Chapter II

The Political Context: Censorship and Co-optation

1. Censorship and the press in the late Kádár era

Although in some distant ways the democratic opposition was born out of the revolution of 1956 and the reformist ideas of 1968, it appeared as an independent group only at the end of the 1970s. Earlier, the dissidents directed more sporadic and isolated acts of criticism against the socialist regime. From 1981 onward the dissidents started to define themselves as a tightly knit and increasingly well-organized democratic opposition. Yet before discussing this, I describe the political context: The practices and institutions the communist party leadership used to scrutinize public expression and restrict the freedom of speech.

1.1 The practice of controlling the press

How did censorship work in Hungary in the 1980s? The answer to such a question and the study of the structure of public expression are inseparable from the country’s political system. Hungary had a dictatorial regime from 1948 until 1989, and restricting the freedom of speech, the censorship was a vital part of this system. However, the period cannot be regarded as uniform. The years from 1948 to the early 1960s, except the revolution, displayed the traits of totalitarianism, which ended with the careful opening of the regime’s cultural policy.¹ After the early 1960s until the dissolution of the

¹ Standeisky, Az írók és a batalom.
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system may be regarded as the era of a post-totalitarian system. There were variations though in the practicing of power. Thus, the regime was reform oriented between 1963 and 1971, followed by the dominance of anti-reformist trends between 1971 and 1978. The regime was once again reform oriented in 1979–1984, and the period from 1985 until 1989 may be described as a period of gradually disintegrating dictatorship. The two latter stages saw the appearance of a systemic opposition, a struggle between reformers and hardliners within the regime, a surge ahead of the reformers, the manifestation of inner conflicts, and the ultimate erosion and collapse of the system. The last period was aptly described as “discursive dictatorship.”

The weakness of a system built on coercion manifested in the paradoxical attitude of arguing with its opponents. The regime change was partially preceded and partially accompanied by the victory of the Gouldnerian “culture of critical discourse” over the party state’s jargon.

Getting there was a long road. In the following, I describe the principles behind the regulation of the press and media as reflected by party resolutions, then I will analyze the operation of censorship and the main features of the public expression in the 1980s. There was no Press Act on the statutes until 1986. The 1949 Constitution formally declared the freedom of the press, and, at the same time, announced that the leading force in society was the communist party. Naturally, these two constitutional declarations were contradictory, and it was the unlimited political power of the party which held sway. There was no legislation on censorship because the system did not need it; legislation would have meant the blunt acknowledgment of the limited freedom of the press, and it was easier to exercise party control without such legal norms. The politicians operating within the system often stated that there was no censorship in Hungary, and they were somewhat taken aback when, in 1981, the writer István Eörsi demanded the introduction of censorship at the congress of the Hungarian Writers’ Union, arguing that the boundaries would then become obvious, and then writers would know within what limits they could write “freely.”

2 Csizmadia, Diskurzus és diktatúra.
3 The Constitution of 1949 contained the following passage: “In accordance with the interests of the workers the Hungarian People’s Republic guarantees freedom of the press, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.” For an analysis, see Monori, “Média és rendszerváltás,” 13.
The expectations of those in power concerning the press came in the form of party resolutions. The basis for the Hungarian Socialist Worker’s Party’s (MSZMP) media policy was laid down by the 1958 resolution. According to this decision, which was never withdrawn by the leadership, the “task” of the media was to follow and popularize the policy of the Central Committee of the MSZMP. Thus, the press a means of propaganda, that presented party policy, and its duty was to influence and educate public opinion along the lines expected by the party. The “critical” activities of the press were only needed to attack the negative features, which hindered the realization of party policy. At the same time, individual publications were stated to be “autonomous,” hence party control was essentially exercised through those journalists who were members of the party. It was mandatory for all working journalists, even those who were not party members, to join the Association of Hungarian Journalists (MÚOSZ), which was under party control. Hence a journalist who was not a party member and did not conform to the expectations of the party state, could be called to hold responsible either “professionally” or “ethically” through MÚOSZ. Beside all this, the system of personal dependency was still present. Only party members could become editors-in-chief or leading associates of the more prominent papers. The editors-in-chief were under the control of the party leadership until 1989.

According to the party resolution of 1958, “The press should be partisan, it should base itself without reservations on the dictatorship of the proletariat, and its stand-point should always be a class stand. Party control should be asserted in the entire press, because only in this way can the partisan stand of the press safeguarded properly and the assertion of views alien to Marxism-Leninism avoided.” At the same time, the Central Committee of the Party started a battle against “oppositionism, carping, outsiders, political non-membership, and against the unsubstantiated charges, which lack corrective judgment, and against the hunting of sensations and curiosities, which are still present at some places.”

