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Those who are not against us, are they with us? Cultural Policy of the Kádár Consolidation and the Opposition of the Political System in Hungary

Reinhart Koselleck's book entitled *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* scrutinizes, among many other things, how history is shaped by the interrelationship of the past, the present and the future.¹ When analysing this, Koselleck found that experience is *the past present with us* and expectation is *the manifested future*. Two experienced phenomena that connect the past and the future. If experience and expectation differ greatly, however, immense tensions are accumulated. That is when "it is time to take action", so that "new time perspectives" can open up to those living in the era concerned. *The gap between experience and expectation must be bridged [...] again and again to enable one [...] to live.*²

The change in Hungary's political regime in 1989 could be a textbook example of Koselleck's theory. Amidst a single-party dictatorship, the tension stemming from the gap between reality and desires fuelled political changes that conveyed the possibility of a multi-party democracy and thereby opened up "new time perspectives".

Experience – the part of the past that is present with us

In 1972, Dr. József Béres invented Béres drops, a liquid supplement containing trace minerals, acclaimed as a medicine to prevent various forms of cancer. The reigning power, however, declared that "this person [Béres] is an outsider" and did not support the medicine. They blocked the cause wherever they could. In 1975, criminal proceedings were launched against the inventor on quackery charges. József Béres's misfortunes were also portrayed in a documentary film, the making of which was hindered in many ways. The poet László Nagy, who was a die-hard advocate of József Béres and his invention, turned to Imre Pozsgay³, minister of education at the time, for help. Pozsgay advised Nagy to put aside all his former vows and "go on a pilgrimage", i.e. visit György Aczél, the key cultural commissioner.⁴ *Aczél was a true collector of tro-*

1 KOSELLECK, Reinhart: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Atlantisz, Budapest 2003. (The author wishes to thank Éva Petrás for her inspiration regarding Koselleck's book.)

2 Ibid., p. 424.

3 Imre Pozsgay (1933–2016), politician, Minister for Culture 1976–1982, Minister of State 1988–1990. A leading figure of the communist party's reform wing, he maintained close relations to opposition groups around the so-called popular writers.

4 György Aczél (1917–1991), communist politician. After his assistant-butcher father passed away, he was put into an orphanage where he also carried out his studies. He later obtained an assistant mason

phies. Those who approached and visited him for assistance were put away as trophies, kept in reserve. – said Pozsgay, explaining the rationale of his advice a few decades later. He argued to László Nagy as follows: *You are a key player for this cause, which could fail if you do not change your behaviour. [...] Remember, when Barbarossa returned to Milan, they blamed him for breaching the vow he had made earlier. Barbarossa replied: “I vowed, but my vow was not about keeping it!”*⁵ László Nagy went on a pilgrimage to Aczél; the film was completed but not approved for public screening.

This was one typical story of everyday life under the Kádár⁶ regime. It not only illustrates how defenceless a talented individual was in the 1970s and 1980s in Hungary, but also provides an insight into the mindset of the reigning power at the time. It highlights that the rare opportunities of free thought were treated and distributed like favours, with the reigning power asking for a high price in exchange: the pilgrimage and the acceptance of becoming a trophy. How valuable were these trophies for the regime? This is well reflected in the sniffy remarks made in higher circles (like “even the proud László Nagy had to find a way to become a comrade of Aczél”) and in the state of mind that can be tricked to give up one’s moral convictions (*I vowed, but my vow was not about keeping it*).

certificate at a boarding school. He was mostly self-taught as an autodidact, and also completed one semester at the Academy of Drama and Film besides his work. At the beginning of the 1930s he joined the Zionist youth movement and in 1935 became a member of the illegal communist party. At the beginning of 1942 he was arrested for illegal communist activities and locked in Vác prison. At the end of 1942 he was called up to do labour service where he managed to disassemble himself and return to Budapest. During the German occupation of Hungary in 1944 he was involved in the rescue of Jews as a member of the Zionist movement. After World War II he was appointed as communist party secretary, first in Zemplén county then in Baranya county in 1948. He was arrested on July 6, 1949 and sentenced to life imprisonment in one of the show trials of László Rajk (a Hungarian Communist politician, who served as Minister of the Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was arrested on May 30, 1949, and executed on October 15, 1949. The Rajk trial marked the beginning of Stalin’s anti-Titoist drive and the beginning of the removal of all political parties in Hungary). He was released on August 25, 1954, and rehabilitated. During the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, he joined János Kádár’s new regime, and on October 31, he became the founding member of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP; the reorganised former communist party) and he was elected a member of its Central Committee. After the Soviet troops crushed the revolt, on April 13, 1957, he was appointed Deputy Minister of Culture. He served as First Deputy Minister of Culture from February 10, 1958 until April 18, 1967. In this position, he gradually grew to become a leading cultural politician of the Kádár regime. On April 12, 1967, he was appointed secretary of the Central Committee of the MSZMP and was entrusted with the general control of cultural life in this capacity. In 1971, he became chairman of the newly formed cultural policy working group within the Central Committee, and held his office until March 20, 1974. Subsequently, his career and influence fell into decline. He was Director General of the Party’s Social Sciences Institute from 1985 until his retirement in October 1989.

- 5 BIHARI, Mihály – KÓSA, László – POZSGAY, Imre: *Mi történt velünk. Magyarországi sorskérdések, 1987–2014* (What Happened to Us. The Core Issues of Hungary, 1987–2014). Éghajlat, Budapest 2014, p. 34.
- 6 János Kádár (1912–1989), Deputy First Secretary of the communist party after 1945, Minister of the Interior from 1948 to 1950. He was under arrest from 1952 to 1954. First Secretary of the party’s Pest County Committee from 1955, member of the party’s leadership bodies, the Political Committee and the Central Leadership Board. During the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 the founder and First Secretary of the MSZMP, member of the Nagy Government as Minister of State. Following the Soviet Occupation on November 4, 1956 (until January 28, 1958) Prime Minister of the “Revolutionary Worker-Peasant Government” (set up to defeat the revolution) and as First Secretary of the MSZMP Hungary’s political leader until May 22, 1988.

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One characteristic feature of this Kádarian communist dictatorship mechanism was that the “free manoeuvring space” reserved for “those who thought differently” conveyed at least as many traps as opportunities. The issue not only related to the rather limited free space allowed by the set boundaries. Even this free space was not an autonomous “small circle” of free thought. Its mere existence and role were already part of the power games, closely interlinked with the “favour-based” aspects of Aczél’s cultural policymaking, keeping participants in a highly defenceless state. The choice offered by the regime was not necessarily between fair and unfair. Instead, it related to various distorted types of human self-esteem. As in the story cited above: either one’s active commitment to a cause or his human dignity would be harmed. The regime allowed a free choice between stubborn vanity and the “sin” of becoming compromised. Either was fine with them.

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“Consolidation” is perhaps the most frequently used term when it comes to describing the era of János Kádár’s rule, a path chosen by the Hungarian Communist Party in 1963 after striking down on and retaliating against the 1956 revolution. The approach they elaborated⁷ for treating society was, in their own words, an “alliance policy”. The core principles of that approach also served as guidelines for state security work, propaganda, cultural, and economic policy, and defined all aspects of exercising power. In comparison to the Rákosi regime⁸, a paradigm shift occurred. In the name of Kádár’s slogan, *Those who are not against us are with us*⁹, Hungarian society was offered a new compromise: It was not some incessant fear that forced people to accept being deprived of political rights and intellectual freedom. Instead, a slightly calmer, harassment-free private life and tight but predictable financial security were offered, somewhat easing the tension caused by the above disenfranchisement.

There is a not despicable [...] segment of conservatives [...] comprising those who [...] can only exist within a certain degree of security. [...] What they need is not pure political conservatism but a certain predictability of conditions, [...] or, in a simple and short word: consolidation,

7 See details in TABAJDI, Gábor: *Kiegyezés Kádárral. “Szövetségi politika”, 1956–1963* (Reconciliation with Kádár. “Alliance policy”, 1956–1963). Jaffa, Budapest 2013.

