnöke [...] azt mondotta, hogy az ő osztályuralmuk csak akkor jöhet létre, ha a régit megszüntetik, ha a réginek minden szervét elpusztítják. Szó szerint mondta; “Ezeresztendős alkotmányt teszünk sirba örökre s ezzel eleget teszünk millió és millió proletár szívének.” Szégyenteljesebb szavak nem hangzottak el még egyetlen egy nemzetnek képviselőházában sem [...] és le kell mosnunk erről a Háziól és erről a teremről azt a gyalázatot [...]’ Károly Huszár, 16.2.1920, NN I/1920, 3–4

²⁸ D. Turbucz, *Horthy*, pp. 70–71; L. Varga, ‘Suffrage, Parliamentarism and Social Democracy’, in: I. Feitl and B. Sipos (eds), *Regimes and Transformations. Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest, 2005), pp. 91–2.

Béla Turi, a priest and a Christian Nationalist Member of Parliament, who presented the Restoration Bill, continued the narrative of tragedy, now as a legitimation for the Restoration Bill:

Not only is the greatness of the national misfortune brought upon us without parallel, but also the constitutional situation we are in [...] we stand among the ruins of our territorial integrity, the life of the nation, but also of our constitution.²⁹

Turi's temporal and legal conceptualization of politics stated that the constitutional order had ceased with the stepping down of King Charles³⁰ and the dissolution of the bicameral parliament in 16 November 1918. Thus, by definition, no subsequent government had been constitutional: 'the flow of constitutional life was broken and terminated.'³¹ The complete delegitimization of the revolutionary governments in turn legitimized bringing the constitutional models almost entirely from the past, as no reforms made during the revolutionary era needed to be taken into account.

However, even when the liberal reforms were delegitimized, the broader suffrage of the 1920 elections –an unwanted state of affairs *per se* for the old elite – was at that very moment turned into a proof of the government's broad mandate: the present, unicameral National Assembly was the best suited in history to give a new direction to the country and fulfil the will of the nation.³² Naturally, in the rhetoric of the government,

²⁹ '... nemcsak a ránk szakadt nemzeti szerencsétlenség nagysága példátlan, hanem ezeréves történelmünkben példa nélkül áll az az alkotmányjogi helyzet is, amelyben vagyunk [...] nemcsak területi integritásunk, nemzeti létünk, de voltaképen alkotmányunk romjai között járunk.' Béla Turi, 26 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 51.

³⁰ Charles (1887 – 1922), the last Habsburg monarch of Austria-Hungary (1916 – 1918) used the regal name *Károly IV* as the King of Hungary and *Karl I* as the Emperor of Austria.

³¹ Béla Turi, 26 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 52.

³² Béla Turi, 26 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 54.

that nation was the organic and exclusive one, which had already delegated its will to the present counterrevolutionary House to complete the post-war and post-revolutionary normalization without veering towards the dangerous paths of liberalism. That occasion was also a point where it was necessary to emphasize the democratic nature of the counterrevolutionary regime in order to parry the international criticism of Hungary: ‘We stand against all dictatorships, as representatives of a healthy democracy, built on moral basis.’³³ – ‘moral basis’ being the rhetorical backdoor that was subsequently used to redescribe and subordinate democracy.

In their speeches, Turi and Huszár attempted to combine and harmonize the two contradictory currents of the counterrevolutionary state-building. On the one hand, the political normalization required broad national consensus and avoiding any party-political strife; on the other hand, the choice of the concept of constitutionalism and constitutional life as the lodestars of the restoration inevitably included parliamentarism. Thus the very concept of constitution was effectively retro-described along the lines of the early-modern political thought:³⁴

The form is not important here. I am asking you, whether the spirit of the modern constitution lies in its institutions and its written form, or would it not be the spirit, which lies in the living reality of the constitution, in the organic constitutional life of the nation?³⁵

³³ ‘Mi minden diktatúrával szemben egy egészséges, erkölcsi alapon nyugvó demokrácia nak a képviselői vagyunk.’ Károly Huszár, 16 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 4. Constructing democracy and opposing dictatorship was the necessary rhetorical lodestar in the post-war constitutional debates in the countries striving for domestic legitimacy and international recognition, such as Germany and Finland. See, for example, Ihalainen, *Springs*, pp. 432–6.

³⁴ See, for example, P. Ihalainen, ‘Towards an immortal political body: the state machine in eighteenth-century English political discourse’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 5, (2009), pp. 4–47.

