



## „RECALL: A Study of Central European Places of Memory for Collective Remembrance”

2023-1-HU01-KA220-HED-000154286

**Module Title:** *Back to Europe Together - Transitions, Memory, and Identity in East-Central Europe after 1989 (Topic 9)*

**Target Duration:** 33 minutes (video) + 15-20 minutes (e-learning tasks)

**Target Audience:** University students, researchers, and history enthusiasts

This module, titled "Back to Europe Together: Transitions, Memory, and Identity in East-Central Europe after 1989," explores the political, social, and cultural changes in East-Central Europe after the fall of communist regimes. It is part of the ReCall Project, and the 33-minute educational video is aimed at university students, educators, civil society workers, and anyone interested in post-socialist changes, memory politics, and European integration.

The module is organized into thematic and national sections. It features insights from experts like historians and social scientists Bálint Mezei, Robert Klementowski, and Ondřej Haváč. They look at the region's journey from authoritarian rule to democracy and EU membership. Through case studies on Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, it explores the collapse of state socialism, the challenges of memory and justice, and the socio-economic impacts of transition. The session concludes with a reflection on the effects of Euro-Atlantic integration and the common challenges of democracy and identity in the 21st century.

### **Primary Goals of the Module:**

- **1. Contextualizing the Democratic Transition:** To provide historical context for the fall of communist regimes and the international developments (e.g., Gorbachev's reforms, Malta summit) that led to systemic change.
- **2. Exploring National and Regional Dynamics:** To present national case studies that illustrate how transition processes unfolded differently across Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, while sharing common regional traits.
- **3. Investigating Memory Politics:** To critically assess how post-communist societies reinterpreted their past, especially through monuments, museums, lustration laws, and debates over historical responsibility.
- **4. Assessing Socio-Economic Change:** To examine the impacts of privatization, economic restructuring, and cultural transformation in Hungary and the Czech Republic, including tensions between nostalgia and modernization.
- **5. Understanding Integration and Identity:** To analyze the formation of the Visegrád Group, EU and NATO accessions, and the long-term effects of integration on regional identity, cooperation, and democratic development.



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### EU Key Competences Addressed in This Module:

- **Cultural awareness and expression:** Learners reflect on how history, memory, and identity have shaped national cultures and collective narratives across Europe.
- **Critical thinking and historical literacy:** The module fosters analytical skills to examine complex political transitions and to differentiate between fact, interpretation, and propaganda.
- **Social and civic competence:** By exploring how societies deal with injustice, memory, and integration, students develop a nuanced understanding of citizenship in post-authoritarian contexts.

### Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the session, learners will be able to:

- Identify key events and turning points in the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe.
- Describe and compare the democratic transitions in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.
- Analyze how memory politics have shaped public discourse and education in the region.
- Reflect on the social and economic challenges of the transition era, including inequality and disillusionment.
- Understand the regional significance of the Visegrád Group and its role in Euro-Atlantic integration.
- Critically assess the continuing effects of historical narratives and political memory on current European identity and politics.
- Distinguish between commemorative practices, historical facts, and political instrumentalization of the past.

Instead of providing a neat conclusion, this module encourages ongoing thought about the complexities of transition. The democratic changes in East-Central Europe were not straightforward. They were influenced by international events, domestic desires, and ongoing historical issues. While joining Euro-Atlantic structures represented a symbolic “return to Europe,” it also brought up new questions about inclusion, memory, and belonging. In a time when democratic values, historical truth, and European unity face new challenges, the experiences after 1989 provide lessons and warnings. They remind us that freedom must be regularly renewed, that history requires careful understanding, and that working together in the region is vital for protecting shared values. Ultimately, it shows that the legacy of 1989 is not just a historical moment but a challenge for today and a duty for the future.

