

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE LANGUAGE OF HISTORY  
IN POST-SOCIALIST SLOVAKIA.  
ON THE CONCEPT OF HISTORICAL DEMOCRATIC  
IMAGINATION AFTER 1989<sup>1</sup>

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Shortly after the democratic revolution of 1989 it seemed that history ended and the emerging democratic order would focus on future. However, the conceptualization of the language of history and subsequent transformation of it into deliberate policies appeared as crucial within discourses of legitimacy. Besides what could be called “coming to terms with the national past”, other contributions could be seen as easily resolved by condemning nationalism. In this article, I will argue that liberal-democratic milieu, politicians, writers, historians and more broadly intellectuals, were actively contributing to debates on history, historiography and/or philosophy of history instead. In doing so, they constituted a key component of the post-socialist democracy-building. The case of post-socialist Slovakia is instrumental in shedding the light on viability of such imaginary as it had to be in communication with the growing nationalism that eventually lead to Czechoslovakia’s dissolution in 1993. I intend to excavate attempts of the post-dissident intellectuals to give the emerging democracy a meta narrative through actively pursuing and utilizing the language of history. In order to do so, I examine the variety of intellectual accounts through the analytical tool of the “historical democratic imagination”. While it built on the thought originating in the 1960s debates, I put emphasis on its adjustments and meaning-making through the post-socialist situation. Although, the liberal-democratic milieu did not adopt it and eventually gave way to a more politically utilizable condemnation of nationalism, I would argue the “historical democratic imagination” was a key element of “thinking post-socialist democracy” in Slovakia after the 1989 revolution. Key words: Liberal democracy. Philosophy of history. History. Historiography. Nationalism. Post-dissent. Post-socialism. Slovakia.

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Shortly after the democratic revolution of 1989, Pavel Tigríd, Czech writer, dissident, and advisor to the newly elected president Václav Havel, drew attention to the issue of approaching the problem of history in a post-socialist configuration. Referring to Francis Fukuyama's work *The End of History?*<sup>2</sup>, he raised the issue whether history ends with a revolution or begins anew, in front of the audience at the intellectual symposium *Ethics and Politics (Etika a politika)*.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the question of whether history as both an abstract and practical concern could be justified at all, seemed entirely legitimate. Following one of Tigríd's lines of arguments, history was seen as a concept associated with the former Communist dictatorship, while the present and future belonged to the emerging democratic order.<sup>4</sup> Almost as if uttered in a cynical fashion, this logic could be demonstrated by the speech of the poet and writer Ľubomír Feldek, a prominent figure of the Public Against Violence (*Verejnost' proti násiliu*, VPN) revolutionary democratic movement, addressed during the commemoration of the 1848 Hungarian revolution, in Slovakia. According to Feldek's remarks at the VPN's subsequent internal discussion, nothing exceptional happened at the gathering of about five hundred commemorating participants. As for the speech itself, in his own words, it roughly conveyed the following: "*Nationalism sucks, and then something on history.*"<sup>5</sup> The underground musician, poet, writer and dissident philosopher Marcel Strýko, another representative of the cultural community within VPN, expressed similar sentiments. According to him, the "national aspect" was mired in the past, while the civic aspect looked toward the future.<sup>6</sup>

From this brief introduction, we cannot draw many conclusions. However, it illustrates that within VPN, there were legitimate viewpoints that considered evoking questions of the past either counterproductive or secondary. Alternatively, the conceptualization of the language of history and subsequent transformation of it into deliberate policies could be seen as easily resolved by condemning nationalism.

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2 FUKUYAMA. *The End of History?* In *The National Interest*, 1989, No. 16, p. 3-18.

3 *Etika a politika: Umenie proti totalite*. Bratislava 1990, p. 71-72. The symposium, result of which was the aforementioned publication, was co-organized by VPN, the Slovak Ministry of Culture, the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research and the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* in Vienna and held under the auspices of the Czechoslovak President Václav Havel. The event took place in Bratislava in April 1990.

4 *Etika a politika*, p. 71-72.

5 The Slovak National Archive (SNA), fund (f.) VPN II. oddelenie, box (b.) 24, inventory number (inv.) 105, minutes from the Coordination Center, March 15, 1990. Translations of all the quotes are made by the author.

6 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 255, inv. 241. Strýko's elaboration on "open society."

In addition to the conceptualization of the languages of history or memory politics, one cannot overlook the effort towards the so-called coming to terms with the (nation's/communist) past.<sup>7</sup> On an institutional level, this primarily involves the establishment of the Government Commission for the Analysis of Historical Events from 1967 to 1970, which was set up immediately after the revolution in 1990.<sup>8</sup> The Commission was led by a prominent dissident historian Jozef Jablonický, who also became the director of the newly founded Cabinet of Political Science within the Slovak Academy of Sciences. In terms of the institution's and its chair's primary endeavor, they sought to get rid of all the malpractices of the Communist dictatorship in the field of professional historical science. Indeed, this very endeavor bore its moral value.

"Coming to terms with the past" after 1989 was politically utilized by some entities through political anti-communism, with individual regional cases in Central Europe differing in how they used the language of history in the context of current party-political competition. According to Michal Kopeček, the emergence of political anti-communism involved configuring political conflict, which either enabled or hindered the use of de-communization for political purposes.<sup>9</sup> The permeation of the languages of history into the ranks of VPN is primarily related to the predominantly intellectual and even academic structure of the leadership of the movement, as well as the active promotion of the concept of anti-politics.

The post-revolutionary civic-democratic milieu was not politically or ideologically unified. Coming from a shared dissident experience, its *raison d'être* lay more in advocating the idea of liberal patriotism aimed at forming a broader support, first against the Communist dictatorship, and after 1989 against the rising nationalism. In this article, I primarily focus on the analysis of the languages of history, which aimed to approach history from the perspective of philosophy of history, which in the newly established democratic framework

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7 In the text I use this term not as a fixed concept. It mainly points out to a retaliatory approach towards crimes, malpractices, wrongdoings or more general misconduct carried out under the auspices of the broadly defined Communist dictatorship. However, this approach may have reached particular fields, such as historiography, in a varying or different fashion.