8 Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971), communist politician, commissar for Socialist production in the Communist regime of Béla Kun (1919). After the triumph of the counterrevolution in Hungary he flew to Moscow. Dispatched in 1924 to reorganize the Hungarian Communist Party, he was arrested, and finally in 1934 sentenced to life imprisonment. He was released to the Soviet Union in 1940, in exchange for the Hungarian revolutionary banners captured by the Russian troops at Világos in 1849. In the Soviet Union, he became leader of the Comintern. Returning to Hungary with Soviet troops in 1944, Rákosi became secretary of the Hungarian communist party. A confirmed Stalinist, he reigned supreme as party chief from 1949 to 1953, from 1952 also as prime minister. Following Stalin’s death, he was forced to relinquish the premiership to the reform-minded Imre Nagy and was removed as First Secretary of the Party under pressure from the Soviet Politburo in June 1956. When revolution broke out in Budapest in October 1956, he again fled to Russia.

9 In a speech delivered at the Congress of the Patriotic People’s Front on December 8, 1961, János Kádár rephrased Mátyás Rákosi’s slogan, *Those who are not with us are against us* as follows: *Yes we believe that those who are not against the People’s Republic of Hungary and the MSZMP, are actually with them.*

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wrote István Bibó¹⁰ in his essay, *The Crisis of Hungarian Democracy*, in 1945. In that text, Bibó advised the communist party that was increasingly showing its dictatorial nature to strive for an atmosphere that creates better living conditions for the people *instead of intensifying the fight against reactionary forces*.¹¹

Despite the superficial similarities, Kádár's consolidation was not identical to the solution recommended by Bibó. The reason for this is that Bibó suggested the aforementioned approach in 1945 while Kádár launched his so-called consolidation policy in the early 1960s. Kádár's "gesture" was not about a promise to terminate the dictatorship, only about creating better living conditions within the same framework. In 1945, this would have sounded like a threat. It could only be interpreted as a relief after an era of the "merciless fight against reactionary forces". Consolidation, the cornerstone of the Kádár regime, was not entirely independent of Rákosi's policy, which had been based on brutal retaliations. Kádár only implemented a more sophisticated form of dictatorship, but that did not represent any change in the fundamental principles: the Soviet occupation, the unlimited power of the communist party and the presence of state security remained the foundations of the political system.

Therefore, this form of consolidation that also took shape in other Soviet bloc countries (albeit in a different form and to a different extent) was not a step towards breaking down the dictatorship. Instead, it represented an organic alignment to it, despite bringing some relief and better living conditions for society. The Hungarian version of this consolidation, however, had a unique trait that differentiated it from the dictatorships of other socialist countries. The regime agreed to certain elements of the "Kádarian deal" only because it felt forced to do so. They had to loosen their belts a few more notches than what their nature would have dictated. They paid a little bit more attention to pressure from public mood, a few more "valves" were put in place to ease the pressure on society and they treated "those who were thinking differently" a little less harshly [than other Soviet-style regimes]. These "different thinkers" were allowed to be a little louder than elsewhere when they could no longer put up with the tight boundaries.

The communist party was driven to adopt this "more liberal" approach mostly because of the 1956 revolution. What they experienced then was not only the realization that they may actually lose power, but also a sense of fear from the outburst in popular anger. Kádár's regime was built on ruthless retaliation for 1956. Each minute of his reign was permeated with fear from the memory of the revolution. He not only took vengeance for the uprising but also required Hungarian society to adopt the "justification" provided for it, the counter-revolution theory. This was like asking society for a declaration of loyalty. Those who wanted to live in compliance with the law

10 István Bibó (1911–1979), one of the most significant Hungarian political thinkers of the 20th century. A theorist of the so-called populist movement between the two world wars. Politician of the National Farmers' Party from 1945, Minister of State in the 1956 revolution, for which he received a life sentence. He was released from prison in 1963 and worked as a librarian.

11 BIBÓ, István: *A magyar demokrácia válsága* (The Crisis of Hungarian Democracy) – see <https://mek.oszk.hu/02000/02043/html/166.html> (quoted version dated 8. 4. 2020).

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in Kádár's Hungary had to refrain from questioning the counter-revolution doctrine that justified retaliation. Even installing a tomb to commemorate loved ones who were sentenced to death and lying in unmarked mass graves was forbidden. However, another aspect of the fear from 1956 was that the regime clearly strove to achieve some sort of "reconciliation" and gain the acceptance of society.

The aforementioned "alliance policy" was elaborated against this background. "Alliance policy" was one of the most frequently used political, ideological and propaganda terms of the Kádár era.¹² It was based on the conclusion drawn after the 1956 revolution that *in essence, communists and the party do not have a mass base*,¹³ as György Aczél put it at the November 11, 1956 Central Committee meeting. The cornerstone of managing this situation was to build a new relationship with intellectuals. *Although it is not a good policy for making them feel important, we must not forget that they are important, because if they whine about something a whole lot of people will whine with them*,¹⁴ said Kádár at a Political Committee meeting on June 17, 1957. *We have our opinion about our intellectuals. We know their past and present, yet it is their future that is decisive for us. [...] We can and must work together with the majority of the intelligentsia*,¹⁵ went Aczél's directive.

This policy regarding intellectuals was not aimed at recruiting committed believers. Instead, it strove to draw potential opponents into the communist party's sphere of influence in one way or another, i.e. "enticing dissidents into an alliance". The regime loudly communicated its policy to the public as an alliance policy, even though it had nothing to do with a real alliance in the true sense of the word. "Cooperation" continued to be based on the defenceless situation of the intellectuals. The conditions of the "alliance" were not carved out by mutual agreement but were directives issued by a reigning power. The regime did not enter into an alliance – it forced others to accept a deal. The obligation to play the role of an ally was part of the transaction. In 1982, Dénes Csengey¹⁶ described this situation with an analogy: *Today we say [...] politics is in partnership with literature. [...] the dramatist Berchtold] Brecht had a famous saying: "Let's go fishing! – said the angler to the worm", so the angler is in a partnership with the worm*.¹⁷

Even though the guidelines were enforced from a ruling position, the goal of the new strategy was to pacify society. This endeavour called for complex and differentiated tactics – not an easy task for communist party commissioners whose mindset was aligned to rigid ideological categories. To a considerable extent, the success of this strategy depended on György Aczél's personality traits, since the coordination of the so-called alliance policy and the operation of the related cultural areas were all Aczél's "territories".

12 TABAJDI, Gábor: *Kiegyezés Kádárral*, p. 9.

13 RÉVÉSZ, Sándor: *Aczél és korunk* (Aczél and our Age). Sik, Budapest 1997, p. 63.

14 Ibid., p. 93.

15 Ibid., Comments by György Aczél at the Central Committee meeting on June 22, 1957, p. 98.

16 Dénes Csengey (1953–1991), a leading young opposition writer, a founder of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and member of its first board of eight.

17 CSENGEY, Dénes: The role of literature today. Comments on the literature conference held in Debrecen on November 18–19, 1982. *Alföld*, 1983, Vol. 23, No. 2, p. 49.

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Unlike Kádár, Aczél was not a senior politician of the party before 1956. Still, he was one of the few cadres who passed the tests of the movement: he survived prison and remained a declared communist but did not gravitate to Imre Nagy's¹⁸ reform endeavours and did not tarnish his reputation in the events of 1956. This record gave him a pass to the party's most influential circles. However, it took a personal decision of first secretary János Kádár to get György Aczél a seat in the Temporary Central Leadership of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party after the revolution was oppressed. He was later appointed Deputy Minister of Education. This enabled him to become an increasingly important figure after the cultural implications of the retaliation policy came to an end.

By 1962–1963, Aczél had reached a level of prominence that made him a highly influential cultural policymaker. Through the long decades of the Kádár regime, he held a wide range of positions. Similarly, his relationship with Kádár followed a roller-coaster pattern but his status as part of the innermost communist party circles was never called into question. He experienced a few major failures when he was expelled from the Political Committee and lost his job as minister. Each of these changes defined the actual range of his influence. His confidence was weaker when it came to controlling the generations born after the war and maintaining a grip on opposition movements and the events that preceded the regime change in Hungary. The toolsets he employed, however, the enforcement of his will from behind the scenes through personal relations and obligations purchased with past favours, the adoption of methods that he introduced in managing cultural life all made him unquestionably influential, regardless of the actual party functions he held.

Aczél pursued a refined and complex “alliance policy”. Instead of raw power, he built his influence on weaving personal and confidential relations. There were few open political elements in those intrigues, while his knowledge of intimate, confidential personal secrets was key.

