

Nagy: Kelet-nyugati kapcsolatok emlékezetkultúrájáról [Culture of Memory in the Context of East-West Relations]

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## DISCOURSE ON THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE REGARDING EAST-WEST RELATIONS (1975–2025)

## DISZKURZUS A KELET-NYUGATI KAPCSOLATOK EMLÉKEZETKULTÚRÁJÁRÓL (1975–2025)

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**Abstract.** The study examines the commemorative political discourse of the East-West confrontation regarding the history of the period between 1975 and 2025, with special emphasis on narratives applicable to secondary education. The author draws a sharp distinction between the logic of "peaceful coexistence" (the partition of the world and acceptance of the status quo) and the "Helsinki process" (the assertion of universal norms and human rights even beyond the Iron Curtain). The analysis highlights that while arms control negotiations did not interfere with the internal affairs of dictatorships, the three baskets of the Helsinki Final Act disrupted the closed structures of socialist systems. From a 2026 perspective, the text evaluates the fortieth anniversary of Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power, highlighting the "zapadnik" (Westernizer) tradition. All this is linked to the current conflict in Ukraine: for the West, the stakes remain twofold: the protection of democratic norms and preventing Russia from permanently becoming an Asian power. The West can facilitate both by supporting the "zapadnik" tradition and the resisting Ukraine.

**Keywords:** Peaceful coexistence, Human rights, Zapadnik tradition, Cold War, Helsinki Final Act, Geopolitical turn, Politics of memory

The author of the present study is not a historian of international relations, nor does this writing aim to uncover new facts regarding the period. Its objective is to construct an emphatically brief narrative—usable for example authors of secondary school textbooks, or any non specialist intellectual focusing the social knowledge about contemporary history – within the framework of the culture of remembrance.

A major problem of the current commemorative-cultural situation is that while the East-West struggle once again became a central element of modern history during the 2010s and especially the 2020s, the post-Cold War history of the East-West confrontation is not represented with appropriate emphasis in historical consciousness.

Beyond this immediate relevance, the study also relies on discourses from around the year 2000, conducted partly in my capacity as vice president of the Teachers' Division of the Historical Society – where we may also commemorate the president of the division, Ottó Szabolcs—and partly within the international project of NATO headquarters examining the possibilities of teaching about international security. (Nagy, 2014, 2007, 2003, 2002, 1999, 1999a)

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## Two directions in the history

The most significant misconception is that the concepts of “peaceful coexistence” and the “Helsinki Accords” – when one considers the period between 1962 and 1990 – are categorized together in the minds of many. In reality, they represent two entirely distinct directions. One is the direction of the partition of the world, while the other is the assertion of values (or at least the aiming toward the assertion of values) even within that portion of the world which, at that moment, does not yet stand under our control.

Both systems of thought trace back many centuries, at least to the era when – in a West not yet organized into a unified Panhellenic state – public life from the Greek colonies of the Iberian Peninsula to Asia Minor, or indeed to the northern shores of the Black Sea, was resonant with a single true, great debate. In some places, this debate took the form of a struggle for the throne; in others, political assassinations and forced emigration; and in others still, the struggle of political parties. The dilemma was whether the confrontation with the East (then called the Persian Empire) could be postponed indefinitely, or whether “coexistence” must be conducted in such a way that the Westerners and states (such as Miletus) in the buffer zones – or at least the people belonging there – must be protected, while remaining prepared for the arrival of the great clash. A clash that „we” would win because – this is already the story of Alexander of Macedon – only the Indian jungle and the Sahara can resist the people of the West, whereas Great Kings and their armies recruited from “slave peoples” cannot. (For those to whom the numerous historical novels or classic history books of the era are not readily available, the dilemma can also be understood through *The Lord of the Rings*, as mass culture production.) (Hanson, 1999)

It is clearly not worth tracing the history of this dilemma throughout the organized state-world of antiquity (the domestic politics of the Hellenistic empires and Rome revolved around alternatives for managing relations with their Asian and African competitors, and presumably much of medieval history can be interpreted thus), but intellectual and party-political debates similar to those of today were certainly occurring by the 19th century. We shall refer to only two: the activity of the *Morning Chronicle* and *The Times*, which mobilized the British intelligentsia (and ultimately led to government decisions). This activity eventually distanced British policy – which had been expressly committed to the “European balance-creating” power bargain of the 1815 Congress of Vienna – from the Holy Alliance, which, in both a socio-political and ideological sense, played Europe into the hands of reaction for half a century.

