The pre-history of cultural heritage in Hungary

By social history of cultural heritage I mean the historical analysis of the social and cultural context in which the notion of cultural heritage and the implicit cultural heritage protection were taking shape in Hungary. The term itself does not stem from the inner Hungarian discourse: it is a borrowing from Western languages. I do not intend to present here a complex history of this term, but I feel it is necessary to underline certain important characteristics, which will lead to our analysis of the Hungarian model.

1. In this paper I would like to show briefly the specific features of Hungarian identity building in the post-communist period through an analysis of the institutionalization of the notion of cultural heritage. I suggest a simplified approach to this rather complex problem. First, I present a few ideas concerning the re-construction or reconsideration of the Hungarian national identity from the late 1980s onwards. This is followed by a critical analysis of the institutionalisation of cultural heritage around the year 2000. Finally, I provide some conclusions about the most recent years of cultural heritage protection in Hungary. The research related to this paper was realized with the help of the Bolyai János Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The term “cultural heritage” is a product of the 1970s, when:
- great theories (ideologies) explaining social development were being seriously questioned;
- accordingly, humanities as well as social sciences undertook a set of paradigm shifts commonly labelled by the term “turn”;
- linguistic and/or cultural turns in the above-mentioned fields suit perfectly the multiplication of identities; identity becomes unavoidable and turns into a subject of continuous (re)construction;
- national identity is also redefined by the acceptance of the pluralistic nature of Western nations due to mass immigration and a set of revivals;
- like identity, culture is also written ever more often in plural to express the multiple identities and the academic confusion related to it.3

This is a period, in which cultural heritage is imposed and, thanks to its fuzziness, seems to be a suitable solution to cover and to integrate all these questions raised by the social, economic and cultural changes in the West.

Hungary, just like other Eastern-Central European countries, was more or less cut off from those Western discourses or its social realities were merely not reflected in them. Some civic – and later – state initiatives4 showed similar tendencies, especially those wishing to appreciate more the national heritage against the official ideology of internationalism, but those complex problems of social, cultural and academic paradigm shifts, which had led to the birth of cultural heritage, were not really present.


4. The “Táncház” (Dance House) Movement is a good example of the authoritarian state’s attempt to put under its cultural (and political) control a civic national heritage preserving initiative, which had originally expressed the intellectual discontent regarding the official internationalism of the state.
Obviously, the definition of present-day Hungarian national identity is not unique for its problematic nature, but because of the events of 20th century history, it has preserved some 19th century characteristics, which has become much less significant, or even extinct in other nations' self-definition. In order to understand this complex process, I would like to apply Krzysztof Pomian’s model on French nation-building to the Hungarian case. According to this model, nation building intellectuals can be divided into two distinctive groups: (1) those, who believe that the national spirit (incarnated in traditional national institutes such as the country and the state) determines a member of a nation; (2) those, who emphasize the national character (race and racial characteristics) as a determining factor belonging to a nation. As opposed to the traditional distinction between the state and cultural nations, Pomian posits a rather conflictual co-existence of the two approaches which lasted till the end of the Second World War, after which they both became disqualified by the tragedies of the war, having caused to it by means of their own conflicts and concepts. This is how cultural heritage imposes itself as a new term, which is suitable for a consensus-based national (or other) identity derived from existing objects and sites, rather than fictional spirit or character. Moreover, in the peaceful and pacifist post-war decades, external threat was not the major source of nation-building any more. The internal construction and definition of this new sense of belonging was not based on the command of an unchallenged unity. Accordingly, the hierarchical character of cultural heritage was accepted and different social/regional levels could find their own significant heritage to express their identity and they could also attach this to the shared set of national or even universal heritage.