18 Imre Nagy (1896–1958), was conscripted into the army in 1915 and taken prisoner by the Russians. He joined the Red Guard in June 1918 and fought in the Russian Civil War. He joined the Bolshevik Party in 1920. In the Soviet Union he worked at the Comintern Institute of Agricultural Sciences, at the Central Statistical Office and at Radio Moscow, where he was editor of Hungarian broadcasts from 1939 to 1944. He returned to Hungary in November 1944 as a member of the Hungarian Communist Party leadership. He became a member of the legislature in December 1944 and then Agriculture Minister in the provisional government. He served as Interior Minister in the coalition government that took office on March 20, 1946. Nagy was critical of the rapid collectivization of agriculture and was dropped from the leading bodies of the party in 1949. He then taught at the Hungarian Agricultural University until the summer of 1950. In December 1950, he was appointed Minister of Food, and in January 1953, Minister of Collection. In November 1952, he became Deputy Prime Minister, and on July 4, 1953, Prime Minister, at the initiative of the Soviet Union, but was dismissed on April 18, 1955, and expelled from the communist party on December 3 of that year. He was considered the leading politician in the party opposition, opposed to the Stalinists. On October 23, 1956, he was brought back into the leadership of the party, in response to the demands of the demonstrators, and became Prime Minister again. As such, he tried to gain acceptance from the Soviet Union for the main demands of the revolution; on November 1 Nagy declared Hungary's neutrality and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. He took refuge in the Yugoslav Embassy at dawn on November 4. On June 15, 1958, Nagy was sentenced to death for initiating and leading a conspiracy and for treason.

By the early 1960s, practically everyone who mattered in Hungarian intellectual life was part of this network of favour economies in one way or another. Aczél acted in the role of a “caregiver”, who helped resolve the personal crises of intellectuals, i.e. the potential opposition of the regime, from health issues to marriage conflicts.¹⁹ *It was almost fantastic how he managed to bridge galactic distances that separated creatives from the regime after 1956. [...] It is no exaggeration to say that Aczél was a great master at building relationships,*²⁰ explained his confidant associate, Péter Rényi.

Aimed at creating favours, this network of relationships between intellectuals and the regime stretched into the private sphere and created the illusion of a “partnership”. In reality, those who did not accept the communist ideology had no chance of influencing political life and were not in a real decision-making position. *If we enter into a conversation with politicians, we misunderstand the situation if we interpret it as the formation of a mutual partnership. The decisions are made by politicians and as long as I am not part of the decision, I don’t identify with it, even when I agree with the decision itself,*²¹ said Dénes Csengey. Aczél’s partnership gesture through the economy of favours was a cover-up for the lack of peer status and the lack of participation in decision-making.

In the years following the Second World War Aczél was appointed party secretary in Zemplén county. Legend has it that on secret orders from Aczél, the security forces took away and locked up the highly popular priest of a local village. He then lobbied with a great deal of noise and apparent outrage, striving to have him freed. Similarly to the story of that Zemplén priest²², one could never know exactly what role György Aczél played in creating the very situation that he was so eager to resolve. As a gift, he authorized the release of a book that had earlier been banned at his decision. The so-called “policy of three T-s” (in Hungarian: támogat, tűr, tilt – support, tolerate and ban) determined which writing or other work of art could be part of Hungarian culture. The arbitrator was Aczél. *Banning, then tolerating served to force author and artist into subservience,*²³ said Pozsgay. Ferenc Kulin,²⁴ who was dismissed as editor-in-chief of the *Mozgó Világ* (Moving World) periodical in 1983 owing to his overly “radical” editorial approach, recalled in a memoir in 1989 that Aczél often appeared to be a person who was fighting for him and for the survival of his periodical. *To this day, I am uncertain about what Aczél’s role actually was.*²⁵

It was also Ferenc Kulin who shared a typical story illustrating the embarrassing nature of this policy. At the editor-in-chief’s staff meeting, the visiting political leaders duly condemned the politically in-compliant articles. *Hearing their words, we thought*

19 RÉVÉSZ, Sándor: *Aczél és korunk*, pp. 375–378.

20 CSÁKI, Judit – KOVÁCS, Dezső: *Rejtőzködő legendárium* (Hiding Legendry). Szépirodalmi, Budapest 1990, p. 235.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

22 RÉVÉSZ, Sándor: *Aczél és korunk*, p. 30.

23 POGONYI, Lajos: *A szelep és a tisztálkodási vágy*, p. 23.

24 Ferenc Kulin (born 1943), Literary historian, editor, one of the founders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF).

25 GYÖRFFY, Miklós: *És mégis mozog... (And it is still in motion...)*. Interview with Ferenc Kulin. *168 Óra*, 1989, Vol. 1, No. 10, p. 10.

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the end was near [for our periodical].²⁶ Then, right after the meeting, the same people, often Aczél himself, overwrote the former threats with a warm handshake and a pat on the back. This schizophrenic situation was a serious mental burden. As Kulin wrote, it drove me into an increasingly severe crisis. When we thought [...] we were taking a risk [...], we did not do it in the hope of receiving praise and mild treatment, even in such a cunning, direct way. [...] The real dramatic conflict of the era was the lack of actual battle. You are looking for the opponent, you can see the opponent and you are about to hit, but [...] right at that moment they reach out to shake the hand that is raised to hit them.²⁷

Aczél's policy was aimed at ensuring the greatest possible stability for the single party regime that had been built on communist ideology. To this end, tactics "not characteristic of the party" were also allowed. Even art works that could damage the sensitivity of the party were allowed, inspired and rewarded. Consequently, some works of art created in the context of Aczél's cultural policy represented genuine cultural value. However, Aczél's fight was not a mission against the dictatorship for the freedom of culture, or for allowing Hungarian cultural life to reach its full potential amidst restrictions. He strove to create the largest possible elbow room that would provide the highest attainable security for the regime to manage the tensions deriving from societal discontent. At the same time, György Aczél played a cardinal role not only in expanding this manoeuvring space but also in setting its boundaries, i.e. the limits of relative freedom. In setting the boundaries and the rules of the game, enabling culture to fulfil its regenerating role in society (albeit aligned to the enforced ideological circumstances) was not the key driving force. What is more, this was the exact opposite of what the cultural policy was aiming at. Sometimes they allowed astonishingly brave thoughts and creations, but also did everything possible to dissolve the communities where these thoughts could have taken effect. Although it allowed many great intellectuals to create, it isolated them from each other, from their audience and from potential students that could have ensured continuity. It made disparaging remarks about them and stigmatized the tradition to which they belonged, in many cases with a far-reaching effect that still has an impact today.

Intellectuals had to be "subdued" in a way that prevented their circles from becoming "power factors" i.e. assemblages that would be able to propagate their independent views while considering themselves united and independent groups. *We cannot provide [...] an independent organizational and economic background to any school of writers because that would enable certain writer groups to become political hubs,²⁸* so went the *Education Policy Guidelines* released in the form of an MSZMP resolution.

Kádár's regime was only willing to reconcile with non-communist "Allies" at the individual level, on condition that the other party would give up the sense of togetherness. The goal of Aczél's cultural policy was not to help intellectual life reach

26 CSÁKI, Judit – KOVÁCS, Dezső: *Rejtőzködő legendárium*, p. 415.

27 *Ibid.* pp. 415–416.

28 VASS, Henrik – SÁGVÁRI, Ágnes (eds.): *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt határozatai és dokumentumai 1956–1962* (The Resolutions and Documents of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party 1956–1962). Kossuth, Budapest 1973, p. 268.

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a fully-fledged state, but rather to polarize it. As a result, Hungarian culture was populated by the ivory towers of free thinkers who worked in isolation. *We are getting by; Morosely, uncommunicatively and in recess*,²⁹ wrote the poet Lőrinc Szabó to the writer János Kodolányi. Imre Pozsgay put this as follows: *They created a sort of a “natural reserve” especially in the social sciences. Professionals could debate as much as they wanted there, they were isolated from the rest of society.*³⁰

Consequently, when an author was condemned to silence, when a paper was banned or when a lengthy struggle was needed to launch an independent periodical, confrontation with the regime was not really about voicing radical thoughts but rather about the self-organization of communities and fighting for the rights of that community.

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Although György Aczél was an expert in cultural policymaking, actually one of the most influential ones, he was first and foremost a manipulator of political power who believed that sophisticated methods of managing society could be implemented from a cultural starting point. Evidently there was more at stake here than culture in a narrow sense. There is no better proof of this than the fact Aczél's approach of controlling others by way of personalized favours instead of open confrontation was a characteristic feature of several political branches, not only of Aczél's individual policies.