The other great debate took place between the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, Julius Andrassy, and his conservative opponents. As an alternative to the League of the Three Emperors (which can be interpreted as the successor to the Holy Alliance), Andrassy’s – boldly described as brilliant – realized plan was for the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as parliamentary states, to secure one another against the autocratic Russian Empire. However, he intended that the alliance should not encourage those who wished to see the German Empire as a power expanding

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beyond the Rhine or toward Scandinavia, or the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as a power expanding toward the Balkans, and who, citing these two “grand” imperial goals, would have urgently curtailed the room for maneuver of the free press, local governments, or parliamentary parties. (The “useful invention” of curtailing the rule of law by citing non-existent opponents is a substantially later development, but the “good intentions” were already present then.) (Schroeder, 2004)

In the 20th century, the greatest shame and, simultaneously, the greatest error among the actions of the Free World was the Munich Agreement – there, England and France succeeded in surrendering the Central European democracies they themselves had created into the hands of Hitler, as the price for a European peace promised for “our generation,” which in reality lasted but a single year.

Its alternative—one that actually achieved governance—was Churchill’s great speech, which proclaimed an – ever uncompromising – confrontation with embodied historical Evil even in the event of the potential loss of London or the British Isles. Furthermore, there was the Atlantic Charter, which – finally, finally fulfilling the thousand-year dream of the better half of the world – broke with the practice that another state (provided it “leaves us alone and ensures advantageous trade opportunities”) may do whatever it wishes with its own citizens. (Haslam, 1997)

Should anyone assume that only “liberal” intellectuals – labeled by some as “Jewish hirelings” – held the view that the West’s duty was not merely military victory but liberation, I would direct their attention to the title of the memoirs of Eisenhower, the indisputable supreme commander of the Western forces: *Crusade in Europe*. Should anyone think this was merely a wartime attitude, I would point to the most significant – and certainly morally most potent – sentence of Kennedy’s presidency, delivered in West Berlin in 1963: “Ich bin Berliner,” that is, “I am a Berliner.”

NATO is a stronger alliance than, for instance, the Entente once was, because NATO allies declare that an attack against any single state in the North Atlantic region is treated by all states as if it were an attack against themselves. “Ich bin Berliner” signifies nothing less than that, for the American President, Berlin is not merely a zone like countless others in the 1960s – from which pro-Western forces either withdrew or remained based on the U.S. weighing the level of conflict a non-withdrawal was worth – but rather that an attack on Berlin is equivalent to an attack on America itself.

This distinction cannot be interpreted otherwise than that, according to Kennedy – who was not only the American President but also the son of Roosevelt’s wartime ambassador to London – various countries and territories in Africa and Asia belong to one side or the other only by historical contingency; based on their history, it is not self-evident that they must be democratic states governed by the rule of law. In contrast, Germany, despite having been a recent enemy, is part of the West – excluding the period between 1933 and 1945, which was explained at the time as a “collective mental derangement” – and Berlin is one of the capitals of the West. Therefore, it is fundamental to defend the principle that fundamental civil liberties and democracy must prevail in Berlin. (Similarly, there was no doubt that the neutralization of Austria could only be neutrality in a military sense: in 1955, the West could not concede the

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requirement that Austria, and specifically Vienna, remain part of the West in a socio-political sense.) (Sarotte, 2014)

### **„Peaceful Coexistence” contra „Helsinki process”**

These two distinct lines persisted within the duality of “disarmament negotiations” and “peaceful coexistence,” as contrasted with the Helsinki-policy.

Disarmament negotiations implied a reduction in the risk of the Soviet Union and the United States launching a nuclear strike against one another. During these negotiations, the U.S. did not demand civil liberties for the Soviet population. This was, in general, the established practice of the era. During the Vietnamese peace talks, the United States did not protect the rights of the South Vietnamese people. Furthermore, disarmament negotiations were not terminated even when the Soviet Union used armed force to suppress the rights of the Czechoslovak people in 1968. The United States' rapprochement regarding trade policy toward Hungary – offered to the country as a “reward” for the Kádárist consolidation – stalled momentarily due to Hungary's participation in the occupation of Czechoslovakia, but had already resumed by 1970.