³⁵ ‘A forma itt nem fontos. En azt kérdezem, hogy ha a modern alkotmányosságnak ez a szelleme ott, ahol arra intézmények vannak, ahol arra írott alkotmány van: csak ott nem volna ez az alkotmányosságnak a szelleme, ahol az alkotmány élő valóság, ahol az alkotmány voltaképpen a nemzetnek organikus élete?’ Béla Turi, 26 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 54.

The concept of constitution was rhetorically detached from the post-war discourse on constitutional reform and returned to the pre-modern organic form, which was imbued with the Hungarian national spirit, without the need for imitating Western models. In this discourse, limiting suffrage and reinstating monarchy were but natural parts of the national tradition. Bishop Ottokár Prohászka³⁶ also concurred with the special nature of the Hungarian constitution, Hungarian national spirit and the present situation, where Hungary did not have the need or even possibility to model its constitution on Western Europe, but had to stand firm on the national policy, as it was the only way out of the crisis.³⁷

In the politicization of history, concepts such as ‘millennial Hungary’ and ‘ancient constitution’³⁸ were used to present the basis and the normal: the nation that had existed, prospered, secured its position and fought for it. Millennial Hungary referred to the mediaeval kingdom of St. Stephen, which was in turn directly equated with pre-First World War Greater Hungary.³⁹ In addition, the ancient role of Hungary as the eastern bulwark of the West and of Christendom, which had always withstood the onslaught of the East, was redescribed to Hungary’s heroic role in repelling the Communist threat.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ottokár Prohászka (1858–1927), bishop of Székesfehérvár, originally a modernist Catholic and a Christian Socialist reform politician, chose a more decidedly nationalist position during the counterrevolutionary years and was until his death one of the central proponents of Hungarian Christian Nationalism. P. Hanebrink, *In Defence of Christian Hungary. Religion, Nationalism and Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (Ithaca, 2006), 92; Vidor, *Almanach 1920–1922*, 108–109.

³⁷ Ottokár Prohászka, 26 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 65.

³⁸ ‘[...] ezeréves Magyarország’, ‘ősi alkotmány’, Károly Huszár, 16 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 5.

³⁹ Despite the numerous breaks in the statehood or territorial integrity. See, for example, Cartledge, *The Will*.

⁴⁰ This kind of rhetoric was also part of the post-war transnational discourse; in their respective nation-building processes also Finland and Poland were eager to appropriate the same role. M. Vares & V. Vares, *Valmis valtioksi. Suomi ja eurooppalainen itsenäistymisaalto* (Jyväskylä, 2019), pp. 123, 255.

We, Hungarians, have always been those at whom the Asian shockwave has stricken first and it was our circulation, our national life and common thought, which the Asian spiritual plague first infected. As so many times before, again the Hungarian nation with its Christian morals and defiant resistance has broken the onslaught of the spiritual current that was endangering the whole of Europe.⁴¹

Huszár also gave a temporal dimension to the environment of the parliamentary work, emphasizing that it should keep in pace with the ever-quickening tempo of world history. Therefore the House should not let petty disagreements or formal impediments slow it down, but take the needed resolutions in the spirit of patriotic duty.

The wheel of world history now rotates more quickly, and the parliaments and assemblies have to adapt to it in their work. The legislature which cannot keep pace with history is not suitable for this time. Therefore we should resolve all our problems without lasting debates, taking into account all the sacred interests of the nation, with the tempo, wisdom and intrepidity, which the foreign and domestic political situation correspondingly demands.⁴²

⁴¹ 'Mi, magyarok, voltunk megint azok, akiken ez az ázsiai hullám először átcsapott és ez az ázsiai szellemi pestis először a mi vérkeringésünket, a mi nemzeti életünk közgondolkodását inficiálta. Amint azonban a múltban már annyiszor, most újból az egész európai civilizációt veszélyeztető ez a szellemi áramlat a magyar nemzetnek keresztény erkölcsén és a nemzetnek dacos magyar ellenállásán tört meg.' Károly Huszár, 16 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 5.

⁴² 'A világtörténelem kereke most gyorsabban forog, s a parlamentek és a népképviselők munkájának is ehhez kell alkalmazkodnia. Az a törvényhozás, amely nem tud lépést tartani a históriával, nem méltó az időhöz. Nekünk tehát mindezeket a problémákat hosszas viták nélkül, a nemzet minden szent érdekének figyelembevételével, azzal a gyorsasággal, bölcseséggel és elszántsággal kell elhatároznunk, amint azt a kül- és belpolitikai helyzet egyaránt parancsolja.' Károly Huszár, 16 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 6.