Gradually, from the mid-1960s, milder wordings were added to the initially tough points, stressing “ideological persuasion” as the main instrument of control. Kádár’s philosophy that “who is not against us those are

4 Jakab, A tömegkommunikáció, 15.
5 Lajti, A sértődékeny állam.
6 Jakab, A tömegkommunikáció, 40.
with us” started to gain ground. The ideology was represented more and more by the leading articles, and the other pieces had to be loosely formed to them. By then the party was making a demand that “the entire quantity of information” be presented to the public, except for facts whose publication would be detrimental to the national interest. This was expressed even more strongly—the duty to give information was not optional—in the 1986 Press Act which was the only legislative act on the press in the Kádár era. But the criteria for national interest were not expressed in practice, each organ of the state had the authority to decide what information it wished to share with the public, and what it would classify. As such the need for comprehensive information and the duty to supply it remained a dead letter.

The Party resolution of 1975 was a good example of the spirit of the anti-reform campaign of the seventies. For the first time, in addition to the need to set positive objectives, it referred to the Party’s adversaries, even if they were not precisely defined: “We will strengthen the ideological struggle against bourgeois and petit bourgeois ideology and against the different unscientific world views and we take a resolute stand against the enemy ideas and the malpractices detrimental to socialist public thinking. For this purpose, the radio, television and the press would also be put to their proper use.”

Though it has never been written down, it was common knowledge among Hungarian journalists that they were not supposed to touch upon certain taboo issues. These were: (1) Criticism on the Soviet Union; (2) Questioning Hungary’s membership of the Soviet military system (the Warsaw Pact), and the stationing of Soviet forces in Hungary; (3) Criticism of the socialist economic and political system, and finally, (4) Any real assessment of the revolution of 1956. The suppression of the last was the genesis of Kádárism, which officially deemed 1956 a “counter-revolution.”

In addition, some issues were temporarily taboo because of the political needs of the day. These covered a broad range of topics. For example, in the late 1970s when the MSZMP demanded that the euphemism of “a situation of multiple disadvantage” should be used instead of economic poverty of people had to be used, but not out of any desire to be politically correct. Mention of the lack of political representation for Hungarian minorities living abroad was also a taboo, because—according to the official stance—it

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7 Jakab, A tömegkommunikáció, 85.
would have endangered the good relationships with neighboring countries, which were also members of the same communist system. The political leadership loosened the rein on this question from the mid-1980s when they sensed the people’s growing lack of confidence in them. This loosening happened mostly in an \textit{ad hoc}, unpredictable way.

Communist cultural policies were based on selective repression and associated with the name of György Aczél, a leading communist politician, who set up the categories of “Prohibit, Permit, Promote.”\footnote{Agárdi, \textit{Nemzeti értékviták és kultúrafelfogások}.} Works by writers committed to socialism and by the so-called fellow-traveler authors were supported; ideologically neutral works, or writings not sympathizing with the system but having a marginal influence were tolerated; finally, works classified as “oppositional and hostile” were prohibited.

The dissident writer Miklós Haraszti remembered this period as follows:

\begin{quote}
By my whole attitude, it was the fight against censorship, and personally self-censorship that brought me into the opposition. The main motive for me was always the freedom of opinion and the free press—later I regarded this as the real stake and thrill of the regime change, and the only possible and genuine change.\footnote{Interview with Miklós Haraszti, 1997.}
\end{quote}

It seemed that loosening the limits of writing and the freedom of speech were among those fundamental issues that could bring the ideologically heterogeneous intelligentsia to a common platform.

\section*{1.2 Mechanisms of informal control}

In the 1980s, signs of economic liberalization and the political dissolution of the system appeared. The way in which press was controlled increasingly moved from normative regulation toward \textit{ad hoc} interference, which often made conditions for the working press unpredictable. However, unpredictability made journalist more and more resourceful and independent since any adjustment to a “central line” was made impossible. The decision on what could be published and what could not was increasingly dependent on
individuals and less on the centrally accepted principles. Opportunities for tactical journalism were greatly enhanced.

In analyzing these conditions, which had become chaotic by the second half of the decade and were often difficult to comprehend, we may follow István Hegedűs in differentiating between preliminary control and retrospective adjustment. Preliminary control was exercised in four ways: through (1) the screening of news and information; (2) institutionalized internal information; (3) ad hoc orders; and (4) individual responsibility of editors-in-chief.

