Hungarian Politics, the Symbolic Power of Currency, and Geographies of the Nation

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I. Introduction

Europe today is awash in competing visions of its future. While many still hold to the promise of ever-deepening integration within the European Union (EU), years of economic turmoil and international crisis have opened up myriad avenues for parties of the Left and Right to air their grievances and their agendas for the future. New voices have come from all sides, seeking to help chart the course of the EU and their own respective countries. Some of the loudest of these have been the extreme nationalist movements that have arisen in many countries. Commonly rooted in ethnocentrism, these platforms often entail a defensive stance against what is perceived as an encroaching and pernicious multiculturalism as well as the desire to strengthen the nation as they see it. Xenophobia, Far-Right politics, and outrage over alleged social decay are common highlights in nationalist rhetoric across Europe. More importantly, many have found their messages are falling upon receptive ears. Right-wing nationalists have found themselves with new and surer footing in a number of Europe’s democracies. As a member-state of the European Union that has seen a rise in nationalist party politics and renewed questions of ethnocentrism in both foreign and domestic policies, Hungary is a suitable site of inquiry into contemporary European nationalism.

II. Hungarian Nationalism in Europe’s Union

Zsuzsa Csergo and James M. Goldgeier argue in their 2004 study that "the question is not whether nation building will continue in an integrated Europe, but how the new European framework will provide room for different, in some cases conflicting, kinds of national
inspirations."\(^1\) They go on to assert that territoriality has not declined in importance for many nationalists in Europe. Just as crucially, they stress that these different kinds of nationalist forces do and will continue to influence the very nature of the European Union. Whether or not these states see integration as compatible with their aims, as well as the level at which they view the Union (either as a cooperation of states or sub-state alliance of nations), is ultimately determinant in their posture towards the EU and its future.\(^2\) For ethnic Hungarians, almost three million of whom live outside the borders of the Hungarian state, the question of territorial revision is an obvious one. However, Csergo and Goldgeier note that the post-Communist government has largely cast traditional nationalism and irredentist policies aside. Rather, they have pursued a form of nationalism which is “best achieved if Hungary and its neighbors become members of the European Union and state borders fade away. . . In Hungarian political discourse the idea is commonly articulated as a need to ‘virtualize’ existing state borders. . . In this approach Hungarians abroad should be able to claim Budapest as their national cultural center; Bratislava, Bucharest, or Belgrade as their state capital . . .”\(^3\)

However, their assessment of Hungarian policies was published ten years ago, and the political climate is not what it once was. In recent years, Hungarian nationalism has increasingly opened up to revisionist and extremist views. Fidesz, the established political party, has repeatedly engaged in bouts of authoritarian and restrictive policy-making while the Far-Right Jobbik, a populist party, has recently risen to record highs in public support. The latter’s brand of extreme nationalism has been noted for its acrid ethnocentric ideologies, amongst which runs a vein of toxic anti-Semitism. In May 2014, Jobbik came second in 18 of Hungary’s 19 counties

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\(^1\)ZsuZsa Csergo and James M. Goldgeier, "Nationalist Strategies and European Integration," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (2004), 21-37 30.
\(^2\)Csergo and Goldgeier, 32-33.
\(^3\)Csergo and Goldgeier, 27.
and remains the third largest party in the national parliament.⁴ In a report for the Center for International Relations, Dr. Dieter Dettke observes, “Hungary’s Jobbik Party is a case of extreme ethno-nationalism and the determination to lead Hungary out of the European Union is at the core of its political agenda.”⁵ Later, he highlights how the growing strain of Magyarism engages the legacy of Trianon - the 1920 Treaty that cut both Hungary's territory and population by over two thirds - and ongoing ethnic frustrations. He states, "the frequent reference to ‘Magyars’ could potentially open up territorial claims against Hungary’s neighbors and/or claims to protect Hungarian minorities in other countries, in particular Romania."⁶ Prime Minister Orban has, for his part, done little to put substantial distance between Fidesz and Jobbik. Rather, he has often sought to play upon common grounds issues in order to gain political support from those to his right on the political spectrum. Orban’s decision to make Hungarian passports and citizenship available to all Hungarians living abroad is a testament to this rightward shift and the power of Jobbik’s ethno-centric narrative. With large proportions of ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring countries like Slovakia and Romania as well as a domestic influx of Roma peoples, Hungary's extreme nationalists hope to advance their own revisionist agenda.⁷ In this light, Hungarian national consciousness has the potential to be fertile ground for extreme expressions of nationalist sentiment.

