

Article

## Double *Ressentiment*: The Political Communication of *Kulturkampf* in Hungary

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### Abstract

Emotions have always been invested in politics. Politicians and politically biased public intellectuals manage citizens' emotions for various purposes: to alienate them from the rival political camp and to make them participate in elections or in politics in general. *Ressentiment* is an affective style of great political potential and it is present throughout democratic European societies. By analysing the discourses of the culture war between the political camps in Hungary since 2018, this article presents the components, drivers, mechanisms, and some typical outcomes of *ressentiment* on the levels of the individual and the political communities. It argues that in political communication both political sides are trying to appeal to the citizens' *ressentiment*. Both camps use communicative means to incite, channel, and reorient *ressentiment* by, e.g., scapegoating, identity work, and transvaluation to attract citizens, stabilize their own support, and nudge followers towards specific political activities.

### Keywords

identity work; political communication; political psychology; resentment; victimization

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Political communication has always been used to manage emotions. Plato underlined the dangers of demagoguery, Aristotle, in turn, advised on how to influence emotions, reasoning that “the emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgements” (Aristotle, 1990, 1378a). Recently, particularly since the reception of Damasio's works (1994) by the social sciences, political science and political communication studies have extensively scrutinized the links between emotions and politics (e.g., Braud, 1996; Demertzis, 2013). A great number of projects dealt with the incitement of fear (e.g., Mack, 2004; Wodak, 2015), anger (Hochschild, 2016; Mishra, 2017), and hope (Brader, 2006) by parties and politicians, particularly during campaigns. A remarkable character-

istic of the research so far is the dominance of studies on basic or primary emotions (TenHouten, 2007) such as fear, anger, or joy. Some have studied secondary emotions, such as hatred or hope, but more complex emotions or affective states in politics are seldom analysed (e.g., Capelos & Demertzis, 2018; Ciulla, 2020; Hoggett, 2018; Hoggett et al., 2013; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017, 2018; TenHouten, 2018; Wimberly, 2018).

The present article deals with the political communications management of one of the most complex affective mechanisms: *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment* is a subjectively unpleasant emotional state, a specific affective style that makes people inclined to focus on painful developments and also to feel powerless to repair them. In a therapeutic culture (Aubry & Travis, 2015; Illouz, 2008) where not only hearts are managed but selves are also outsourced (Hochschild, 1983, 2012), it is hardly

surprising that citizens also turn to professional political communicators for healing (Sointu & Hill, 2020). Plato thought that politics is for the soul what gymnastics and medicine are for the body (Plato, 1967, 464b), and Goethe warned against turning society into a hospital where citizens are sick-nurses to each other (Scheler, 1912/2018, p. 54). Particularly under the conditions where social media make interaction and two-way political communication between professional communicators and citizens a part of everyday politics, citizens may look for public figures who perceptibly empathize with them, who help them alleviate frustration and discontent by offering explanations, enemies to blame, values to follow, and ways of action to gain relief. Sometimes professional communicators play the therapeutic role unconsciously: They offer metaphors and narratives, their own authentic or fake emotions and, on being favourably received, they deploy them recurrently not knowing that the favourable reception springs from deep-seated *ressentiment* present among the citizens.

This article, therefore, analyses which components of the political communications processes in the public sphere lend themselves to public communicators (politicians, journalists, and further actors such as commenting citizens) to allow them to take advantage of the *ressentiment* that is likely present in the emotional realm of the audience. Consciously or unconsciously, political communicators incite, appease, or orient; in short: They manage the emotions of audiences as well as the mechanisms covered by the concept of *ressentiment*. The article will present the discourses and issues offered by communicators that help citizens alleviate the unpleasant feelings stemming from *ressentiment*, by, e.g., externalizing the urges that they feel threatened, by giving objects to their hatred, and by transforming *ressentiment's* components (which would make them politically passive) into anger whereby they may turn towards participation in politics (Ost, 2004).

The article also claims that *ressentiment* can multiply in a society; one may speak, therefore, about double *ressentiment* too. Since *ressentiment* may arise from perceived injuries in various fields, specific groups of political communicators may try to represent and manage the emotions of specific groups of citizens with specific *ressentiments* based on the perceived hurts and powerlessness in respective fields. As the article will show, some political communicators may take advantage of *ressentiment* springing from recurrent political failure, while others handle impotent revenge due to felt cultural inferiority.