8 The result of the actions of the Commission was published as a two-volume publication: Komisia vlády SR pre analýzu historických udalostí z rokov 1967 – 1970. *Slovenská spoločnosť v krízových rokoch 1967 – 1970: Zborník štúdií I. a II.* Bratislava 1992. It is well worth mentioning that the Commission found its predecessor and inspiration on the Czechoslovak federal level.

9 KOPEČEK. Von der Geschichtspolitik zur Erinnerung als politischer Sprache. Der tschechische Umgang mit der kommunistischen Vergangenheit nach 1989. In FRANÇOIS et al., eds. *Geschichtspolitik in Europa seit 1989. Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen im internationalen Vergleich.* Göttingen 2013, pp. 352-395.

could serve a democratizing function. I refer to this conception as “historical democratic imagination,” with the adjective “democratic” referring to a liberal-democratic, consensual or post-dissident understanding of democracy.<sup>10</sup> It is important to reiterate that I will focus on intellectual discourse, mainly for two reasons. First, a detailed analysis of political activities related to institutionalizing history and historical narratives would require a more in-depth examination of political contest and a solid genealogy of power developments both within and outside VPN. Second, and this is more important from the perspective of intellectual-historical research, the emphasis on intellectual discourse allows us to better understand post-socialist continuities, namely how the post-dissident-infused argumentation shaped the nascent democratic order. In terms of the examined period, my attention is drawn to the immediate aftermath of the democratic revolution of 1989 to 1992, i.e. the time before the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

Political configuration, party affiliation, and ideological preference were also important factors in conceptualizing the “usable” language of history. However, its application by individual actors stemmed primarily from intellectual motivations and aspired to transcend party lines, aiming for an academic, non-political or public influence. My intention is to excavate the entanglement of historical and historiographical discussions that were relevant in Slovak public discourse after 1989. These debates cannot be reduced merely to, on one hand, “coming to terms with the nation’s past,” and on the other, the fight against nationalism and chauvinism, let alone a counteraction against the return of the so-called *Ludák* historiography. An elaboration on the case of Slovakia is urgently important as the historical debates collided with the ardent activities to justify the respective, either federalist or independentist positions, where historical topics played instrumental role. The political act of the dissolution of the Czecho-Slovak state and the subsequent era of ethno-nationalist populism obfuscated the delicate nuances articulated by the advocates of building a solid historically grounded democratic order after 1989.

### **Resurfacing of the past**

In the initial weeks or months following the revolution, the VPN weekly magazine *Verejnosť* did not dedicate much space to articles on history. However, potential conflicts stemming from the common Czechoslovak history would resurface, as is evident from one of Václav Havel’s first statements as president, on January

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10 A different reading of collective, ethno-nationalist, yet emancipatory and thus partly democratic reading of history was promoted by the so-called national communists. Further explore in HUDEK. National Communist Roots of the Slovak Post-1989 Illiberalism. In *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 2023, vol. 71, no. 4, p. 553-554.

2, 1990. He emphasized that he was aware of the bitter experiences of Slovaks in the past and that he felt personal responsibility to uphold and respect all the interests of the Slovak nation, particularly by providing equal opportunities in obtaining official positions, including the highest ones.<sup>11</sup>

Gradually, the weekly *Verejnosť* frequented questions of national history and “coming to terms with the past.” In addition to articles by intellectuals, writers, historians, or the editorial team, many letters from readers also addressed historical topics.<sup>12</sup> Far from unexpected, particularly in the early 1990, most articles dealt with “coming to terms with the communist past.” This was motivated both due to the fear of a Communist victory in the upcoming elections and also by *VPN*’s efforts to legitimize its political ambitions in establishing democratic institutions.<sup>13</sup>

Some conclusions from the extraordinary general assembly of the Slovak Historical Society (*Slovenská historická spoločnosť*, SHS) held on January 30, also made their way into the pages of *Verejnosť*.<sup>14</sup> SHS concluded that the main role of historiography, should be to seek scientific truth and provide an unbiased scientific interpretation of history. In other words, historiography was meant to

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11 Prezident Václav Havel. In *Verejnosť*, 2. 1. 1990, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 1. The cautiousness of Václav Havel got challenged during the so-called hyphen war on the legal name of the Czecho-Slovak federal state, when he attempted to conduct a less moderated approach towards the position of the representatives of Slovakia. See, RYCHLÍK. *Rozdělení Československa 1989–1992*. Praha 2022, p. 132-146.

12 For instance, one of the readers’ letters suggested the building of a memorial to the fallen victims of the Černová massacre, pointing out national sentiments. Obec Černová bez pomníka. In *Verejnosť*, 23. 1. 1990, vol. 2, no.7, p. 4-5. Černová massacre is strongly connected with Andrej Hlinka, the mythologized father of Slovak nation. For better understanding of the post-socialist transformation of the Czechoslovak public space, monuments and commemoration, see: HUDEK. Kam zmizli sochy Lenina a Gottwalda? Premena československého verejného priestoru po roku 1989. In *Historický časopis*, 2023, vol. 71, no. 1, p. 115-132. <https://doi.org/10.31577/histcaso.2023.71.1.5>

13 IVANČÍK. State of Grace: A Probe into Understanding Democratic Trust and Legitimacy Through the Eyes of the VPN (The Public Against Violence). In *Forum Historiae*, 2021, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 123-138. <https://doi.org/10.31577/forhist.2021.15.2.9>

14 The activities of SHS shortly after 1989 show tendencies of so-called historical reconciliation, primarily due to the different nature of the Slovak intellectual scene, where there was not enough of a reservoir of “uncompromised” historians who could replace the old structures. For more details on the congress and activities of the SHS after 1989, see: HOLLÝ and HUDEK. K reakciám Slovenskej historickej spoločnosti na politické zmeny v roku 1989 (od vytvorenia Akčného výboru po Mimoriadne valné zhromaždenie 30. 1. 1990). In EDROIU et al., eds. *Rok 1989: Pád komunistických režimov v Rumunsku a na Slovensku. 25. výročie od udalostí. (11. stretnutie zmiešanej Komisie historikov Rumunska a Slovenska)*. Arad 2016, p. 77. For similar reconciliation debates in Slovenia see: KONOVSĚK. Reconciliation: The Institutionalization of Memory in Post-Yugoslav Slovenia. In *Journal of Nationalism, Memory and Language Politics*, 2021, vol. 15, No. 1, p. 87-92. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jnmlp-2021-0006>

serve society, not to cater to those currently in power.<sup>15</sup> In a like manner, Jozef Jablonický declared the intention to distance himself from political leaders in the new democratic constellation.<sup>16</sup> Divesting of the connection to the political seemed to be an obvious choice for professional historiography.

