

Signs Be Damned: Budapest Street Renaming Debate Continues

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Alongside the recent court decision banning Nazi and Communist symbols in Hungary this month, the government continues to dig into the budget in an effort to clean up the Socialist-inspired streets and boulevards throughout the country.

To aid the widespread changes, the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has published a list of controversial historical figures to be avoided when renaming such streets.

A new law requiring all controversially named areas—be they streets, squares, or otherwise—to be renamed by 2014 bans the “name of persons who played a leading role in founding, developing or maintaining the authoritarian political regimes of the 20th century, or words and expressions or names of organisations which can be directly related to the authoritarian political regimes of the 20th century.”

In February, the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities contended that such a figure was honored in Kunhegyes, a small town in eastern Hungary and who adopted for a street the name of the Hungarian Holocaust-era ruler Miklós Horthy.

The Hungarian capital itself has seen its fair share of street renaming in the past few years, each incident sparking as much criticism of the ruling party Fidesz and its actions. In May alone of last year, 26 streets in Budapest were renamed.

In 2011, Roosevelt tér ceded to Széchenyi István tér, named for the founder of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Although Moszkva tér, the label given by the communist government in 1951, stuck around for some time on city maps, the square was reverted to Széll Kálmán tér. Oddly enough, a small square north of the Buda-side Margaret Bridge was even given the name Elvis Presley tér, commemorating the King as an honorary citizen of Budapest.

Other major changes have been the renaming of Köztársaság square—famous for being the HQ of the former communist party—to Pope John Paul II, and the transition of the steel girder Lágymányosi Bridge to Rákóczi

Bridge, taking the name of Hungary’s leader in the uprising against the Habsburgs. From 1950 to 1990, the main traffic road in Budapest, Nagykörút, honored the Russian communist leader Vladimir Lenin.

Going even farther back, the famous Andrassy boulevard was renamed three times in the 1950s: Stalin Street in 1950 during the Soviet occupation, Avenue of Hungarian Youth during the 1956 uprising, and People’s Republic Street following the revolt. 1990 saw the Élyséesian way restored to its original title.

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