The 19th century Hungarian nation-builders, in partially different social circumstances, applied the Western terms of modernisation
to their own reform projects aiming at the Hungarian society. As a result, one can find here the representatives of the two groups of Pomian’s model and can apply this clash between the national spirit and the national character to the Hungarian nation-building process. The national spirit applies to the Hungarian Empire (the countries of the Saint Crown; the Kingdom of Hungary with its “natural” borders determined by the Carpathians, etc.) engulfing anyone living on its territory, whereas the national character applies to those possessing gross and fine racial characteristics determined in the course of the 19th century. Due to the Trianon Treaty (1920), however, the Hungarian Empire did not cease to exist for many nation-builders — rather, it became fictional and its resurrection was being expected continuously. At the same time, by the loss of the Empire, the national character approach could become more prominent, since the defense of the protection of the pureness of the Hungarian national identity against external threat and inner division was justified. The forced internationalism of the communist/socialist post-war decades did not allow any critical or society-wide debate on the trauma, so neither the fictional wake for the Empire nor the disqualification of the discriminative nature of the national character approach could take place. Monuments were protected for their historical or artistic values by state institutions, but civic/local initiatives could be scarcely carried out to express local/national identities through the renovation of locally chosen objects or sites. This is why cultural heritage protection as a social practice could not happen in communist Hungary. The undertraumatised problem of the national identity, which burst out for example during the Revolution of 1956, meant a serious threat for the authoritarian state.

From the late 1980s, rising awareness of the intelligentsia was partially expressed in renewed debates on national identity. By the time of the political changes, however, the previous conflict between the authoritarian state and the opposing intellectuals was replaced by a clash, a sort of blurred Kulturkampf, harking back to the good old urbanist/populist conflict of the 1930s among the once
opposing intellectuals who were shaping the new Hungarian democracy. This inner clash was gradually translated into political terms and was (and still is) identified by the left/right opposition, which makes it almost impossible to form any kind of shared definition on present-day national identity based on consensus, which should be one of the most significant characteristics of identities expressed through cultural heritage.

As the institutionalisation of cultural heritage in Hungary shows, it has primarily become a political term, which is still struggling for its deeper content.

**Institutionalisation of cultural heritage in Hungary: 1997-2002**

In the second part of this paper, I shall give a short history of how cultural heritage has been shaped in Hungary from the mid-1990s to the present day, and, in a conclusion I will try to expound a set of ideas which derive from observation of the Hungarian practice, but may have some common features with the experience of other Central European countries.

As I have mentioned before, the fact that the term “heritage” appeared in Hungary had political origins, and its most conspicuous results were of the institutional kind. After some precedents, the expression “cultural heritage” was introduced by the Hungarian government based on the coalition of the socialist and the liberal party in the mid-1990s, and it was used sporadically in the law on culture in 1997. It was also mentioned in connection with the millennial celebrations of the Hungarian land conquest of 1996, and a new Cultural Heritage Directorate was set up besides the National Board for the Protection of Historical Monuments, an old institution with


a tradition of more than a hundred years. Then, after the parliamentary elections of 1998, the winning conservative parties not only adopted the term from their political rivals, but also took advantage of it in the transformation of the governmental structure: following the programme of the leading party of the coalition, Fidesz – the Hungarian Civic Party, the Ministry of Culture and Education was divided in two, and the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage was established. With a reference to foreign examples, especially the English one, culture, monument protection and tourism, which had previously belonged to three ministries, were unified in this single new ministry. The electoral programme underlined not only the economic potential of heritage, but also its capacity to raise the awareness of “historical and cultural identity,” which on the one hand should help the “citizens” (polgárok, a word frequently used by the new government, playing upon the ambiguous meaning of the word) face the challenges of
the globalizing world, and on the other hand should qualify them for the reception of its positive effects. Culture, seen in this light, was ranked as a strategic goal in the state’s policy, while, paradoxically, the years to come were characterized in the programme as a period of moderate governmental intervention.