Huszár made use of transnational modernization in the conceptualization of parliamentary life,⁴³ but redescribed it as a need for patriotic consensus. In the enormous task of the nation's reconstruction from the ashes, parliamentary life was not an absolute value, but it was an instrument of fulfilling the will of the nation and its historical mission. This, in turn, demanded putting aside the party differences and working together for the greater good:

[...] we should unite all the constructive forces and push away from the nation's path everyone who now, whether for individual or party political reasons, puts obstacles in the path of national reorganization in foreign and domestic policy.⁴⁴

By such rhetorical formulation, the parliamentary opposition was delegitimized as internal enemy that hampered the healthy development of the nation. Negative denominations such as 'catchphrase politics', 'party politics' and 'petty differences' were used to remind the House of the failures of the pre-war parliamentary system that had ultimately led to the revolutions. Now parliament was presented instead with a normative and imperative mandate from the nation, which naturally did not leave room for parliamentary dissent or debate.

The newly elected Speaker István Rakovszky also outlined the policy of reconstruction based on consensus, where differences were to be set aside in the interests of the nation, and positioned himself as the guardian of such procedure.⁴⁵ Rakovszky also

⁴³ Ihalainen, *Springs*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ ' [...] fogjanak össze az összes konstruktív erők, és távolítsanak el a nemzet útjából mindenkit, aki most akár egyéni, akár pártszempontból akadályokat gördít annak a gondolatnak az útjába, hogy ez a nemzet külpolitikailag és belpolitikailag mint újjászervezendő [...] ' Károly Huszár, 16 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 7.

⁴⁵ István Rakovszky, 18 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 14.

underlined the importance of civilized debate between government and opposition, and warned against any kind of unparliamentary oppression:

It is never allowed to be forgotten that the House Rules contain, along with the instructions to ensure the uninterrupted flow of the debate, another instruction, and it is that to defend the opposition against the potential excesses of the majority, as the minority is an integral part of Parliament, without the opposition there cannot develop a healthy parliamentary life. The opposition is an opponent, but not an enemy.⁴⁶

As honest as Rakovszky himself might have been in protecting the House Rules and the fair treatment of the opposition, in the long run the promise turned out to be arguable at best. Even though the parliamentary debate remained polyphonic throughout the interwar era, parliamentary procedure and the prerogative of the Speaker were repeatedly used to silence and obstruct the opposition. At that time, they also mentioned the ideals of civilized debate and respect for the parliamentary opposition, but these ideals did not last. In the following years it was exactly the parliamentary procedure and the House Rules which were repeatedly exploited by the government to silence the opposition.

Huszár, in turn, promised that the government would speed up the legislation, and there would be no question whether the House would have enough work, but whether it should have the will to accomplish it.⁴⁷ Again, the ideal of a parliamentary procedure did not include lengthy speeches and debates, but the ‘wise, remedial, vigorous

⁴⁶ ‘Sohasem szabad elfelednie, hogy a házszabályoknak azon rendeltetésén kívül, hogy a tanácskozás zavartalan lefolyását biztosítsák, egy másik rendeltetésük is van, és ez az, hogy az ellenzéket a többség esetleges túlkapásai ellen megvédjék, mert a kisebbség is a parlamentnek integráns része, ellenzék nélkül egészséges parlamentáris élet nem fejlődhetik ki. Az ellenzék ellenfél, de nem ellenség.’ István Rakovszky, Speaker of the National Assembly, 18 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 14.

⁴⁷ Károly Huszár, 23 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 31.

decision-making that the whole country expects from us.’⁴⁸ Members were presented with a mandate from and responsibility to the whole nation, where no partisanship or individualism was allowed:

[...] without partisanship, every party and every Member, equally from the Right and the Left, should only act and speak in this House in accordance with the interest of the fatherland and the nation, and the interests of every individual and every party should be put aside in relation to them.⁴⁹

Liberal Member Gábor Ugron, as the sole opposition voice raised in the debate, argued that one could not choose partial democracy or only select those parts one pleases, but must accept democracy and constitutionalism in their entirety. He also opposed the current of the Hungarian self-proclaimed exceptionalism in terms of constitutionalism, instead invoking the widely accepted argument of Hungary as the bulwark of western civilization, and argued that it should even now embrace the western model of constitutional reform.⁵⁰ Ugron’s voice was all but silenced by the counterrevolutionary consensus. As the Restoration Bill was passed with an overwhelming majority, the ‘return to constitutional life’ in the newly elected parliament did indeed point out the quasi-

⁴⁸ “[...] bölcs, üdvös, erélyes határozatokat vár tőlünk az egész ország.” Károly Huszár, 23 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 31.