With VPN, however, a clear separation between the political and the historical was not entirely possible. At the beginning of 1990, the movement introduced its program thesis *An Idea of a Country (Predstava o krajine)*, in which its representatives also addressed the issue of national history in a section titled *A Historic Opportunity*:

*“Slovakia’s struggle for historical identity has always been a dual battle for both human and national identity. Human identity in the civic sense – that is, the recognition of the same rights for the neighbor, for the other; and national identity in the sense of the national state, for the recognition of common rights for the entire country. The twentieth century is Slovakia’s struggle for its identity – the transformation of historical necessities into human and historical freedoms. It has always been one at the expense of the other: either Czechoslovak statehood at the expense of national identity, or national identity at the expense of fundamental human and civil rights. Today, for the first time in the history of the Slovak nation, and of the national and ethnic minorities inhabiting this land, we find ourselves in the situation of freedom: as individuals, and as inhabitants of this country.”<sup>17</sup>*

Although direct references to specific historical figures or events are absent and the VPN did not explicitly align with a specific historical reference, it is evident that the authors of the programmatic goals enshrined in the *Predstava o krajine*<sup>18</sup> had a clear idea about the meaning of Slovakia’s 20th-century history and the role of the (Czecho-)Slovak society during this period. VPN’s effort to engage in discussions about the past has intensified, particularly in relation to growing manifestations of nationalism through activities of organizations and associations such as *Matica slovenská* and *Štúrova spoločnosť*, as well as political parties like the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská národná strana*, SNS).<sup>19</sup> The materialization of this effort was evident in connection with the

15 HOLLÝ and HUDEK, K reakciám, p. 87.

16 JABLONICKÝ. *Fragment o histórii*. Bratislava 2009, p. 24-29.

17 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105. *Predstava o krajine* (On programmatic goals of VPN), 30. 1. 1990.

18 The authors collective of the Coordination Center of VPN (*Koordináčné centrum*, KC VPN) consisted of Peter Zajac, Martin Bútorá, Ján Langoš, František Mikloško, Peter Tatár, Jozef Kučerák, Ján Pišút, Lajos Grendel, László Szigeti a László Nagy.

19 For further elaboration on the organizations’ activities and programs, see: HUDEK. Slovenski



so-called hyphen war. Milan Zemko, a historian and a leading figure of VPN, pointed to the importance of this issue due to its historical resonance, which, in his view, could complicate the future capacity to come to consensual solutions to pressing problems.<sup>20</sup> Historical topics, language of history and “coming to terms with the nation’s past” gradually became an important topic for VPN and the post-dissident milieu, and for the community of historians and intellectuals prone to historical topics, in particular. With growing both numbers and diversity of political actors on the political map, the “resurfacing of history” became ever more evident.<sup>21</sup>

The emerging democratic plurality was poignantly described by the dissident writer Juraj Špitzer:

*“Every revolutionary move is like a movement that unites different streams into one current with the goal of breaking through a barrier. After breaking through, the waters spread out, the current quiets, new branches, bays, and eddies emerge. The law of gravity creates a series of new smaller currents, which may never meet again, except perhaps in the sea.”<sup>22</sup>*

It was the emerging framework of pluralism in which the leaders of VPN felt the need to construct a discourse about the past. However, it must be said that this framework also determined the possibilities and limits of what was *salonfähig* in terms of practical political use. I am referring particularly to the stance on the communist past, as many VPN members were former communists. Michal Kopeček speaks of a *grundlegender Missklang* (a fundamental dissonance), a kind of initial fundamental contradiction arising from the reality of the so-called round tables – negotiations with representatives of dictatorial regimes – which became a paradigm for post-socialist societies in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>23</sup> This fundamental contradiction significantly shaped the interventions of the historical community into politics, as well as the interventions of politicians into historical topics. Despite the seemingly negative connotation, I understand this *grundlegender Missklang* as something constitutive for historiography and the

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národní komunisti a dilemy volieb v roku 1990. In GJURIČOVÁ and ZAHRADNÍČEK, eds. *Dlouhý volební rok 1990 ve střední Evropě*. Praha 2022, p. 103-113. Besides, for further politicization of the debates on history was responsible Anton Hrnko and SHS, through the comments on the issue of the official coat of arms of Slovakia. HOLLÝ and HUDEK, K reakciám, p. 84-85.

20 Symboly a názov štátu. In *Verejnost'*, 2. 2. 1990, vol. 2, no. 10, p. 1.

21 ŠŮSTOVÁ-DRELOVÁ. Čo znamená národ pre katolíkov na Slovensku? (Prístupy a metodológia po kultúrnom obrate a postkonfesionálnej kritike). In *Historický časopis*, 2019, vol. 67, no. 3, p. 10-13.

22 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 255, inv. 241, Political Club of the KC VPN, 6. 12. 1990. The VPN Political Club was a counselling organ without decision-making powers.

23 KOPEČEK, Von der Geschichtspolitik, p. 354.

broader societal perception of history. However, it is important to emphasize that the historical democratic imagination was rather “dynamized” by the revolution and subsequent developments, not “created” by them.