The article presents the political communication targeted at *ressentiment* using the case of *Kulturkampf* in Hungary in the period from 2018 to 2020. Although the concept of *Kulturkampf* originally covered the struggle between state and church in Germany in the second half of the 19th century (Clark & Kaiser, 2009), today it signifies any cultural fight between political forces. Recently it has been applied to label the conflict between the

American Democrats and Republicans on moral and cultural issues, such as abortion or gay marriage (Chapman, 2010), the conflict between Labour and the mainstream press in the UK (Curran et al., 2019), and it has also been used in France (Brustier, 2013) and Spain (Ibañez, 2020) and applied to Occidentalism, regarding the future of the West and its enemies. *Kulturkampf*, or at least cultural threat, in parallel with economic difficulties, seems to have played a special role in the rise of populist parties throughout Europe (Ferrari, 2021).

I proceed by reviewing research on *ressentiment*: How the concept has been used to understand politics. In the third section, I describe the political context in Hungary including the historical experiences that make the presence of *ressentiment* in the country probable. I then introduce the theoretical framework offered by the concept to detect the components of the political communication efforts that may appeal to *ressentiment*. Subsequently, I describe the sources and methods used to collect and analyse the data. Then, I explicate the empirical results, that is, the political communications methods that may have proved useful to manage the citizens' *ressentiment*. Finally, I discuss these findings.

## 2. *Ressentiment* from Culture to Political Sentiment

Although the concept of *ressentiment* had been used previously (van Tuinen, 2020), the most important source of its modern version is Nietzsche (1887/1994) who put it into the centre of the European culture defining it as the psychic foundation of Christianity, the morality of the slaves, and a characteristic of the weak and impotent. Scheler (1912/2018) considered *ressentiment* the almost inevitable effect of the discrepancy between the ideology and the reality of democracy. Democratic ideology makes people believe that everybody is equal, and some have more power and fortune only because they are more gifted. One may, however, have the experience that worthless people climb high in the economic and political hierarchy, without any mechanism to redress such undeserved success, which fills one with resentment and, if the feeling is recurrent, with *ressentiment*.

The concept has proved to have great potential in explaining movements and revolutions in history (Burrin, 2007; Ferro, 2007) as well as more specific issues (e.g., Ball, 1964), one of them being populism (Fassin, 2017; Fleury, 2020). The connection had been foreseen by Sennett (1974/1986), but the real renaissance began with the strengthening of the new forces later called populists and especially after the middle of 2016, that is, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's victory in the US.

Salmela and von Scheve (2017, 2018) found fear, insecurity, disappointment, and distrust lead to *ressentiment*, and they defined envy, hatred and, in the case of right-wing populism, also shame as its drivers and outcomes. With shame included and leaning on Scheff's theory of shame/anger (Scheff, 1990, 1994), the approach

was able to explain how shameful citizens move from negative and therefore rather discouraging emotions to anger, that is, the emotional background of action—crucial in politics. Salmela and Capelos (2021), in turn, define *ressentiment* as the affective core of reactionism, which leads towards nostalgic political activities against outgroups and minorities. Capelos and Demertzis (2018) focused specifically on populist and reactionary political behaviour and the role *ressentiment* played there. They defined *ressentiment* as the combination of anger or anxiety with low political efficacy, the perception of powerlessness.

A special part of the literature is about the ways politicians have tried to elicit or take advantage of *ressentiment* among the people. Wimberly (2018) claims that Donald Trump was efficient in offering citizens ways to vent their *ressentiment* onto the professional class. With professionals being mediators between the people and the elites, citizens may have felt Trump more authentic than the rest of the politicians, being a person who turned against professionals just as they were happy to do. Kelly (2020) theorizes that *ressentiment* explains the apparent contradiction in Donald Trump's communication between toughness and self-victimization, and Dolgert (2016) reevaluates the political potential of *ressentiment* and suggests that the political left also should manage the affect in its own interest. Dolgert's approach is specifically relevant for the present research because it is based on the idea of parallel or double *ressentiment*: Communicators belonging to different political camps may manage the same *ressentiment* among citizens to reach their own goals.

