Parliamentary Museums and Exhibitions in Central Europe

Ivan Halász

https://doi.org/10.33542/VSS2025-2-3

Abstract

The article focuses on museums and exhibitions that present and promote the history of parliaments in Central European countries. In the Czech and Polish parliaments, there are only shorter exhibitions presenting some elements of their constitutional history. The situation is similar in Slovakia; however, Slovakia has, within the framework of the Slovak National Museum, a separate Museum of Slovak National Councils (1848, 1918, 1944) in Myjava. Although it is not a typical parliamentary museum, it contains important information on Slovak public history. The oldest traditions are held by the Hungarian parliamentary museum in Budapest, which existed in the building of Hungarian Parliament between 1929 and 1949 and then revived in 2014. In the neoclassical building of the Austrian Parliament in Vienna, there is an impressive and interactive exhibition called Demokratikum, which focuses not only on presenting Austrian parliamentarism but also mainly on Austrian origins of democracy and forms of democratic participation. The Austrian, Hungarian, and Slovak models of presenting their legislative and constitutional traditions are therefore different. Austria focuses primarily on presenting its democratic past, Hungary on the history of its parliamentarism, and Slovakia on the Slovak national-emancipation process in 19th century.

Key words: *constitution, democracy, exhibition, museum, parliament*

Introduction

Central Europe has a rich history of national representative bodies, whose origins go back to the Middle Ages. The terms Sejm, Snem, or Országgyűles have been used for centuries to refer to them. Naturally, various Latin names were also originally used. (Képes, 2019, 15-16.) However, the emergence of modern parliaments, which, in addition to legislative functions, also effectively controlled the government and adopted budgets, can only be discussed from the mid-19th century onwards.

One of the first modern constitutions on the old continent was adopted on May 3, 1791, in the Polish-Lithuanian state. This constitution was born before the first French constitution (1791), but it soon ceased to exist, so the Poles were able to restore their own national bicameral parliamentarism only after 1918. Before that, they became familiar with modern parliaments within the Habsburg Empire, unified Germany, and, from the beginning of the 20th century, also in Tsarist Russia. (Kallas, 1999, 323-327.) The other nations of Central Europe

shaped their modern representative bodies and gained parliamentary experience within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

The specific conditions and concrete timing of this process were different. The acceptance of individual parliamentary bodies and their significance in the process of nation-building and building of modern political identity also varied. The overall relationship to the past in the Central European region also has many national aspects. In addition, political and legal priorities sometimes changed depending on the overall developments. These factors continue to influence the processes of shaping memory policy and, through them, the cultivation of one's own constitutional identity.

Naturally, a lot always depended on the concrete forms of democratic, authoritarian, or dictatorial regimes in the countries of the region at the time. The relationship of individual political regimes to their own parliamentary past did not have to be identical. After 1989, however, all Central European states live under conditions of parliamentary democracy. Democracy generally makes the traditions of its own parliamentarism popular and politically necessary. The active policy of democracy-building is also very important.

In the process of popularizing their own democratic and parliamentary history, parliamentary bodies themselves, their buildings, the old prominent members, various artifacts connected with parliaments in culture, references in literature, folklore, and other similar elements can play an important role. Nowadays, promoting their own parliamentary history and traditions is a task for the professional parliamentary apparatus itself; however, fundamental decisions in this sphere of public life are also made by high-level politics.

The situation of individual Central European national parliaments in this area is not the same. From this perspective, the region can be divided into two major groups. The first group consists of countries whose parliaments have at most a small exhibition, which includes brief information about their history and possibly a few important historical artifacts and symbols (e.g. original texts, insignias, flags etc.). This group primarily includes the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. The absence of a dedicated parliamentary museum, however, does not mean a complete lack of self-promotion, which can be carried out through organized tours, educational programs, or open house events.

The existence of a special museum or a well-developed permanent exhibition always accessible to the general public, however, represents a different level of parliamentary self-presentation and promotion of the purpose of its existence. The second group of countries, therefore, consists of states that have such an institution. Specifically, this refers to Austria and Hungary, although in the case of Austria, it is more of a large permanent exhibition than a museum.

