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## THE DEMOCRATIC CONFISCATION OF THE PAST: THE CASE OF KOSSUTH SQUARE IN BUDAPEST

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### ABSTRACT

In 2011, the Hungarian parliament approved a resolution that ruled the return of Kossuth Square in Budapest (Hungary) to its "pre-1944 artistic image" and the Imre Steindl Program was assigned to conceptualize and implement the refurbishment of the public space and its facilities. Referred to as the "main constitutional square of Hungary", Kossuth Square houses the parliament building, and the political community led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán turned the space into a materialization of their idealized nation. This research intends to investigate how the republican and democratic toolkit, especially the Parliamentary Resolution 61/2011 and the 2011 Fundamental Law, were used to review the material and the symbolic apparatuses of the square according to the views of a political and cultural 2/3 majority. Based on the recent biography and images of the square, I intend to demonstrate how events and personalities were erased from the landscape while other idealized versions of the past were framed and returned to the square with the help of a supposed democratic mechanism - the vote – and institutions – the parliament. In addition, I would like to problematize the fate of a non-convenient past and the rights of future generations to experience vestiges of the chronological past in the city without being condescending.

**KEY WORDS:** memory; monuments; illiberal democracy; historicism; constitutional identity

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## THE NORMATIVE GROUND – FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF 2011

All references to the 2011 Constitution, also called Hungarian Fundamental Law (HFL), or to its preamble, also called National Avowal, in this research are based on the English version in force on 23 December 2020 available at <https://www.parlament.hu/documents/125505/138409/Fundamental+law/73811993-c377-428d-9808-ee03d6fb8178> (retrieved on 19.02.2024). I strongly recommend the reading of the preamble quoted below:

QUOTE -

**“The Fundamental Law of Hungary**  
(25 April 2011)

God bless the Hungarians

NATIONAL AVOWAL

*WE, THE MEMBERS OF THE HUNGARIAN NATION, at the beginning of the new millennium, with a sense of responsibility for every Hungarian, hereby proclaim the following:*

*We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian State on solid ground and made our country a part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago.*

*We are proud of our forebears who fought for the survival, freedom and independence of our country.*

*We are proud of the outstanding intellectual achievements of the Hungarian people.*

*We are proud that our nation has over the centuries defended Europe in a series of struggles and enriched Europe's common values with its talent and diligence.*

*We recognise the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood. We value the various religious traditions of our country.*

*We promise to preserve our nation's intellectual and spiritual unity, torn apart in the storms of the last century.*

*We proclaim that the national minorities living with us form part of the Hungarian political community and are constituent parts of the State.*

*We commit ourselves to promoting and safeguarding our heritage, our unique language, Hungarian culture and the languages and cultures of national minorities living in Hungary, along with all man-made and natural assets of the Carpathian Basin. We bear responsibility for our descendants and therefore we shall protect the living conditions of future generations by making prudent use of our material, intellectual and natural resources.*

*We believe that our national culture is a rich contribution to the diversity of European unity.*

*We respect the freedom and culture of other nations, and shall strive to cooperate with all nations of the world.*

*We hold that human existence is based on human dignity.*

*We hold that individual freedom can only be complete in cooperation with others.*

*We hold that the family and the nation constitute the principal framework of our coexistence, and that our fundamental cohesive values are loyalty, faith and love.*

*We hold that the strength of a community and the honour of each person are based on labour and the achievement of the human mind.*

*We hold that we have a general duty to help the vulnerable and the poor.*

*We hold that the common goal of citizens and the State is to achieve the highest possible measure of well-being, safety, order, justice and liberty.*

*We hold that democracy is only possible where the State serves its citizens and handles their affairs in an equitable manner, without abuse and impartially.*

*We honour the achievements of our historic constitution and we honour the Holy Crown, which embodies the constitutional continuity of Hungary's statehood and the unity of the nation.*

*We hold that the protection of our identity rooted in our historic constitution is a fundamental obligation of the State.*

*We do not recognise the suspension of our historic constitution due to foreign occupations.*

*We deny any statute of limitations for the inhuman crimes committed against the Hungarian nation and its citizens under the national socialist and the communist dictatorship.*

*We do not recognise the communist constitution of 1949, since it was the basis for tyrannical rule; we therefore proclaim it to be invalid.*