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### **Title: Back to Europe Together - Transitions, Memory, and Identity in East-Central Europe after 1989 (Topic 9 - ReCall Project)**

#### **I. Introduction: Historical Framework: East-Central Europe in the Yalta World until 1989–1990 – Communist Regimes in the CEE region - Bálint Mezei**

1. If you want to understand the significance of the East Central European democratic transitions and the Eastern enlargements of the European Union, we need to recapitulate some of the most important historical events after the Second World War. The Yalta Conference, held in February 1945, already designated this spheres of influence, which divided Europe until the fall of communism. Most of the Central and Eastern European countries became part of the Soviet Union's spheres of influence. And the Soviet Union as a superpower not only extended its influence to the countries of the region, but it also forcibly imposed its own political, economic, social system on the countries of the region. This system had crystallized in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin's rule in the 1930s as a result of forced industrialization and collectivization. This dictatorial system, usually called communism or with a different historical terminology, state socialism was later, so after the Second World War, was forcibly exported to almost all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.
2. The Sovietization of Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria was roughly completed by the year of 1948. In the following year, the superpowers rendered the division of Germany permanent. So the Federal Republic of Germany was created from the Western occupation zones of the country and the German Democratic Republic, the GDR, was formed from the Soviet occupation zone. The technical barrier was gradually built on the border separating the two Germanys. And with the words of the great Winston Churchill, an iron curtain descended, which became a symbol of the separation of the two competing world systems, perhaps the most famous and infamous section of the Iron Curtain was the Berlin Wall, which divided the German capital city from August 1961 till November 1989. The Berlin Wall was a very visible and, at the same time, a very physical section of the whole iron curtain that separated the Eastern Bloc Soviet satellite countries from the Western European democracies.
3. The Soviet leaders forced the Central and Eastern European countries to join alliance organizations, which were set up and led by the Soviet Union. We can speak of two major Soviet alliance organizations military and an economic one Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romani, Bulgaria together with the GDR and Albania joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), which had established in 1949, and a few years later, in 1955, already entered into a military alliance, the Warsaw Pact organization commonly known as the Warsaw Pact. The COMECON was basically the Eastern Bloc's response to the announcement of the Marshall Plan in Western Europe and the creation of the Organization for European Economic Co-operation, the OEEC, which later became the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the OECD. Both Soviet alliance organizations, the

COMECON and the Warsaw Pact were finally dissolved in 1991, shortly before the breakup of the Soviet Union.

4. The Soviet satellite regimes in the East and Central European countries experience several periods of crisis during their existence of over 40 years. Just think of the 1953 East Berlin Workers' Uprising, or the 1956 Poznan Uprising, and of course, the Hungarian revolution of the same year. Furthermore, the 1968 Prague Spring, together with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and finally, but absolutely not least, the Polish crisis of 1980 and 1981 with the rise of the Solidarity mass movement and the introduction of martial law in Poland.
5. Nevertheless, very important changes took place at around the middle of the 1980s in the Eastern Bloc countries. In March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected the new general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. With him, a younger generation of Soviet politicians to cover the supreme leadership of the Soviet Union. In foreign policy, Gorbachev shifted the emphasis from confrontation to cooperation, which had a very positive effect not only on the Soviet-American relations, but also on the relations between the COMECON and the European economic community. The COMECON member countries at the time were already facing very serious economic problems, primarily because of their heavy indebtedness to the West. So a closer cooperation between the two largest European economic organizations became inevitable. A very interesting concept, the concept of double dependence, can be also dated to this period. Several COMECON member countries, first of all Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were connected, more and more connected to the West, mostly due to Western loans. However, at the time, so at around the middle of the 1980s, they were remained politically and militarily dependent on the Soviet Union. The COMECON and the European Common Market finally signed a joint declaration in 1988, which represented a significant step towards the normalizations of the relations between the Western European democracies and the Eastern European Soviet satellite countries.
6. However, Gorbachev's reforms did not achieve their original goals. The measures introduced under the slogans of Perestroika and Glasnost (restructuring and transparency) failed to solve the economic problems of the planned economies. And they also failed, sure, to transform the one party political systems into working socialist democracies. Among other very important factors, this led to the political regime changes and the establishment of civil democratic systems in the East Central European countries at the turn of the 1980s and the 1990s. A turning point in Soviet diplomacy was the 1989 Malta summit where the US President George H.W. Bush and the Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev met just a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall which happened in November of the same year. The fall of the Berlin Wall led to the reunification of the two Germanies. So the former German Democratic Republic became the first of the COMECON member countries to join

the Euro-Atlantic institutions such as NATO and the European Economic Community. During the Malta summit, Bush and Gorbachev declared an end to the Cold War. So in the following years, the Soviet Union, and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation withdrew its military units from the East Central European countries.