The comprehensive nature of this “alliance policy” is adequately illustrated by the fact that state security methodologies were aligned to it, too.³¹ *The adoption of Kádár's slogan “Those who are not against us are with us” in day-to-day state security work directly led to the spread of sophisticated methods that manipulated human relations in a covert manner*,³² wrote the authors Tabajdi and Ungváry.

One of the persons who elaborated the new working methodologies for state security was Major István Agócs, who summarized his policies in a state security college textbook in 1963.³³ This methodology textbook also highlights the “alliance policy's” dark side that was never public. Individuals whose disobedience brought them onto the regime's radar were not only granted “kindnesses” in Aczél's economy of favours,

29 Letter dated February 26, 1957. János Kodolányi and Lőrinc Szabó were from the great generation of writers that were close to the movement of popular writers between the two world wars. Quoted by: STANDEISKY, Éva: *Az írók és a hatalom, 1956–1963* (The Writers and the Regime, 1956–1963). 1956 Institute, Budapest 1996, p. 55.

30 POGONYI, Lajos: *A szelep és a tisztálkodási vágy*, p. 23.

31 TABAJDI, Gábor: *Kiegyezés Kádárral*, p. 186; TABAJDI, Gábor – UNGVÁRY, Krisztián: *Elhallgatott múlt – A pártállam és a belügy. A politikai rendőrség működése Magyarországon 1956–1990* (Concealed Past. The Single Party State and the Interior Ministry. Operation of the Political Police in Hungary 1956–1990). Corvina, Budapest 2008, pp. 144–177; SZÓNYEI, Tamás: *Titkos írás. Állambiztonsági szolgálat és irodalmi élet, 1956–1990* (Secret Writing. State Security Services and Literature Life, 1956–1990). Noran, Budapest 2012.

32 TABAJDI, Gábor – UNGVÁRY, Krisztián: *Elhallgatott múlt*, p. 169.

33 *Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltárát* (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security) (ÁBTL), 4. 1. A-3016/13, AGÓCS, István: *A bomlasztás, leválasztás, elszigetelés mint a realizálás módszerei* (Subversion, Separation and Isolation as Methods of Realization). BM Tanulmányi és Módszertani Osztály (Study and Methodology Department of the Interior Ministry), Budapest 1963.

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but, without them being aware of it, their intimate personal life also became under state security control. The state security organization generated life-changing events without inhibition and often used the most unprincipled means needed for the purpose. Since the core mission was to crack down on independent thinking and autonomous communities, actual operations often destroyed friendships, created tensions, and made individuals feel uncertain and defenceless.

At a time when the building of socialism is in the completion phase, several questions are raised in a new form regarding the security of state and of society. [...] Elbow room for enforcement and administrative intervention is gradually shrinking while measures that educate and convince the masses are gaining significance. [...] State security organizations are enabled to serve this approach by employing procedures like prevention, separation and subversion.³⁴

If we realize [a would-be crime] in due time and in due manner, we deprive enemy individuals from their power of resistance. We veritably deprive them of their safe ground, i.e. we destroy the grounds of enemy propaganda. [...]. Our actions can narrow the “mass base” and influence of the enemy.³⁵

After reviewing the general principles, the textbook presents examples of the open and secret methods that security bodies can apply: subversion, meaning the shattering of an “enemy group”;³⁶ dishonouring, when the “enemy person” is put to shame so that he loses his influence;³⁷ separation, when the members of a group are isolated from bad influence, from *enemy persons or misled individuals*.³⁸

According to the textbook, class reunions, card game parties and, as they put it, even “wine cellar gatherings” were to be treated as “specific assemblages”. Intervention was already necessary in “loose gatherings” if the assemblage was found to include a person who was deemed dangerous or of inappropriate views, i.e. when *memories of the good old days were brought up, in fact only to sustain and cherish old world views*.³⁹

When it came to taking specific action, the state security forces were not choosy in their methods. *Compromising the leader’s reputation enables us to ridicule him in the eye of his acquaintances, or simply to annihilate respect for him. [...] We can compromise a person politically, financially or morally. The point is that his acquaintances should detest him.*⁴⁰

This methodology put a huge workload on the agent. Yet the agent was not only important as an information source or as a person who helps to subvert a community. Manipulation through one’s position as an agent was part of the regime’s toolset. If the regime intended to restrain somebody’s activity in the community, it was enough to rope the person in as an agent. After that, he or she would rather avoid the community than write reports on it. One frequently applied method of disparagement was to put a person into a situation whereby everyone would think he or she was an undercover agent.

34 Ibid., pp. 2.

35 Ibid., pp. 5–9.

36 Ibid., p.10.

37 Ibid., pp. 10–11.

38 Ibid., p. 30.

39 Ibid., pp. 10–11.

40 Ibid., pp. 12–13.

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Disseminating fake news, generating tension and distrust, exploiting differences of opinion, personal sensitivities and small-scale mistakes were all part of the state security tactics, along with anonymous letters and calling on official organs for help. This personalized working method required more knowledge and attention from the state security than traditional intimidation. They had to know the characteristic features of each individual along with their sensitivities and minor offences.

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Back to György Aczél and the cultural policy under his direction: Gaining a thorough, in-depth insight into Hungary's intellectual life both in respect of individual artists and intellectual traditions was just as characteristic an aspect of his working methods as the detailed screening and studying of individuals were integral elements of the state security's work. Aczél's abilities and knowledge extended beyond holding the greatest Hungarian intellectuals in dependency by exploiting health issues, intimate secrets and other intrigues. He was not merely a highly powerful "conspirator", but a talented politician blessed with great skills and excellent instincts.

Great artists, thinkers and the members of the most diverse intellectual schools were not only important to Aczél as "trophy". He also needed their knowledge. Aczél's genius lay in his ability to make artists and authors believe that cooperation with the regime meant that the "sacred cause" or mission of the ally would be added to the regime's important parameters.

This offer, however, was also a challenge to "fight", where the regime's goal was to exploit and neutralize the intellectual tradition for which the representative of that tradition "entered the ring". Enduring this burden was an extremely hard task, as was evading the challenge and bearing the consequences. Both alternatives, i.e. being excluded or losing the fight recalled the same fear: the terror of giving up one's self. In the dilemma of to write or not to write, the two different decisions related to the same commitment: standing up against oppression and safeguarding intellectual values for future generations. The ways of implementing this included full reclusion, or full presence in intellectual life, and standing up to the powers that be through the power of creation.

One might ask why the regime needed intellectual traditions that were alien to it. One key pillar of Hungarian foreign policy was building an image of Hungary as a Soviet Bloc country where the framework of free thinking is in place. The representative values of Hungarian culture helped support this impression (the more so the further away they were from the workers' movement ideology) and thereby helped the acceptance of Kádár's regime in the West, considerably expanding its elbow room. With regards to the equilibrium of a regime that was burdened by legitimacy problems, this was of crucial importance.

Nevertheless, the contact network of various Hungarian scientific and artistic schools reached all around the globe. Intellectuals who escaped by emigrating represented the living tradition of Hungarian culture, not crippled by dictatorship, maintaining their own periodicals, intellectual workshops and several internation-

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ally renowned figures. A regime that longed for international recognition could not overlook this global connection network. And the road to these networks led through prominent figures who remained in Hungary but represented the regime's opposition owing to their thinking.

Regardless of foreign opinion, intellectual traditions that grew out of the "soul" of Hungarian society carried on the legacy of being embedded in everyday reality. Their thoughts often emerged from the joy and pain that were "shared experiences of society". The authors not only experienced these things themselves but were also able to voice them. The regime needed this ability, while it was aware that it was both a hazard and an opportunity for them. In the Kádár era, this dual nature determined the regime's responses to culture. Depending on that, all works that openly voiced the pain stemming from community existence were banned. However, if the author added a few sentences that suggested "it is OK like that", i.e. that softened the message, the work could be reassigned to the "tolerated" category and be published.

However, the formula never worked with unquestionable consistency. For the "intellectual traditions", the "hazard and the opportunity" they conveyed not only gave them the unpleasant status of becoming a target or a tool, but also gave them a "weapon" by making them a factor opposing the centralized power which could not be overlooked. Even if this "compelling factor" was incomparably insignificant compared to the will of those in power, it could potentially generate considerable changes both within society and the governing powers. It kept alive thoughts and traditions that were classed as forbidden. At the same time, it also forced the reigning power to confess differences regarding values, it unveiled problems that were intentionally overlooked, generated gaps and, as illustrated by some examples, it could serve as a basis within the communist party for those opposing mainstream policies.