The conceptualization of the past and the topics discussed at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s were reflected on multiple levels after 1989. Among these were the re-publication of works that had been produced during the peak of discussions about the meaning of history or works that either could not be published during the so-called normalization period or were withdrawn from circulation. According to historian Ivan Kamenec, the Archa publishing house, established by VPN and led by one of its prominent members, dissident Martin Milan Šimečka, was founded for this purpose.<sup>24</sup>

### **Juraj Špitzer and the insistence on the humanist tradition**

The question of the meaning of history was crucial for writer and dissident Juraj Špitzer.<sup>25</sup> Martin Milan Šimečka recalls in his reflections on the history and present of Slovakia and Slovaks a question retrospectively evaluated as key to the ambitions of VPN to establish democracy in Slovakia, which he calls the so-called Špitzer’s question. This question attempts to find a positive content that would fill the framework or field of the post-1989 emerging democratic order. In other words, according to Špitzer, it was not enough to be a democrat. Democratic order should have had a constitutive meaning, a content that would lead society to a certain understanding of its existence. This understanding should connect it with the nation’s history, should be embedded in it. When asked about the vision for the post-revolutionary order, Šimečka asserted that the natural response was, democratic.<sup>26</sup> For Špitzer, however, this was not enough: “*We must have an idea of Slovakia. Do we even know what it is and what we want it to be?*”<sup>27</sup> Šimečka admits that in the post-revolutionary period, this question was largely overlooked, especially by the political leadership of VPN.

Špitzer’s views must be understood in the context of building democracy and civil society, into which he sought to bring a humanistic perspective. His attempt

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24 CHMEL, ed. *Bolo raz jedno vydavateľstvo ... Štvrtstoročie Kalligramu 1991 – 2016*. Bratislava 2020, p. 195-196.

25 Being a Jew who escaped deportation, joined the Slovak national uprising in 1944 and then contributed to the 1950s Communist dictatorship practices, later emerging as one of the most important figures of the 1960s reformist movement, he became well-versed in rendering Slovak history a valuable aspect of political debates. Moreover, he carried out an interview with the former Slovak war state minister of interior responsible for the deportations of Jews Alexander Mach.

26 ŠIMEČKA. *Medzi Slovákmi*. Bratislava 2017, p. 52.

27 ŠIMEČKA, *Medzi Slovákmi*, p. 52.



at having a usable philosophy of history for the democratic times, I maintain, must be interpreted as a political tool. Špitzer sought to go beyond taking history as merely an intellectual ornament or a moral pathos of an elite discourse. For Špitzer, it was explicitly about practice, directly connected to his belief that VPN needed to become political, even partisan.<sup>28</sup> In other words, it was not just a politically usable framework for “coming to terms with the past” that could be legislatively instrumentalized and anchored as the founding ethos of a newly emerging democratic society:

*“I am afraid to voice the opinion that VPN is caught in sociologism just as OF (Civic Forum, Občanské fórum) is caught in economism. These modern-day deities are pushing aside the humanist character of the movement. The area of ‘spiritual life’ is being neglected. [...] The sphere of the so-called spiritual and national life is being left ‘at the mercy’ of other, often irrational, influences. [...] The cult of reforms and entry into Europe – these slogans have become panels before which the cult of economism is cultivated, along with questionable, suspicious prognostics, and, above all, pragmatism of all kinds. What we call human rights, as well as culture, are being pushed to the margins. Now, only the president visits the nation like a good shepherd.”*

Špitzer continued:

*“With all due respect to modern views and social and human sciences, it seems to me that emphasizing the humanist aspect of governance is the most important because it enables consensus, compromise, and dialogue. It engenders positive influence on social consciousness and public opinion. After all, this is how the VPN movement was established, and this is how it could preserve its ‘historical pathos’.”<sup>29</sup>*

Having expressed concerns about which direction should the new society decide to go, he clearly mouthed the dissident, human-rights and humanist narrative advocating for a Charter 77-like aspiration on building a societal consensus. However, Špitzer’s ideational frame dated back to a period of reformist debates in the 1960s that were heavily infused with existentialist and Marxist-humanist understanding of a subject embedded in history.<sup>30</sup>

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28 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 255, inv. 241. The Political Club of the KC VPN, 6. 12. 1990.

29 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 255, inv. 241. The Political Club of the KC VPN, 6. 12. 1990.

30 BLAGOJEVIĆ. Phenomenology and existentialism in dialogue with Marxist humanism in Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 1960s. In *Studies in East European Thought*, 2022, vol. 75, p. 429-433. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-022-09513-x>; MERVART and RŮŽIČKA. “Rehabilitovat Marxe!” *Československá stranická intelligence a myšlení post-stalinské modernity*.

Reinvigorating the dissident narrative, Špitzer insisted that society needed to have the ability to form a positive and consensual view of its own history. In other text, *Skepticism and Hope*, he stated the following:

*“A relationship to history can serve as a prevention against hatred, if it enables the courage to seek the truth. It can be useful in a moral sense, ‘so that the humane is freed from the inhumane’ (G. Picon), because ‘the problem is not to know the goal of history, instead, to attribute one to it’ (J.P. Sartre). K.R. Popper understands history in the same way: ‘History has only the meaning that man attributes to it.’”<sup>31</sup>*

Špitzer expressed the intention to authentically anchor historical democratic imagination as follows:

*“VPN is a flagbearer of the most nation-devoted policies, but it does not manifest it outwardly, it does not articulate it—to use modern vocabulary – which is not to say it should constantly proclaim its ‘historical roots,’ which are mentioned in its foundations. By contrast, the Matica slovenská does it constantly, even though, from a historical perspective, a significant part of its tradition is rather questionable. VPN is the heir of revolutionary movements, and furthermore, it is in such a favorable situation where, for the first time in European history, there is no empire standing, and even the last one is collapsing, and borders have ceased to be a threat.”<sup>32</sup>*

Špitzer’s aspiration to promote consensual understanding of a nation’s history extended beyond internal debates. When one of the most prominent democratic revolutionaries and future minister of foreign affairs Milan Kňažko attended the World Congress of Czechoslovak Jews in Jerusalem in April 1990, the speech he gave was authored by Juraj Špitzer.<sup>33</sup> The address was strongly influenced by the legacy of the Second Vatican Council, whose understanding of the “other” was largely impacted by the historical development of phenomenological and humanist approaches. Notably, three days ahead of the Congress, Špitzer’s remark directed at Václav Havel through his advisor Milan Šimečka voiced a particular concern: *“I consider it a mistake that the delegation does not include a representative of the church, for example, Bishop Korec.”<sup>34</sup> From the perspective of Slovak needs, that would have been very useful.”<sup>35</sup>*

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Praha 2020, p. 100-121.