In the parliamentary debate about the new ministry,\(^8\) the socialist and liberal parties, now in opposition, claimed that the word “heritage,” being unable to describe the integrity of culture, was not appropriate as a name for the ministry, and that it would provoke a shift towards the past, i.e. conservative historicism. To these objections, the government answered with a combination of “national” and “European” logic: preservation of the objects from the Hungarian past and adherence to the European standards of cultural politics were both suitable arguments to prove their rightness. Predictably, the debate provided an opportunity for a fight between stereotypes, between the imaginary “protectors” and “enemies” of national values, otherwise known as “conservatives” and “liberals.”

In the following years, the term became widely used in the official texts of the government, but the definition of “heritage” was again missing. The discourse, taken from the \(\text{EU}\) proposals, i.e., an invitation directed to the local communities encouraging them to find their own heritage, opened the door for practical definitions, overshadowing the need for a theoretical one. Actually, the loose terminology surrounding the concept of heritage seems to be connected with the uncertainties regarding the status and the whereabouts of heritage itself. Not only were “communities” mobilized, but a wide range of things, now summed up as “heritage,” was “shifting” as well.

The year 2000, the Millennium of the Hungarian state, in connection with the second millennium of Christianity, offered an extraordinary chance for the politics of identity and of heritage. Preparations started before the parliamentary elections of 1998: both governments,

the old and the new one, intended to take advantage of it. When
the former cabinet talked about reconstruction of royal castles of
the medieval period, they were mentioned as parts of “the built her­
itage representing the thousand years of the state.” The new cabinet
called for a nation-wide renewal and preservation of heritage, and
repeatedly stressed the ideas of national self-confidence, cultural
productivity, the ability to filter the effects of globalization - all this
was well-known from the electoral campaign.

But how was the concept of nation described on this occasion?
Instead of referring to a homogeneous identity, the government chose
to speak of a mosaic of different identities, without ethnic, religious
or gender discrimination. This official statement could be interpreted
as a gesture made in order to avoid accusations that Hungary sim­
ply follows the pattern of the Millennium of a century before, when
the country had celebrated the thousand years of land-conquest
with an “imperialistic” accent. In 1896, the references to modern
technical progress, political integrity or even supremacy curiously
blended with romantic national mythology. The model of 1896 was
in part imitated by the practice of the celebrations of the year 2000.
Pride beamed at not only the figures of the more distant past, but
also the 19th century ancestors, since they had given us a prestig­
ious and enduring example of dignified remembrance. What did
the Hungarians remember during the Millennium of Christianity
and their statehood? Perhaps the patterns drawn by the 19th century
Millennium of the land conquest and the memories of the political
propaganda of the period between the World Wars were more pow­
erful than the knowledge of the first nine hundred years: the histori­
cal past of the 20th century was close and concrete, and influenced
the vision of the rest of the country’s history.

In the financial system, drawn up for subsidizing the large cul­
tural enterprise, direct central investment was combined with
a competition, in which, according to the logic of the heritage move­
ment known from Western countries, the communities were invited
to participate with their own projects. However, the government’s
At the same time, the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage prepared a draft of a new law on cultural heritage, with the intention to establish a new and comprehensive institution for its protection. In this way, heritage was at last defined by law in 2001. The definition included monuments, archeological findings and collections (museums, archives and some libraries): three areas were now supervised by the new Office of Cultural Heritage, which united the former

National Board for the Protection of Historical Monuments with the Cultural Heritage Directorate. The parliamentary debate was again edifying: the government simultaneously played the cards of EU-conformity and national identity, while the socialist and liberal parties defended the previous system of heritage protection, trying to relieve the centralizing and modernising fervor of the government, and in this respect, playing the role of a conservative opposition. In the new elections of 2002 the socialist and liberal parties established a government, and kept the structures of heritage protection created by the former one.