### 3. The Political Context in Hungary

The concept of *ressentiment* has been used by historians to shed light on Hungary's past. It was applied to explain antisemitism in the 19th and 20th centuries: Unable to adjust to the requirements of capitalism and seeing Jews get rich and advance socially, Christian Hungarians felt *ressentiment* and nurtured hatred against the prospering minority (Szabó, 1981). *Ressentiment* has also proven fruitful in understanding the regime prior to 1990 (Majtényi, 2012). János Kádár, the leader of the country from 1956 to 1988, was the politician of *ressentiment* because he was constructed as embodying the impotent vengefulness against the Russian oppression.

Just as in the case of France in the 18th century (Greenfeld, 1992) or Poland recently (Kazlauskaitė & Salmela, in press), since 1990, a significant proportion of Hungarians may have felt *ressentiment* due to the country persistently lagging behind Western Europe. That frustration explains the disparaging of western values in general and the so-called European values in particular: The less one is successful in realizing them, the more one might appreciate the specific national values instead of facing failure and drifting towards shame and self-loathing. *Ressentiment*, hence, seems to be persis-

tent in the Hungarian mentality either because of the Christian culture, or because of the inherent tension between equality and undeserved prosperity by some in democracy, or because of the perceived recurrent failure to come up to the West's standards.

Still, the summer of 2018 can definitely be regarded as the beginning of a new phase in the Hungarian *ressentiment* and its management. By 2018, Viktor Orbán had won all the parliamentary, local, and European elections since the autumn of 2006, reaching, e.g., a two-thirds majority in the parliament, and according to the opinion polls, his party (Fidesz) had been the most popular for twelve years. As early as 2009, he foresaw the radical transformation of culture if the political and economic transformations his future parliamentary majority was to implement proved successful. In 2010, he started to restructure the regime (Körösesnyei et al., 2020) on the premise that the liberal democracy built on the implicit negotiations within the elite had failed politically as well as economically. It failed politically in 2006 when unprecedented riots took place in Budapest because of a leaked secret speech in which the Socialist Prime Minister of the period from 2004 to 2009 confessed that his government had been lying to the citizens instead of governing the country; and liberal democratic regime had failed economically even before the world crisis of 2008 which then aggravated the difficulties. Since politics and economics are in interaction with culture, according to Orbán, a new political and economic system should result in a new cultural atmosphere and situation including a rearranged system of cultural institutions more favourable to the political right. Practically, indeed, the governance of the political right restructured the political system and regime during the first period from 2010 to 2014 and finished the economic transformation by the end of the second period from 2014 to 2018. The three parliamentary electoral victories in a row seemed to have grounded the implementation of Orbán's vision regarding culture.

The 2009 plans were repeated and confirmed in the prime minister's speech of late July 2018. Viktor Orbán announced that the government should be crowned by the transformation of culture. The speech was reflected upon by a great number of articles and media programmes and a series of legislative steps and personnel reshuffling in the realm of culture followed. The reactions on both political sides after the speech labelled the debates as part of an age-long cultural war, and frequently used the noun *Kulturkampf* and its Hungarian version *kultúrharca*.

The call by Orbán and the expansion of the political right in culture was highly appreciated in the prime minister's camp but, even as late as 2020, by when the government's appointees had occupied the leading positions, the right-wing journalists and public intellectuals still complained about the continuing cultural hegemony of the liberals and the political left. The latter, in turn, claimed that, quite to the contrary, it was the political

right which dominated culture, although the country had one single cultural elite, which always came from the political left; the political right, therefore, had neither real culture, nor valuable artists, and, moreover, the rightist politicians were culturally backward. Thus, the left and the liberals should rule politics as well because only they are progressive and European enough to adjust to international tendencies.

Each elite, hence, accused the other of undeservedly keeping culture in general and cultural policy occupied. The favourable reception by the audiences, and, therefore, the systematic repetitions of conspicuous contradictions, mutual accusations, self-victimization, hatred, and relentlessness by both sides indicate that the communicators were successfully targeting audiences presumably overwhelmed by some deep-seated emotional state. What one sees is not only the incitement of grievance, anger, fear, envy, or hatred separately but the political management of a complex constellation of emotions that nurtures an enduring conflict. The recurrent character of the elites' emotional management efforts and the specific emotions they focused on implied that what was invested is entrenched *ressentiment*.

