

Bence Keresztes

University of Debrecen

Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies- Media specialisation

OSA Visegrad Fellow, January-February 2025

Western press image of the Hungarian Democratic Opposition compared to the correspondence of the British Embassy in Budapest

Final Report

Open Society Archives, Budapest, Hungary

Project description:

In my PhD dissertation, I will compare the correspondence of the British Embassy in Budapest to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with the Western press coverage of the Hungarian Democratic Opposition. In my thesis, I was concerned with the following questions: What was the general impression of the Western journalists about the Hungarian opposition? How different or similar was their viewpoint to that of the British diplomats? Moreover, how did the opposition itself try to influence its image abroad in the 1980s?

The Western press image was a crucial factor in the history of the Hungarian opposition during the late socialist area in Hungary. As Ervin Csizmadia (Csizmadia, 1995) and Miklós Mitrovits (Mitrovits 2020) stated, until the transition period, the Hungarian dissidents used their foreign media appearance as a protection from the harassment of the Kádár regime. In the 1980's the Hungarian government had serious debts towards the Western banks. To get more foreign loans in the future, they needed to preserve their relatively positive image in the eyes of the Western public and governments. The Kádár regime was often called as "the most liberal Communist system in the Eastern bloc", which was partly true, compared to other countries in the block, like Romania or Czechoslovakia. In these countries, the regimes often arrested their dissidents and sent them to prison.

In Hungary, however, the dissidents due to their regular connection with Western journalists never ended up in prison, instead, they got penalties, and their samizdat publishing activities were treated as breaking the Hungarian press law. Their regular contacts were correspondents like Nick Thorpe- the BBC's local correspondents in

Budapest-, Judy Dempsey- also the BBC's journalist, later the correspondent of the Financial Times in Vienna-, the foreign radio broadcasts, like the Radio Free Europe - where László Kasza from the radio's Hungarian was their main contact-, Voice of America and the BBC's Hungarian Service.

The dissidents had contacts with Western intellectuals who supported their case like Timothy Garton Ash, Susan Sonntag. If the Hungarian dissidents were punished by the authorities (house searching or huge penalties) They often wrote open letters and statements to support them.

However, it is still missing from the Hungarian historical studies, how Western journalist interpreted their activities. I am interested in whether they even considered their activities as a real threat for the Hungarian government like the Polish Solidarity and the Charta 77 Movement in Czechoslovakia.

For background sources, I would like to use the British diplomatic sources I found during research in 2023 in the United Kingdom, in the National Archives. The correspondences written by the British diplomats could be reliable sources for analysing the Western press imagination about the Hungarian Opposition and for analysing the dissidents' communication with their Western contacts.

Based on the work of Kasper Szulecki(Szulecki, 2019) the Eastern European dissidents liked to use the foreign media to make their activity popular and well-known. However, as the author mentioned sometimes (by the journalists' mistakes) they were seen as martyrs and more influential in some situations than in reality. Sooner when the dissidents realised the power of the press, they started to give interviews, write articles and send statements to the news agencies.

Relying on his results, I aimed to analyse the Hungarian dissident's communication in the Western press too.

In my research I concentrated on three main dissident cases which had appeared in the press:

- the closure of the Rajk boutique in 1983 January
- the arrestment of Miklós Duray, Hungarian dissident in Czechoslovakia, 1982 & 1983
- Gábor Demszky's beating by the police and court trial from September 1983 an December 1983

Research in the Blinken OSA Archivum

During my research period in Budapest, I worked at first with the Records of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Institute, primarily with the Hungarian and Czechoslovak Units.

I started my research from January 1983 when the authorities closed the Opposition's samizdat bookshop, which was often called Rajk-boutique. The boutique was functioned in the flat of László Rajk Junior, who was the son of the former interior minister, László Rajk, who was executed in 1949.

Here I collected the reports mostly from the main news agencies like Reuters, United Press, Associated Press, AFP, BBC.

Beside the short reports about the closure, I tried to find more detailed articles which try to give answers and explanations for the response of the Hungarian regime to the dissident's activities. I have found long, analysing articles and background reports from the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Boston Globe, Guardian and also reports from BBC' Radio. Even the background analysis of the Radio Free Europe for the Radio's journalists.

These articles gave new inspiration for my research. The differences between American and European journalism during the Cold War area -the usage of headlines quotes, interviews and the journalist's background knowledge about Hungary and Hungarian history- had a huge impact on their narratives about the Hungarian situation and the Democratic opposition.