31 ŠPITZER. Skepsa a nádej. In *Svitá až keď je celkom tma*. Bratislava 1996, p. 27.

32 SNA, f. VPN., b. 255, inv 241. The Political Club of the KC VPN, 6. 12. 1990.

33 SNA, f. VPN., b. 255, inv 241. KC VPN.

34 At the beginning of 1990, Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec did not yet publicly stand out as an advocate of a *Ludák* concept of the Christian-nationalist Slovak history. After all, in 1987, he also signed a statement condemning the deportations of Jews from Slovakia.

35 SNA, f. VPN., b. 255, inv 241. KC VPN. Aware of Slovakia’s Catholic character, Špitzer

It is questionable whether Špitzer's intention to include a high representative of the Catholic Church can be understood as part of the post-communist tradition of historical reconciliation.<sup>36</sup> Instead, his efforts and reflections on demonstrating a "national compromise" should be seen as a conscious inclination toward non-violent constellations, the rejection of revenge, and the search for a shared constitutive legacy, based on a common dissident experience. Juraj Špitzer must therefore be associated with figures like Petr Pithart, Adam Michnik, Miroslav Kusý, and other representatives of the dissident tradition.

In the Slovak dissident political thought, Miroslav Kusý schemed the most articulated democratic and consensual understanding of the nation's history in his essay *The Slovak Phenomenon (Slovenský fenomén)*.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Jozef Jablonický's and Ján Mlynárik's dissident writing contributed to this tradition substantially. The three respective authors thus provided the Slovak intellectual tradition with a sense of historical continuity during the 1970s and 1980s. This "anchoring of a sense of historical continuity," as Ľubomír Lipták would put it, took on new significance and brought along new challenges after 1989, when not only the political scene but also historiography<sup>38</sup> generated both perspectives and thinkers emphasizing the aspect of discontinuity to the democratic revolution.<sup>39</sup>

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added ironically, referring to the work of Dominik Tatarka: "I probably don't need to explain why. After all, it was essentially the Parish Republic." (*Farská republika*) In addition, he attached to Milan Šimečka the prayer of pope John XXIII from 1962, "which our *Pacem in terris* did not read, and few people know it."

36 KONOVSĚK, Reconciliation, p. 93-102.

37 For contextualizing Kusý's political thinking in the 1980s, see: DALBERG. *Politische Denken im Tschechoslowakischen Dissens. Egon Bondy, Miroslav Kusý, Milan Šimečka und Petr Uhl (1968–1989)*. Stuttgart 2023, p. 118-147. The Slovak Phenomenon Essay by Miroslav Kusý has to be understood as a contribution to a wider and relevant dissident discourse on national reconciliation that involved texts from multiple authors from the Central European region and beyond, such as Petr Pithart, Adam Michnik or Jan Józef Lipski. Although the debates articulated a common interest while representing "civil", "Christian" and other parts of intellectual circles, already within the dissident debates diverging paths emerged. See, KOPEČEK. Human Rights Facing a 'National Past'. Dissident 'Civic Patriotism' and the Return of History in East Central Europe, 1968–1989. In *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 2012, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 580-584. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41803363> ; ŠUSTOVÁ DRELOVÁ. An Arrested Dialectic: The National Past and (Post-)Dissident Catholic Moral Reasoning in Slovakia. In *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 2024, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 820-828. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254231219752>

38 KOVÁČ and MICHELA. *Na ceste k poznaniu. Dušan Kováč o slovenskom dejepisectve s Miroslavom Michelom*. Bratislava 2021, p. 148-149. Dušan Kováč, the new director of Institute of History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAS) wanted to pursue discussions with *Ludák* historians. On the contrary, Jozef Jablonický opposed this idea.

39 The term discontinuity solely refers to a set of opinions and intellectuals that would outright denounce historiographical knowledge engendered official institutions and/or the so-called regime historians throughout the period of Communist dictatorship, regardless of its scientific value.

In his role as editor-in-chief of the revived magazine *Kultúrny život*, Juraj Špitzer continued to advocate for a continuity reading of what the role of VPN should be and what legacy it should endorse. Building on the post-Stalinist 1960s humanist influence, he directly translated the historical democratic imagination onto VPN:

*“VPN is a movement that emerged from tradition, because nothing arises from nothing. Let us provisionally call it the humanist tradition, which took different forms in various historical periods but shares a common denominator – universal human ideals. This links national traditions with European and global ones, which should also appear as a lasting principle in the magazine. In this sense, the intellectual activity of VPN could influence something that is so often revisited in Slovakia – reevaluating history, to ensure that power-political ambitions are not cloaked in tradition. I am referring to the philosophy of history, which almost lacks a tradition in our country.”<sup>40</sup>*

Although the primary challenge for VPN was to come to terms with the nation’s communist past, there were specific efforts to maintain a coherent approach to the nation’s history in general. For this reason, members or affiliated intellectuals aimed to highlight positive figures from Slovak history, such as Ľudovít Štúr and Milan Rastislav Štefánik or the democratic tradition of the first Czechoslovak Republic, while emphasizing their emancipatory, democratic, “liberal,” or anti-nationalist traits. However, other themes also arose, such as the existence of the Slovak state 1939–1945 and the events directly or indirectly related to it. This included the antifascist Slovak National Uprising of 1944, the deportation of Jews, and figures like Jozef Tiso and Andrej Hlinka.