This overview shows that the concept of cultural heritage was an important element in the conservative government’s own identity-making: these politicians tried to prove not only their adherence to the European standards and expectations, but also their national commitment to their electors. Material objects of national
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heritage were used in political propaganda during the electoral campaign in a massive and unprecedented way: one could, for example, observe on the streets and in the underground posters representing the Millennial monument restorations as elements of "Our cultural heritage – our common heritage." On the other hand, the fact that the term "cultural heritage" was employed by every government, proves that it was treated as a useful technical instrument, and it is not necessarily identifiable with a given political project. On the other hand, though "heritage" is general enough to be apolitical, in the sense that any political power can utilise it (which facilitates its adaptation in Central European countries, the new members of the EU), it can be interpreted in terms of party politics as well. Thus, instead of mitigating the conflicts in the name of a common patrimony, it can recreate the existing boundaries in politics and mentality.10

It is difficult to find out whether and in what sense the millenary festivities met the official intention of strengthening identity in individual communities, and how people will remember them in the long run. Moreover, the Millennium, which could be relevant for identity politics and cultural diplomacy, did not make it easier to formulate the theoretic or legal definition of heritage, either. Perhaps the moment was too exceptional for that: the Millennium connected heritage protection with commemorations. Although the anniversary provided a very special occasion for exhibitions, monument restoration and the like, it also diverted attention from working out a serious concept of cultural heritage in Hungary.

The political heritage project of the Millennium ended, the term and the new structures remained unchanged till 2006 when Cultural Heritage and Education were reunited in the same Ministry under

the new Socialist-Liberal Coalition. The question whether the local initiatives could gain enough energy from this particular event to persist even in an “average” period remains open. In the meantime, tourism already made its effect on the production of local heritages: the city of Győr rediscovered its baroque potential, Gödöllő has its story to tell about the Habsburg dynasty, materialised by its palace, in which Queen Elizabeth, the wife of Emperor Franz Joseph used to stay. There is a long list of similar examples. New sites have been added to the UNESCO List of World Heritage. The creation of new heritage sites does not mean that many of these local traditions had been neglected before heritage became trendy. But then, one should ask which features of today’s national culture and identity in Hungary owe their existence to the concept of heritage.

In fact, are there such features at all? It is true that at present, from the legal and institutional point of view, heritage is well defined in Hungary. But during the preparations of the law in 2001, a detailed and careful consultation with a wider circle of experts (archeologists, art historians, etc.) was missing. The law omitted the definition of “intangible heritage” (in a period when UNESCO was trying to find criteria exactly for this term). Heritage has not brought about a new consensus on the national canon of literature and the arts. In intellectual debates of the past few years, the term has not played any remarkable role. A group of heritage experts has already appeared, recruited mainly from the field of monument protection, archeology and diplomacy, and there have been academic projects, either on the process of centuries-long shaping of heritage by the humanities, or on how it works in contemporary Hungary. As early as in 1995, the European Folklore Institute tried to cover the area of the safeguarding, revitalisation and diffusion of traditional culture and folklore heritage in Europe and published a review on Hungarian

11. Two cultural landscapes: The Fertó/Neusiedlersee Cultural Landscape (shared with Austria, 2001) and the Tokaj Wine Region Historic Cultural Landscape (2002).
traditional culture and folklore revival. Neither the research and representations, nor a more general public discussion (which is missing) have yet compensated for the inverted chronological order in which political decisions preceded the intellectual analysis of the problem.

Our latest example from the chronology of the history of heritage in Hungary will illustrate again the permanence of the term "heritage" in political discourse despite the changes of governments. One of the main problems of Hungarian history from the early 20th century is whether (and in what sense) the Hungarian minorities, living outside Hungary, on the territories separated from the nation state by the peace treaty of Trianon in 1920, constitute a continuum with the actual citizens of the Hungarian state. How has the heritage discourse contributed to this problem? The conservative government tried to extend the festivities of the Millennium to the minorities – for example, it financed the restoration of some monuments, such as the cathedral in Alba Iulia, today in Romania, built in the period of the medieval kingdom of Hungary, which is of special interest because Alba Iulia was the seat of the principality of Transylvania, and once it was treated as a "national pantheon," since many of the princes of Hungarian origin had been buried there. While this case and similar ones may show that "Hungarian heritage" can sometimes be expanded to the culture of these Hungarian minorities in symbolic terms and even in a material sense, the state never claimed officially any right to incorporate those heritages into its own national heritage. The strategy of the conservative government was to create a special status for native Hungarians living outside the present Hungarian borders, which could have granted them several benefits.