However, besides the foreign news agencies, I could read some Hungarian emigrant articles too like Nemzetőr, Párizsi Irodalmi Újság, Látóhatár and even the Hungarian samizdat editions from the Beszélő, Hírmondó, Demokrata. Among them, I could read most of the dissident's narratives about the actual cases and I could compare their interviews given to the foreign journalists and the British diplomats.

I used the BBC's reporter, Judy Dempsey's articles about the Hungarian dissident activities, which I found in the Radio Free Europe- Hungarian Unit, Index on Censorship Country files in English.

Judy Dempsey's articles will be returning crucial elements in my thesis. Compared to other articles her explanations were closer to the truth – mean to the current historical answers – about the reasons behind the closure.

In the Czechoslovak Unit of the Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty Research Department, I found Western articles related to Nationalism and to the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, which were in connection with the closure of the Rajk-boutique and the Duary case (more details in the Results)

Beyond the foreign articles, Hungarian emigrant newspapers and samizdat editions, I had the opportunity to discover the books in the Blinken OSA Archivum and in the CEU Library. To understand deeper to the analysed period I could read books about the works of foreign radio broadcasts and the relationship between the dissidents and the Western journalists. (See under "*Bbooks I used..*")

Results

After my research, I could find suitable sources for my dissertation which gave new directions for analysing the Western articles about the Democratic Opposition.

Reading articles about the closure of the Rajk-boutique I found a new perspective for the research. Some articles mentioned an interesting explanation which stated that the Hungarian dissidents had to be punished because they wrote a lot about the Hungarian minority's situation in the neighbouring countries, especially in Romania. In Transylvania (previously a part of Hungary before 1920) there was a small dissident community that created samizdat which was sent to Budapest, for the Hungarian Democratic Opposition. They often quoted from these samizdat periodicals and there were interviews with the Transylvanian dissidents in their own samizdat journal, the Beszélő (in English: the Speaker). Dissidents like Attila Ara-Kovács, Károly and Ilona Tóth and Géza Szócs created a Hungarian samizdat called Ellenpontok (in English: Counterpoints) in which they wrote about their experiences being a Hungarian citizen in Romania. During the Ceausescu regime, Hungarian citizens suffered a lot because of the nationalist politics of the regime. They often could not practice their language, Hungarian schools and journals were closed and even Hungarians were moved from their homeland to territories where ethnic Romanians were in majority. One of their samizdat editions was read on the Madrid CSCE Conference in 1982 with the help of the Hungarian Democratic Opposition and American Hungarian emigrants in the United States (formally formed the Hungarian Human Rights Foundations by László Halmos, who had connections with American senators, congressmen too). (Stefano Bottono, 2019)

After the conference, the creators of the Ellenpontok were arrested, humiliated by the Romanian security forces and then forced to emigrate Hungary. Their case had appeared in the Democratic Opposition's samizdat journal, the Beszélő and was read out in Radio Free Europe too.

More than ten articles mentioned these events as reasons behind the closure of the Rajk-Boutique and the harassment against the dissidents in Hungary. According to these theories, the steps against the Democratic Opposition were in connection with their articles regarding to the Hungarian minorities' situation in Transylvania and the story of the editorship of the Ellenpontok.

Victoria Pope, who wrote about the Hungarian dissident movement in the Wall Street Journal and into the Boston Globe stated that by closing the boutique the Hungarian authorities could cut the dissidents not just from their audience and readers but even from the Hungarian dissidents in Romania to avoid a dissident cooperation between the two countries' dissidents. Similar theories were published from other correspondents, who considered the minority case as a threat for the Kádár-regime. However, there were many other articles which did not consider the Hungarian dissidents and their movement as danger for the regime.

Although others, like Judy Dempsey emphasised the Hungarian government's problematic relationship with Romania (relations were frozen since 1977) that the

minority case could be a possible unifying force for a social movement in Hungary. This theory also appeared when she wrote about Miklós Duray, who was released from arrest by the Czechoslovak regime in March 1983. According to her, the statement signed by the Democratic Opposition and the right-wing writers in Hungary (like Sándor Csoóri and István Csurka) was also problematic in the sense of the Hungarian-Czechoslovak relations, not to mention the fact that Miklós Tamás Gáspár personally wrote a letter to President Husak to set Duray free.

Articles published in Reuters, Guardian, AFP and AP emphasised the possibility of a social movement in Hungary, but they mentioned other reasons. Like economic situation, the closure of a critical journal *Mozgó Világ* (which was popular among university students who organised minor demonstrations against it), and the protests of the Hungarian Peace Movement the Dialogue whose members were university students.