#### 4. Analytical Framework

In the following, first I define the hypothesis for the analysis. Second, I outline a specific definition of *ressentiment*, its components and effects, that is, I introduce the terminology necessary to test the hypothesis. Since the research aimed at clarifying emotion management, in this part I will also introduce the possible ways and means political communicators can apply to incite, appease, or channel emotions stemming from *ressentiment*.

##### 4.1. The Hypothesis

As the works by Nietzsche, Scheler, and recent scholars (Hungarian historians included) suggest, in societies permeated by Christian culture and democratic ideology, and which are lagging behind, *ressentiment* is pervasive and confirmed regularly by emotional episodes that make it generic. Although so far theories have defined single *ressentiments* that single subjects or social groups maintain towards another person or group, it is relevant to study where and in what social spheres such episodes take place: Unfolding in a specific social realm, they may contribute to the *ressentiment* nurtured by a specific group or segment of the people towards specific others. Accordingly, the hypothesis of double *ressentiment* is as follows:

The political communication on *Kulturkampf* takes advantage of specific *ressentiments* two political communities have towards each other and feed on experiences in separate spheres.

The hypothesis suggests that both groups may suffer from impotent revengefulness and, moreover, they may feel hurt by the other, either in the same or in different fields.

##### 4.2. Definitions

To test the hypothesis, I define the main concepts: *ressentiment*, its drivers and outcomes in the public sphere, and the ways in which political communication studies can detect them.

###### 4.2.1. *Ressentiment* as an Affective Style

In this research, *ressentiment* is an affective style. Although originally defined within neuroscience (Davidson, 1998), the concept of affective style recently has been broadened to cover sensitivities and specific emotional responses (Hofmann & Kashdan, 2010; Nielsen, 2018). Accordingly, one finds an affective style when the subject is inclined, sometimes obsessively, to notice specific developments in the environment and to respond in a specific way to them. *Ressentiment* is the affective style of impotent vengeance: the recurrent perception of *injustice* which the subject is *unable to retaliate*, and the incapability leads to an unpleasant general sentiment with specific effects. Each component is crucial.

The experience of injury is *recurrent*. In contradistinction to a single occurrence, where the intentional object (the actor behind the attack), the formal object (the moral content of the injury), and the focus (its victim; Helm, 2001, p. 34), are clear, in the cases where the perception of injustice is recurrent, the sentiment loses its objects and focus and, with time, only the memories and the impression of the inevitability of injustice and impotence remain. The objectless character of *ressentiment* (Hoggett et al., 2013) is favourable for professional political communicators because they can manage the unpleasant feelings by blaming strategically chosen figures, delineating the moral stakes—and indeed, they are able to define their victim at will.

It is *injustice* that is experienced. Injustice is a moral experience offending not only the subject but also the group that they feel they belong to. The victim's identity is, therefore, open to redefinition: The subject may extend personal hurt to the group he/she identifies with or may self-victimize by identification with a suffering group. In several cases, the feeling of injustice stems from comparison with others who should be on the same level but who seem better off. This component opens opportunities for the political communicators: They may reinterpret developments for the followers as unjust and define the group that is the victim thereof. In case they want to arouse *ressentiment*, they may obsessively put forward comparisons between various social groups so that the target group go through a further negative emotional episode.

*Incapability of retaliation*, if enduring, may lead to passivity. *Ressentiment* is directly linked to the experience that coping is useless, it must be postponed, sometimes even the expression of resentment is forbidden by feeling rules and expression norms (Hochschild, 1983). Passivity is unfavourable for the politicians who usually want to make citizens act: They want participation in elections, demonstrations, and politics in general. On the one hand, politicians are, therefore, interested in transforming the repressed urges into anger or hope to mobilize the people. On the other hand, the activities should be carried out at a specific place and time and, hence, deferment (inherent in *ressentiment*) is useful for them. They may, in turn, be interested in letting people incubate aversions in their emotional realm until the day of action.