In plain terms, disarmament negotiations and peaceful coexistence represent the partition of the world, wherein governments remain free to do whatever they wish domestically with their own populations. One might “rejoice” that we did not perish in a nuclear holocaust – yet even North Korea, which refuses to engage in disarmament negotiations, has not yet dropped an atomic bomb on South Korea. One might “rejoice” that even more money was not squandered on atomic bombs – but the Soviet or Hungarian party and state leadership proved remarkably resourceful in dissipating national income even without such expenditures. Conversely, where military competition was not restricted – such as in aviation and satellite reconnaissance – the most high-quality industrial and technological complexes in Eastern Europe were established. (Snyder, 2013)

Helsinki, by contrast, is an international agreement that penetrates the social systems of socialist dictatorships and disrupts them from within.

Helsinki consisted of three packages.

The first package was, in a way, a continuation of earlier security policy principles, yet the principle of the inviolability of borders pointed far beyond previous arms control and disarmament negotiations. The 1972 Basic Treaty between East Germany and the West Germany recognized the independent legal statuses of the German Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic of Germany, and West Berlin, but this formally left open the possibility that the Western allies might leave Berlin upon the expiration of the fifty-year period calculated from the end of the Second World War; in such an event, the government of a microstate could “freely” deliberate whether to preserve its independence against the German Democratic Republic.

In contrast, the Helsinki Final Act was signed by the GDR and the FRG as separate states, but it was not signed by West Berlin. However, in 1976, in Budapest – a venue

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obviously acceptable to both Germanies—the so-called ratification document was signed. On behalf of the Federal Republic, the ratification document was signed—in which the West German government undertook the implementation of the Helsinki Final Act „für das gesamte Hoheitsgebiet der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, einschließlich Berlin (West)“, that is, regarding West Berlin as well.

In plain terms, the inviolability of the territory of West Berlin—and thereby ultimately the fundamental liberties of millions of West Berliners, including, for example, the right to criticize the system of the GDR, the right to carry out "propaganda" deemed undesirable by GDR authorities, and the right to provide refuge to those fleeing the GDR or the Eastern Bloc on the territory of West Berlin—was from that point onward guaranteed by the sovereignty of the FRG in a manner similar to other West German cities, and the sovereignty of the FRG was ultimately guaranteed by NATO.

The Helsinki Accords thus protected the liberties of people living in the only European territory entirely surrounded by a socialist country—the GDR, which possessed significant armed forces even independent of the Soviet Union—a territory that could ultimately only be supplied by air during the Berlin Blockade (1948-1949) because American, British, and French aircraft did not have to request permission to fly over the territory of a Germany that had previously surrendered unconditionally. A similar crisis—at a hypothetical future point when there is no longer an American-British-French occupation in West Berlin—would have made the microstate dependent on the whims of the GDR.

Historical experiences demonstrated that peace treaties following various African wars were unable to guarantee the fundamental rights of those persons accused of cooperation with Belgians, French, British, or Portuguese under new governments that could not be called democratic even with the best of intentions, or by individuals exercising local power within "Marxist" or "nationalist" paramilitary organizations. (Sarotte, 2010)

The second Helsinki package concerned commercial relations. Commercial relations had existed between East and West European countries previously, too. However, the export of Soviet oil to Germany, for instance, naturally exerted no democratizing effect on Soviet society; on the contrary, it reinforced the power of local politicians and industrial leaders selected on a party-political basis within Soviet society.

In contrast, as part of this package, Helsinki "prescribed" scientific and technological cooperation (more precisely, its state encouragement), based on which the flow of actual people inevitably commenced: Eastern European technical intellectuals, foreign traders, and scientists arrived in Western Europe in increasing numbers, establishing human connections and becoming acquainted with norms, making it increasingly difficult to deny Western intellectuals travel to Eastern Europe. The thousands of entrants now made it impossible for authorities to monitor everyone; it became impossible to prevent the emergence of collegial or even casual residential connections. The increasing number of entrants made it impossible to prevent the

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entry of books and newspapers – "nominally for the personal use of Westerners" – or an increasing number of pieces of Western material culture. The number of romances and marriages weaving between persons "belonging" to NATO and the Warsaw Pact increased, providing hundreds of thousands of people across entire circles of acquaintances with Western connections that did not serve the "interests of the growth of the Soviet economy."

There was an already-hackneyed joke at the time, according to which Stalin committed two great mistakes from his own perspective: he showed his soldiers to Europe, and he showed Europe to his soldiers. If this was a mistake: Brezhnev and the Eastern European leaders fell into it once again as a consequence of Helsinki: the "West" appeared to Eastern European people increasingly through personal information and less through carefully controlled media.