## II. The Hungarian Perspective: Democratic Transition in Hungary - Bálint Mezei

1. Just a few words about the democratic transition of Hungary after 1989, 1990. January of 1989 was the official beginning of the reevaluation of the 56, 1956 revolution in the Hungarian historiography. The reevaluation process was a complete metamorphosis. The year of 1956, first from a counter-revolution, first became a democratic popular uprising, then soon became an anti-Soviet and an anti-communist revolution in the new state memory politics. Imre Nagy, the martyr prime minister of the 56th revolution, together with other four revolutionary leaders, were officially reburied in June of 1989, 31 years after they had been executed. Also in 1989, in September, the Iron Curtain was cut in Hungary, so the East German citizens who absolutely did not want to return to the GDR, they were given a chance to leave Hungary and crossing the Austrian-Hungarian border, which was opened to him. And a few weeks after, on the 23rd of October, on the anniversary day of the 1956 Hungarian revolution from the balcony of the Hungarian Parliament building, the Hungarian Republic, the third republic in Hungarian history, was proclaimed by the interim president of the country. In the following year, in the spring of 1990, the first free parliamentary elections were held in Hungary after the fall of the state socialist regime. Following the two round elections, a center-right coalition government led by József Antall was formed relying on a three party parliamentary majority. The Hungarian Democratic Forum achieved a great success in the elections with the promise of peaceful regime change, stable democratic transition, and the accession to the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Also in 1990, the state party censorship and the communist propaganda ended and the press freedom and the freedom with speech finally ushered in. The communist past slowly began to be processed. However, most of the archives had not yet been opened. The public education was also transformed. Meanwhile, the renaming process of streets and squares also began. The statues of the communist era were mostly removed. However, some of them were placed in the so-called Memento Park in the outskirts of Budapest, which was opened in 1993. By 1991, the withdrawal process of the Soviet army troops of Hungary was completed. The less Soviet soldier, General Lieutenant Viktor Shilov, left Hungary, crossing the border at the Záhony–Chop station on the 19th of June at 3:01 p.m..

## III. Reinterpreting the Past: Challenges of Decolonisation and Democratisation - Robert Klementowski

1. *The political transformations of 1989–1990 in East-Central Europe went far beyond the end of the communist era. They simultaneously marked the continuation of complex processes of decolonisation, democratisation, and, in a later phase, a*