#### 4.2.2. The Outcomes of *Ressentiment*

That was the core of *ressentiment*, which has specific outcomes. They depend on the subject's personality and the societal conditions around them. However various the effects may be, they have a mechanism in common: the protection of the positive image of the self. Powerlessness and failure are painful for the subject to admit because shame and self-loathing may develop; the defence mechanisms of repression and denial come into play to protect the self. While several mechanisms may occur, when presenting the results below I focus on three: externalization, self-victimization as identity work, and transvaluation.

*Externalization by blaming*. One tries to believe that something or someone else is responsible for one's failures. Either the arrangement of the world or some specific person or group is behind injustice. If one feels shame, it is because others make one do so and not because one has done something shameful. If one is outperformed by others, it is because others have means that one is denied. Such means against which no one can compete is that provided by a conspiracy: The enemies collaborate behind the scenes whereas the subject can only act alone.

With the personalization of politics (Bennett, 2012), blaming people, instead of impersonal entities such as parties, the government, or governance as a whole, is taken for granted. The tendency is an effect and factor of the moralization of politics: People, rather than structures, are made morally responsible for political developments. Even if structures are blameworthy, they can be moralized because they serve the interests of specific groups, whereby they are personalized.

*Self-victimization as identity work*. The subjects may try to protect themselves by transforming their identity, commonly through self-victimization: One constructs oneself or one's group as the victim. If there are perpetrators to blame, the subject must be their victim. Sometimes the subject develops such a strong identity as a victim that any improvement in the world becomes unacceptable because that would weaken the subject's

victimization. Improvements are, hence, perceived as deceptions, parts of some master plan, which will ultimately deteriorate the subject's situation even more. The professional communicators may reframe the positive developments so that the audience feel that they can see through them.

*Transvaluation*. Possibly the most sophisticated and complicated mechanism is the revaluation of values. The subject is unable to live up to the values such as the power and reputation they cherish. That failure is unbearable, and one of the solutions is to replace the values with ones according to which the subject can be or seems to be successful. The new values come either from the future, far beyond the present era, a usual solution on the political left, or from the past, leading to a specific complex emotion: nostalgia, a usual solution on the political right. By transvaluation, the subjects attain moral superiority, hence, they feel entitled to judge and criticise the previously superior rivals on moral grounds, a position of power. In politics, transvaluation works either by underrating the values of the previously envied rival camp, or by overrating values of the own political community, or both.

## 5. Method and Sources

So far *ressentiment* research has used two main methods: surveys and deductive qualitative content analysis. The former consists of querying citizens about the most important emotional components of *ressentiment* (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018). León et al. (1988) asked for opinions regarding 34 statements. Most of the studies, however, followed the qualitative method: First, they gave a definition of *ressentiment* and then looked for the components in the texts produced by the actors (Hoggett et al., 2013; Wimberly, 2018).

I also used the latter method. Since *ressentiment* is accompanied by self-deception, denial, and repression, those who appeal to *ressentiment* may do so unconsciously; therefore, it is unlikely that the sentiment and the political communications efforts to manage it can be discerned directly, in contradistinction to primary emotions, such as joy, anger, or fear. I tried to find the traces of the components and typical consequences of *ressentiment* in the public utterances collected.

I used a snowball procedure to collect the data. First, I gathered the articles containing words *Kulturkampf* and its Hungarian version *kultúrharca* published between the end of July 2018 and December 2020 on the most visited and/or politically most relevant media portals: *24.hu*, *168ora.hu*, *444.hu*, *hvg.hu*, *Index.hu*, *magyarnemzet.hu*, *magyaridok.hu*, *Mandiner.hu*, *nepszava.hu*, and *Origo.hu*. Second, I processed the articles and television shows the pieces cited, thereby the corpus also covered data from the period before the middle of July 2018. The collection contained 296 pieces. The processing consisted of searching for the components of *ressentiment* and for the



communications means that have the most potential in managing emotions stemming from *ressentiment* presumably present among the targeted audience, the citizens in the political community of the political therapist.

## 6. Results

The objective of the research was to detect and present communicative means that may manage citizens' *ressentiment*. I will, therefore, detail the political communication of *Kulturkampf* according to the structure introduced in the analytical framework section above.