Furthermore, the intellectuals around VPN engaged in extensive discussions that either took place around significant anniversaries or filled the pages of various newspapers. This demonstrates the importance of historical debates as part of democratic culture, which could thrive after the break-up of the Communist dictatorship. In Slovakia, however, the issue of emancipation was significantly complicated by the fact that the Hungarian minority party, the Hungarian Independent Initiative (*Maďarská nezávislá iniciatíva*, MNI), closely collaborated with and negotiated a future coalition with VPN. Publicly, this was portrayed by SNS and *Matica slovenská* as a betrayal of the nation. The fact that representatives and supporters of the MNI were involved in dissident activities<sup>41</sup> was overshadowed by the agitation of some regional branches of

40 SNA, VPN II., b. 255, inv. 241. The Political Club of the KC VPN.

41 MARUŠIAK. 1989 in Slovakia – Between Reform and Radical Change. In *Securitas Imperii*, 2020, vol. 36, no. 1, p. 119.

*Matica slovenská* in southern Slovakia, which expressed fears about the erosion of Slovak cultural and linguistic heritage.<sup>42</sup> VPN's stance was accommodating toward the Hungarian minority, as the movement had already set the goal of fostering constructive relations with ethnic minorities in its initial program objectives, having it built on the human-rights legacy connected to the Charter 77 initiative.

However, the issue was politically far more complex, and it would be an oversimplification to claim that VPN did not acknowledge the concerns of Slovak-speaking citizens in southern Slovakia. Additionally, addressing the nation's history became a pressing political challenge for VPN, with voices from the streets of several larger Slovak cities repeatedly drawing attention to it. These demonstrations, organized by various nationalist activists in close coordination with SNS and *Matica slovenská* significantly contributed to the mobilization against VPN's policies. Given the sensibleness of its coalition government with the Czech OF, VPN had to maintain close cooperation with Prague, yet at the same time walk on a tightrope of communicating its adherence historical emancipatory figures. In August 1990, during the commemoration of Andrej Hlinka's death anniversary, two different events took place—one organized by *Matica slovenská* and one by VPN. VPN dedicated an entire seminar to the role of Andrej Hlinka in Slovak history. The speakers included prominent historians from the Slovak Academy of Sciences (*Slovenská akadémia vied*, SAV), such as Ľubomír Lipták, Július Mesároš, Dušan Kováč, Ivan Kamenec, and Valerián Bystrický. On a more political note, Fedor Gál issued an official statement regarding the celebrations in the city of Ružomberok honoring Hlinka's legacy, where, on behalf of the entire coalition government, he criticized the loud nationalist rhetoric calling for separatism and alleged chauvinism.<sup>43</sup> More importantly, Gál expressed concerns about the potential impression that “national solidarity” was being reduced to separatism: “*We, too, are Slovaks. However, we do not wish to define our national identity based on hostility towards other nations and ethnicities.*”<sup>44</sup> VPN's statement made sure to differentiate its voice of civic patriotism from the voices of separatism, which, according to Gál, primarily originated from outside the country, particularly from the so-called *Ludák* exile.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that VPN leaders understood the gravity of the situation and the risk posed by ignoring the language of history. Figures like Andrej Hlinka were especially important in shaping public opinion. Fully aware of the subtle

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42 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, KC VPN meeting materials – *Matica slovenská* declaration from 19. 1. 1990

43 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, KC VPN meeting materials, 27. 8. 1990.

44 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, KC VPN meeting materials, 27. 8. 1990.

45 SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, KC VPN.

difference between Jozef Tiso and Andrej Hlinka, Václav Havel, too, was cautious when talking about the “father of the Slovak nation”:

*“From what I know about Andrej Hlinka, I conclude that he was in important representative of the Slovak nation and its ambitions. If anyone links him with what happened here during the second world war, then this link is not fair. Because, as we know, he died before the war started.”<sup>46</sup>*

Moderating the approach to figures like Andrej Hlinka could play a vital role in maintaining healthy relations with VPN’s other coalition partner, the Christian-Democratic Movement (*Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie*, KDH).

One of the strongest endorsements was given to the role of Milan Rastislav Štefánik. It is no coincidence that discussions around his death brought to light significant views on the nature of Czech-Slovak relations. Another important theme for creating a positive narrative of Slovak history was the Slovak National Uprising. Like Milan Rastislav Štefánik, it allowed the Slovak and Czech nations to unite in a shared history of resistance and to establish a new positive project. At the same time, it represented a fundamental rejection of Slovak separatism, countering the “nationalist incantations” that emerged after 1989. To some extent, it provided a platform to counter the Communist dictatorship’s biased and factually incorrect historiography on both Štefánik and the Slovak National Uprising, of which the latter was dear to the former president Gustáv Husák’s national myth-building. Indeed, it was mainly the historiographical distortion of the Uprising that Jozef Jablonický systematically fought against in his proscribed writings.

Regarding Štefánik, two tendencies are evident. On the one hand, there was an effort to fill certain “*historiographical gaps*,” and on the other, the push to bring this significant figure into the broader consciousness reflects a shift in historiography towards the question of “*national history*.”<sup>47</sup> In 1969, historian and dissident Ján Mlynárik, a signatory of Charter 77, wrote on Štefánik, though it was not published until 1989.<sup>48</sup> Despite the number of books or other publications that either failed to appear before the normalization process took hold, or were

46 VALO. Čakanie na pravdu. In *Verejnosť*, 29. 5. 1990, vol. 2, no. 13., p. 1-2.

47 KOPEČEK. Historical Studies of Nation-Building and the Concept of Socialist Patriotism in East-Central Europe 1956–1970. In KOLÁŘ and ŘEZNÍK, eds. *Historische Nationsforschung im geteilten Europa 1945–1989*. Köln 2012, p. 144-149.

48 MLYNÁRIK. *Cesta ke hvězdám a svobode*. Praha 1989. Ján Mlynárik attempted to emphasize the importance of the first Czechoslovak Republic 1918–1938. See, the question of the October 28 as the date of the establishment of the republic: MLYNÁRIK. *Diaspora historiografie*. Praha 1998, p. 280-282; MLYNÁRIK. *Českí profesori na Slovensku. I. diel*. Praha 1994, p. 9-10.



published in a samizdat form, the efforts to “restore” the figure of M.R. Štefánik to historiography cannot be limited to dissident activities. Dušan Kováč recalls how, by the late 1980s, certain authors gradually began pushing the boundaries of what could escape the censorship, particularly in the assessments of Štefánik’s role in Slovak history. These efforts must be placed in the context of the delayed, but nonetheless ongoing, perestroika in Czechoslovakia.<sup>49</sup>

### **Lubomír Lipták and the searching for philosophy of history**

Through Lipták’s multifaceted endeavor, we are able to observe the intertwining of the languages of history and democracy with a goal to free Slovak historiography not only from the control of party censorship but also from an obsession with factual neutrality, and at the same time, to infuse the post-89 democracy-building with an idea of continuity that could only be achieved by reiteration of a distinct philosophy of history.