*specific kind of “recolonisation” and the commercialisation of collective memory. For decades, the communist regimes imposed by Moscow effectively controlled both historical research and public debate, significantly limiting the freedom to interpret the past. The breakthrough of 1989 brought the long-awaited freedom to express differing opinions to the societies of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The abolition of censorship created a space for media and opinion pluralism, which soon led to tensions and so-called “memory conflicts” surrounding the evaluation of earlier events and ideologies. As the initial euphoria associated with the return to democratic governance faded, the long-term effects of restricted intellectual autonomy became increasingly evident. The decolonisation of memory manifested itself above all in the challenges of reckoning with the communist past and in grassroots civic movements demanding the truth about past repressions. In Hungary, a symbolic expression of this process was the rehabilitation of Imre Nagy, which restored dignity to the victims of communist terror. In Poland, a lustration law was adopted—similar to regulations enacted in the Czech Republic and Slovakia—which aimed to reveal individuals who had collaborated with the security services. However, none of these countries managed to carry out a complete and consistent accountability process for the officials and beneficiaries of the previous system. As a result, the figure of the homo sovieticus—a person internally submissive to authority—continued to serve as a convenient explanation for the difficulties in implementing the principles of democracy and the free market. Another significant challenge lay in formulating an appropriate approach to the material legacy of communism, including monuments, street names, and commemorative plaques. Some objects were removed—such as the statue of Marshal Konev in Prague—while others were relocated to specially created symbolic “open-air museums,” such as Memento Park in Budapest. In Poland, debates about Soviet monuments culminated in a comprehensive decommunisation law. The decommunisation of memory also manifested through the systematic opening of archives—such as the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Poland or USTR in the Czech Republic—and the creation of new museum institutions, such as the Narrative Museum of the Warsaw Uprising or the Post Bellum initiative in the Czech Republic, which focuses on documenting the testimonies of witnesses to the turbulent twentieth century. At the same time, the societies of the region had to confront long-standing, unresolved historical issues that, in the new circumstances, gained particular intensity. In Poland, the Jedwabne massacre sparked a nationwide debate; in Hungary, disputes erupted over responsibility for the Holocaust and the controversial commemoration of figures like Miklós Horthy. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, discussions continue about the relationship with Hungarian and German minorities, including debates over the expulsion of Sudeten Germans, as well as difficult questions regarding the interpretation of Slovak collaboration during the Second World War.*

Przemiany ustrojowe lat 1989-1990 w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej wykraczały daleko poza koniec epoki komunizmu, stanowiąc jednocześnie kontynuację złożonych procesów dekolonizacji, demokratyzacji, a w późniejszym okresie swoistej rekolonizacji oraz komercjalizacji pamięci zbiorowej. Przez dziesięciolecia reżimy komunistyczne narzucone przez Moskwę skutecznie kontrolowały zarówno badania historyczne, jak i dyskusję publiczną, znacząco ograniczając swobodę interpretowania przeszłości. Przełom 1989 roku przyniósł społeczeństwom Polski, Czech, Słowacji i

Węgier długo wyczekiwana wolność artykułowania odmiennych opinii. Zniesienie cenzury otworzyło przestrzeń dla pluralizmu mediów i poglądów, co zaowocowało napięciami oraz konfliktami pamięci dotyczącymi oceny wcześniejszych zdarzeń i ideologii. Kiedy opadała początkowa euforia związana z powrotem do demokratycznych form rządzenia, coraz wyraźniej zaczęły ujawniać się skutki długotrwałego ograniczenia autonomii intelektualnej. Dekolonizacja pamięci przejawiała się przede wszystkim w problemach rozliczenia komunistyczną z komunistyczną przeszłością oraz w oddolnych ruchach obywatelskich domagających się ujawnienia prawdy o dawnych represjach. Na Węgrzech symbolicznym wyrazem tego procesu stała się rehabilitacja Imre Nagya przywracająca znaczenie ofiarom komunistycznego terroru. W Polsce uchwalona została ustawa lustracyjna, podobnie jak analogiczne regulacje w Czechach i na Słowacji zmierzała do ujawnienia osób współpracujących z aparatem bezpieczeństwa. Jednocześnie żaden z tych krajów nie zdołał przeprowadzić pełnego, konsekwentnego rozliczenia funkcjonariuszy i beneficjentów poprzedniego systemu. Co sprawiło, że figura homo sovieticus, człowieka wewnętrznie podporządkowanego władzy, nadal służyła jako poręczne wyjaśnienie trudności w implementacji zasad demokracji czy wolnego rynku. Istotnym wyzwaniem okazało się również wypracowanie odpowiedniego podejścia do materialnego dziedzictwa komunizmu, pomników, nazw ulic czy tablic pamiątkowych. Niektóre obiekty usuwano, jak choćby pomnik Koniewa w Pradze, inne przenoszono do specjalnie tworzonych skansenów symbolicznych, czego przykładem jest Memento Park w Budapeszcie. Natomiast w Polsce dyskusje na temat pomników radzieckich przybrały formę kompleksowej ustawy dekomunizacyjnej. Dekomunizacja pamięci manifestowała się również poprzez systematyczne otwieranie archiwów. W Polsce IPN, w Czechosłowacji, w Czechach USTR. oraz tworzenie nowych instytucji muzealnych, takich jak Narracyjne Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego czy inicjatywa Post Bellum w Czechach, koncentrująca się na dokumentowaniu historii świadków burzliwego XX wieku. Równoległe społeczeństwa regionu musiały zmierzyć się z dawnymi, nierozwiązanymi problemami historycznymi, które w nowych warunkach nabrały szczególnej intensywności. W Polsce ogólnokrajową debatę wywołała sprawa Jedwabnego, na Węgrzech zaś rozgorzały spory dotyczące odpowiedzialności za Holokaust oraz kontrowersyjne upamiętniania takich postaci jak Miklos Horthy. W Czechach i na Słowacji wciąż żywe pozostają dyskusje o relacjach z mniejszościami, węgierską i niemiecką, w tym spory o wysiedlenia Niemców Sudeckich, a także trudne pytania o interpretację słowackiej kolaboracji podczas II wojny światowej.