⁴⁹ “... pártkülönbőség nélkül, jobbról és balról egyaránt minden párt és minden képviselő csak azt tegye és azt mondja ebben a teremben, ami a hazának és a nemzet egyetemes érdekének áll szolgálatában, és minden egyéni és minden részleges pártérdek háttérbe szoruljon ezzel szemben.” Károly Huszár, 23 February 1920, NN I/1920, p. 31.

⁵⁰ Gábor Ugron, NN I/1920, 27 February 1920, p. 70. It must, however, be noted that for Ugron, too, ‘western constitutionalism’ was not irreconcilable with Hungarian nationalism, defiance of the Entente plans of Hungary’s borders, or Hungary’s leading role in Central Europe. In a comparative perspective, it was commonplace to use the ‘western ideals’ or ‘western model’ as catchwords in the post-war state-building debates, yet give them profoundly vernacular content when applied to domestic traditions and history; see Ihalainen, *Springs*, pp. 20, 29, 66.

democratic nature of interwar Hungary, where the rhetorical construction of national unity was used to diminish the role of political pluralism.

The explicit limits of parliamentary scrutiny, 1923

By 1923 the style and the content of parliamentary debate had again changed. The Social Democrats, after gaining representation in parliament in the elections of 1922,⁵¹ had taken over the main opposition position from the liberals, and boldly used their parliamentary mandate to question the legitimacy of the government and its rhetorical foundations. With little actual leverage against the government supermajority, they often made use of parliamentary questions to voice their arguments.

In 1923, the Social Democrats attempted to exercise their parliamentary control of government by presenting an interpellation over the conditions of the political prisoners in the internment camp in Zalaegerség. The opposition demanded to know why the political internees were kept in captivity in appalling conditions, without trial, years after their alleged crimes.⁵² The exceptionally heated debate clearly demonstrated the limits of the so-called consolidation discourse, or the willingness of the government to treat the opposition as a legitimate party in the parliamentary debate, or even to approve the parliamentary scrutiny of its actions.

Therefore, the procedure of the question hour was also tailored to suit the government agenda. The first question was given to a government Member, Dr. Kálmán Éhn, who did his utmost to prove the critics wrong and whitewash the conditions in the internment camp. In his planted question,⁵³ Éhn made use of his credibility and integrity

⁵¹ L. Hubai, *Magyarország XX. századi választási atlasza, 1920–2000*, 3 vols (Budapest, 2001), vol. I, p. 34; M. Ormos, *Magyarország a két világháború korában, 1914–1945* (Debrecen, 2006), p. 90.

⁵² See, for example, János Esztergályos, 21 February 1923, NN X/1922, pp. 54–8.

⁵³ The term planted question is used here to mean a parliamentary question presented by a member of the government party to the government itself, in order to highlight the government stance on the matter or create a favourable narrative of its actions. On this practice, see M. Roitto, *Dissenting visions: the executive*,

as a physician to prove that the conditions of the prisoners were indeed adequate. In order to maintain the illusion of impartiality of his question, Éhn, was ready to make a single concession to the criticism: the food rations of those inmates who refused to work were reduced. Still, this could be explained away by the argument that the recalcitrant prisoners virtually caused the harm to themselves.⁵⁴ In explaining out the issue, he could invoke the concepts of respectability and parliamentary procedure, and finally accuse the opposition of irresponsible and unpatriotic agitation as they had made negative propaganda towards Hungary over the completely legal matter of incarceration.⁵⁵ The Social Democrats answered by furious heckling of Éhn's hypocrisy, but he kept his temper, repeatedly asking for 'a little patience'⁵⁶ of the opposition.

This, in turn gave Károly Huszár, the former Prime Minister now serving as the Speaker of the National Assembly, a rhetorical opportunity to remind the Left that by protesting, they were themselves undermining the constitutional right to exercise parliamentary control of the government:

I am obliged to remind the [opposition] Members again that the practice of interpellation secures the right of parliamentary control of the government. But at the moment the [opposition] Members are making it completely impossible for the [government party] Member to live by the constitutional right to present an interpellation.⁵⁷

parliament and the problematic Anglo-American Atomic Collaboration in the changes of British atomic foreign policy 1945–6 (Jyvaskylä, 2015), pp. 109–10.

⁵⁴ Kálmán Éhn, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 301.

⁵⁵ Kálmán Éhn, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 307.

⁵⁶ '[...] egy kis türelemmel [...]' Kálmán Éhn, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 307.