The entry of Western press products and books into Eastern Europe – primarily, of course, in the capitals and among intellectuals – increased the number of people who gained access to Western publications. The system could respond with nothing other than improving the quality of the media it controlled: objectivity increasingly became a norm for journalists, at least in Hungary and Poland. In the press, which previously at most adopted articles from Western communist papers, more and more analyses – either adopted or extensively summarized – originating from Western newspapers appeared. Although these analyses in the rarest of cases concerned Soviet foreign policy and almost never the internal conditions of the USSR or other Eastern European countries, it certainly must have struck those consuming Western papers through the review articles of Hungarian or Polish papers that European newspapers were not stingy with criticism of either the USA or their own governments. One could see in the original what it meant to have an "independent press" – and one could feel aggrieved that „we had no such thing”. More and more political and ideological interviews appeared on Eastern European television programs, where West European social democratic, liberal, and conservative politicians spoke with their own mouths – and were not written about by party-state journalists. It was an entirely extraordinary phenomenon in the late 1970s that a well-known editor of Hungarian Television, János Hajdu, led a regular roundtable consisting of Western journalists in prime time, who did not hide their opinions regarding, for instance, the 1979 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

In response to the spread of Western media in Hungary, the Hungarian News Agency (MTI) was tasked with providing staff members of the party, state administration, and the press with a closed-circulation publication. The "Articles from the International Press" published an enormous number of Western articles 104 times a year (!); among these were even reports on the internal political conditions of the Soviet Union, and there were also specialized publications titled "Articles from the International Economic Press" or "Articles from the International Cultural Press." The system was now informing its own cadres en masse about Westernized positions, distributing views opposing itself. (A personal comment: in 1981, at the Faculty of Humanities of ELTE-University of Budapest – for example, under department head

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József Vilmos—among students and instructors, only those did not read these principally „closed, confident” publications who did not wish to).

An unprecedented quantity of Western social science textbooks and literary works appeared in book publishing. The supply of the Hungarian book market with translated works—American or other Western works—far exceeded the supply of Western countries comparable to us (e.g., Portugal or Flemish Belgium). (Mark, 2005)

The third Helsinki package covered the issue of "Humanitarian and other cooperation (human rights)."

- Family reunifications, expansion of travel opportunities—these opportunities expanded slowly in most Eastern European countries, but explosively in Hungary. Mass Western tourism had already begun from the 1970s through travel agencies, and from the 1980s, with individual passports as well.
- Freedom of the press, cultural and academic exchange programs—without cultural and academic exchange programs, the establishment of the MTA-Soros Foundation would likely have been impossible, the first such institution in Hungary that openly declared the creation of an Open Society as its goal—naming the society of the party-state as a closed society.
- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms— with this, the issue entered the center of international politics in Europe for the first time. Among the fundamental human rights and fundamental freedoms was indisputably the freedom of conscience, following which the activity of small churches multiplied, and circles and groups were established within the major churches that the police—naturally with the support of the episcopates—had previously obstructed. This included the freedom of association—associations were established in large numbers, nominally without political definitions of goals, but every social, economic, and cultural issue carried within it sectoral-policy debates, and sectoral-policy debates made it clear in the eyes of more and more people that without a multi-party political structure, positions cannot be organized into competing alternatives. Based on the freedom of assembly, it became impossible to prevent—at least in private apartments—circles of acquaintances from meeting, debating politics, or establishing „free universities” (flat seminars).
- The debates—conducted partly by those who wanted capitalism and a multi-party civil democracy and a Hungary breaking away from the Soviet Union—were inseparably linked with the debates of those who wanted to reform socialism, wanted inner-party democracy, and hoped very much that reform forces would triumph in the Soviet Union as well. These forces, and the countless transitions between them, together created the condition for Hungarian society to become receptive to the Great Power bargain which, starting from Reykjavik, lifted Hungary out of the Soviet bloc and transformed it into a capitalist multi-party democracy.

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All those who opposed this were repeatedly confronted by international civil organizations citing the Helsinki Final Act, which were capable of influencing their own governments and their own bourgeoisie making economic and investment decisions. (Mark, 2005)

Disarmament and international trade on one hand, and Helsinki on the other. The discourse is more relevant than ever.