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⁵ Dieter Dettke, “Hungary’s Jobbik Party, the Challenge of European Ethno-Nationalism, and the Future of the European Project,” Center for International Relations (2014), 10
⁶ Dettke, 25.
⁷ Dettke, 23-25.
III. The “Imagined Community” at the Heart of Europe

It is important to offer a working definition for national consciousness at this point. The primary basis for understanding will be that of the “imagined community” offered by Benedict Anderson. This imagined quality is due to the fact that, as Anderson puts it, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”

Anderson's thesis rests heavily upon the rise of vernacular print capitalism. As the technology of mass printing processes became accessible, the national languages assumed the place of the eroding role of Latin. He outlines how the rise of literature and other texts, printed in the vernacular and circulated through the population, territorially defined, helped to build a sense of communion and identity of "people in their language-field." However, this analysis aims to elaborate on this idea with a few theoretical interventions that might expand the terms of this imagining.

David McCrone observes that "the whole point of the hyphenated term ‘nation-state’ is that it aligns the strictly political realm of state with the cultural one of nation, thereby fusing two analytically distinct spheres." Given that this study is interested in both the modern European nation-state and role of national identity in Hungarian politics, McCrone's assessment is particularly relevant. More importantly, by taking his distinction of the nation-state as cultural-political, it opens up a means of examining how the compound idea is cultivated. It also requires a working definition of culture to go along with the one already outlined for nation. For that working definition, this analysis turns to Clifford Geertz. Geertz's understanding of culture is

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9Anderson, 56-57.
semiotic, defined as a "web of meaning" specific to a group that allows for communication and play. Geertz describes the task of his form of anthropological inquiry as endeavoring to "make available to us the answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said." By drawing on the view of nation-state as a meeting of the cultural and political, as well as adopting a meaning-centered approach to culture, my aim is to open up Anderson’s definition to include a broader view of communication and national culture. The hope, in this sense, is to pay attention to what the nation is saying and to accept that how it speaks entails more than linguistic preference. My analysis does not equate this imagining with the more pernicious and ideological nationalism of which Isaiah Berlin warns. This is rightly so, as he himself distinguishes from the sense of belonging to a nation and the order of ideological nationalism with which he is concerned.

This article does posit the imagined community, nevertheless, as the fundamental basis for whatever national ideology is being deployed. This article attempts to open multiple avenues and vehicles for this imagining. Yet, it is still necessary to single out a site of inquiry for examining the construction of this “imagined community.”

What makes print capitalism especially powerful in the Andersonian sense is the territorial nature of these vernacular communities. This lent a clear, geographically circumscribed, scope to the “imagined community,” cultivating the beyond-the-immediate, yet still limited, sense of nation that Anderson describes. It is my belief that a broadening of Anderson’s emphasis on vernacular print capitalism to incorporate other forms of communication, which provided a source of national meaning/meaning-making, offers a way of enriching our understanding of how national consciousness is constructed. Currency, the coins

and notes of national issue, provides just such a material. National currency carries both
economic value and an array of state-ordained images and texts, as well as being an object of
daily interaction for many people. In addition, it circulates within the borders where it holds legal
tender, giving it a geographical component similar to Anderson's print capitalism. This territorial
element makes for a particularly salient point of contact with the Hungarian case considering the
abovementioned concerns over the Hungarian diaspora and the border issue left in the wake of
Trianon.