Slightly greater freedom and a little more attention to society's will were enough to influence the "day-to-day political routine" but they could not possibly change the core mechanisms of the regime's operation. Even though the cultural policy of the era often recalled Cardinal Richelieu's policies in terms of its deviousness and sophisticated ways of exercising power, it could not conceal the fact that the political system was built on the oppression of society's will. Although the makers of this policy did have the courage to rely on intellectual values that pointed beyond their horizon, they only used these values as tools and never identified with them. They never stepped out of their dominant authority status, narrow-minded ideology and party-state logic. Their vision was not built on anticipation but on reluctant acceptance.

Reality: The present in our presence.

Beginning in the late seventies, the "welfare system of goulash communism" was running out of resources. Naturally, the crisis was not limited to Hungary, as the Soviet Union, crippled by the Cold War arms race, radiated it throughout the entire region. This increasingly spectacular economic downturn also changed Moscow's policy. Gorbachev announced his reform programme at the Soviet communist party's convention in March of 1986, calling on communist parties to strive for a broader social consensus.

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Hope was growing that the ruling political system would not live on forever. Referring back to Kosselck, his study also emphasizes that without hope, not even the deepest discontentment can generate “desire for action” that can open up “new time perspectives”.⁴¹ Hope was fuelled by several small success stories, many lesser or greater accomplishments beside the many failures, the increasingly loud feedback from society and the more and more spectacular uncertainty of the regime. As a comprehensive review of the struggle between the communist party and the opposition would exceed the scope of this study, I only present a few selected examples to showcase the nature of this conflict.

As mentioned earlier, one core principle of the Kádár regime’s cultural policy was that even though every now and then they allowed the publication of thoughts “incompliant with party values”, they never allowed the “gathering” of independent communities around those thoughts. From the 1980s onwards, however, it was increasingly difficult for the party to sustain that approach. University students, college students and other communities began to found clubs. Maintaining loose ties with each other, these clubs evolved into a veritable movement. Their events drew jam-packed crowds and also hosted the advocates of thoughts that violated the regime’s sensitivities. Intellectual circles were organized around periodicals that struck a bold tone and their evening events filled theatres. One such periodical was the aforementioned *Mozgó Világ*.

Beginning in 1981 when Ferenc Kulin was appointed editor-in-chief, the writings published in the periodical seemed less and less compelled to be compliant with the regime’s expectations. This lack of compliance created an “intellectual coalition”, where authors and thoughts from diverse backgrounds could find a way to one another in the name of honesty. *Mozgó Világ* was not an intellectual school, but first and foremost a moral assemblage,⁴² said the periodical’s former deputy editor-in-chief, Károly Alexa. The periodical, as he put it, voiced the experience that the endeavour to express free thoughts could in itself generate cooperation. The need for such self-expression was so sweepingly powerful that a real movement was formed around the paper, drawing a broad range of intellectuals to it. Dozens of *Mozgó* clubs were formed and *Mozgó* evenings were held throughout the country. This sealed the fate of the periodical. The entire editorial board was dismissed in 1983.

In the opinion of editor-in-chief Ferenc Kulin, this dramatic move by the reigning power was not triggered by the tone of the published essays and writings, but by the staff of authors and the readership that were drawn to the paper. *Mozgó* was not stopped because of the publications in it, but because of the *Mozgó* movement that evolved around the periodical. [...] Had *Mozgó* lived on, it would have conveyed a chance that a virtual multi-party system would evolve in Hungary as the periodical could have become an official forum for an opposition on the verge of legality.⁴³

41 KOSELLECK, Reinhardt: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, p. 424.

42 CSÁKI, Judit – KOVÁCS, Dezső: *Rejtőzködő legendárium*, p. 298.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 428.

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From the late 1970s and early 1980s, this circle, mostly comprising artists, writers and poets, increasingly looked like a coordinated company. Reviving the popular writers' movement that thrived between the two world wars, they were highly sensitive to "matters of national destiny", issues that they raised increasingly firmly and with overtones that touched on the regime's responsibility. Their goal was to bring their endeavours to fruition in an as organized and independent manner as possible with the reigning power admitting the legitimacy of the issues they raised and their independent approach. In other words, they strove to be respected as a united intellectual group and not just a bunch of isolated creatives, while making their endeavours recognized by the "official" side of Hungary, too.

This struggle was fought on three fronts, but most of all in culture, in literature forums, in editorial offices and in film studios. The Hungarian Writers' Union played a decisive role in expanding these aspirations.⁴⁴ Owing to the role the union played in the events of 1956, the regime dissolved it and only approved its relaunch in 1959. The regime intended to use the newly formed union as a perfectly controlled channel of literature. The union functioned under strict party control. Party delegates guaranteed the compliant tone of the meetings of official bodies; the members and leaders of the general board were all "elected" from a properly pre-screened list. Directives were issued to party member writers in an effort to control the events and topics of general meetings. The first attempt to disrupt this scheme was made at the general assembly of the Hungarian Writers' Union on May 25–26, 1970. At the open forum of the general meeting, new names were added to the list of nominees prepared in advance. This turned the closed voting process upside down. As a consequence, a few writers labelled as disobedient were elected to the board while some key supporters of Aczél were voted out. Punishment was clearly on the way and the party gave a green light to cautious policies towards intellectuals.

The struggle continued at the December 12–13, 1981 general meeting.⁴⁵ On the first day, there were fiery speeches and several speakers used unusually open wording, not only about the regime's policy regarding literature but concerning the entire political system as well. The Jaruzelski coup⁴⁶ and the introduction of a state

44 KISS GY., Csaba: Földcsuszamlás az írószövetségben (Landslide in the Hungarian Writers' Association). In: KISS GY., Csaba – SZILCZ, Eszter (eds.): *A másik Magyarország hangja. Dokumentumok az Írószövetség 1986-os közgyűléséről* (The Other Voice of Hungary. Documents from the 1986 General Meeting of the Hungarian Writers' Union). Antológia, Lakitelek 2016, pp. 9–26.

45 For details see PINTÉR M., Lajos: *Ellenzékben, 1968–1987* (In Opposition, 1968–1987). Antológia, Lakitelek 2007, pp. 50–52; KISS GY., Csaba – SZILCZ, Eszter (eds.): *A másik Magyarország hangja*, pp. 11–12; RÉVÉSZ, Sándor: *Aczél és korunk*, pp. 290–292.

46 Under the Gdansk Agreement (August 31, 1980) the nationwide Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" was established. The emergence of Solidarity – a legal, anti-Communist organization – was a precedent in the totalitarian Communist system. Moscow exercised increased pressure on the regime in Warsaw to handle the issue of Solidarity by its own devices. At midnight on December 12, 1981, Wojciech Jaruzelski (Defence Minister and Prime Minister) announced martial law on behalf of the Military Council of National Salvation and Poland was attacked by communist forces with

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of emergency in Poland cooled people down and the representatives of the reigning power behaved in a more confident and threatening manner. After a series of tough debates and considerable tension, a significant number of writers loyal to the regime were not re-elected to the board. The Hungarian Writers' Union became an official organization, probably the only one in the country with a managing body in which the MSZMP was underrepresented.⁴⁷ The significance of these two days is well illustrated by the fact that the report on the general meeting drawn up for the communist party described the writers' union as *an opposition forum operating in a legitimate framework*.⁴⁸

The last of the great battles with the Hungarian Writers' Union took place on November 29 and 30, 1986, where "time swinging into motion" and the regime's loss of cohesion were two apparent phenomena.⁴⁹ The meeting was preceded by a number of confrontations. There were more and more signs that the opposition was becoming consciously organized. The reigning power responded with threatening statements, banning papers, launching disciplinary action against editors, condemning authors to silence and rejecting passport applications.

The meeting was held at the Vigadó Hall in Budapest and turned out to be the stage for what was probably the toughest conflict with representatives of the reigning power at an official forum. There was open confrontation in a debate that did not skip over real problems and demands. Then, as the outcome of the general meeting, almost all the representatives of the regime were ousted from the union's managing board.⁵⁰

The communist party leaders had to put up with their inability to influence the course of events at a public forum. However, during the twelve months following the general meeting, they employed the most undisciplined of tactics to retake lost ground. They ordered a full news ban on anything that happened at the writers' union meeting, curbed the union's budget, annihilated its direct relations with foreign partner organizations and personalities (by referring the union's foreign relations to the foreign affairs department of the Foreign Ministry).⁵¹ Defamation campaigns were launched, tension was generated and a series of denouncing articles were published while all publication was only allowed for those loyal to the regime. They even threatened to ban the Hungarian Writers' Union using the Literature Council, an organization that fully served the reigning power's will. Finally, they organized and urged member departures from the union.