The territorial partition of the world and, on this basis, arms control and non-interference in internal affairs are, above all, what the Putins of the world want. The forces of the world committed to democracy and the rule of law expect the states of the former Soviet region to move ever closer to the world of norms of the West. There are reserves for this everywhere in the former Soviet bloc. The most important reserve is called *zapadnik*, that is, the Westernizer tradition. Its main representative today is Ukrainian President Zelensky.

If we desire a world where the West – in possession of its enormous preponderance of power – protects the forces committed to democracy and the rule of law in non-Western territories, then we must urge for “Helsinki.” If we desire one where Putin, Xi Jinping, and the Hungarian Prime Minister reigning from 2010 to 2026, Viktor Orbán, do whatever they wish, then we must urge for “Peaceful Coexistence.”

### The Memory of Gorbachev from 2026

Although<sup>1ii</sup> anniversaries almost invariably stimulate interest in certain topics, by April 2026, we can observe that there has been relatively little discussion regarding the fact that in the past year it was forty years ago, in the spring of 1985, that Gorbachev was elected to lead the USSR. Perhaps we do not speak more of this event now because those of us who lived through it attached immense hopes to Gorbachev’s elevation to the position of General Secretary – and this hope seemed to be vindicated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union... yet, in comparison, Russia today is a more aggressive power than the Soviet Union ever was.

The discourse on the politics of memory would, however, be highly significant: there are many who, having been born after 1975, no longer remember it as contemporaries; those born after 1985 have not yet studied it in history due to excessive “historical proximity”; and those born after 1995 have become the “influencees” of right-wing parties’ controlled textbooks and media in Hungary.

Reflecting, then, on our perceptions in 1985: Gorbachev was relatively young. With his birth in 1931, a generation stepped onto the stage that had experienced Stalinism in its youth, yet its adult political socialization was no longer defined by dread of the “unquestionable leader” and his unscrupulous associates. Instead, it was defined by the naturalness of the fact that the leadership was characterized partly by struggling currents and partly by the demands for space from disadvantaged regions (from which he also originated). The vitality of these factional struggles lasted for a good decade – from Stalin's death to the failure of the Kosygin reform (the model for the later 1968

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Hungarian economic reform)—after which the Brezhnevite stagnation set in (associated with re-Stalinization symbols and an unusually high average age for the leading elite). Nevertheless, the push from the periphery toward the center – the path taken by Gorbachev and his later Foreign Minister, Shevardnadze – continued even then. (Kotkin, 2000)

A generation emerged which, while having experienced the World War in its youth, did not find its primary spontaneous point of reference in the world-shaking victory of the Red Army in 1945 – which had substantially extended the borders of the Soviet Union in both Europe and Asia, and even more so extended, by many millions of square kilometers, the region where pro-Soviet political forces could come to power. Rather, their reference point was that the gigantic Soviet army – in the decades following 1945 – was essentially maintained *for nothing*. The U.S. army behaved as a "real" army with varying frequency on three continents in the interest of pro-American regimes (generally somewhat more democratic than their opponents, though unfortunately not always). Moreover, the British, French, Belgian, Portuguese, and Chinese armies were also engaged in warfare, while the Soviet army faced "non-regular" resistors in Berlin in 1953 and Budapest in 1956; during the 1968 Czech occupation, there was no actual fighting. While Soviet military advisors operated in many parts of the Third World, engagements involving complete Soviet divisions and later corps occurred for the first time only in 1979: in Afghanistan. By the time Gorbachev ascended from his role as Central Committee Secretary for Agriculture to a position of military and foreign policy decision-making, he already had to face a lost war. Furthermore, it is a two-century-old tradition that Russia is a "giant with clay feet" such that military defeat leads to systemic collapse; this occurred in relation to the Crimean War, the Japanese War, and the First World War as well. (Westad, 2000)

Gorbachev's "background" lay in the sphere of agricultural policy: he was the first politician about whom it could be believed that – alongside the assertion of the interests of the power-exercising apparatus – it was not the interest groups of industrial giants and planning offices, but rather the "scandalous nature" of the daily supply of the population that represented the challenge for him.

Gorbachev was the first to be supported politically by the patently most intellectual giant of the Politburo, KGB chief Andropov, yet whose name was nonetheless not associated, either at home or abroad, with the post-Stalinist Soviet secret service – one that did not shrink from political assassinations, torture, or confinement in mental institutions.

Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader to communicate and appear in a "Westernized" manner; anyone watching the television news anywhere in the world a few months earlier – before his General Secretaryship – took notice of the spontaneous interview at a London airport in an unbuttoned coat, and the attractive wife soon presented to the world.

Gorbachev began by openly criticizing government members by name in a Soviet Union of impersonal, "Dodonaic" communication, and subsequently replaced seventy percent of them.

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In short: Gorbachev represented the "better face" of Russia, the Westernizer (*zapadnik*) tradition, the "Westernism" known since the 18th century. One could begin to trust that Russia – over the course of decades – would arrive among the European nations. (Taubman, 2022)

What makes this forty-year-old story relevant now in the spring of 2026, however, is the turn in foreign policy, which was already perceptible during the aforementioned London visit – where he went formally as the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Soviet parliament, yet was nonetheless received by the British Prime Minister. By September, a leading Soviet foreign policy journalist predicted the Soviet-American summit as a corollary event to the UN General Assembly; although it only took place in Geneva in November, the American President received the Soviet Foreign Minister as early as September. There had been no such high-level Soviet-American negotiations since the Soviet aggression against Afghanistan.

Soviet-American relations had been based on the balance of power and "mutual deterrence" since the sixties. The Soviet Union – despite its GDP being much lower than that of the USA and relatively declining compared to the world or the West – maintained a nuclear force that balanced not only the closely cooperating U.S. and British nuclear forces but potentially the French nuclear force as well. The West's antidote to Soviet thermonuclear weapons for decades was the maintenance of a nuclear capacity capable of destroying a similar number of Soviet major cities. In a conventional war, Soviet armored units would have reached the Atlantic Ocean; the substantive antidote to this – as could be read in military textbooks (purchasable in Budapest second-hand bookstores, without confidentiality) – was that in the event of such an attack, NATO strategists designated a line between the Elbe and the Rhine which, if crossed by the Soviet army, would trigger the West's use of nuclear weapons. The escalation of this, in densely populated Western Europe and on the Eastern and Western coasts of the USA, could have resulted in as many as "one hundred million victims." (Sarotte, 2010)

In the 1980s, however, a technological shift occurred: high-performance interceptor missile systems were developed – a development that was tested under live-fire conditions in the 2025 Iran-Israel war, where the launched Iranian missiles practically failed to penetrate. Hopefully, the "drone wall," currently under construction in the 2020s, will serve a similar purpose at the eastern border of NATO.

Utilizing the rather unfortunate expression "Star Wars", satellite-based laser technology made it a realistic possibility to destroy Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles before they could re-enter the atmosphere over the USA. Following 1978, the neutron bomb program was restarted, which would have enabled the halting of Soviet tank columns without the general radioactive contamination of Western Europe.

In other words: Western technological and GDP superiority now allowed for the stopping of an aggressor without risking the destruction of one hundred million people, or indeed, the entirety of human civilization. Although many characterized it as an illusion, 45% of the American population began to trust that the American satellite laser protective umbrella would function.

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Western security-policy thinking sought to assert this superiority and this new reality, a point upon which Brezhnev and his team became rigid. They believed that the legendary Soviet aviation—the Soviet space-race advantage described by the proper names Sputnik–Gagarin–Salyut—and their intercontinental missiles, supplemented by tank superiority, would counterbalance the Western superiority of which they themselves were aware. Gorbachev, in contrast, recognized that the Soviet Union had lost the arms race; the USSR could no longer be defended on a basis of parity, but rather by yielding to Western demands. This began in military terms with a unilateral moratorium on intermediate-range missiles—this was logically followed by a relaxation of human rights, the relinquishing of Afghanistan, the liquidation of Third World terrorist connections, then the relinquishing of Eastern Europe, and finally—though no longer planned by Gorbachev—the "release" of the Soviet Union itself and the banning of the Soviet Communist Party.