12. Its publications are: European Centre for Traditional Culture Bulletin (1995-1998), and Hungarian Heritage (2000-). Despite the quite early and systematic research on intangible heritage, the European Folklore Institute has gradually gained a rather marginal position in the construction of the Hungarian Intangible Cultural Heritage for UNESCO.
when they travelled to Hungary or stayed there. As a result of this strategy, a law was made in 2001, which, according to its preamble, was meant to guarantee the belonging of these people to “the unity of the Hungarian nation” to foster “their well-being in their homeland,” and to strengthen “their national identity.” The new government modified the law in 2003. In the preamble, the reference to the “unity of the nation” was now replaced by the formula “preservation of their relationship with Hungary,” and “the possibility to express their adherence to Hungarian cultural heritage as a sign of their belonging to the Hungarian nation.” To sum up: in 2003 a vague concept of national unity (though it was never interpreted as a territorial or legal unification) seemed already too straightforward, and not unlikely to hurt the sensibility of the neighbouring states, so it was left out and replaced by a reference to the common cultural heritage of Hungarians living inside and outside Hungary. However, “cultural heritage” was just as imprecise as “unity,” which is not very surprising, if one looks back at the short history of all the missing definitions.

Concluding remarks
Cultural heritage protection has a legal framework in Hungary, which has been achieved in the last two decades. Since the 2001 Law on Cultural Heritage, the more recent UNESCO Conventions were integrated into the Hungarian legal system in 2006 and in 2008. Their meaning, however, was not and has not been widely debated among Hungarian intellectuals. As I have mentioned before, the 4th Hungarian Republic was born in the mist of an inner cultural clash about national identity, which was quickly transformed into a political opposition, which is still unsolved.

This conflict gave way to - using István Bibó's expression - new "false realists,"\(^{15}\) who tend to reinterpret Hungarian history and culture according to their wishful thinking. Although most of the specialists of Cultural Heritage protection do their job with much attention, the strictly opposing opinions on present-day Hungarian cultural and national identity
- were not pacified by the festivities of the Millennium;
- were not turned into a national consensus on a common Cultural Heritage;
- did not allow to clarify the relationship between the Hungarians in and outside Hungary;
- did not allow a thorough scientific analysis of the Hungarian Cultural Heritage at the beginning of the 21st century.

The consensus should be initiated by the Hungarian academic circles, which still do not seem to be ready for the above-mentioned paradigm-shifts. Hopefully, the encouraging examples of other Central European countries and a raising awareness of local, national and universal Cultural Heritage will supply the necessary impetus for the Hungarian intellectuals.

World Heritage can serve as a justification for re-thinking the representation of Hungarian, or any national past in a global, and also in a revisited national context, since for the nomination of a site nation states are supposed to prove the universal value of cultural/natural sites on their own territory. Not surprisingly, the proposed sites are often places of memory of their national pasts, which had been chosen as such to express the particular characteristics of a given nation. UNESCO requirements, however, impel the representatives of each nation-state to change the commendations and justifications linked to a given site to reflect more universal values. This

\(^{15}\) For the debate on the Hungarian character, where the concept of the "false realists" is elaborated by István Bibó, see Iván Zoltán Dénès, *Eltorzult magyar alkat*. Bibó István vitája Németh Lászlóval és Szekfü Gyulával, Budapest 1999.
representation-shift and its social scope can be a gratifying object of scientific analysis of present-day identity building.

By 2010, the number of (material) World Heritage Sites reached 1,000, so it can be analysed even by statistical methods. I suppose that the number and the type of sites proposed by nation states and approved by UNESCO can be an important indicator of the self-representation of the given states and also that of its success in a global context. By the following simplified analysis of the Visegrad Four (V4) countries’ World Heritage Sites compared to European ones, I wish to draw some attention to the utility of further research in this area.