⁵⁷ 'A képviselő urakat újból figyelmeztetem arra, hogy az interpellálás épen a képviselő uraknak ad jogot a kormány ellenőrzésére, a képviselő urak mégis teljesen lehetetlenné teszik, hogy az interpelláló képviselő ur ezzel az alkotmányos jogával éljen.' Károly Huszár, Speaker of the National Assembly, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 300.

That is, the government appealed to concept of parliamentarism and attempted to present the opposition itself as uncooperative and unparliamentary. The concept of freedom of parliamentary speech was defined as equal opportunities for all parties, but now it was the Left who were continuously violating it.

When the opposition finally was given turn to present their questions, they continued to criticize the government on the matter. János Esztergályos, in particular, went on to present the misconduct towards the prisoners, including malnutrition, inadequate clothing and brutality of the wardens.⁵⁸ He pressed on by hinting at bribery among the camp officials; a story circulated among the inmates ‘[...] that those who could pay 25, 000 crowns to a certain lawyer in Diószeg, would be released from the camp [...]’.⁵⁹ Speaker Huszár repeatedly objected to what he saw as Esztergályos’ abuse of parliamentary procedure, and finally had him removed from the lectern.⁶⁰

Finally, after repeated interjections and interruptions, Minister of the Interior Iván Rakovszky appeared to answer the accusations. The beginning of his speech was marked by repeated cries of ‘Dissolve [the camp]!’⁶¹ which required the Speaker declare a five-minute recess. This gave Rakovszky the rhetorical opportunity to rely on the House Rules, arguing that if the Members of the opposition wanted to exercise their parliamentary control of the government, they should at least allow the minister responsible to give an answer.⁶² He also used the heated and lasting debate as a pretext for limiting his answer to a bare minimum:

⁵⁸ János Esztergályos, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 334.

⁵⁹ ‘[...] hogy az internálótáborból szabadulnak emberek, akik 25.000 koronát tudnak egy Diószegi ügyvédnek fizetni [...]’ János Esztergályos, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 335.

⁶⁰ Károly Huszár, Speaker of the National Assembly, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 335–6.

⁶¹ ‘Felosztatni!’ NN X/1922, p. 338.

⁶² Iván Rakovszky, Minister of the Interior, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, pp. 339–40.

I would have liked to deal with the matter of the internment camp thoroughly and in detail, yet given the late hour and especially the fact that the atmosphere of the House is not actually conducive to assessing the matter objectively, I shall try to keep my words as brief as possible.⁶³

In so saying, Rakovszky performed another reinterpretation of the parliamentary concept: he hinted that the right of parliamentary control of government was not absolute, but conditional; it was formulated as the mutual, benevolent co-operation between the government and the opposition. In case the opposition failed to do its part and did not respect the parliamentary dignity, the minister was not bound to answering them. As the government had already determined the correct policy concerning the matter, the opposition could not have any acceptable arguments or universal interests concerning it, but merely petty propagandistic intentions of individual members, who were thus excluded from the sphere of politically competent persons. Due to his position, Rakovszky could at the same time appeal to the ideal of the parliamentary culture, but actively dismiss any forms of actual parliamentary control or criticism of the government.⁶⁴

The debate and the reinterpretations of parliamentary scrutiny of government illuminated the explicitly limited nature of parliamentarism, however cherished the concept itself was. The question hour was not expected or allowed to be a serious challenge to the government. When the questioning of the official narrative went too far, the official procedure and the House Rules were used to silence the opposition.

⁶³ 'Szerettem volna részletesen és hosszasan foglalkozni az internálótábor kérdésével, tekintettel azonban arra, hogy az idő igen messzire előrehaladt, tekintettel továbbá arra, hogy a Ház hangulata valóban nem alkalmas arra, hogy objektíve intéztük el azt a kérdést, igyekezni fogok mondandóimat rendkívül rövidre fogni.' Iván Rakovszky, Minister of the Interior, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 340.

⁶⁴ Iván Rakovszky, Minister of the Interior, 7 March 1923, NN X/1922, p. 340.

Even though the Social Democrats had been nominally accepted to participate in parliamentary work after the 1921 pact between the Prime Minister István Bethlen and the chairman of the Social Democratic Party Károly Peyer, and even though the same pact had included the promise to close down the internment camps,⁶⁵ the legitimacy of all the demands was nevertheless flatly denied by the government. Thus, the Social Democrats were never treated as political equals, but still rhetorically antagonized, distrusted and delegitimized in the debate whenever they ventured to take any political initiative and use the momentum of the House for a goal ideologically unacceptable to the government.