The concern among contemporary participant observers—I am a personal witness to such anxieties among Hungarian, Polish, American, and French intellectuals—was that the *zapadnik* (Western) Gorbachev would be replaced by a figure standing on the ground of Russian superpower status who would attempt to undo these developments. Russian GDP did not need to be improved for this purpose, as such a vast portion of it was concentrated in oil and gas exports that the country was capable of disproportionately large military efforts; furthermore, the Russian population tolerated being kept at a low standard of living more readily than the European population tolerated even a one-percent reduction of its much higher standard of living for the sake of increasing the security budget. (Kotkin, 2000; Sarotte, 2010)

### Post 2014 situation

This turn occurred with Putin; it became clear by 2014 at the latest, but the West did not react appropriately. Now, in the mid-2020s, however, we have reached the point where the aggressor could be stopped; a West-East war (if necessary) could be fought on the East European Plain. The Russian-American balance of power has shifted even further in favor of the latter, yet Trump is abandoning what his predominantly Republican predecessors achieved: that the containment of the Eastern power must be resolved on the grounds of reality—by forcing peace if possible, or by defeating the opponent in war if necessary.

It is a fundamental difference that a Gorbachev-era coup in the 1980s would have faced a much weaker Europe (lower GDP, fewer member states, with Sweden and Finland considered neutral), while counting Ukraine—which represents a full third of the Russian Empire's historical strength—among its own resources. Furthermore, several strong Central European states—the GDR, Poland, and despite all its "separate path," Romania—would also have strengthened them. (Romania and Poland represent significant force in a conventional war; if, according to Litvinov's concept, the Poles and Soviets had stood together against Germany in 1939, the war would have ended sooner with a German defeat. The switching of sides by the 430,000-strong Romanian

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army in 1944 substantially increased the superiority of the 1.3 million-strong Soviet army over the half-million-strong German army, which greatly accelerated the advance through Moldavia, Wallachia, and the Banat into Hungary; moreover, Romanian troops played a significant role in repelling the final German counter-offensive launched in the Lake Balaton region.)

Thus, the game is not over even in the case of Trump's betrayal and/or strategic error; Europe and Great Britain are capable of stopping the aggressor. Excluding nuclear capacity, the armed forces of European NATO states manifoldly surpass those of Russia (Plokhly 2024). The long-term stake is not only whether Ukraine remains free and whether Eastern Europe comes under direct Russian threat, but also whether we let go of the chance for a "Zapadnik" (Westernizer) regime change to occur "as scheduled" in the event of a Russian defeat.

There is, then, another connection we do not talk about. Ukraine is historically a very young nation-state. 19th-century European thought, for example, viewed Poland as a territory occupied by the Russians, which had only recently come under Russian sovereignty. Accordingly – as the broader Hungarian intelligentsia knows, if from nothing else, then from Spiró's roman *The X-es* – Russian Poland possessed some autonomy. Similarly, the acquisition of Central Asia – which partly meant the conquest of independent states and partly replaced the Ottoman Empire – was clearly defined by the European press (the contemporary British and Hungarian papers are worth browsing) as the expansion of the Russian Empire.

It was the Tsarist Empire's actions against Central Asian, Baltic, Finnish, and Polish populations that caused people to speak of Tsarist Russia as the "Prison of Nations." These peoples were in prison – according to contemporary European thought, their desirable future (even without concrete plans) was liberation, just like that of the Greeks or the Balkan peoples from under the Turkish Empire. Not many considered that Ukraine's "natural state" should also be independence from Russia. In the *Pesti Napló* during the second half of the 19th century, the word "Russian" occurs 921 times more frequently than the word "Ukrainian"; for the much smaller Lithuanian population, this disadvantage is only 144-fold. The concept of "Russia" exceeds "Ukraine" 217-fold, while it exceeds "Lithuania" 260-fold, which – though in this case Ukraine's visibility is slightly greater – still indicates the weakness of perceptions regarding Ukraine compared to the proportions of the two areas that did not exist as independent states.

During the First World War, Russia surpassed Ukraine 52-fold, and Lithuania only 38-fold; the "Russian" concept surpassed the "Ukrainian" 114-fold and the "Lithuanian" 124-fold. The early medieval state centered in Kyiv was called Kyivan Rus, and the Hungarian minority in Máramaros County was called Ruthenians – or more clearly: Hungarian-Russians (magyar-oroszok).

And although various Ukrainian independence efforts existed during the struggle between the Whites and Reds in the 20th century, and during the Soviet-German war, Soviet internal politics could view the Ukrainian elite and the Cossacks as enemies; however, the thought of any security risk did not even arise when Khrushchev

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annexed Crimea—the only warm-water Russian port—to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. (That post-Soviet military strategists considered Crimea, which had returned to Ukraine, realistically recoverable sooner or later, can be suspected from the fact that in the quarter-century before 2014, no efforts were made to expand the naval ports on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, which unquestionably belonged to Russia.)