1 Slovakia

Slovakia holds a unique position among the Central European countries, because in the building of the National Council there is only a small exhibition with a few interesting exhibits, which is far from being a museum. However, in the town of Myjava, since 1968, there has been the Museum of Slovak National Councils, which is part of the Slovak National Museum headquartered in Bratislava. It is therefore not an integral part of the Slovak parliament. However, the Slovak parliament traces its roots precisely to the first Slovak National Council, which convened on September 19, 1848, in the house of Mrs. Anna Kolóniová[1], which is still part of the museum to this day. (SNM) The museum was established in Myjava, a small town on the Czech-Slovak border, because in 1848 this region was home to the first Slovak national armed uprising. This uprising was led by the first Slovak National Council.

The museum in Myjava uses the grammatical plural in the name in the case of national councils. In modern Slovak history, such a representative political body was actually formed three times – first during the revolutionary Spring of Nations in 1848, then after the collapse of Austro-Hungary in October 1918, and finally at the end of 1943, as the central body of the Slovak anti-fascist resistance movement. (Pekník, 2009)

It then transformed in 1944 into the leading body of the Slovak National Uprising against Nazi Germany (August–October 1944). Until then, it was always a political representative body, whose members were not directly elected. The Slovak National Council only became a truly elected representative body for the whole of Slovakia in 1946. In 1946, the members of the Slovak National Council did gain electoral legitimacy, but direct elections had not yet taken place. 100 mandates within the Slovak parliament based in Bratislava were allocated in August 1946 according to the results of the elections to the Czechoslovak Constituent Assembly in May 1946. At that time, the overwhelming majority in Slovakia was won by the politicians of the Democratic Party. (Podolec, 2017, 285-299.) Since then, it has functioned as the highest Slovak representative body, and since 1993 at the level of an independent and sovereign Slovak Republic.

The museum in Myjava has a distinctive character and profile. Its main goal is not to present the development of Slovak parliamentarism, but rather the struggle of the Slovaks for the recognition of their national and state identity, or independence. The main focus of the

[1] At that time, the Slovak National Council had only eight members - three political leaders, three military commanders, and two secretaries. Therefore, this body could meet in a single room of Mrs. Kolóniová's private house.

museum's permanent exhibition is on the events of 1848/1849. In addition, its exhibitions also serve the purposes of a regional museum.

The symbolism of 1848 is highlighted by various sculptures, reliefs, and other artifacts within the museum, such as the group sculpture 'The Nation Awakening from Servitude,' the sculpture 'Slavic Linden,' and so on. The museum also has an external exhibition outside the town of Myjava (Košariská), dedicated to the figure of Milan Rastislav Štefánik, the founder of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Therefore, it is not a classic parliamentary museum, although it has close ties with the symbolism of the current Slovak parliament.

2 Hungary

The Hungarian Parliamentary Museum in Budapest is probably one of the oldest museums of its kind in Europe. The decision to establish it within the parliament was made as early as 1923, but it only began operating in 1929. (Lengyel-Kedves, 2016, 173-186.) It experienced its pre-war golden period at the end of the 1930s, when it was among the most popular museums in the Hungarian capital. Its popularity was also boosted by the fact that it was located directly in the legislative building and admission was free.

In the pre-war years, the museum focused on collecting the legacies and heritige of prominent political figures, but it also collected various artifacts related to Hungarian constitutional history and the history of the building of parliament. It began presenting its history starting from the Middle Ages, but overall, its work was thematically dominated by the 19th century. (Cs. Lengyel, 2016, 109-120.)

Although its staff originally avoided current politics, they later began organizing exhibitions on contemporary political developments in the first half of the 20th century. They also presented the consequences of the Treaty of Trianon. In 1942, due to wartime events, the museum had to close its doors, and during the battles for Budapest (1944/1945), it suffered great losses along with the damaged parliamentary building. However, its staff attempted to resume its activities immediately after the war, collecting materials related also to the revived political life in 1945-1947, but the new communist political power decided to close the museum. Its collections, which before the war comprised approximately 16,000 exhibits and documents, were divided among various Hungarian museums. (Lengyel-Kedves, 2016, 173-186.)

The Hungarian Parliamentary Museum resumed its activities in 2014 on a new legal basis. (Berényi 2016) The museum is no longer located directly in the parliament building, but in the new visitor center, which is situated underground near the northern wing of the impressive neo-Gothic parliamentary building. Visiting the museum is free, and tourists only have to pay for a tour of the parliament.

The centerpiece here is the permanent exhibition „A Thousand Years of the Hungarian Parliament." Both tours can be combined, but they can also be taken separately. From the visitor center, it is also possible to visit other exhibitions, which, for example, are connected to the construction of the parliament building at the beginning of the 20th century or to the revolutionary events of 1956.