What makes the debate interesting and worth more detailed analysis is that it was an exception to the government-controlled parliamentary agenda setting, where the government usually had both the initiative and the administrative tools to control the debate, limiting the discursive space of the opposition. In this case, however, the opposition actively promoted an unwelcome issue, forcing the government onto the defensive, to reveal its prevailing, unyieldingly punitive counterrevolutionary attitude towards the former revolutionaries, supported by *ad hoc* –arguments, thus exposing the strict limitations of the ‘consolidative’ stance of the Bethlen government towards its opposition.

The glorious memory of 1848 redescribed, 1927

The third case concerns the historical-political commemoration law of Lajos Kossuth and the Hungarian Revolution of 1848,⁶⁶ debated in the Hungarian Parliament in 1927. As the

⁶⁵ Ormos, *Magyarország*, pp. 86–7; Püski, *Horthy-rendszer*, p. 63; Romsics, *Hungary*, p. 175.

⁶⁶ The Hungarian era of national awakening and the long-standing disillusion with Austrian rule had culminated in the revolution of 1848, as a part of the transnational revolutionary wave of 1848. On 15 March the Hungarian reformists had published their 12-point programme concerning constitution, civil rights and Hungarian autonomy within the Austrian Empire. Protests in Budapest had rapidly led to the overthrow of the Austrian officials and the establishment of an independent, Hungarian parliamentary

demands of the Revolution of 1848 had exactly focused on constitution, parliamentary government and civil rights, the government could not avoid mentioning them in the bill. Instead, the revolutionary ideals were rhetorically reframed and reinterpreted as inherent virtues of the freedom-loving Hungarian nation, but were left vague enough to suit the contemporary political need. The ideals of 1848 thus were made to conform to the grand national narrative and, effectively, the revolution was rhetorically stripped from revolutionary content and only represented to highlight the Hungarian national spirit and national virtues:

The Hungarian nation [...] commemorates the 15 March 1848, on which day the honourable sons of the nation, in their ardent patriotism, swore loyalty to the ideals of constitutional liberty and equality before the law. Their sacred enthusiasm penetrated the whole nation and showed our millennial fatherland a way for future development [...] The spirit of that day realized the epoch-making legislative reforms, which extended constitutional rights to all social classes of the nation.⁶⁷

government under Lajos Batthyany, with both Lajos Kossuth and István Széchenyi serving in ministerial positions. Of these, Kossuth represented the most radical and liberal ideals on political progress, constitutionalism and independence. In Hungarian historiography and history culture, the revolutionary spirit came to be personified in him. The revolutionaries were initially successful, as the Austrian Empire, having been caught off-guard with the European revolutions and on the brink of dissolution, was forced to comply with the demands of the Hungarians. However, after his ascension to the throne the young Emperor Francis Joseph revoked the concessions, which led to the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848–49. Eventually Austria, with the assistance of Russia, was able to subdue the Hungarians, and Kossuth ended up spending the rest of his life in exile. The revolution gradually became one of the cornerstones of Hungarian nationalist historiography and Kossuth its central cult figure, himself contributing to its construction by his spirited publicity and publication activity abroad. Cartledge, *The Will*, 198–228; H. Fischer, ‘Vorwort’, in: H. Fischer (ed.), *Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894): Wirken – Rezeption – Kult* (Hamburg, 2007), pp. 8–12.

⁶⁷ ‘A magyar nemzet [...] emlékezik meg az 1848. évi március hó tizenötödikéről, amely napon a nemzet dicső fiai az alkotmányos szabadságnak és a jogegyenlőségnek izzó hazaszeretetükben fogant fenkölt eszményei mellett hitvallást tettek, szent lelkesedésükkel az egész nemzetet áthatották, s az ezeréves hazának az új idők szellemében való fejlődéséhez irányt jelöltek [...] E nap szellemében valósultak meg azok a korszakot jelentő törvényhozási alkotások, amelyek az alkotmányos jogokat a nemzet minden osztályára kiterjesztették.’ *Törvényjavaslat március tizenötödikének nemzeti ünneppé nyilvánításáról* / Bill concerning the declaration of 15 March as a national holiday, 18 October 1927, *Képviselőházi irományok* (Bills and motions of the House of Representatives, hereafter KI) 268/VI/1927, p. 83.