However, thanks to the failure of the annihilation attempts and the relentless efforts of the union's new board, the communist party was eventually forced to back

tanks, guns and batons. After the coup tens of thousands of innocent citizens were arrested without charge. Some 10,000 were detained in forty-nine internment camps. All official institutions, from the Ministries to railway stations and public libraries, were subject to the orders of a military commissar.

47 RÉVÉSZ, Sándor: *Aczél és korunk*, p. 291.

48 PINTÉR M., Lajos: *Ellenzékben, 1968–1987*, p. 152.

49 For details see KISS GY., Csaba – SZILCZ, Eszter (eds.): *A másik Magyarország hangja*; PINTÉR M., Lajos: *Ellenzékben, 1968–1987*, pp. 148–156.

50 PINTÉR M., Lajos: *Ellenzékben, 1968–1987*, p. 148.

51 KÖSZEG, Ferenc: *Közgyűlésen és közgyűlés után* (At and after the General Meeting). *Beszélő*, 1987, Vol. 6, No.1, p. 3.

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off. It had to put up with the situation but continued to make all efforts to make the union's life difficult. Being confined to the boundaries of their own logic, the communists could see two alternatives only: Either suspend the Hungarian Writers' Union or disrupt it. Genuine cooperation was not one of the regime's paradigms. The reigning power's behaviour after the general meeting provided first-hand proof that the regime was unsuitable for dialogue and partnership by nature. The mere existence of an autonomous, independent circle of thinking was incompatible with the regime's reigning principles.

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The so-called democratic opposition chose a different path of struggle with the powers that be.⁵² Miklós Haraszti⁵³ described their approach as follows: *We are banned? Fine, then let's do what we want to do.*⁵⁴ If the communist dictatorship did not give them democratic rights, then they would exercise those rights illegally: They would implement freedom of speech in samizdat publications and freedom of assembly through conspiracy, undertaking all the risks that entailed. The weakening stability of the political systems brought their first minor accomplishments. *We got stronger, too. We gained self-confidence, realizing that this whole samizdat thing was working and could not be put out,*⁵⁵ recalled György Konrád.⁵⁶

The beginnings of this circle date back to the philosopher György Lukács and his circle of students. *Younger philosophers of the Lukács school and radical sociologists embarked on the path that led to the birth of samizdat literature in Hungary,*⁵⁷ explained Ferenc Kőszeg⁵⁸, one of the group's key figures. György Lukács and his students criticized

52 For details see CSIZMADIA, Ervin: *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék* (Hungarian Democratic Opposition) (1968–1988). I. *Monográfia* (Monograph). T-Twins, Budapest 1995; CSIZMADIA, Ervin (ed.): *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék* (1968–1988). II. *Dokumentumok* (Documents). T-Twins, Budapest 1995, and CSIZMADIA, Ervin (ed.): *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék* (1968–1988). *Interjúk* (Interviews). T-Twins, Budapest 1995.

53 Miklós Haraszti (born 1945), leader of the left-wing of the democratic opposition, Maoist movement that was critical of the political system, 1969–1970. Put under police supervision from 1970, sued by the regime in 1973 because of his novel *Darabbér* (Piecework Pay), received a suspended 8-month prison sentence. Editor of the *Beszélő* samizdat periodical from 1981 to 1989.

54 See conversation with Miklós Haraszti in András Sólyom's film: *A Kádár-korszak demokratikus ellenzéke* (Democratic Opposition of the Kádár Era) – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77FeoV-n9i0> & NR=1 (quoted version dated 8. 4. 2020).

55 See conversation with György Konrád in András Sólyom's film: *A Kádár-korszak demokratikus ellenzéke*.

56 György Konrád (1933–2019), studied literature, sociology and psychology. In 1956 he participated in the Revolution. Between 1960 and 1965 he was editor-in-chief at the Magyar Helikon publishing house. From 1965 he worked closely with sociologists. He got in touch with the democratic opposition and was published in samizdat and by publishers in the West. From this period until 1989 he was a forbidden author in Hungary, deprived of all legal income.

57 BOSSÁNYI, Katalin: *Szólampróba – Beszélgetések az alternatív mozgalmakról* (Section Rehearsal. Conversations about the Alternative Movements). Láng, Budapest 1989, p. 46.

58 Ferenc Kőszeg (born 1939), served as editor at several literature publishing houses. Got in touch with the democratic opposition in 1970. An associate of *Beszélő* from 1981.

the “implemented version of socialism” in an increasingly firm tone from the 1960s but they never reached the stage of political opposition. Their students, members of the so-called “Lukács kindergarten”, however, voiced their reservations regarding the entire political system. The events in 1968 confirmed their radical opposition views while they also made the regime stronger as it applied radical solutions to create order. Many “Lukács kindergarten” members were expelled from the communist party or dismissed from their jobs; some were arrested, including György Konrád and Miklós Haraszti, who received a suspended prison sentence.

The next organized, common move was to protest against the arrest of Charter 77 movement leaders in Czechoslovakia.⁵⁹ *In 1977 [...], with the signing of the petition in support of Charter 77, the movement of the democratic opposition was born,*⁶⁰ explained Miklós Szabó,⁶¹ describing the significance of the campaign. Breaking away from criticizing Marxism, this group of intellectuals was organized around standing up for human rights. In the words of Bálint Magyar,⁶² their activities were *the provocative exercising of rights that were not allowed to be exercised despite being enshrined in the constitution.*⁶³ What they were also doing was recalling the memory of the 1956 revolution, the Achilles’ heel of Kádár’s regime. The October 1983 thematic issue of the samizdat periodical *Beszélő* (The Speaker) 1983 was a clear stand for interpreting 1956 as a revolution. From then on, 1956 and the related documents and memoirs were the main subjects of samizdat publications and the democratic opposition.⁶⁴

Since the expressive style of this circle, the problems raised and the depth of their criticism radically crossed the regime’s boundaries of tolerance, only so-called “secondary publicity” could provide them with a forum of expression. *Beszélő* became their most significant periodical, serving as an anchor for the “hardcore” figures of the democratic opposition. Operating illegally meant being exposed to atrocities by the authorities, but these hardships never went beyond being unpleasant experiences,

59 Charter 77 (Charta 77) – the main opposition movement in Czechoslovakia – emerged from a group of intellectuals (non-communist party members, and also former communists) who protested against a lawsuit launched against the rock group The Plastic People of the Universe. The prime task of this group was to defend human rights, and force the communist regime to follow the UN Declaration of human rights, and the Helsinki Final Act.

60 BOSSÁNYI, Katalin: *Szólampróba – Beszélgetések az alternatív mozgalmakról*, p. 208.

61 Miklós Szabó (1935–2000), historian. He became closely involved with the democratic opposition in relation to a solidarity campaign in support of the Charter 77 movement. At a presentation held at the Rakpart Club (a non-governmental organization organizing cultural events in Budapest) in November 1985, he was the first presenter to speak about 1956 in public without adhering to the official stand on the matter.

62 Bálint Magyar (born 1952), sociologist. He got in touch with the democratic opposition in 1979. As a consequence, he lost his job. An associate of *Beszélő* from 1981 onwards. Minister of Education, 1996–1998 and 2002–2006.

63 FARKAS, Zoltán: „Senki nem akar a saját történetének a levéltárosa lenni” (“Nobody wants to be the archivist of his own story”). A conversation about the *Beszélő* group with Bálint Nagy and Bálint Magyar. *Mozgó Világ* 1992, Vol. 21, No. 7, p. 76.

64 The fiercest confrontations with the regime for writers who revived the traditions of the popular moment all related to 1956. The writers concerned were condemned to silence, publications that featured their writings were banned and many editors were dismissed.

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they never were a threat of full annihilation. Ferenc Kőszeg remembered this as follows: *The most unpleasant times were the ones when groups of 10–12 policemen dressed in civvies were following us, in the summer of 1982. We protested this at the police and at the prosecutor's office. After that, monitoring, or at least this kind of close monitoring stopped. [...] After all, tolerance can also be considered a marketing gimmick: One that proves the liberal nature of the political system, at least to the outside world. Nevertheless, the various forms of repression (loss of jobs, harassment) were sufficient to deter most intellectuals from the circles of samizdat makers.*⁶⁵

In 1986, the communist party prepared a report on opposition activities and on the methods of managing these activities. It concluded in a relieved tone that the *radical civilian opposition group* comprises a few dozen people whose influence extends to a few hundred intellectuals and university students.⁶⁶ Thus the reigning power believed that isolation owing to illegality is a proper “treatment” in itself to ensure that the danger to society posed by the democratic opposition is kept under control.