### 6.1. Hardening the Core

We saw the core of *ressentiment*: a recurrent perception of injustice and powerlessness. The political communicator may be interested in inciting and maintaining the affective state so that the audience should hoard and incubate the necessary quantum of grievance that can be transformed into anger and, hence, action in due course. To do that, the communicator may appeal to any of the three main components, as follows.

#### 6.1.1. Recurrent Character

The theme of the leftist cultural dictatorship is recurrent in the right-wing public sphere. In 2016, a journalist very close to the prime minister, Zsolt Bayer, wrote a 39-piece long series of articles on the issue in the main daily paper of the political right under the title "Intolerable," which suggested that the double standard used on behalf of the leftists and liberals in general, and of people with a Jewish background in particular, was not to be tolerated anymore. Another leading journalist on the right, Árpád Szakács, prepared 15 pieces on the topic in the same daily paper in 2017 and 2018 under the heading "Whose cultural dictatorship is it?" In 2019, the two series were published in a separate volume (Bayer & Szakács, 2019). A poet and writer, Dénes János Orbán, also wrote a six-piece long series under the title "Marginalia to *Kulturkampf*" in 2018. A right-leaning historian, Márton Békés, published a 400-page long book with the title "Cultural Warfare" (Békés, 2020) on the inevitability of culture war if the political right wants to win elections in the future.

The greater part of the articles coming from the cultural left responded to the rightist criticisms and accusations, and that was what made them serial, but some dealt independently with the tendencies in the sphere of culture. In 2017 and 2018, several articles on the issue of finances in culture were raised by a respected literary critic (Reményi, 2017) who dwelt on the rightist advancement in literature and arts. The leading daily paper of the political left, *Népszava*, has been using the tag *Kulturkampf* since 2014 but only one article was tagged before the middle of 2018 whereas 31 were tagged after that time. Another tag, *Kultúrharca*,

shows similar numbers: a single article before our period, whereas 52 occurred during the following two and a half years.

It is highly unlikely that these series would have been written if they had not resonated with their audiences.

#### 6.1.2. Injustice

The rightist and the leftist article series mentioned above are hardly more than complaints about the unfair treatment by the other side. The right laments the double standard and the wide international visibility and reputation of the left-leaning artists and the much more generous finances they get even now when rightist appointees distribute sources, which demonstrates the persistent and unbreakable left-liberal hegemony in culture. A poet and journalist compares the reception of two poets respected by the political right with the one of the writers close to the left:

The two exceptionally great poets' reception by the liberal side amounts practically to zero. If anyone wants to deny it, he ought to present and compare the bibliography of works on Esterházy and Nadas with the ones on Faludy and Kányádi, and add the comparative lists of the university master theses as well....It is a bad argument to say that the opportunities are equal because the national camp has had exceptionally great sums for years, which it should have used much better; the issue does not depend on money, rather on mentality, the attitude of the people should be changed. (Orbán, 2018)

The left-leaning and liberal authors also monitor the support the leftist organisations obtain vis-a-vis the rightist ones and they also find the other camp undeservedly better off particularly when comparing cultural performances. Both sides eagerly calculate how much they have lost to their counterparts in terms of money and influence.

#### 6.1.3. Powerlessness

Communicators on the cultural left often mention the two-third majority of the right-wing coalition in the parliament and the aggressive way in which the right prefers to use its power both in legislation and personnel changes in culture. A left-leaning author, Gergely Péterfy, wrote on Orbán's regime:

The regime... is establishing its own network of institutions where revolutionary ideology is compulsory and where a class of clowns has been made aristocracy. In that parallel universe of the regime, which is the network of academies, universities, research institutes and journals that suffocate the institutions of democratic and European traditions by their abundance of money, suspends the validity of discourses

the normal part of the world has been indulged in. (Péterfy, 2017)

As shown in the quotation in Section 6.1.2, the rightist public figures claim that the huge influence of the left-liberals stems from the communist era, which now is backed by European and US support. They say that the indoctrination by the Marxist and later by the postmodern cultural elites, coming practically from the same circles, has had such a persistent influence on the mentality and attitude of the audience that it is an almost impossible mission for the cultural right to make changes in the short term.