**IV. Currency in the National Consciousness**

Currency’s usefulness as a carrier of national significance has already been well
established by other scholars. Eric Helleiner argues succinctly for the efficacy of currency in
providing a source of national consciousness. He turns to the case made in *Imagined
Communities*, writing, "as Benedict Anderson has noted, national identities are a specific form of
political identity in which individuals feel that they are linked as members of an 'imagined
community'. . . In some cases, territorial currencies were used to strengthen a 'top-down' nation
building project in which state officials sought to cultivate a set of common nationalist beliefs
and culture."\(^\text{13}\) My analysis aims to focus on the Hungarian currency – its iconography and text –
as a form of national meaning and meaning-making. Moreover, this article discusses its
relevance to the rise of more extreme forms of right-wing nationalism in Hungary.

Currency obviously also highlights issues of sovereignty and control over monetary
policy. In this context, Orban’s government announced plans to replace all Hungarian Forint

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banknotes by 2018. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Margit Feher and Veronika Gulyas note that “Mr. Orban has said protecting national sovereignty and preserving the country’s independence is one of his main tasks. A move to join the EU’s single-currency zone would mean losing control over monetary policy.”¹⁴ While Hungary has set a number of goals to meet the desired economic requirements for Euro conversion, it has also missed more than one adoption date.¹⁵ While Orban’s tactic may be mostly concerned with maintaining independence in monetary policy and maintaining as much sovereignty as possible, it is hard not to also see a strong symbolic message to retention of national currency. The Central Bank of Hungary’s website highlights that, of the historical figures featured on its banknotes, “many of these celebrated statesmen also played an important role in the issuance of Hungarian currencies.”¹⁶ Thus, the government’s keeping national currency in circulation could be taken as more than a move for political autonomy; this decision represents the maintenance of a deeply symbolic expression of national identity and a material through which the imagined community is encountered on a daily basis.

This article proposes currency as a site through which to study Hungarian national consciousness while paying heed to the more pernicious strains of current Hungarian nationalism. Of course, imagery of the currency (notes and coins) is provided as data and evidence in support of my argument. Alongside the geographical circulation of currency, it is worth questioning what territorial imaginings these symbols entail. Images of the Hungarian past are not tethered to the political boundaries of the Hungarian present. Therefore, they may offer an idea of Hungary that may exceed the actual boundaries of the currency’s circulation. In this sense, my analysis aims to

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¹⁵ Feher and Gulyas
provide visualizations and mappings of the Hungarian diaspora, historic sites, as well as locations that have any association with the images on the notes and coins of the Hungarian forint. In so doing, my analysis aims to present how the imagining of the Hungarian nation might produce what may be termed geography of belonging, which exceeds the current borders. This could provide a useful way of engaging the causes of extreme Hungarian nationalism, such as its irredentist claims.

In summary, Hungary offers a rich context for examining contemporary nationalism in Europe. Whether “transsovereign,” as Csergo and Goldgeier put it, or revisionist, Hungarian nationalism has shown a concern for the reality of political separation that faces ethnic Hungarians.\textsuperscript{17} What is outlined here is a means of understanding the Hungarian imagined community expanding on the original thesis offered by Benedict Anderson. My argument posits that currency offers a particularly opportune site of inquiry. A strong qualitative analysis of the currency, paired with a mapping of its associated geographies, can help in examining the fault lines of Hungarian national identity and the extremist causes of groups like Jobbik. Given Hungary’s status as an EU member state and the question that Euro adoption plays in this case, it can also serve as a helpful study in the broader understanding of European integration and national consciousness.