The museum's exhibits are labeled in two languages, Hungarian and English, and the supplementary text is also in these languages. However, the entire tour can be taken with commentary in all major world languages and in the languages of Hungary's neighboring countries. In addition, the text is available in Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Portugal and Vietnamese.

The Parliamentary Museum in Budapest uses parallelly traditional and very modern methods. The exhibition, whose main theme is the development of the Hungarian legislature (Parliament) from the early Middle Ages to the present, contains a large number of physical objects (for example, a decorated urn into which members of the lower house cast their votes during the interwar period), historical documents, as well as short films, newspapers, the original voices of old politicians, or the uniforms of constitutional officials and the guards of the parliament building. There are also wax figures depicting, for example, Maria Theresa, a model of an open-air medieval parliamentary session in the village of Rákos near Buda, and similar displays. Historical persons (Lajos Kossuth, Ferenc Deák etc.) of the 19th-century liberal movement, who contributed to the transformation of the feudal parliament into a modern representative legislature, play an important role here. The first women (Margit Slachta and Anna Kéthly) in the Hungarian parliament also have a place in the exhibition. The last images and exhibits are dedicated to the restoration of the democratic parliament in 1990. (Berényi, 2016)

3 Austria

Austria is connected with Hungary not only by a long common history but also by the impressive parliament building. Originally, it was the imperial parliament of the western (Austrian) part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (Cisleithania). It was built in the 1870s in a neoclassical style. Since the interwar period, the former imperial parliament has served as the parliament of the new Austrian Republic. Unlike the current Hungarian parliament, it has retained a bicameral character, which is mainly related to Austria's federal structure.

To this day, it combines both old and modern elements. The Federal Council, for example, meets in a beautifully decorated room that was originally, before 1918, a budget hall and a meeting place for Austrian and Hungarian parliamentary delegations. During the republic period, parliamentary committees met here for a long time. The National Council – the lower

but decisive chamber of the Austrian parliament – meets in the modernly renovated spaces of the former Upper Chamber of the former Imperial Council (Herrenhaus), which was destroyed by a bomb during World War II. The room is dominated by wooden walls, a glass roof, wooden benches for the deputies, and other decorations. The entire hall exudes a minimalist and refreshing spirit of the modern era.

In the former grand hall of the lower chamber (chamber of deputies) of the Imperial Council, where in the past, among others, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk also met, meetings are no longer held regularly; however, occasional joint ceremonial sessions of both chambers of the Austrian parliament are sometimes held here. It is also where the inauguration of the new president of the republic takes place. The impressive hall, where at the end of the 19th century 516 deputies from 17 kingdoms and countries forming the Austrian part of the common monarchy met, is built in the style of Ancient Greece and Rome. To some extent, the hall resembles the ancient Roman Senate.

On the ground floor of the Austrian Parliament building – opposite the main entrance – there is an information desk and then a particularly interesting bilingual (German and English) exhibition: Demokratikum - Experience Parliament (in German: Erlebnis Parlament). Within it, 27 interactive media stations illustrate the development of democracy in Austria, as well as possible forms of democratic participation for citizens and the overall work of the parliament. (Welcome to Parliament)

Unlike the Hungarian Parliament, the presentation of Austrian parliamentary development does not begin in the Middle Ages, but only in 1848, when a liberal constitutional system began to be established in Central Europe. The development of the constitutional system in Austria is divided into periods before the First World War, the interwar republican period, the period of Nazism, and the post-war restoration of independent Austrian statehood. Key laws here include the constitutional laws of December 1867 and the constitution of 1920. The key periods of Austrian constitutional development here are defined by the years 1848 (the civic liberal revolution), 1867 (Austro-Hungarian dualism), 1918 (declaration of the republic), 1920 (adoption of the constitution), 1934 (authoritarian coup d'etat), 1938 (Anschluss), 1945 (end of Nazism, restoration of Austria, and the beginning of a new democracy), 1955 (regaining of sovereignty), and 2004 (entry into the EU). The years 1945 and 1955 are presented here as positive turning points in Austrian history.

The exhibition contains many pictures, posters, portraits, as well as explanatory text. The exhibition features several interactive tables, and from the films projected onto the tables, Austrian politicians speak to the visitors. The target audience of the exhibition includes not only adult citizens but also children and students, to whom a large part of the exhibition is adapted.

Next to the exhibition, the bookstore and souvenir shop also offer a variety of books for children and young people of different age groups. Thematically, these publications deal with the relationship between law and legislation, the state and its citizens, or the explanation and promotion of the current constitution. Overall, Demokratikum—true to its name—is focused on strengthening democratic awareness and is oriented towards the future.