## 6.2. Repression and Outcomes

*Ressentiment* leads to specific changes in the emotional realm. The subjects do not want to admit responsibility, rather deny or repress any acknowledgement of any blame they may share for causing their own unpleasant experience. The subjects, therefore, protect their self-image by specific defence mechanisms. Here, I am presenting three directions the mechanisms can take: externalization, self-victimization as identity work, and transvaluation.

### 6.2.1. Externalization by Blaming

Both camps name the people responsible for the deterioration of culture in Hungary. They are painted as demonic figures coming from the cultural elites; they have, therefore, betrayed high culture in general, and art in particular, by joining political groups. For the left, all the rightists participating in *Kulturkampf* are guilty because they have the government behind them, thereby they let the government have a say in the development of culture. The right considers the canon makers of the cultural left are to blame for excluding their favoured great artists. Even if their parties are not powerful politically, the cultural elite has inherited authority and domestic and international networks from the past, whereby it has a huge influence.

In rightist public communication, the political and cultural left systematically tries to put the political and cultural right to shame. In the autumn of 2020, well-known artists from Cate Blanchett to Robert Wilson declared solidarity with the cause of the students who were revolting against the government's measures to re-establish the University of Theatre and Film Arts Budapest and the plans to appoint new principals mainly from among the right-leaning artists. Meanwhile, the rightist journalists explained this international protestation as being the result of a conspiracy on the left to destroy Hungary's image and to shame and humiliate the country abroad. The leftist communication, in turn, interpreted the case of the University as an explicitly political move by the government against cultural values. Although the new appointees in charge of the University used to be great

artists in the past, the leftist discourse says, they lost their talent when they joined the efforts of the government and Viktor Orbán personally and accepted the task of conducting a rightist occupation of culture.

### 6.2.2. Identity Work: Self-Victimization

A left-leaning journalist and writer wrote an indignant article against the generous scholarship a government-financed public institution granted to writers and poets from both political camps:

Last time I was shocked by the story of the Térey scholarship. Lay persons may appreciate the idea: Let's support the Hungarian writers with a major grant for period that is long enough to produce a great work. But the real purpose is again to divide, divide the Hungarian literature in this case, to spoil the so far credible voices, to demonstrate that the champions of morality also go after the fat bit. (Karafiáth, 2020)

The writer was unable to accept that anything favourable could happen. Positive developments are but traps to compromise the artists critical towards the governance of the political right.

The communicators on the political right also insist on their identity as a victim. Although their political parties have won every parliamentary, local, and European election since the middle of 2006—and even though Fidesz, the large right-leaning party, has been the most popular according to opinion polls since that time—they still recurrently write about the right's bleak future, given the leftist and liberal cultural hegemony. There is a conspicuous self-contradiction in the discourse: They simultaneously claim that it is impossible to win in politics without cultural hegemony, and they boast of their victories since 2010. It is hardly possible to avoid the conclusion that they lay claim to the identity of the victim and that of the victor at the same time.

### 6.2.3. Transvaluation

The two camps have a specific transvaluation discourse in common: Both claim that the other exerts political power in the culture at the expense of authentic artistic worth.

The cultural right accuses the rival party of ignoring and excluding great achievements several authors outside the canon produced. The discourse explains that since the cultural canon is based on political power and not on merit, political power is necessary to change the situation otherwise the old canon and canon makers would maintain a false hierarchy. This is indeed transvaluation: The cultural right perceives injustice from the side of the canon, wants to be appreciated by the canon makers, but being unable to reach that, it judges the canon wrong, not worth trying to get into. Sometimes the latter disparagement takes the form of underrating works

by leftist artists as meaningless and unenjoyable for the Hungarian people, which is not surprising because the so-called Europeaness and liberalism on the base of which they are produced have become outdated and irrelevant:

When you have to work according to the regulations of political correctness, you will think it over whether to write erotic love poems or whether you are allowed to let your humour show, and whether you are free to choose topic at all. It is far from easy to write and live foreseeing that if you make a mistake, if you meddle with something delicate, you will be excommunicated and financial and publication opportunities will shrink for you. (Orbán, 2018)

The other camp also insists on the principle of meritocracy and denies the existence of any canon or political consideration in judging works. The left-leaning communicators point at the politically motivated invasion by the government's appointees and favourites in culture, which threatens the sphere with bad art gaining ground. A cameraman says in an interview: "This regime thinks talents can be appointed. In contradistinction to them, although knowing that talents were not loyal, Kádár and his staff gave them some space." (Kardos, 2020). Still, from time to time, even left-leaning public intellectuals admit that there is a canon, a rather questionable one (Kőbányai, 2018), and that the canon makers have had a long-standing alliance with politicians of the late socialist and liberal parties.