\section*{V. Mapping National Imagery in the Context of Historical Geography}

Before moving to the visual element, this article explores in depth the national imagery utilized on Hungary’s major banknotes and the kinds of imaginings this imagery evokes. Three prominent rulers of Hungary’s medieval and early modern past are featured on the notes: Stephen I; Francis II Rakoczi; and Matthias Corvinus. Stephen, as the founding patron saint of

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\textsuperscript{17}Csergo and Goldgeier, 27-28.
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Hungary, is arguably the most significant. Moreover, the crown utilized throughout Hungarian national iconography is a depiction of the Holy Crown of Stephen, an artifact of such significance to the Hungarian national mythos that it bears comparison to the Ark of the Covenant or pieces of the Cross. It is my intent to tether these images, among others, to distinct imaginations of the Hungarian nation, rooted in their associative geographies, which expand beyond the extant political borders we see today. A single map depicting the collective reach of all these images is more compelling, in my view, than individually mapping each respective note. The paragraphs that follow move, initially, through a historical and cultural accounting of these individuals and sites before presenting a map that represents their sum. Historical maps are offered along the way, whenever possible, so as to lend clarity to the process.

This analysis begins with St. Stephen I and his Holy Crown. As shown in Figure 1, the Hungarian 2000 forint note features the coronation of St. Stephen and his Holy Crown on its

Figure 1: http://www.banknotes.com/HU186.JPG
respective sides. Stephen is the ideal starting point, as he is today celebrated as Hungary’s founder. His feast day, August 20, is celebrated nation-wide in Hungary. Pal Engel notes that “What is beyond question is that the formal foundation of the Christian kingdom was Stephen’s achievement. This is sufficient to justify both his canonization in 1083 and his status, in the eyes of posterity, as the founder of the kingdom of Hungary.”

St. Stephen’s coronation was itself a significant political and symbolic maneuver. He had himself crowned rex Ungrorum, ‘king of the Hungarians,’ on Christmas Day in 1000 at Esztergom. Stephen had cemented his rule two years prior at the battle of Veszprem. He went on to invade and subjugate Transylvania, support the Holy Roman Emperor in defeating the Bulgarians, and eventually go to war himself with a later emperor, Conrad II, ultimately repelling an attempted invasion of Hungary. As Engel emphasizes, “It is a fact, however, that we can find no trace of vassal status in Stephen’s relationship with the empire. Indeed, he took every opportunity to stress his sovereignty.”

Stephen stands then as a near personified idea of Hungary, its founding king and the well-spring of its national history.

The crown itself has been entrenched as a national relic. It is important to highlight that for much of its history the crown and the various discourses concerning it “refer either to the (common) monarch, or the person of the king, or the royal office.” The crown did eventually develop a distinct nationalist – and territorial - connection. Peter Laszlo notes that, over time, “The crown became the territorial reference for the unitary Hungarian national state . . . And from the 1830s the Liberal nationalists called for all Lands of the Hungarian crown to be united

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in a single governmental system."\(^{22}\) However, this nineteenth century association was wrapped up in Liberal ideals of civil society and legal equality of which the State was merely an impersonal guarantor.\(^{23}\) Laszlo emphasizes that the idea of the crown as synonymous with the “State” did not emerge until 1930 and the revisionist reactions to the Treaty of Trianon, which had culled large parts of Hungary’s territory.\(^{24}\) In order to add to this idea, it is necessary to turn to Zaltan Szente's observation that “After the peace of Trianon the doctrine of the Holy Crown became quite popular in the country again because it appeared to be an appropriate theory for justifying the claim for the lost territories, referring to the ‘historical’ right of Hungary.”\(^{25}\) The territorial effects of Trianon are shown below in Figure 2.

![Map of Hungary 1919](https://www2.bc.edu/~heineman/maps/1930smaps.html)

\(^{22}\) Peter, 458.
\(^{23}\) Peter, 458.
\(^{24}\) Peter, 457-461.
Having outlined perhaps Hungary’s most famous historical figure and his associated relic, it is useful now to turn to the other three leaders featured on Hungarian currency: King Charles Robert; Francis II Rakoczi; and Matthias Corvinus. They are shown here (Figure 3) on the 200, 500, and 1000 forint notes, respectively.