In the same vein, Lajos Kossuth was presented as ‘the incarnation of the sacred ideals of Hungarian national self-determination, independence, national spirit, strength and self-esteem’,⁶⁸ with little emphasis on his revolutionary liberalism.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Kossuth was credited with the creation of ‘the first Hungarian parliamentary government’⁷⁰ as well as the ‘modern, democratic Hungary.’⁷¹ The government readily appropriated both ideals and gave them favourable content that was in line with the contemporary policy. ‘Freedom’ was given the narrow conceptualization of freedom from foreign oppression; ‘democracy’ was earned through the technical functioning of the elections – and, as the government enjoyed a safe supermajority in parliament, it was quite naturally a parliamentary government. Concepts of oppression and unconstitutional rule were externalized to the Austrian Empire, an entity that had conveniently ceased to exist.⁷² Kossuth’s policies were actively de-politicized in order to pre-emptively reject all attempts to legitimize more liberal or leftist policies in his name:

Kossuth did not fight for classes! Kossuth did not propagate the rule of one class over others, but rather a national unity and national greatness, the kind of national greatness with which he wanted to embrace and bless both the poorest of workers and the great lords of palaces and estates. This

⁶⁸ ‘[...] az egész nemzet tisztelettel övezi, mert őbenne látja inkarnálva a magyar nemzeti öncélúság, függetlenség, a nemzeti akarat, erő és önérzet szent eszméit.’ István Rubinek, 7 November 1927, *Képviselőházi napló* (Protocols of plenary sessions of the House of Representatives, hereafter KN) VI/1927, p. 227.

⁶⁹ *Törvényjavaslat Kossuth Lajos örök érdemeinek és emlékének törvénybeiktatásáról* / Bill concerning the commemoration of Lajos Kossuth's undying memory and merit, 24 October 1927, KI 293/VI/1927, p. 304.

⁷⁰ ‘[...] az első magyar felelős ministerium [...]’ István Rubinek, 7 November 1927, KN VI/1927, p. 225.

⁷¹ ‘[...] a modern, demokratikus Magyarország [...]’ István Rubinek, 7 November 1927, KN VI/1927, 227.

⁷² István Rubinek, 7 November 1927, KN VI/1927, pp. 225–6.

programme, for which we also campaign, is about fulfilling the spirit of Kossuth, only by other means and other words.⁷³

As expected, opposition criticism concentrated in these reinterpretations, especially the empty letter of ‘constitution’. As the Social Democrat Géza Malasits retorted, the famed Hungarian Constitution had for centuries been nothing but a mutual contract between the Kings and the aristocrats:

They are telling that Hungary has a millennial constitution. I can admit there has been a constitution for thousand years, but let us not forget it has been a mere empty letter; there has been only one real constitution and that has been the will of the current King [...] When and if the Diet convened, it was good for pondering petty formalities, nothing more did the Kings allow. However, the Hungarian constitution had one bitter part, the domestic part, the part that gave the nobility a free hand over the serfs, the poor people of the villages and rural lands. And that was the constitutional right the nobility used abundantly to increase its power [...].⁷⁴

⁷³ ‘Kossuth nem osztályokért küzdött! Kossuth nem az osztályuralmat hirdette, hanem igenis a nemzeti egységet és a nemzeti nagyságot, és a nemzeti nagysággal kívánta egyformán felruházni és boldogítani a legszegényebb munkást s a paloták és birtokok hatalmas urát. Ez a Programm, amelyet mi is kívánunk, csak más eszközökkel és más jelszavakkal Kossuth szellemében szolgálni.’ Aladár Erdélyi, 7 November 1927, KN VI/1927, p. 229.

⁷⁴ ‘Azt mondják, Magyarországnak ezeréves alkotmánya van. Elismerem, hogy ezeréves alkotmánya van, ne feledjük azonban el, hogy ez csak írott alkotmány; valóságos alkotmány csak egy volt: a mindenkori császárnak akarata [...] Az országgyűlést, ha összehívták, jó volt, ott tessék-lássék forma szerint elintézték az ujonc-megajánlás kérdését, ennél tovább a császárok nem mentek. A magyar alkotmánynak azonban volt mégis egy virulens része, a belügyi része, az a része, amellyel a magyar alkotmány birtokában az uralmon levő osztály a jobbágyokkal, a falu szegényeivel, a föld népével szabadon rendelkezhetett. Ezt azután bőségesen ki is használta hatalmának gyarapítására [...].’ Géza Malasits, 7 November 1927, KN VI/1927, p. 236.