#### **IV. A New Era in East-Central Europe: The Visegrad Cooperation and EU Accession - Bálint Mezei**

1. As I have already mentioned, the two major Soviet alliance organizations, the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON, were dissolved in 1991 shortly before the breakup of the Soviet Union. All of these, together with the political regime changes that had already taken place by that time, gave substantially more diplomatic freedom to the East Central European countries. The most important regional initiative at that time was the formation of the Visegrád Group in February 1991. This group was formed by this group was formed at a meeting between the President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Václav Havel, the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech

Wałęsa, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, József Antall, in the Hungarian town of Visegrád. The Visegrad Group was formed, was created with the clear aim of moving away from communism and implementing the reforms required for the full membership of the Euro-Atlantic institutions such as NATO and the European common market. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, which happened on the 1st of January 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia became independent members of this alliance, raising the number of the member countries from three to four.

2. The Visegrad member countries in December 1992 in the city of Krakow in Poland, signed the Central European Free Trade Agreement, CEFTA. Later, other former state socialists or with a different terminology, communist countries also joined the CEFTA. In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty established the European Union, which placed the functioning of the European Community on a new foundation. And it also had a very huge impact on the future enlargements of the European Union. From 1991 to 1996, ten former communist countries submitted their applications to join the European Union. We are talking about the Visegrad Group countries, the Baltic countries, former member republics of the Soviet Union, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. We are talking about Romania and Bulgaria, and of course we are talking about Slovenia, former member Republic of Socialist Yugoslavia. In order to prepare for the EU membership, the candidate countries first signed Europe agreements in the case of the former communist East European countries or association agreements in the case of Cyprus and Malta. The European Union heavily supported the efforts of these candidate countries to adopt the community's rules. So the European community gave these candidate countries substantial financial support for modernizing their infrastructure, their institutions and their economies. Excession negotiations began in March 1998 with the six best prepared countries. So with Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, and Cyprus, and in February 2000 with all the other candidate countries. Meanwhile, in 1999, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary became members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Copenhagen European Council of December 2002 found that 10 of the 13 candidate countries had already fulfilled the conditions necessary for joining the European Union. Therefore, these countries signed their accession treaty in April 2003 in Athens and officially joined the European community on the 1st of May 2004. So the Visegrad Group countries became on the first of May 2004, full members of the European Union. This day is a very important day in the history of the European community because ten new countries with a combined population of almost 75 million joined the community. Barely a month before, before the first eastern enlargement of the European Union, the Baltic countries together with Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia joined the NATO.