In the Austrian Parliament, even the bistro, canteen, and café promote democracy, constitutionality, and Austrian legal traditions. It is dedicated, according to the prominent Austrian legal theorist, one of the main authors of the 1920 constitution and later president of the Constitutional Court, Hans Kelsen – Kelsen in Parliament. The menu in the canteen boasts a humorous title, Hungry for Democracy. On the restaurant's website, there are also phrases such as: „Our democracy is hungry." Most of the dishes represent and promote Austrian cuisine, which the restaurants also emphasize in their self-presentation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the countries of Central Europe do not neglect their parliamentary heritage and also attempt to cultivate their constitutional-democratic traditions. At the same time, however, museums and exhibitions related to the legislative body do not represent a unified model in the region. Naturally, this is not a problem, as each nation and state of Central Europe, despite many similarities and shared historical roots, still has a slightly different specific past.

This is also reflected in the priorities of individual museums and exhibitions. The oldest and probably the largest museum in terms of area in Budapest, for example, emphasizes primarily the history of the parliament and legislation. The Austrian Parliament and its extensive and methodologically refined exhibition, Demokratikum, is focused more on the presentation and promotion of democracy and its values. It sees the roots of constitutional democracy primarily in the 19th century, not in the distant feudal past. The Museum of the Slovak National Councils in Myjava, on the other hand, emphasizes primarily the national-state emancipation of Slovaks. This is mainly about the struggles of Slovaks for the recognition of their national individuality and later about achieving their own statehood, which was much more evident to the Austrians and Hungarians. Moreover, the Slovak museum is not located in the parliament building, or even in the capital of Slovakia. In addition to its main focus, it also serves as a regional museum. Post-war — otherwise very successful — Austria had to reflect on its war-era Nazi past, which is probably why the emphasis on democracy here is no coincidence. Hungary, on the other hand, has traditionally been proud of its old statehood and constitutional traditions, regardless of whether they are modern or old parliamentary traditions. In any case,

in all the countries mentioned, this is an important forum for fostering democratic awareness and constitutional patriotism.

Acknowledgements

Publication is prepared within the VEGA Project No. 1/0487/24 |13| Strengthening of Constitutional Awareness and the Authority of the Constitution in the Central European Context.

References

Begleitbroschüre zur Litfasssäule/ Accompanying Booklet for the Advertising Pillar. Parlement Österreich 80 70 30 Jahre.

BERÉNYI, M. 2016. *One thousend years of Hungarian legislation*. Budapest: Országház Könyvkiadó, ISBN 9789639848986.

CS. LENGYEL B. Az Országgyűlési Múzeum. *Folia Historica*. 109-154.

FEITL, Í. 2023. *Az Országgyűlési Múzeum*. Budapest: Országház Könyvkiadó, 96 p. ISBN 9786156704030.

KALLAS, M. 1999. *Historia ustroju Polski X-XXw.* Warszawa: Wyd. Naukowe PWN. ISBN 8201121637.

KÉPES, G. 2019. The name of the game – the historical names of the Hungarian parliament. *Central European Papers*. 7 (2) 9-32. DOI 10.25142/cep.2019.005

LENGYEL, B., KEDVES Gy. 2016. Az Országgyűlési Múzeum egykor és ma. AETAS 31 (1) 173-186.

PEKNÍK, M. (Ed.) 2009. *Slovak National Concils and the Road to Parliamentarism*. Bratislava: Veda, ISBN 978-80-224-1088-5.

PODOLEC, O. 2017. Takzvaná obnova zastupiteľských orgánov na Slovensku po voľbách 1946. In: Parlamentní volby 1946 a Československo: souvislosti, prognózy, fakta, následky. - Praha: Historický ústav AV ČR. 285-299. ISBN 978-80-7286-310-5.

Welcome to Parliament. Parliament Austria. Available at: www.parlament.gv.at

SNM. Available at: www.snm.sk/muzea-snm/muzeum-slovenskych-narodnych-rad/muzeum-slovenskych-narodnych-rad/o-muzeu#menu

Contact address

prof. Dr. Ivan Halász Ph.D.
ID ORCID: 0000-0002-5340-6595
Ludovika University of Public Service, Budapest
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice
Faculty of Public Administration
Popradská 66, 040 11 Košice
E-mail: ivan.halasz@upjs.sk