Expectation: the manifested future

By the mid-1980s, two forces began to take shape within the opposition, evolving beyond the loose format of companionships. The democratic opposition around samizdat periodicals and the so-called popular intellectuals,⁶⁷ who intended to expand the narrow manoeuvring space without crossing the boundaries of the law.

Although the two groups did not get organized into a single unit, coordination between them became increasingly systematic. One sign of that was a joint consultation forum set up by representatives of the two wings in 1982 with the purpose of harmonizing the collection of signatures for protest petitions and other actions.⁶⁸ The meeting held at the campsite in the town of Monor at Ferenc Donáth's⁶⁹ instigation was also organized through this forum.⁷⁰ This meeting, however, represented a new quality compared to similar past endeavours as it had a perspective that pointed towards the future.

65 BOSSÁNYI, Katalin: *Szólampróba – Beszélgetések az alternatív mozgalmakról*, p. 50.

66 After the so-called Opposition resolutions issued in 1980 and 1982, the MSZMP issued a third one on July 1, 1986. Quoted by CSIZMADIA, Ervin (ed.): *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék 1968–1988. II. Dokumentumok*, pp. 278–290. See analysis in RIPP, Zoltán: *Rendszerváltás Magyarországon* (Change of Hungary's Political System) 1987–1990. Napvilág, Budapest 2006, pp. 42–44; PINTÉR M., Lajos: *Ellenzékben, 1968–1987*, pp. 125–130.

67 The democratic opposition mainly represented the principles of liberal politics, while the so-called popular opposition was more tied to conservative traditions

68 *ÁBTL*, 4. 1. A-2003, Analysis of the opposition resolution by László Kasza, Radio Free Europe, October 1986.

69 Ferenc Donáth (1913–1986). He took part in the organization of the communist party in 1944. He was one of the party's agricultural specialists. In 1951, he was arrested on fake charges and condemned to 15 years in prison. Released from prison in 1954. He was a member of Imre Nagy's reform group in 1956. Received a 12-year prison sentence in the Imre Nagy trial in 1958. He was released in 1960. Joined the opposition movements in the 1970s and served as a contact person who put popular writers in contact with the democratic opposition.

70 See minutes of the conference in RAINER M., János (ed.): *A monori tanácskozás, 1985. június 14–16* (The Monor Conference, June 14–16, 1985). 1956 Public Foundation, Budapest 2005.

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As the conference in Monor on June 14–16, 1985 was held illegally, it was preceded by conspiracy work. The meeting had 45 participants, representatives of the main opposition forces: Reform economists, participants of the 1956 revolution, the democratic opposition organized around samizdat publications and the so-called popular opposition.⁷¹

A deep, meaningful debate took place at the meeting, addressing Hungary's economic, political and societal situation and the role of the opposition. Despite the fact that the meeting was illegal, it was not followed by severe sanctions. The minutes of the meeting were published in September 1985, albeit only as a samizdat publication.

*No comprehensive program was elaborated at Monor; but that was not the purpose anyway,*⁷² said the report published in the emigrant newspaper, *Irodalmi Újság* (Literature Journal). The Monor conference was intended to be an operational and intellectual harmonization forum for forces that were increasingly firm critics of the state of affairs in the Kádár regime. The participants represented groups that were no longer under the illusion that their objectives could be reached through negotiations with the regime, yet they did not give up those objectives. As the common ground of the participants was described: Nobody in attendance at Monor believed anymore that the *reigning power was an unchangeable circumstance*.⁷³

This “assessment of the situation”, however, also meant that the opposition's role changed along with the related opportunities. It was no longer just an indictable set of values that represented a counterpoint to the regime: It had also evolved into a political alternative for the future. At the Monor conference, participants perceptibly became aware of this, albeit only implicitly, even though it was not declared explicitly. The nature of the debate already reflected the opposition's newly developed self-awareness. They knew that the scope of their discussion was no longer limited to presenting Hungary's critical position and criticizing official policies. Instead, the debate raised proposals on how to resolve specific problems and issues that would set political directions.

Another major question that inevitably emerged at the meeting was the institutionalization of the opposition. At the Monor conference, participants were still trying to ascertain each other's standpoint. Consequently, they were beating about the bush, but the dilemma was already reflected in the atmosphere and gestures of the meeting. Ferenc Donáth's opening speech was no exception: *I for one support the*

71 It must be noted that these groups were not distinct organizations. Several reform economists were also members of the democratic opposition, as with the 1956 revolutionists. These categories rather mark the themes of opposing the regime and do not indicate organized groups. For details see PINTÉR M., Lajos: *Ellenzékben, 1968–1987*, p. 302.

72 K. I.: A monori tanácskozás (The Monor Conference). *Irodalmi Újság*, 1986, Vol. 36, No. 1, p. 6.

73 In Gábor Demszky's opinion, this assessment of the situation determined the relation of the “popular movement” to the reigning power in the Kádár regime. See CSIZMADIA, Ervin (ed.): *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék (1968–1988). Interjúk*, p. 338. Gábor Demszky (born 1952) earned a degree in sociology. During the final era of communist regime, he was a leader figure in the underground democratic opposition. He was a founding member of the Alliance of Free Democrats. He was the first elected Mayor of Budapest from 1991 to 2010.

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*approach that we are here today to exchange thoughts so that each of these loosely organized circles can continue their efforts with a better insight into each other's goals and endeavours. We could go farther than that, but I don't think it would be desirable at this point.*⁷⁴

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The decision on this question was still open in 1985. By 1987, however, both main opposition groups thought it was time to break away from the status enforced on them by the regime. The editorial board of *Beszélő* elaborated a program tailored to the actual political situation under the title *Társadalmi Szerződés* (Social Contract). The popular opposition launched a movement, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum, MDF) on the grounds of self-organization, remaining within the boundaries of the law.

The program developed by the *Beszélő* editors used the realities of 1987 as a starting point. Therefore, it did not call for a change to the political system, but merely a structural transformation. This document did not demand the full democratization of the political system and the termination of the communist party's monopoly. What is more, it accepted the party's privileged role saying that it is a status guaranteed for the party by Hungary's power position, i.e. the fact that the country belonged to the Soviet Bloc. The program was only intended to establish more democratic controls over the regime, expand the elbow room and accentuate the significance of the expert professionals working in the background. They elaborated this control function or, as Gáspár Miklós Tamás⁷⁵ put it, this "proto-democratic political system" in detail.⁷⁶ Although the program was published illegally only, it drew up a certain direction for the democratization of the reigning power that could be eligible for negotiation for any clear-headed reform communist who accepted reality. The program did not include any element that would not (or could not) have been raised by the end of 1987 in some legitimate form, including the radical opening thought: *Kádár must go!* Perhaps one issue was an exception: The martyrs of 1956 who were buried without a proper funeral. *If the regime wants to reconcile with the nation, it must not stand by any gallows from which martyrs were hanged instead of sharing the martyrs' views. A proper funeral for the dead [heroes] must be the starting point of the dialogue.*⁷⁷ In order to remain restrained, this demand skipped the counter-revolution narrative that was such a sensitive issue regarding the regime's legitimacy. Breaking away from the tone of samizdat publications, it approached 1956 from a viewpoint of piety.

74 RAINER M., János (ed.): *A monori tanácskozás, 1985. június 14–16*, p. 13.

75 Miklós Tamás Gáspár (born 1948), philosopher and public writer born in Transylvania, Romania. After being expelled from Romania in 1981, he settled in Hungary and began working in the democratic opposition. He was regularly invited to teach at several universities in the USA, the UK and France from the 1980s.

76 TAMÁS GÁSPÁR, Miklós: *A Társadalmi Szerződés* (The Social Contract). *Hírmondó* (The Messenger), March–June 1987, pp. 2–3.

77 *ÁBTL*, 4.1 A-2003/1, KASZA, László: *Kormány- és az ellenzéki program* (The government and the opposition program). Program aired on Radio Free Europe, Munich, on October 14, 1987, p. 33.