The obverse of these notes each depicts a piece of nationally significant architecture. The HUF 200 displays Diosgyor Castle; the HUF 500 shows the Hungarian Parliament Building, completed in Budapest in 1904; and the HUF 1000 portrays the Visegrad Royal Fountain, which comes from the Royal Palace where Matthias Corvinus would summer. These are useful to include since they are geographically fixed locations, all of which fall within the boundaries of present-day Hungary. However, in their historical, symbolic, and metaphorical associations they are less limited. Each of these notes represents its most recent issue.
King Charles Robert, also known as Charles I, was the half-French great, great-nephew to the Angevine King Robert of Naples.²⁶ He came to power in 1301 in the midst of a succession crisis resulting from the death of King Ladislav IV. Though Charles would win out, he would be crowned twice more: in 1309 and 1310. Charles was then faced with the difficult task of reunification in the face of myriad internal conflicts amongst various noble houses. He was ultimately successful in this task. When the fighting cleared in 1323, he established his capital at Visegrad, then at the center of the empire.²⁷ Today, Visegrad sits near Hungary's northern border with Slovakia. A map of Hungary as it was in 1301 is featured here in Figure 4.

²⁷Sugar, et al. 32-37.
Matthias Corvinus, on the throne from 1458 to 1490, was "the last national Hungarian king preceding the reigns of two Jagellon kings and a rapid succession of Hapsburg rulers between 1526 and 1918."\(^{28}\) It is worth adding here that Corvinus's birthplace, Cluj, is located in modern-day Romania. In Professor Ivan Volgyes's study of the Romanian treatment of Hungarian minorities in Ceausescu, he notes that in "Cluj, a city where at least one-third of the population is Hungarian, only a single sign remarks to visitors that the greatest king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus, was born there."\(^{29}\) Matthias was a great reformer and patron of the arts, attempting to systemize the legal code and welcoming artists, scholars, and princes to his court at Buda.\(^{30}\) In addition, his reign also oversaw an expansion of Hungary's territory. He annexed lands from Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Austria, in addition to repelling Turkish invasions (Figure 5).\(^{31}\) Corvinus, too, provides a connection to Visegrad, where his summer palace, and its abovementioned Visegrad Fountain, were located.

\[figure 5: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Hungary\]

\(^{28}\) Joseph Szoverffy, "History and Folk Tradition in Eastern Europe: Matthias Corvinus in the Mirror of Hungarian and Slavic Folklore," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 5, no. 1 (1968), 69-70


\(^{30}\) Sugar, et al 74-75.

\(^{31}\) Szoverffy, 70.
Finally, attention can be turned to Francis II Rakoczi. He was born in the town of Borsi in 1676. Like Matthias Corvinus, Rakoczi's birthplace now rests outside of contemporary Hungary. Now known as Borsa, the town sits just across the border in neighboring Slovakia. Francis II led a prolonged military struggle against Hapsburg rule at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Rakoczi’s family had a history of rebellion. In 1711, the Hapsburgs ultimately reasserted their dominance, dealing the Hungarians a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Trencin, in modern-day Slovakia. The Peace of Salzburg, signed in that same year, cemented Hapsburg rule in Hungary.

Some historical maps are included as route markers along the way in the hopes that this lends clarity to my own visualization. The following maps, of my own making, highlight major sites and territories tied to the imagery on Hungary's currency. The aim is to show just how the collective histories and associations of the iconography utilized on Hungarian banknotes may be deployed to create a geographic scope that far exceeds the current boundaries of the Hungarian state. It is not my argument that these images are engaged in a causal relationship with Hungarian nationalism; it is merely that the symbolic power of currency and its intrinsic territorial qualities can be mobilized in profoundly nationalistic ways. In this, different sites are shown, like those discussed above, as in birthplaces and burial sites, in addition to certain major battle sites associated with the individuals in question. Figure 6 shows the map in full; the next paragraphs examine the map in sections. It ought to be observed, however, that Figure 6 already demonstrates the way in which the imagery of Hungary currency evokes geography outside of the existing national borders; in many ways, it seems plain, adhering to an ancient, greater Hungary. It is crucial to stress that these figures are heroes of the Hungarian past and their

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legends are intertwined with the national myth of the people. A brief move through the sites highlighted demonstrates the rich historical geography conjured by the iconography of the Hungarian currency.

