

Összeomlás és útkeresés 1917–1920. A magyar külpolitikai gondolkodás útjai [Collapse and Quests for Direction, 1917–1920: The Paths of Hungarian Foreign Policy Thinking].

By Gergely Romsics.

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The book systematically and comprehensively analyses the evolution of Hungarian thinking about foreign policy in four political systems (late Dualism, Octoberist governments, the Council Republic, and the Counter-Revolution) between 1917 and 1920. The period of just over three years, especially the year and a half preceding the peace treaty, represents a sort of ‘transformation history,’ an important episode in Hungary’s twentieth-century history, primarily from the perspective of the Treaty of Trianon. This is one of the main reasons for the nearly overwhelming abundance of relevant contemporary sources and the related literature, and also for the decades-long sustained professional and lay interest in trying to understand what happened between 1918 and 1920. By offering a foreign policy-focused perspective alongside the prevailing domestic political narratives and by highlighting—in an unexampled manner—foreign policy thought from under the shadows of intellectual, ideological, and political history, the book will significantly promote our understanding especially of how contemporaries viewed these processes.

Gergely Romsics had been engaged with the topic, both in a broader and narrower sense, for at least a decade before this publication, as evidenced by his numerous studies and books.¹ However, his interest in international political thought was

1 *The Memory of the Habsburg Empire in German, Austrian, and Hungarian Right-wing Historiography and Political Thinking, 1918–1941*. Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2010; *Nép, nemzet, birodalom: a Habsburg Birodalom emlékezete a német, osztrák és magyar történetpolitikai gondolkodásban, 1918–1941* [People, Nation, Empire: Memory of the

also fuelled by his experience in cultural diplomacy. For a decade (2007–2017), he worked as a research associate, and from 2010 as a senior research associate, at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, later the Institute of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Subsequently, he joined the Institute of History at the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. There, he was involved in the work of the Trianon 100 Momentum Research Group, where modern Hungarian foreign policy thought was his main research area for five years. The result is a monumental, yet digestible synthesis built on new sources, showcasing Romsics's own relevant theoretical and/or methodological innovations, as well as a vast amount of relevant literature produced by the historical profession over the past sixty years.

The main novelty of the book—fulfilling its objective—is that it provides insight into the mindsets that make the contemporary witnesses' (including politicians, economic decision-makers, and members of the intellectual elite) understanding of the autumn 1918 collapse and the ways to recovery comprehensible. The success of Romsics's endeavour is ensured by his consistent effort to understand the reasons behind the actions of the individuals studied from the perspective of the actors of the time (identifying with them). This approach allows him to avoid the so-called 'fundamental attribution error', which, according to social psychologists, stems from the differing perspectives of an external observer and the subject in judging the motives of actions.² Former historians often incorrectly explained actions with the actors' subjective reasons, personality traits and capabilities, while the subjects themselves attribute their actions to external causes: opportunities and constraints presented by the environment, in this case, primarily foreign policy constraints.

For this approach, the author uses a large quantity of contemporary sources from various locations, including the Hungarian National Archives, the Manuscript Collection of the National Széchényi Library, the Library and Manuscript Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Archives of the Hungarian Reformed Church Synod, the Military History Archives, and the Parliamentary Library. Since

Habsburg Empire in German, Austrian, and Hungarian Political Thought about History]. Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2010; *A lehetetlen művészete: diplomácia, erőegyensúly és vetélkedés a klasszikus realizmus elméletében* [The Art of the Impossible: Diplomacy, Balance of Powers, and Competition in the Classical Theory of Realism]. Budapest: Osiris, 2009; *Myth and Remembrance: The Dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in the Memoir Literature of the Austro-Hungarian Political Elite*. Wayne, NJ: East European Monographs, 2006; *Mítosz és emlékezet: A Habsburg Birodalom felbomlása az osztrák és a magyar politikai elit emlékirat-irodalmában* [Myth and Memory: The Dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in the Memoir Literature of the Austrian and Hungarian Political Elite]. Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2004.

2 Hunyady, György. "Történelem és pszichológia: folytatódó diskurzus" [History and Psychology: Continuing Discussions]. In *Szociálpszichológia történelemtanároknak. Tanulmánygyűjtemény*, edited by György Hunyady. Budapest: Ökonet, 2002.

some of the sources are fragmentary or entirely missing from Hungarian institutions, he also relies on primary sources, in several cases gathered abroad, specifically from the Diplomatic Archives in Paris, and the French and Austrian National Libraries, to present the foreign policy intentions and thoughts of Hungarian political actors.

Gergely Romsics's most original thesis arises precisely because he devotes special attention to perspectives contemporary to the time studied. Accordingly, following World War I, the foreign policy thinking of regimes with differing ideologies exhibited constant features and similar reflexes in crisis situations. He shows that the challenges (foreign policy constraints) that each government's representatives had to face stemmed from a relatively unchanged international situation. These were also the so-called common points of foreign policy: a disintegrating multi-national state, a collapsed army, and the hostile small states gathering strength around Hungary, on whose military forces the war-weary great powers consciously relied starting from the autumn of 1918.

Romsics draws the ultimate conclusion that the only way representatives of the various regimes could face the constraints of the international environment was by realistically considering their options; consequently, their foreign policy behaviour was more coherent than previously assumed. This finding also indicates that the author made every effort to keep in mind the social psychological assertion that the likelihood of an event occurring seems much greater in retrospect after the event has happened than it did prior to the event.

According to the author, the realistic consideration of options also meant that representatives of all three political systems successfully identified with their weaknesses and thus—in contrast to the illusions of the Late Dualism era elite—consciously chose the path of adaptation, which most often resulted in cooperation and compromises, and only in exceptional cases did it lead to resistance (in crises or collapses). At this point, through a consistent analysis of perspectives, the author manages to supplement our previous knowledge with new explanations. Among other things, he demonstrates that exchanges during compromises never involve items of equal value. However, the Hungarian governments—as he shows—did not consider this fact (i.e., the costs of accepting offers); they failed to anticipate the perspectives of the winners.

The author's conclusions about the four political systems follow from the results described in over five hundred pages. He demonstrates how informed the contemporary elites were in terms of foreign policy and how they acquired their knowledge. He also depicts the international system of the time as seen by contemporaries. Finally, he examines the extent foreign policy steps were in harmony with theoretical conceptions.

Essentially, Romsics intends to capture the mindset of contemporary decision-makers and reveal their worldviews. To do this, he uses the ideas and key

concepts of British historian Martin Wight, a representative of international political theory, as an interpretative framework. The essence of this framework is that political thinking about foreign policy can be described by three intellectual traditions that exist in parallel: realism, rationalism, and revolutionism. Accordingly, Romsics describes the foreign policy thinking of the four political regimes as a journey segmented by revolutionary phases, ranging from rationalism to realism.

Gergely Romsics's book approaches a complex topic fraught with challenging, unprocessed, and controversial issues in a narrative manner. This fits well with the author's intention to understand the perspective of the contemporary person, ultimately offering an interpretation that could provide the foundations not only for professional discourse but, due to its digestible and invariably calm and balanced style, also for broader society's future discourse.