## 7. Conclusion

Although I have had space to present only a couple of components and outcomes of *ressentiment*, it was not difficult to find communicative means that could be traced back to, and which capitalize on, the affective style. One could see the obsessive sensitivities towards the signs of injustice, the discourses on powerlessness, and the outcomes of *ressentiment*: transvaluation, self-contradiction, self-victimization, and scapegoating. The recurrent deployment of these means can be explained by their efficiency, which, in turn, verifies the premise of the hypothesis of the research: The political communication on *Kulturkampf* took advantage of the *ressentiment* present among the citizens.

The hypothesis also foresaw the existence of double *ressentiment*, that is, the possibility that two political communities have *ressentiment* towards each other at the same time. Indeed, the research could detect the components of *ressentiment* and means to manage it in the activities of both political camps. A great part of their communicative efforts was invested in the emotional episodes that maintained and oriented the affective processes feeding *ressentiment* and the outcomes of the impotent revenge were directed towards the other camp.

Following Nietzsche or Scheler and supported by the research on *Kulturkampf*, one may conclude that *ressentiment* offers a plausible analytical framework to study a considerable part of political communication processes in Hungary and presumably in other democratic European countries facing a culture war. *Ressentiment* is a psychological resource politicians and public communicators can rely on to mobilize citizens for a specific purpose. Being indeterminate regarding objects and focus, it opens a large space for politicians to manoeuvre. In the framework of a special political therapy, they can offer threats and hopes, ways of deferment and outburst, conspiracies of scapegoats, and the sharing of victimhood. This is a therapy also in the sense that the success depends on the personalities and sensitivities of the citizens and their groups: Some accept threats that face them as explanation for their discontent; some need the scapegoats on which to project their frustration; others find relief in self-victimization; and further groups consider their bad feelings legitimate and only to be acted upon when they are informed that others are also hurt. There are many combinations that exist within this collection, all of which are capable of appealing and uniting citizens in one single political community: an in-group based on *ressentiment*.

More specifically, in the Hungarian case, one can see twofold *ressentiment* in another sense as well. Both camps nurtured *ressentiment* in two fields, but each focussed mainly on one of them: The political right concentrated on culture whereas the political left on party politics. Rightist communicators tried to manage the citizens' *ressentiment* by raising cultural injuries and grievance, whereas the cultural left did the same alluding to the political deficiencies of the ruling right as reflected by an un-European eagerness to occupy culture. Each invested in the other field as well. The cultural left foresaw oppression and the deterioration of culture due to the political preponderance of the right, whereas right-leaning communicators repeated that the cultural hegemony of the political left and liberals might result in their political prevalence in the long run.

We, hence, see a twofold double *ressentiment*: There are two fields where communicative means can be used to manage *ressentiment*, and there are two political communities in Hungary, just as in some other countries, which are receptive to specific efforts of affect management. One may conclude that in cases where a political force is in power for a prolonged period, and particularly if it has a huge majority which causes recurrent frustration amongst the rest of the political elite and its voters, coupled with the urge to avoid facing failure and not to attribute it to the losing side's weakness, its elite and audience may survive the hard times by finding superiority in some non-political realm, such as, in this case, culture.

The research and the article have limitations. The first being that only one country and one case served to test the hypothesis. More cases would have resulted



in more nuanced knowledge on the political communication of *Kulturkampf* and its use in managing *ressentiment*. Secondly, triangulation through the analysis of citizens' reception would increase the validity and generalizability of the analytical framework. Thirdly, on another level of analysis, the prototypical indicator nouns and narratives used to detect the components of *ressentiment* could be broadened according to a more comprehensive approach to, and definition of, *ressentiment*.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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