The residents of Ukraine, who became independent in the momentum of the Soviet Union's collapse, fluctuated between Eastern and Western orientation between 1990 and 2014 according to polling data and election results; Westernism triumphed in Ukrainian public opinion due to the impact of the Russian attack. The separation of the Ukrainian church from the Russian patriarch symbolically completed this process.

Now, this story can also be interpreted as the "Westernist" (*Zapadnik*) and "Easternist" forces of the Russian-Ukrainian world previously clashing within a "unified Russia," without geographical constraints, in the society of large cities—though Odessa was obviously a *Zapadnyik* city even then. With the separation of Russia and Ukraine, the old *Zapadnyik*–*Narodnik* opposition received a clear territorial meaning. (As a continuation of this meaning, Putin began a clear Eastern, i.e., Asian orientation, and within this, he announced a program stating that the still predominantly European Russian population must slowly populate the millions of square kilometers of habitable—i.e., southern—Siberia.)

Thus, for us, for the West, the stake has become twofold: the former—minority—"Westernist orientation" has physically moved further west. Therefore, we must defend Ukraine not only because we theoretically love independent states and dislike it when they are attacked, but also because our allies have been "squeezed" there in the Russian-Ukrainian historical complex. Secondly, because the defeat of "Easternist" Russia—the fall of the Putin system—can prevent Russia from becoming Asia's "forward outpost" against Europe.

Those who thought that after the fall of the Soviet Union, China or Islamism would be the global challenge the West must face, can also see the solution in a Western victory on the Ukrainian-Russian front. Returning to the starting point: Gorbachev and Zelenskyy wanted and want to lead Eastern Europe to the West. Putin and Yanukovych, on the other hand, definitively to Asia. (Plokhyy, 2015; Kotkin, 2000)

It is quite difficult to imagine a stake more global than this.

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**Absztrak.** A tanulmány a Kelet-Nyugat közötti szembenállás emlékezetpolitikai diskurzusát vizsgálja az 1975 és 2025 közötti időszak történetére nézvést, különös tekintettel a középiskolai oktatásban, történelmi tudat formálásban használható narratívákra. A szerző éles különbséget tesz a „békés egymás mellett élés” (a világ felosztása és a status quo elfogadása) és a „helsinki folyamat” (Az univerzális normák és az emberi jogok érvényesítése a vasfüggönyön túl is) logikája között. Az elemzés rávilágít, hogy míg a fegyverzetkorlátozási tárgyalások nem avatkoztak be a diktatúrák belső viszonyaiba, a helsinki záróokmány három kosara szétzilálta a szocialista rendszerek zárt struktúráit. A szöveg 2026-os perspektívából értékeli Mihail Gorbacsov fellépésének negyvenedik évfordulóját, kiemelve benne a „zapadnyik” (nyugatos) tradíciót. Mindez összefügg a jelenlegi ukrajnai konfliktussal: a Nyugat számára a tét ma is kettős: a demokratikus normák védelme és Oroszország véglegesen ázsiai hatalommá válásának megakadályozása. Mindkettőt a "zapadnyik" hagyomány, az ellenálló Ukrajna támogatása révén segítheti elő a Nyugat.

#### APPENDIX

<sup>i</sup> At this point, the study relies on Péter Tibor Nagy, *Helsinki ötven* (Helsinki Fifty), *ÉLET ÉS IRODALOM* 69:34 Paper: 2025-08-22 (2025) <https://www.es.hu/cikk/2025-08-22/nagy-peter-tibor/helsinki-otven.html>, as well as my lecture titled *The Essential Difference of "Helsinki Process" and "Peaceful Coexistence"*, delivered on August 1, 2025, at a private apartment seminar for foreign students.

<sup>ii</sup> At this point, the study relies on Péter Tibor Nagy: *Gorbacsov negyven* (Gorbachev Forty), *NÉPSZAVA ONLINE* 2025.09.29. Paper: 3299441 (2025) [https://nepszava.hu/3299441\\_gorbacsov-negyven](https://nepszava.hu/3299441_gorbacsov-negyven); and Péter Tibor Nagy: *Szlávok orbáni háborúja* (War of the Slavs in the mind of Orban), *NÉPSZAVA ONLINE* 2025 Paper: 3306467 (2025). [https://nepszava.hu/3306467\\_szlavok-orbani-haboruja](https://nepszava.hu/3306467_szlavok-orbani-haboruja)