## **V. The Hungarian Perspective: (Socio)Economic transformations in East-Central Europe - Bálint Mezei**

1. Just a few words about the social and economic transition of Hungary after the political regime change. The democratic political change was followed by an

economic transition which was primarily based on the drastic reduction of state property, namely the privatization, which basically happened in all of the East Central European countries. Although privatization was necessary, at least in part, it increased social inequalities and unemployment. At the beginning of the 1990s, due to the critical economic situation, unfortunately, many people were disappointed in the freshly born civil democratic system which reused the popularity of the regime changing political parties. In addition to that, existential insecurity strengthened the nostalgia for the communist regime. The example of the famous Hungarian bus manufacturer, Ikarus, I believe is a typical story of the contradictions of the economic transition of the country which happened after 1990. As a flagship company of the communist Hungary's industry, Ikarus was one of the largest bus manufacturer internationally. And it was the dominant bus company of the COMECON. However, after the political and economic regime change which happened at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, Ikarus gradually lost all its foreign markets. And it basically disappeared by the end of the decade, by the end of the 1990s. And please let me give you just an interesting example related to the mass culture of Hungary of that era. The neighbours in Hungarian Szomszédok (Neighbours) was one of the most popular TV series of that era. It was originally broadcast on the first channel of the Hungarian national Television every two weeks on Thursday from 1987 to 1999. A very distinctive feature of this series was that the main characters, and not only the characters, reflected, often reflected on public events expressing their personal opinions on social issue. This TV series presented a country and its society in transition from the perspective of the residents of a concrete apartment building in Budapest. Of course, there were many interesting cultural projects in the 1990s. For example, the Sziget Festival in English: the Island festival was first organized in Budapest in 1993, and later it became one of the preminent rock festivals of the continent. Cooperation opportunities in the field of culture, of course, also multiplied after the country's EU accession. Just an example, a beautiful example, in January 2010, the city of Pécs, together with Essen and Istanbul became one of the European capitals of culture.

## **VI. The Czech Perspective: (Socio)Economic transformations in East-Central Europe - Ondřej Haváč**

1. Privatization refers to the change from public to private ownership. Usually the term is used to refer to the transfer of public assets to private ownership. It took place in two waves between 1991 and 1994. In Czechoslovakia, it started on the 1st October 1991 with the sale of voucher books and stamps. One coupon book cost 1035 Czech crowns. The investor received shares in the state-owned companies. It was mainly promoted by then Finance Minister Václav Klaus. Eight and a half million people participated in the first wave, which took place during the Czechoslovak Federation. In both waves, the state privatized assets worth 367.5 billion Czech crowns, representing a total of 1,172 companies. Economists mentioned positive impacts of the voucher privatization on a merge of capitalism. On the other hand, some also mention the negatives. Because the legal system was not yet firmly established, there were large transforms of money that were not transparent. It was impossible to control

the corruption that was going on at the time. The process of privatization gave the world a new term, tunneling, which means financial fraud committed by the transfer of assets and profits out of firms for the benefits of those who control them.

2. Games without borders in French "Jeux sans frontières" was an international television competition organised by the European Broadcasting Union for 30 seasons from 1965 to 1999. Between members of the union who participated representing their countries. Broadcasters and mixed teams that competed against each other in a series of funny physical games played in outlandish costumes. The most successful teams of the season from each country competed in a grand final. For the first time, Czechoslovakia participated in the 1990-1991-1992 edition, which was also the only one held under the banner of the Winter Games without borders. By 1992, the show had risen to the top of the ratings. Cities considered their participation prestigious and commentator, Martina Adamcová, became very popular. The fact that Czech teams were winning the competition also contributed to the show's popularity.
3. To the European Capital of Culture, title is awarded by the European Union to one or more cities for one year to showcase their cultural life, diversity and development to Europe. The year 2000 was the year of the millennium to highlight the lasting legacy and to meet the high demand for the title, nine cities were selected including two from countries that joined the European Union four years later, and one of them was Prague. The project gained large popularity. It was opened with a festive programme in the Municipal House (Obecní dům) attended by President Václav Havel and his wife, Dagmar, members of the government and representatives of a number of European countries. In short speech, Prague Mayor Jan Kasl stressed Prague's tradition as a culture crossroad of Europe. By awarding the title, he said Europe had accepted Prague back after decades of great totalitarianism.