The Hungarian aristocracy, Malasits argued, had eagerly submitted to the rule of any King, Hungarian or foreign. In return it had received a *carte blanche* for exploiting the Hungarian people. And now, the Hungarian government was cherishing the very same limited conceptualization of constitution, which was exactly against what Kossuth had fought for.⁷⁵

In response, the government conservatives went even further in redescribing the figure of Kossuth and the content of 1848. When the commemoration bill reached the Upper House, the rhetorical redescription had evolved into a level, where 1848 had not been a revolution at all, but a legitimate campaign for constitutional justice.⁷⁶ Kossuth was seen as a moderate reformist and, moreover, a loyal monarchist who had only opposed the ‘unfortunate and regrettable’ decisions of the Habsburg Court and was thus driven to the ‘ill-fated’ declaration of independence.⁷⁷ The emphasis of the constitutional progress was shifted from 1848 to the Compromise of 1867, the ‘true and lasting’ achievement of the revolution, a constitutional settlement that had produced an era of prosperity and mutual, benevolent relationship between Hungary and Austria – exactly what the pre-war elites remembered with nostalgia.⁷⁸

The politicization of history, the reinterpretation and selective application of the past was indeed one of the cornerstones in the legitimization of the interwar regime. This applied also to the construction of suitable meaning for the ideals of the 1848 Revolution. The counterrevolutionary government felt safe to proclaim itself to be the ‘true’ heir to Kossuth, cherishing the concepts of liberty, equality, constitutionalism and

⁷⁵ Géza Malasits, 7 November 1927, KN VI/1927, p. 236.

⁷⁶ Aladár Széchenyi, 25 November 1927, *Felsőházi napló* (Protocols of plenary sessions of the Upper House, hereafter FN) II/1927, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Albert Berzeviczky, 25.11.1927, FN II/1927, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Gyula Wlassics, Speaker of the Upper House, 25.11.1927, FN II/1927, pp. 4–5. See also G. Romsics, *Myth and Remembrance: The Dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in the Memoir Literature of the Austro-Hungarian Political Elite* (Boulder, 2006).

parliamentarism, without any real commitment to implement them. All demands of the opposition even hinting at that direction were judged by the government as ‘ahistorical hindsight’ and abuse of Kossuth’s ‘sacred’ memory by those who were undeserving of it.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The construction of the post-First World War political order was a transnational phenomenon, in which the diverse and entangled discourses of crisis and mitigation contributed to highly contingent political processes. In Hungary, the reaction to the post-war tumult was deeply conservative; the counterrevolutionary discourse chose to combat that uncertainty by introducing increasingly authoritarian policies within an ostensibly parliamentary polity.

The political elites were exactly aware of the contemporary transnational discourses of parliamentarism and constitutionalism; yet the same tenets were constantly and consciously redescribed and reinterpreted to legitimize the counter-revolutionary regime and to exclude the opposition. The constitution and parliamentarism were treated as conditional and subordinate to the grand narratives of national identity and national history.

At the same time, the opposition presented arguments that applied the concepts of parliamentarism and constitutionalism in the modern sense. However, the opposition was repeatedly silenced by exploitation of the House Rules and the authority of the Speaker, often in the pretext that the opposition itself was violating the parliamentary dignity, or the constitutional rights of government members.

⁷⁹ István Bethlen, Prime Minister, 25 November 1927, FN II/1927, p. 11.

The catchwords of the transnational reform debate were applied only superficially: democracy, suffrage, civil rights and parliamentarism were all rhetorically rendered dangerous in their ‘unrestrained’ form but given conservative and regulated ‘national’ meanings.

The findings also defy those historiographical conceptualizations that tend to call the interwar counterrevolutionary regime ‘semi-authoritarian’, ‘semi-parliamentary’ or ‘intermediate’ system, arguing that the undeniable authoritarian elements were counterbalanced by the parliamentary pluralism and functioning democratic organs.⁸⁰ Instead, we can see that the government only superficially applied the parliamentary culture and parliamentary procedure, and only in cases where they benefited the construction and upkeep of the regime. In any cases where the broader understanding of parliamentary concepts might have opened way for criticism, they were bluntly rejected and the opposition silenced, specifically through the considered abuse of the very same concepts.

Notes on contributor

Ville Häkkinen is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of History and Ethnology in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He defended his PhD thesis entitled ‘From Counterrevolution to Consolidation? Language of nation-building in the Hungarian parliamentary debates, 1920–1928’, at the University of Jyväskylä in 2019 (<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-7766-5>.) His research interests include the study of political language, nation-building and political use of history.

⁸⁰ Boros and Szabó, *Parlamentarizmus*, pp. 304, 353–360, 374; Püski, *Horthy-rendszer*, 7–8, 259; I. Romsics ‘The Nature of the Horthy Regime, 1920–1944’ In: M. Hokkanen, T. Laine-Frigren & T. Särkkä (eds), *Matkoja aatehistoriaan. Esseitä Anssi Halmesvirralle* (Jyväskylä, 2017), pp. 199–200.