The maps have been broken down into eastern, central, and western clusters. Many of these sites should be immediately recognizable from the discussion above.

Francis Rakoczi’s birthplace of Borsa and burial site of Kolsice are both featured. In addition, the reader will remember Timisoara as the former capital of Charles I. Visegrad, the city to which Charles I relocated his court, is also featured. Stephen’s birthplace of Esztergom is a natural inclusion. In addition, Székesfehérvár, where Stephen I, Charles I, and Matthias Corvinus are all interred, should be familiar from the reading above. The remaining sites are those of battles relevant to the individual figures in question. Trenčín, Slovakia, is where Rakoczi’s rebellion was crushed.
The three Austrian sites represent a cluster of major military victories won by Matthias Corvinus. The subsequent images simply provide closer views and explanatory captions for the purpose of assisting the reader in seeing the geography at play. Matthias’s campaign against the Holy Roman Empire was one of his spectacular successes. He seized Hainburg in 1482 and won his victories at Lietzersdorf and Wiener Neustadt in 1484 and 1486, respectively.\(^\text{34}\) As an interesting point of overlap, Francis Rakoczi was briefly imprisoned in Wiener Neustadt in 1701,

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before escaping to exile in Poland. Matthias never managed to cement his hold on Lower Austria; Hungary lost this territory completely with his death in 1490. The Battle of Sibot was, though not fought by Matthias himself, won under his rule. Here, in present-day Romania, the Hungarians delivered a monumental defeat to the Ottomans, one that was crucial in defending Hungary from invasion.

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36 Sandler, 388.  
This mapping, limited though it may be, demonstrates the way in which Hungarian currency, through its iconography, can refer to an imagined geography of much greater scale.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth turning back to the question of contemporary Hungarian politics and the relevance of such imagined geographies. To invert this analysis for a moment, this article turns, in closing, to the odd attempt made by the Orban government to tax Internet usage. The plan was met with widespread derision from both the Hungarian people and the international
Though Orban eventually backpedaled, promising to return to the issue in January 2015, the issue still stands as a sign of the “illiberal” shift of his government. Of particular interest is the role of taxation as a situation in which Orban asserts sovereignty as well as the geographically fixed and localized coercive power of the Hungarian state in a context often looked upon as egalitarian, without borders, and unanchored in place. This would be the grounds of an entirely different, yet worthwhile, study.

In fact, this article illustrates that currency has the potential to be a powerful material carrier of national imagination. The Hungarian past is alive and well on the banknotes of the Hungarian forint; yet it is a past that springs forth with romantic and mythic power in a contemporary nation, living in the legacy of its own political dismemberment, and a contemporary crisis of its national trajectory. The notes, history, and maps (both historical and creative) demonstrate that an examination of Hungarian currency is a rich avenue for attending to these issues. Further studies, both in Hungary and elsewhere, ought to yield even more interesting images.

Yet, in a comparative, historical context, interestingly, the Greek crisis within the Eurozone offers the prospect of a quite different future inquiry, which could pose the question as to why the analysis in this article would not be relevant in that country.

Anna Visvizi explains that “…although Greeks love symbols and referrals to ancient Greece, the drachma lost its appeal as the national currency in the 1980s and 1990s.” Subsequently, she notes, the Euro has served as a much more reliable means of exchange. In her view, the drachma remains a powerful symbol; yet this is only in the inter-subjective sphere of the fabric that forms the Greek society. A return to drachma is supported by only 12% in society.

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according to recent opinion polls. This is not because of the perceived virtues of the drachma with a view to consolidating the nation. It is rather, as Visvizi asserts, because of the ill-conceived economic advantages of returning to the drachma. As viewed from a different angle, some in Greece would argue that the population does not need the drachma to reassert its identity; “concepts and words, such as such as democracy, theater or philosophy, are more effective in this respect,” in Visvizi’s analysis of the situation in 2015.
Bibliography