When we look at the first post-November-1989 issues of the historical journal *Historický časopis*, the effort to publish articles that were prohibited either from publishing or dissemination is more than evident. One can notice an endeavor similar to what the VPN publishing house Archa was doing. The third issue of 1990 included texts by Ján Mlynárik, and Jozef Jablonický, specifically on figures like Štefan Osuský and Štefánik, and the text *Obrátené hodnoty*, which was originally published as a samizdat in 1979.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the following year’s issues of *Historický časopis* were dedicated to reassessing themes and the state of Slovak historiography.

Historiography after 1989 seemed to work within a context where, a visible endeavor to re-establish a continuous historical democratic imagination entangled with the urgency to excavate a positivist, a so-called objective historical research. Along with that, with several historians being tarnished by having being institutionally bound with the normalization-era historiography, the post-socialist Slovak historiography’s faced multiple challenges. Within the relatively wide range of approaches, Lubomír Lipták sought to shape the language of democracy, on behalf of the respective community. Ivan Kamenec commented on his work after 1989 as follows: “*In his case, the continuity was visible and somewhat natural. His work after 1989 builds upon his key work ‘Slovakia in the 20th Century,’ as well as his presentation at the 6th Congress of the Slovak Historical Society in Martin in 1968.*”<sup>51</sup>

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49 KOVÁČ and MICHELA, *Na ceste*, p. 81 and p. 161.

50 JABLONICKÝ. *Obrátené hodnoty*. In *Historický časopis*, 1990, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 420-433.

51 KAMENEC and MICHELA. *Rozhovor s dejinami. Ivan Kamenec o cestách slovenskej histórie s Miroslavom Michelom*. Bratislava 2019, p. 118. It is the aforementioned Lipták’s contri-

The fourth issue of *Historický časopis* is dedicated to Ľudovít Štúr, with a text by Július Mesároš interpreting the “Gentle Revolution” through the lens of Ľudovít Štúr’s legacy.<sup>52</sup> Mesároš’s text was written as a response to an article written by a biologist Ladislav Kováč, *Thinking About Science and Our History*.<sup>53</sup> The responses to the text written by a non-historian reveal nuances within the historical community. Mesároš’s text primarily calls for the clarification and objectification of “*national history*,”<sup>54</sup> but it also emphasizes the legacy of the democratic tradition of the Štúr generation and its relevance for the current needs of democratization after 1989. He highlighted how “*the era and generation of Štúr, at the crossroads of two historical epochs, gave new impulses and a coherent democratic and deeply humane program to the further national social development of Slovaks.*”<sup>55</sup>

Ľubomír Lipták, however, focused on a different aspect of Štúr’s legacy. Lipták’s efforts to present a more comprehensive historical democratic imagination, and his positioning of it in contrast to “mere” objectivism, can be interpreted as an awareness of the potential risks that opposition to previous interpretations could bring, particularly in the case of absence of an additional constitutive historical narrative of the so-called national history.<sup>56</sup>

In *Slovak Historiography of the Post-1945 Period* from 1991, Lipták pointed out the historicizing of democratic traditions, predominantly those from the era of the first Czechoslovak Republic. He, yet again asserts the importance of historical continuity: “*To bring the study of the postwar period to a scientific level is not just a matter of self-preservation for the historians involved. It is their duty to the entire historical community, but also, and this is often forgotten, a vital interest of the entire historical community.*”<sup>57</sup> Lipták saw this framing of understanding of history and historiography through the lens of “historical community” as desirable, especially given the emergence of a pluralist political landscape in the years 1990–1991: “*Never before have our histories been pulled onto the political stage with such urgency, but also with such blatant presentism, with both correct and false adjustments, as they were yesterday, today, and I*

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bution that was also published by *Historický časopis* in 1990.

52 MESÁROŠ. Nežná revolúcia a štúrovská národná tradícia. In *Historický časopis*, 1990, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 465-469.

53 KOVÁČ. Premýšľanie o vede a našich dejinách. In *Slovenské pohľady*, 1989, vol. 105, no. 3, pp. 12-24.

54 MESÁROŠ, Nežná revolúcia, p. 467-468.

55 MESÁROŠ, Nežná revolúcia, p. 469.

56 LIPTÁK. Premýšľanie o vede a dejinách. In LIPTÁK. *Storočie dlhšie ako 100 rokov*. Bratislava 2011, pp. 70-75.

57 LIPTÁK. Slovenská historiografia obdobia po roku 1945. In *Historický časopis*, 1991, vol. 39, no. 4-5, p. 462-463.

*fear that this will not end anytime soon.*"<sup>58</sup> History, thus, was in Lipták's view a fact that was extremely important after the democratic revolution, countering the earlier and perhaps naïve assessments of people like Pavel Tigríd.

In his essay *Notes on the Historiography of Recent and Contemporary History (Poznámky o historiografii novších dejín)*, Lipták continues:

*"I flip through our journals, collections, monographs again. Thousands of pages, thousands of facts, most of them correct in themselves and perhaps important. And yet: the voice of the public is clear: where is our history, why are you hiding it from us, and if you do write about it, why do you lie?"*<sup>59</sup>

Historian Ivan Kamenec expressed a somewhat more particular emphasis on preserving historiographical continuity, that should withstand the increasing pressures on historiography:

*"To make myself clear: I do not want to protect our historiography from sharp and justified criticism, but the existing scholarly distortions cannot be generalized and we cannot denounce everything that has been achieved in historical research on recent and contemporary history."*<sup>60</sup>

Dušan Kováč's advocacy of historiographical continuity went even further, pointing out the need to distinguish methodological aspects from ideological distortions in the work of historians:

*"Sometimes I feel as if we want to blame Marxism for even the repressions. Marxism, however, is just one of the methods for studying history. I would say, one of the common methods. [...] My most interesting observation is that Marxist historians reside today mainly in Western Europe. [...] Neither Soviet nor even Chinese historians defended Marx's theory of revolution, but rather the historians of Western Europe."*<sup>61</sup>

For some historians, the situation after 1989 may have resembled the 1960s discourse, when the historical community tried to respond to the demands of the time by embracing Franz Kafka's and Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas<sup>62</sup> and for

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58 LIPTÁK, Slovenská historiografia, p. 458.