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*We agree with the Members of the first free National Assembly, which proclaimed as its first decision that our current liberty was born of our 1956 Revolution.  
We date the restoration of our country's self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected organ of popular representation was formed. We shall consider this date to be the beginning of our country's new democracy and constitutional order.  
We hold that after the decades of the twentieth century, which led to a state of moral decay, we have an abiding need for spiritual and intellectual renewal.  
We trust in a jointly-shaped future and the commitment of younger generations. We believe that our children and grandchildren will make Hungary great again with their talent, persistence and moral strength. Our Fundamental Law shall be the basis of our legal order; it shall be an alliance among Hungarians of the past, present and future. It is a living framework which expresses the nation's will and the form in which we want to live.  
We, the citizens of Hungary, are ready to found the order of our country upon the common endeavours of the nation."* [SIC]

- UNQUOTE

### **THE NORMATIVE GROUND – RESOLUTION 61/2011**

*"§1. In the interest of the dignified development of Kossuth Lajos Square in Budapest as the constitutional main square of Hungary in the foreground of the Parliament building, [...]  
§2. [...] (e) the square can be restored to its pre-1944 artistic image while commemorating the victims of the tragic 1956 shooting and providing a fitting setting for the works of art currently on display in the square."*<sup>2</sup>  
*[italicized by the author] – Resolution 61/2011 (VII. 13) OGY (free translation by the author)*

### **IMRE STEINDL PROGRAM – QUOTES FROM CEO TAMÁS WACHSLER<sup>3</sup>**

*"But that [work for the SIP] doesn't make me a politician. Politics has decided that the environment of the Parliament must be transformed and I have a professional role in this: to implement the decision to the best of my knowledge. I am especially lucky that I can live the program and identify myself with it. Moreover, in the case of Kossuth Square, politics did not make political decisions."*

*"Paraphrasing József Antall: I would not have liked to demolish them. The organic development of the square began in 1906 with the erection of the [Count Gyula] Andrassy statue and it was completed by the mid-1930s. However, after the World War [II], an idiotic, sick regime [Communism] demolished the work and even destroyed most of the statues."*

*"We did not destroy any sculpture, we did not even take it to a sculpture park, and we discussed the fate of all works with the creator or the heir. [...] The statue was erected a few hundred meters away. And Katalin Jánosi is not the heir to the rights related to the statue; and we agreed with the sculptor, we set up the work again under his artistic direction. I am convinced that it [the sculpture] is in a better place now than it was before."*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://mkogy.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a11h0061.OGY> retrieved on 24.04.2022.

<sup>3</sup> <https://24.hu/belfold/2019/09/16/wachsler-orban-rendszervaltas-fidesz-parlament/> retrieved on 30.04.2024. Free translation by the author.

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## KOSSUTH SQUARE AND THE MONUMENTS ON THE MOVE

MONUMENT	ORIGINAL DATE & AUTHOR (BEFORE 2011)	SIP INTERVENTION: DATE & AUTHOR	TYPE OF INTERVENTION
Symbolic Gravestone of the Victims of October 25, 1956	1991 (Imre Makovecz and the sculptor László Gömbös)	2014	Relocation underground (Address: "In memoriam 1956. október 25.")
Statue of Poet Attila József	1980 (László Marton and György Vadász)	2014 (György Vadász)	Relocation within
Lajos Kossuth and his political group	1927 (original version by János Horvay and contribution from Antal Fischer) 1952 (communist version by Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl and contributions from András Kocsis and Lajos Ungvári)	2015 (replica made by Reneszánsz Kőfaragó Zrt.) <sup>4</sup>	Replacement of versions
Count Gyula Andrassy	1906 -1945 (György Zala)	2016 (version by András Engler, Polgár Botond, János Molnár Meszlényi)	Relocation in
Eternal Flame of the 1956 Revolution	1996 (Mária Lugossy with contribution of Béla Hámori)	2016	Relocation out (distance to the Imre Nagy Sq. on foot: 2,0km)
Imre Nagy statue	1996 (Tamás Varga)	2018	Relocation out (distance to Mari Jászai Sq. on foot: 1km)
National Martyrs' Memorial	1934 – 1945 (Füredi Richárd and Jenő Kismarty-Lechner)	2019 (version by Imre Elek)	Relocation in (Address: Martyrs' [Vértanúk] Square)
Memorial of National Unity (also known as Trianon Memorial, National Cohesion or National Solidarity)	Not applicable	2020 (Balázs Zimay and Sándor Mohácsi)	New addition
Count István Tisza	1934 - 1948 (György Zala, Antal Orbán and Ernő Foerk)	2014 (Imre Elek)	Relocation in

Table 1 - Monuments reviewed in this research  
Credit: elaborated by the author for the purpose of this research.