The V4 countries consecutively joined the World Heritage Convention, which is presumably related to the rhythm of their opening to the global institutions (Poland in 1976, Hungary in 1985, the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993), and accordingly, the rise in the number of their World Heritage Sites is quite belated in relation to the general European rise. But by 2000, the presence of these countries is unquestionable (Fig. 1 and 2). The largest growth of European sites can be seen in the 1990s, which saw the Central European boom as well. Since 2000, the European presence has been becoming less and less dominant in comparison to the other civilizational units.

If we compare the V4 countries’ World Heritage presence in a bloc to Europe as a whole, we can assume that the sites/inhabitants proportion is in line with the great European nations: it equals that of France (0.6 site/1 million inhabitants), although it is lower than in Spain (1) or Italy (0.8), but higher than in Great Britain (0.5) or Germany (0.4).

The comparison of the categories of the sites can tune our analysis further. The proportion of six out of the ten categories of World Heritage Sites (historic city, urban monument, religious monument, castle/fortress, landscape, natural) is roughly the same for

16. The research covers 42 European states, excluding Russia and Turkey.
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Fig. 1. Number of European World Heritage Sites, 1980-2010. Source: UNESCO World Heritage List. Prepared by Gábor Sonkoly

Fig. 2. Number of V4 World Heritage Sites, 1980-2010. Source: UNESCO World Heritage List. Prepared by Gábor Sonkoly
Gábor Sonkoly

the European and the V4 averages. There is, however, a remarkably greater number of historic towns and villages. Also there are fewer industrial and archeological sites in the V4 countries compared to the whole of Europe (Fig. 3 and 4). Out of the 7 European villages, for example, three can be found in the V4 countries, which shows the importance of ethnographic heritage in this region. This is even more obvious if we take into consideration the fact that the two British villages under protection are supposed to commemorate industrial past.

This example leads us to an analysis of the national World Heritage Site structures, which should be extended to the Tentative Lists, since these later indicate even more the self-image of a given nation-state. In spite of the arguments to prove their universal values, the ensemble of approved and proposed sites can also serve historians or anthropologists of nationalism, who pin down sites and places which receive a symbolic status from the point of view of nation-building. Among these territorial units, one can find the national capital, a village symbolizing the people’s way of life, a national landscape, an area producing emblematic national agricultural products, archaeological sites proving the ancientness of a nation, national places of cult, and natural phenomena expressing national characteristics.

This conclusion might be contradictory at first sight, but let us see the World Heritage List of Hungarian Sites: it starts with the national capital and a village illustrating the Hungarian people’s way of life (inscribed in 1987), it is extended to the most ancient continuous national Catholic place of cult in the year of the Millennium of the settlement of the Hungarians (inscribed in 1996), then to the Hungarian national landscape (inscribed in 1999), and later, to the landscape of the most emblematic product of the Hungarian soil (inscribed in 2002). Obviously, it is just one possible reading of the events, but the coincidence seems to be too conspicuous to remain unquestioned. The lack of Central European industrial heritage sites on the World Heritage List can also indicate the troubled relationship of these countries to their near past. On the Polish
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Fig. 3. European World Heritage Sites divided into categories. Source: UNESCO World Heritage List. Prepared by Gábor Sonkoly

Fig. 4. World Heritage Sites divided into categories. Source: UNESCO World Heritage List. Prepared by Gábor Sonkoly
Tentative List, however, we can find “Gdansk, the city of freedom,” and on the Czech one, the “industrial heritage of Ostrava.” On the Hungarian Tentative List, in contrast, the “youngest” site is the architectural heritage of Ödön Lechner (1845-1914), who was an outstanding architect and contributor to the thriving of national architecture in the last decades of the Hungarian Empire. I believe that these examples related to the World Heritage Sites show quite clearly the importance of the analysis of the social context of any cultural heritage construction/protection.