## **VII. The Polish Perspective: Recolonisation and Commercialisation of Memory – Politics, Identity, and the Market in Central Europe - Robert Klementowski**

2. *In this way, alongside the long-anticipated period of reckoning and regained freedom, the processes of a new “colonisation of memory” began relatively quickly. In this framework, state authorities often imposed official interpretations of the past, frequently in opposition to the spirit of pluralism. One striking illustration of this phenomenon is the controversial exhibition at the House of Terror Museum in Budapest, where, according to numerous critics, the narrative promoted pays insufficient attention to Hungarian complicity in past crimes. In Poland, the heated disputes surrounding the 2018 amendment to the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) law demonstrate that history has become not only a fundamental source of identity in the international arena but also an effective instrument of political power. At the same time, there was a noticeable rise in the commercialisation of memory,*

*particularly evident in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. On the one hand, the growing popularity of historical themes encouraged the organisation of large-scale reenactment events, the development of museums with interactive exhibitions, and the incorporation of patriotic motifs into popular culture—on clothing, gadgets, and in urban public spaces. On the other hand, such trends carry the risk of significantly diluting historical meaning and treating past tragedies in an instrumentalised way, as mere tourist attractions, often referred to as “dark tourism.” A form of retro-nostalgia—characteristic of the entire region—manifests itself in the popularity of bars styled after the communist era, guided tours retracing the remnants of the former system, and the mass production of souvenirs featuring Soviet-themed imagery. In Poland, such examples include the renaissance of “milk bars” as tourist attractions, the operation of the PRL Museum in Kraków, and the rapid growth of the patriotic clothing industry, which frequently employs the symbolism of the Warsaw Uprising and the “Cursed Soldiers.” Similar phenomena are observable in Hungary, where commemorations of the idea of Greater Hungary have gained popularity, and in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where references to the traditions of the Czechoslovak Legions and the mythologised First Republic are often invoked. Despite the many controversies it generates, the commercialisation of memory may also bring positive effects. Younger generations are significantly more likely to engage with historical topics when they are presented in an appealing and accessible format. At the same time, however, this situation demands constant vigilance to ensure that short-term economic gain does not overshadow the need for genuine reflection, and that the tragic dimensions of history are not reduced to superficial spectacle devoid of deeper meaning. In the context of the dynamic development of digital media and the information society, historical simplifications can spread with alarming ease, posing an increasing challenge for both professional historians and conscious recipients of complex narratives about the past. To summarise, in the countries of East-Central Europe after the 1989–1990 transition, there unfolded a series of intense, multidirectional processes concerning collective memory—from an initially enthusiastic decolonisation and democratisation, through new and sometimes problematic forms of historical policy (a form of memory colonisation), to the increasing commercialisation of references to the past. These complex phenomena continuously intersect and influence one another, shaping both social attitudes and the dominant ways of interpreting historical heritage.*

W ten sposób, obok tak wyczekiwane go czasu rozliczeń i odzyskiwanej wolności, Stosunkowo szybko rozpoczęły się procesy nowej kolonizacji pamięci, w ramach której władze państwowe często wbrew duchowi pluralizmu narzucały kierunek oficjalnym interpretacjom przeszłości. Ilustracją tego zjawiska może być kontrowersyjna ekspozycja w Budapesztańskim Muzeum Terroru, gdzie, zdaniem licznych krytyków, promowana jest narracja niedostatecznie uwzględniająca węgierski współdziałanie w zbrodniach. Z kolei w Polsce burzliwe spory wokół nowelizacji ustawy o IPN z 2018 roku dowodzą, że historia na arenie międzynarodowej stała się nie tylko fundamentalnym źródłem tożsamości, ale także skutecznym narzędziem politycznej gry. W tym samym okresie narastał również wyraźny trend komercjalizacji pamięci, co szczególnie dobrze widoczne jest w Polsce, Czechach, na Słowacji i Węgrzech. Z jednej strony rosnąca popularność tematyki historycznej sprzyjała organizacji masowych wydarzeń rekonstrukcyjnych,