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Under the specific circumstances at the time, this remarkable consideration of realities on the part of the *Beszélő* group was not a compromise. Quite on the contrary: it was a radical turn. The regime was striving to force groups they deemed dangerous into as tight a manoeuvring space as possible. As outlined above, illegality prevented the democratic opposition from taking open political action and made it impossible for them to build broader contacts with society. With this new public political program, the *Beszélő* group fundamentally changed its “quarantined” status: As if they had been a decisive factor in the legitimate political sphere but without giving up the “freedom” of illegality, they created a program that was aligned to the actual conditions in respect of political power. This alignment to the existing circumstances conveyed the message that the group was moving away from its illegal status.

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It was inevitable that this friendly meeting would take place. An order to be patient from the policymakers, which is still doubtful and uncertain, would not be sufficient. What was more encouraging is our increasing inclination to break out from our status as nomadic intellectuals⁷⁸ in our lives,⁷⁹ said Sándor Lezsák in his opening speech at the 1987 Lakitelek meeting.

As the *Beszélő* group represented a program-oriented approach, they placed less emphasis on self-organization within society owing to their circumstances. While they intended to establish a mass base along an already elaborated political program, the so-called “national side” considered the launch of the aforementioned self-organization as the main task, where the program would emerge as a result of that process. This difference of approaches was also reflected in the regime’s political endeavours to neutralize them. On the one hand, the means of isolation was forcing the group concerned into illegality. On the other, the regime exploited the group’s desire to remain within the framework of legality. This framework was defined by the reigning power and they carefully shaped it so as to almost completely narrow down the autonomous manoeuvring space, an indispensable prerequisite of self-organization. They did that by promises, endless postponements and other similar tactics.

Zoltán Bíró⁸⁰, first chairman of the MDF remembered a failed attempt⁸¹ of 1984 as follows: *We turned to the highest political body with a few demands that could not possibly be fulfilled without the regime’s approval. [...] We were no longer naïve about political promise. Yet*

78 Reference to Sándor Csoóri’s essay entitled *A Nomadic Intellectual*, which analysed the distorting impact of the Kádár regime’s policy towards intellectuals and the position of professionals who were condemned to *losing their innocence and ability to take action*. The essay was set to be published in the February 1980 issue of the *Forrás* periodical but it was excised from every single copy before it left the printing press. It was later issued in samizdat form with the help of the *Beszélő* group.

79 AGÓCS, Sándor – MEDVIGY, Endre (eds.): *Lakitelek, 1987. A magyarság esélyei* (The Chances of Hungary and the Hungarians. Authentic Minutes of the Conference). Antológia, Lakitelek 2011, p. 5.

80 Zoltán Bíró (born 1941), literary historian and politician. Head of Department at the Ministry of Culture, 1974–1980. A confidant of Imre Pozsgay. One of the founders and first chairman of the first legal opposition movement, the Hungarian Democratic Forum.

81 19 intellectuals wrote a letter to János Kádár requesting permission for a periodical and cultural institution that would operate independently from the reigning power.

Those who are not against us, are they with us?

we never thought that, despite all our efforts, demands and readiness to negotiate, nothing would happen. That is when we finally realized that there was no chance for cooperation, even on the smallest scale. [...] We had had enough..., we had experienced on countless occasions that there was no way to make progress with these guys. Bíró also added that *perhaps this experience can be regarded as the key direct antecedent of the MDF's launch.*⁸²

One key turn at the Lakitelek meeting was the decision of the MDF's founders to launch a political movement that would rely on self-organization but observe the boundaries of legitimacy. However, the movement was no longer aligned to the framework set by the reigning power. On the contrary: It was forcing the regime to accept the new frameworks set by the movement.

Formally, this was a friendly meeting in a private home. The goal, however, was far-reaching: To organize a countrywide movement. Imre Pozsgay, a high-ranking member of the communist party and its central committee was also invited to the event. Both he and the organizers emphasized that Pozsgay was attending the meeting as a friend and not as a representative of the party. As opposed to many former occasions, his presence did not mean an opportunity to cooperate with the party but a chance to remain within the bounds of legitimacy. Pozsgay's high-ranking position in the party was a legitimizing force in itself and created a chance to skip decades of bargaining with the reigning power as long as the process remained legitimate. Owing to the same reason, leading party functionaries from the county were also invited. *We knew if we asked for permission, they would surely not provide it. By inviting them to a friendly meeting, the whole thing turned into an official event. They could then decide whether or not to attend, but they had no word in what would actually happen at the meeting,*⁸³ said Zoltán Bíró.

Another part of this game around legality was the fact that the document passed at the Lakitelek meeting, the *Lakitelek Declaration*, did not openly identify the movement as an opposition endeavour. Nevertheless, by establishing an autonomous framework for joint considerations concerning the future of Hungary, it implicitly put itself into an opposition role in an envisaged multi-party democracy. *The persons gathered here today believe it is timely and necessary to create a framework that serves to enable society to participate in shaping a public consensus as partners. [...] In the existing network of political and societal institutions, no opportunity is provided for expressing independent views. Therefore, we propose the establishment of a Hungarian democratic forum that could serve as a stage for continual and public dialogue,*⁸⁴ said the Statement.

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The democratic opposition, i.e. the predecessor of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, later The Alli-

82 *Author's archive*, the author's interview with Zoltán Bíró, May 13, 2017.

83 *Ibid.*

84 The September 27, 1987 declaration of the Hungarian Democratic Forum on its establishment as a non-governmental consultation forum. SZEKÉR, Nóra - RIBA, András (eds.): *Dokumentumok a Magyar Demokrata Fórum korai történetéből, 1987–1989* (Documents from the Early History of the Hungarian Democratic Forum). Antológia, Lakitelek 2017, p. 18.

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ance of Free Democrats – Hungarian Liberal Party – Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége – Magyar Liberális Párt, SZDSZ), implemented a paradigm change regarding the type of their organization, also enforcing a paradigm change regarding the regime’s operation. The establishment of the opposition’s organizational framework and the seeking of position in a gradually expanding manoeuvring space are the subject of the next chapter. The main motivation, however, took shape right upon the opposition’s formation: to shape the many different good intentions into an opportunity “for the future”, either by adhering to the circumstances or, if necessary, cheating them, but always with a mindset that is open to the various schools and options.

In 1987, not only the organization of the opposition moved up to a higher level. The resulting changes enforced political consequences that cleared the way for a new era.⁸⁵ The changes started not only from the opposition, but they also came from the communist party reformers. Communist party leader János Kádár was removed from power on May 19, 1988. At the turn of 1988 and 1989 Hungary’s economic situation deteriorated, which led to strikes and demonstrations, and on the other hand there was a growing number of independent organizations and intellectuals who have become an increasingly important factor.

The communist party fell apart, the group of party reformers led by Imre Pozsgay was becoming more dominant, while the orthodox group of the party was playing the role of a brakeman. The turning point happened on February 11, 1989. At Pozsgay’s request, the Central Committee of the Communist Party revised its position on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 acknowledging its democratic character, which led to the rehabilitation of Imre Nagy and all other victims of the revolution. On June 16, 1989 the ceremonial funeral of Imre Nagy and his companions took place. This mass demonstration was in fact a symbolic farewell to Communism.

On February 11, 1989 the Central Committee of the Communist Party also accepted the resolution on the pluralisation of the political system. In February 1989, at the initiative of the Independent Lawyer’s Forum (Független Jogász Forum, FJF), the concept of a common opposition platform was developed and on March 19, opposition groups were called to join the Opposition Round Table⁸⁶ (Ellenzéki Kerekasztal). On 10th June, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party signed an agreement to start the National Round Table (Nemzeti Kerekasztal) Talks. After a lengthy political quibble, a compromise was finally reached on September 18, 1989. The most important decision was to conduct free elections in Hungary in May 1990. The parliament accepted all resolutions of the National Round Table and adopted the appropriate laws, beginning by changing the country’s name to the Republic of Hungary (Magyar Köztársaság) on October 23, 1989, on the 33rd anniversary of the Hungarian uprising.⁸⁷

w85 DRAUS, Jan: Road to Freedom. Central Europe in 1989. In: DRAUS, Jan – SZYMANOWSKI, Maciej (eds.): *Before the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland towards the Refugees from East Germany in 1989*. Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warszawa 2019, pp. 9–69.

86 The Opposition Round Table was attended by six political parties and two groups of intellectuals.

87 This study was translated into English by Zoltán Farkas.