My results were similar to my diplomatic sources which I found in the National Archives. Between January and April 1983, the British diplomat, Norman J. Cameron sent correspondences to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about the harassments against the dissidents. He did background research on “minority theory” which was one of the reasons of the dissidents (told by Miklós Haraszti and László Rajk) too. He had the same conclusions to the dissidents and the journalists which was confirmed by the Party Secretary, János Kádár himself in his speech in the Politburo in 1983. (forrás) According to them, the Hungarian government had to take steps as the Romanians did with their dissidents. In other words, they were forced because the Romanian regime would criticise them to the Soviet leadership, whom the Hungarians had to show loyalty in those days (it was the area of a new Cold War, American-Soviet relationships were frozen again, it was the year of the War in Afghanistan).

Conclusions:

My results should be analysed more carefully again but we can draw some consequences from them now. As I saw from the articles, foreign journalists were concerned that the acts against the Hungarian dissidents had foreign political reasons as Hungarian historians had already published before. However, in the future, I had to find more details about the connection between the dissident movements and the emigrant circles which were considered real threats to the Hungarian government according to the current studies. The working methods of the Western journalist should be analysed too in the future, because I could see the narratives about the opposition depended a lot on that. It is one of the reasons, why there were differences among them regarding the dissidents’ effectiveness for the Hungarian society.

Sources and files from the OSA Archivum:

HU OSA 300-30-12:56/5	Hungary
HU OSA 300-40-2:84/3	Opposition, Unrest, and Criticism: General
: HU OSA 300-40-1:246/4	Ellenzék: Demokratikus
HU OSA 301-0-3:222/7	Europe and Central Asia: Hungary: Background Information
HU OSA 300-40-6:4/319	Duray, Miklós
HU OSA 318-0-5:111/4	Romania: Minorities: Hungarian Minority
HU OSA 300-120-5:96/9	Hungary: Minorities
HU OSA 362-0-5:1/19	Miscellaneous Radio Broadcasts of BBC
HU OSA 301-0-3:222/8	Europe and Central Asia: Hungary: Background Information
HU OSA 300-40-2:86/2	Opposition: Revolution 1956 [2/5]
HU OSA 300-40-2:86/1	Opposition: Revolution 1956 [1/5]
HU OSA 300-120-5:97/6	Hungary: Publishing Samizdat
HU OSA 300-40-2:84/4	Opposition, Unrest, and Criticism: General
HU OSA 300-40-2:83/1	Nationalism
HU OSA 300-40-1:250/3	Ellenzék: Disszidens nemzetközi kapcsolatok
HU OSA 397-0-1:4/1	Hírmondó: 2-3
HU OSA 397-0-1:1/2	Demokrata: 1-6 [ABC Kiadó
HU OSA 397-0-1:1/1	Angol Figyelő: 1-2 [Katalizátor Iroda]
HU OSA 301-0-3:167/1	Europe and Central Asia: General: Eastern Europe: Background Information: BBC Talks
HU OSA 301-0-3:167/6	Europe and Central Asia: General: Eastern Europe: Broadcasting: Radio Free Europe
HU OSA 302-1-1:1/1	Demszky Gábor írásai
HU OSA 301-0-5:2/5	Index on Censorship
HU OSA 301-0-5:3/1	Index on Censorship
HU OSA 300-40-2:56/2	International Relations: Political: Romania

HU OSA 301-0-3:223/9	Europe and Central Asia: Hungary: Radio Free Europe (Situation riport)
HU OSA 300-40-2:7/6	Culture: Samizdat
HU OSA 300-40-2:82/5	Nationalism

Books and studies which I used during my research:

- Csizmadia Ervin: A Magyar demokratikus ellenzék, T-Twins Kiadó, 1995
- Tiltott kapcsolat: A magyar-lengyel ellenzéki együttműködés, Jaffa Kiadó, 2020
- Arch Puddington: Broadcasting Freedom- The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, University Press of Kentucky, 2021
- Sarah B. Snyder: Human Rights Activism and the end of Cold War- Transnational History of Helsinki Network
- *Cold War Correspondents: Soviet and American Reporters on the Ideological Frontlines*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021
- K.R.M. Short(editor): Western Broadcast over the Iron Curtain, Routledge, 2023
- Kacper Szulecki: Dissidents in Communist Central Europe, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2019
- Stefano Bottoni: Magyar-román kapcsolatok(1945-1990) In: Magyarország Külkapcsolatai (1945-1990), Történettudományi Intézet, Budapest, 2021