powstawaniu muzeów z interaktywnymi ekspozycjami czy wykorzystywaniu motywów patriotycznych w kulturze popularnej, na odzież, gadżetach czy też przestrzeni miejskiej. Z drugiej strony zjawiska te niosą za sobą ryzyko znaczącego spłylenia przekazu oraz instrumentalnego traktowania dawnych tragedii jako atrakcji turystycznych, tzw. dark tourism. Charakterystyczna dla całego regionu retro-nostalgia przejawia się m.in. w popularności barów stylizowanych na czasy komunizmu, organizowaniu wycieczek śladami dawnego systemu czy masowej produkcji pamiątek z motywami nawiązującymi do ZSRR. W Polsce do takich przejawów zaliczyć można np. renesans barów mlecznych jako turystycznych atrakcji, działalność Muzeum PRL-u w Krakowie czy też intensywny rozwój przemysłu odzieży patriotycznej wykorzystującej symbolikę Powstania Warszawskiego i Żołnierzy Wyklętych. Analogiczne zjawiska obserwuje się na Węgrzech, gdzie popularne stały się upamiętnienia idei Wielkich Węgier oraz w Czechach i na Słowacji, gdzie chętnie sięga się po nawiązania do tradycji czechosłowackich Legionów i mitologizowanej I Republiki. Komercjalizacja pamięci mimo licznych kontrowersji, które wywołuje, może przynosić również pozytywne skutki. Młodsze pokolenia znacznie chętniej sięgają po tematy historyczne, jeśli prezentowane są w atrakcyjnej, przystępnej formie. Jednocześnie Sytuacja ta wymaga nieustannej czujności, by doraźny zysk ekonomiczny nie przysłonił potrzeby rzetelnej refleksji i nie sprowadzał tragicznych aspektów dziejów do poziomu powierzchniowego widowiska pozbawionego głębszego sensu. W kontekście dynamicznego rozwoju mediów cyfrowych i społeczeństwa informacyjnego wszelkie historyczne uproszczenia stają się niezwykle łatwe do rozprzestrzenienia, co stanowi rosnące wyzwanie zarówno dla profesjonalnych badaczy, jak i świadomych odbiorców złożonych narracji o przeszłości. Podsumowując, w państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej po przełomie lat 89-90 nastąpiły intensywne wielokierunkowe procesy dotyczące pamięci zbiorowej, od początkowej entuzjastycznej dekolonizacji i demokratyzacji przez nowe, niekiedy problematyczne, formy polityki historycznej, czyli swoista kolonizacja pamięci, aż po postępującą komercjalizację odniesień do przeszłości. Te złożone zjawiska nieustannie przenikają się i oddziałują na siebie wzajemnie, kształtując zarówno postawy społeczne, jak i dominujące sposoby interpretowania dziedzictwa historycznego.

## VIII. Conclusions: The Legacy of Integration - Bálint Mezei

1. The Euro-Atlantic integration and the democratic transition of the East Central European countries was perhaps the last major political and economic project that united the countries of the Central and Eastern European region. And in a broader sense, it also united the mainstream political forces in the region. Its importance is felt even today. Moreover, the continuation of the enlargements of the European Community is constantly on the political agenda of the European Union. Just think of the cases of the Western Balkans, Georgia, or even Ukraine. The Euro-Atlantic integration of the Central and Eastern European region that has been achieved so far is a success story overall. However, we should not forget that it was a result of a much longer process. And this process had already started at around the middle of the 1980s with the weakening of the communist parties in the region. And then it accelerated after the political regime changes, which basically put an end to a communist rule in East Central Europe. Bulgaria and Romania signed an accession treaty in April 2005



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and officially became the members of the European Union on the 1st of 2007. This was the sixth but not the last Eastern enlargement of the European Union because on the first of July 2014, the Republic of Croatia also became member of the European Union. As we have seen in the case of the other former communist countries, the example of Croatia also shows us that the NATO membership usually precedes the EU accession. These historic eastern enlargements of the European Union were the combination of a long excession process leading to the reunification of Europe, which had been divided for half a century by the Iron Curtain and the Cold War. Thank you for the attention.