

## **“Between Crisis and Reform: Polish and Hungarian Critical Intellectual Discourses on the Future of State Socialism, 1975–1989”**

**Visegrad Scholarship at OSA, October 10, 2022 – December 10, 2022**

The prime goal of my stay at the Open Society Archives was to set up a comparative framework, which allows me to effectively bring together my case studies, Poland and Hungary. Even though, these two state socialist regimes are highly similar in their nature, namely that they were regimes which sought to craft their legitimacy through reformism, the asynchrony of the events and the different nature of the ‘crisis’ taking place in the two national contexts challenge the researcher.

A further issue, which I sought to tackle in these two months was the conceptualization of the so called “grey zone.” My PhD project aims to connect dissident thinking on possible reforms with other elites’ ideas on political and economic restructuring. The concept of “grey zone”, even though being ambiguous is a useful term to map the flow of ideas between different intellectual groups. According to my definition the “grey zone” is a range of different critical intellectuals who worked in different official structures and on many occasions served as an interlocuter between the dissident milieu and the party elites.

During these two months I have focused on the materials of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. The subject files series provided a great opportunity to chronologically survey events, debates and policies connected to a wide range of topics. In my case it allowed me to follow two decades of economic reformism taking place in Poland and Hungary. While, on the box level the Polish and the Hungarian unit of the RFE/RL Research Institute produced slightly different collections, on the level of documents these are more-or less similar collections in their nature, which led me to revelatory findings in regard of my future research. An example, which emphasizes the challenge of comparison outlined in the introduction, is that while in the Polish case one of the richest and relevant collection concerned “economic crisis,” in the Hungarian case it was “economic reform”. During my stay I have researched the following boxes in OSA’s collection:

Polish Unit:

HU OSA 30-50-1: 29-30, Philosophical and Political Theories / Teorie filozoficzne i polityczne / Teorie filozoficzne i polityczne, 1977-1983

HU OSA 300-50-1:1611-1612, Referendum, 1987

HU OSA 300-50-1:1637-1639, Polish Economic Model, Market Socialism /  
Polski model gospodarczy, Rynkowy socjalizm, 1971-1989

HU OSA 300-50-1:1708-1711, Economic crisis, prosperity / Kryzys  
gospodarczy, Dobrobyt, 1975-1989

Polish Underground Publishing Unit:

HU OSA 300-55-10:11, Ekonomia: Sytuacja gospodarcza (Economics:  
economic situation), 1985-1990

Hungarian Unit:

HU OSA-300-40-1:364-371, Gazdaság: Gazdasági reform (Economy: economic  
reform), 1973-1989

HU OSA- 300-40-1:641-642, Közgazdászok (Economists), 1982-1992

For different degrees, but all collections led to revelatory findings. First and foremost, my research at OSA made me to reconsider my periodization. The proposed starting point of my doctoral project was 1975, however surveying a variety of economic debates made me realize, that while this date makes sense from a civic society approach but when it comes to reform debates, it is not relevant. As other revisionist historiographies of 1989 emphasize<sup>1</sup>, the state socialist reform debates of the 1980s should be treated as a process of coming into terms with the global changes of the 1970s. This was confirmed by the documents I have found at OSA. When it comes to ‘crisis’ and ‘reform’, there is a significant conceptual shift around 1979, from this point these terms start to dominate different official, marginal or underground discourses. This is the most remarkable in the Polish case, where until 1980 the partly daily *Trybuna Ludu* wrote extensively about the crisis of capitalism in the West, but the narrative suddenly changed that year and reports started to focus on the “Polish crisis”.

The mapping of “grey zone” intellectuals yielded varied results in the Hungarian case and in the Polish one. The Polish and Hungarian Units collected a different set of materials, which concerned different levels of public discourses. The Polish collection is largely consisted of accounts from the national media, connected to different official structures of the regimes. In this case, the localization of critique is much more difficult and depends on historical situation, namely before or after Martial law etc. In the Hungarian case a clear cut three-level division of different discourses appeared from the documents. These were the national official organs, academic discourses and the county level local media outlets. My research focused

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<sup>1</sup> James Mark et al., *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Fritz Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

primarily on the academic discourses, however interestingly these narratives seep into both national and local newspapers, which means that from the early 1980s the concept of ‘reform’ had a strong mobilizing effect in the Hungarian society. Nevertheless, the influential figures of the reform discourses are somewhat different depending on whether we focus on the general national context or on academic debates. To understand whether the research units focused on collecting a different set of materials or there was a significant difference between the structure of Hungarian and Polish discourses on reform and crisis requires further research.

Altogether, my stay at OSA yielded useful insights on the methodological challenges I have faced when designed my PhD project. Most importantly it helped me to define the major directions of my future research and those junctions where the Polish and Hungarian discourses can be effectively brought together.