59 LIPTÁK, Slovenská historiografia, p. 458.

60 KAMENEC. Ako sa vidíme sami a ako nás vidí verejnosť. In *Historický časopis*, 1991, vol. 39, no. 4-5, p. 490.

61 KOVÁČ. K historiografii posledných rokov a jej diagnóza. In *Historický časopis*, 1991, vol. 39, no. 4-5, p. 502-503. After all, the discussions of the late 1960s were born precisely within the confines of Marxist discourses, including their philosophical humanization or the implementation of phenomenological and existentialist elements. See, MERVART and RŮŽIČKA. „Rehabilitovat Marxe!“, p. 137-147.

62 LIPTÁK, *Storočie*, p. 53.

whom the persistence in historical continuity was instrumental. However, after the democratic revolution, the professional historiographical community was not limited to engaging in discussion with both the past and the political reality of the contemporary, which urged them to take sides and through their profession contribute to the establishment of democracy – as the German concept of *Zeitgeschichte* would have instructed them to pursue. Rather, both the professional historiographical community and authors utilizing the historical languages found themselves in discussion with alternative notions of the newly emerging society, within the civic-democratic milieu.

At the time when the political space was being formed and opened to new perspectives, there was a certain multiplicity of languages and politics of the past, or perhaps a lack thereof. From this perspective, the debate on the degree of historical or historiographical intervention in political issues is particularly formative. It is in this context that we can read Lipták's words:

*"...there are increasing efforts to shift some of today's pressing issues onto historians: the German question, 1968, some issues from the past concerning the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, and so on. [...] The emerging pluralism of opinions will surely also be a source of interest in history, but so will the more intense creation of myths and disinformation. The pressure on historians from this direction is and will continue to be immense. [...] The destruction of historical knowledge among the public is so ubiquitous today, that there is hardly a fact, a person, or an event that we could consider indisputable, a foundation upon which we could build further, develop ideas, and confront opinions."*<sup>63</sup>

Lipták is in an implicit dialogue with Juraj Špitzer, who in the aforementioned article for *Kultúrny život* stated:

*"We will not lack the courage to face the truth, to come to terms with the past, to overcome what burdens us from it, to correct what unworthy governments deliberately caused and neglected. Because I realize the weight of words, I do not want and cannot, at this point, replace the duty of historical science, which will have to uncover with equal courage all that was hidden, forbidden, and taboo, so that the destructive work of violence from both totalitarian regimes does not come to light."*<sup>64</sup>

This insistence on the role of historical science can be understood as internal communication within the civic-democratic milieu that could lead to certain practical disagreements despite common intellectual proximity towards the

63 LIPTÁK, *Storočie*, p. 87-88.

64 SNA, f. VPŇ., b. 255, inv 241. KC VPŇ., Špitzer for *Kultúrny život*.

importance of advocating for historical democratic imagination. Lipták's position, for that matter, differed from Špitzer's or Jablonický's, if not in substance, then in form. Despite being an advocate for embeddedness of historical thinking among the broader public, or as he called it historical community, he called for separation of the roles of historiography and politics. Here, he could build on his ideas from the 1960s debates as he addressed this issue:

*“Which direction we will take from here, where we will go, is something historiography can certainly say something about, but the final, or even the primary word, does not belong to it. That is a matter for other disciplines, and primarily the task and duty of politics as both science and practice.”*<sup>65</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

The shift towards nationalism in Slovak historiography after 1989 was evident. It can be understood as a reflection on the overall state of post-socialist historiography in Slovakia. However, my intention was to ask to what extent the historical democratic imagination in Slovakia can be considered a ‘lost language’ not only of building democracy but also of post-socialist liberal consensus. To what extent did it reside within thematic and methodological discussions with the civic-democratic milieu of VPN? And finally, to what extent was this line pushed aside by the binary struggle between nationalism and the position of sidelining of what Martin Milan Šimečka retrospectively called the “Špitzer’s question?”

Historian Dušan Kováč, in his review of the (re)issued 1990 edition of Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays*, states:

*“Old Europe is on a path to seeking its future, which in many ways builds upon elements of the past. And the struggle between the old and the new appears to contemporaries as a struggle between advancing democracy and conservative autocracy and totalitarianism. At the end of the 20th century, it is clear that German organizational precision and scientificity, and even less so the Bolshevik revolutionary zeal, have had less influence in Europe, while the tendency the author named in the previous essay as a possibility arising from the historical development of civilization—‘life without violence and in far-reaching equality of opportunity’—in other words, democratism, has gained ground.”*<sup>66</sup>

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65 LIPTÁK. Úloha a postavenie slovenskej historiografie v našej spoločnosti. In LIPTÁK, *Storočie*, p. 59.

66 KOVÁČ. Patočka, J. Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin, Praha 1990 (review). In *Historický časopis*

In the end, the civic-democratic milieu around VPN ultimately submitted to this triumphalist logic of democratism, and the advocacy of historical democratic imagination gave way to a rather essentialized understanding of democracy. Indeed, in order to fight nationalism, this was politically more utilizable, and more acute. Eventually, however, the “end of history” did not mean the end of the historical democratic imagination, but rather its merger with the intellectual and social practice of the post-socialist liberal consensus. A consensus that conservatives, liberal and even the transforming democratic left would impose their respective ideas upon in order to counter nationalism politically. In other words, the historical democratic imagination, which conceptually developed in the second half of the 1960s and found its oppositional and consensual application in dissent, became after 1989 one of the articulations of liberal democracy, alongside with economic liberalism. Unlike the latter, it has hardly ever come afore so vividly as it did during the immediate aftermath of the democratic revolution.

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