<sup>4</sup> [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20130925\\_Lemasoljak\\_a\\_Kossuthszoborcsoportot](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20130925_Lemasoljak_a_Kossuthszoborcsoportot) retrieved on 15.05.2024.

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Figure 1 – Layout of Kossuth Sq. in 2010 (upper) and in 2021 (lower) and selected monuments  
Source: Google Earth retrieved on 02.04.2024 (coordinates displayed in the pictures).



Figure 2 – Rotunda and the Symbolic Tomb of the Victims of October 25, 1956 in the museum/exhibition  
Credits: image 203170 (left) and image 203171 (right) uploaded to <https://www.kozterkep.hu/25277/az-1956-oktober-25-i-sortuz-aldozatainak-emlekmuve#> by Vera Göröntsér on 22.04.2015. Retrieved on 03.04.2024.

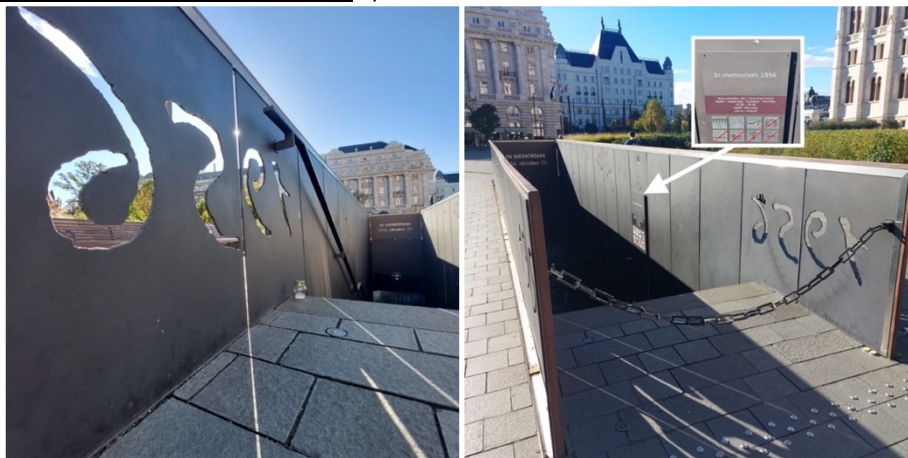


Figure 3 - Entrance of the In Memoriam 1956 closed on November 06, 2023  
Credit: personal archive (2023).



Figure 4 - Monument to the poet Attila József on the Danube riverbank  
Credit: personal archive (2023).

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Figure 5 – Monument in honor of Kossuth Lajos in 1927 (original - upper), in 2008 (communist version - middle) and in 2015 (replica of original - lower)

Credits: upper: written in the picture, middle: image 159226 by István Csuhi,  
<https://www.kozterkep.hu/2416/kossuth-emlekmu#vetito=159226> retrieved on 15/04/2024, lower: personal archive (2023)

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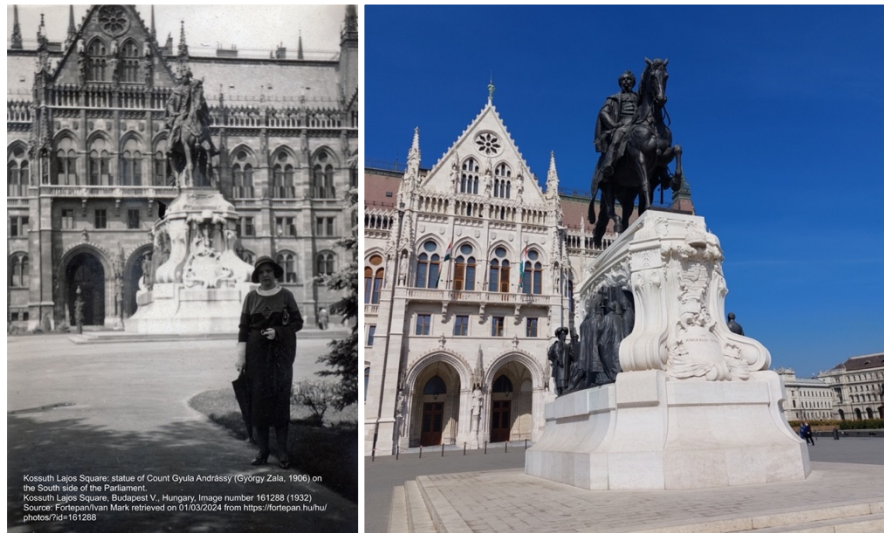


Figure 6 - Monument honoring Count Gyula Andrassy in 1906 and its replica reinstalled in 2016  
Credits: left: written in the pictures, right: personal archive (2023).



Figure 7 - Eternal Flame of 1956 relocated to Imre Nagy Sq. since 2016  
Credits: left: image 256061 <https://www.kozterkep.hu/29323/a-forradalom-langja#vetito=25606>; right: image 256060 <https://www.kozterkep.hu/29323/a-forradalom-langja#vetito=256060>. Both pictures were uploaded by Gábor Verrasztó and retrieved on 15.04.2024.



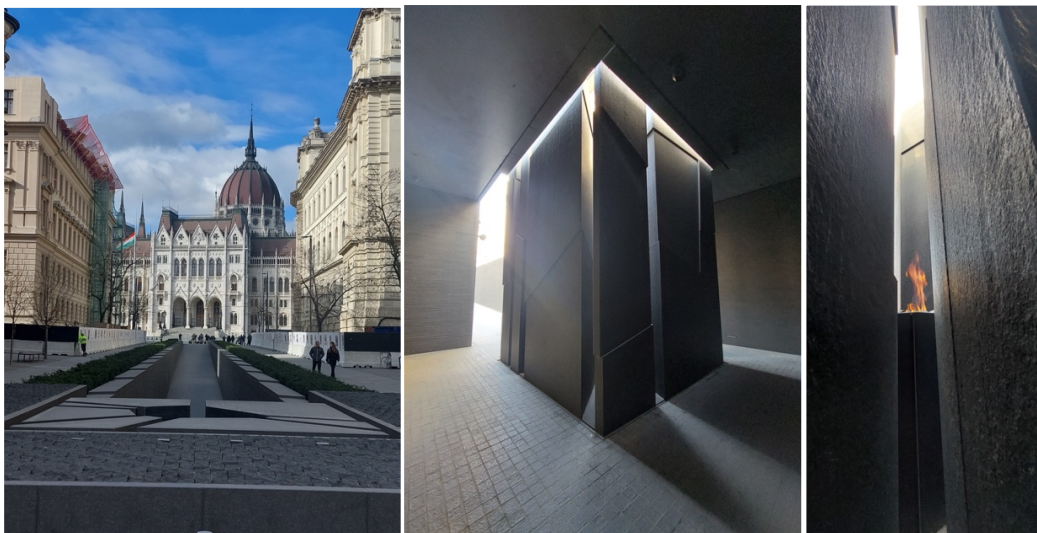
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Figure 8 -Statue of Imre Nagy placed at Mari Jászai Square  
Credit: personal archive (2022).



Figure 9 - Original Memorial to the Martyrs of 1918-1919 (1934) and the two sides of the current replica (2019)  
Credit: left: Fortepan / Márton Kurutz, image 39244 (<https://fortepan.hu/hu/lists/689927/photos/39244> retrieved on 03.02.2024); center and right: personal archive (2022).



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Figure 10 - Monument of National Unity from different perspectives and map of Hungarian Empire divided into 7 regions as the result of the Trianon Peace Treaty (bottom right)

Credits: Upper, middle and bottom left: personal archive (2002 and 2024); bottom right: HM Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum, Térképtár (ref. B XV a • B XV Hungary (after 1920) • BI–XV. Europe, B XV a 111), retrieved from <https://maps.hungaricana.hu/hu/HTITerkeptar/33399/> on 29.02.2024.

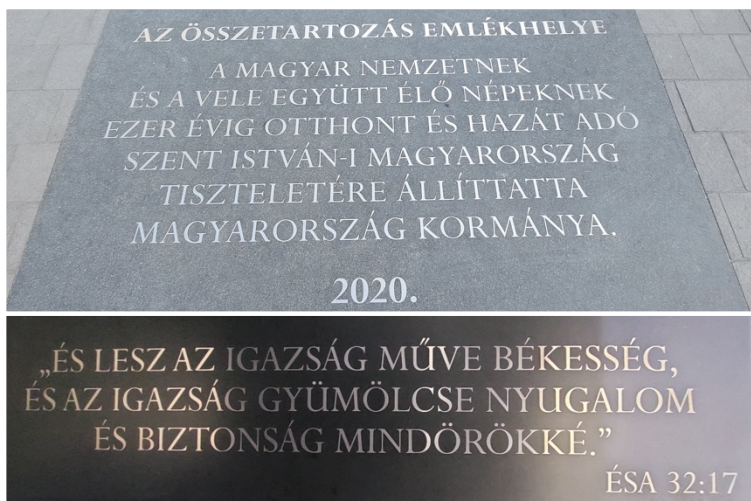


Figure 11 – Religious references on the monument of National Cohesion  
Credit: personal archive (2024).

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