Preliminary control was exercised through the Hungarian News Agency (Magyar Távirati Iroda, MTI) screening news and information, which had a monopoly position in this regard. Consequently, the MTI’s operation became totally intermingled with those of the political authorities. Screening the news was done by the MTI in cooperation with the agitprop department of the Party and under its guidance. The official news agency was particularly keen on only getting news about Warsaw Pact countries only from news agencies in those countries themselves, and not from any Western source. The ironic consequence of this policy was that the public often learned about an event abroad from an announcement published as a disclaimer from a particular news agency. This led to sophisticated, skeptical readers who became able to read between the lines and who received with suspicion, or rejected any kind of, propaganda for success. In many cases the MTI did not even publish a disclaimer, choosing complete silence instead. Incidentally, the fact that the socialist states would only incorporate each other’s official news outlets caused serious problems. At the time of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe in April 1986, the information given out by the Soviets was simply not sufficient for the Hungarian public, thus they tried to get the information from other sources. In such cases, the MTI chose to publish false information with the objective of soothing the people’s worries, thus discrediting itself even more in the eyes of the public. All during this time, MTI published a weekly compilation translated into Hungarian under the title Articles from the International Press which was sent to editors and senior staff as well with the intention of providing them with background information.

10 Hegedűs, Sajtó és irányítás; “Sajtó és irányítás a Kádár-korszak végén.”
11 Hegedűs, Sajtó és irányítás, 13.
The agitprop department of the Central Committee of the MSZMP and the Information Bureau, a state organ, also institutionalized internal information. At regular meetings high-ranking functionaries provided information on the party and government’s current positions. In addition, appeals were made to the press on whether it should or should not deal with certain topics, or if it was a question of more important domestic or foreign events, a press plan was put forward which spelled out precisely in what way certain papers should deal with certain events.\textsuperscript{12} Apparently there were no direct, formal prohibitions. These were expressed in practically each case in the form of “requests” or “recommendations,” which were nonetheless compulsory. The agitprop department held a meeting for editors at least once a month, and once a week for the editors of the national dailies (who were members of the Party anyhow). This was presided over by the secretary of the Central Committee in charge of the media.

Alongside institutionalized internal information, \textit{ad hoc} orders played a major role. These orders were never committed to writing, just as in the case of the meetings of editors-in-chief. Control was exercised mostly through the telephone or personal contact. Those in power laid great emphasis on leaving no traces behind them in any particular case, beyond an outline of general principles. However, it was the individual responsibility of the editors that proved to be the best means of censorship. The appointment or dismissal of editors was carried out at the highest level (Politburo, Central Committee), thus an editor depended on the elite of the nomenclature for his very living. The editors of the party’s national daily (\textit{Népszabadság}) and its theoretical monthly (\textit{Társadalmi Szemle}) were members of the Central Committee. There was a frequent cross-assignment between party headquarters and \textit{Népszabadság}: not infrequently, its editor continued his career in the party headquarters apparatus and his place was taken by someone from another newspaper, but also from the party headquarters. However, in the case of some politically less exposed papers (such as economic weeklies, literary periodicals) the principle of individual responsibility of editors resulted in a slackening of censorship along with more room for journalists to maneuver in. At these papers, the editor was often closer to the journalists than to the bigwigs on party headquarters and thus they performed their

\footnote{Hegedűs, \textit{Sajtó és irányítás}, 13.}
function as a censor to a lesser degree. It frequently happened that they were “willing to take the blame” at the party headquarters in the interest of the paper for articles regarded as more sensitive.

Kádár’s cultural policy tolerated these anomalies until they acquired political undercurrents. One of the MSZMP’s main objectives in controlling the press was to hinder politically tendentious publications. For a decade, the efforts of a group of populist writers to launch a journal of their own were frustrated (because they were deemed politically dangerous), yet the editors of practically all the periodicals could be easily included in the camp of populist writers. It was easier for the individual responsibility of editors to control those heterodox politics of their own. Some younger writers’ request for a literary periodical aimed at their own generation was also turned down. Nevertheless, the same circle evolved spontaneously around the literary magazine Mozgó Világ, which the authorities attempted to break up by appointing a loyal, outside editor. The editorial staff, however, supported their former editor (who was also a party member), which led to the dismissal of the entire editorial staff, in one of the biggest press scandals of the 1980s. A similar story happened to the literary monthly Tiszatáj, published in Szeged, which had temporarily become the place the populist writers were crystalizing around.

Preliminary control was exerted over books as well. The state publishers had to apply for permission from the publishing directorate of the Ministry of Culture to publish each and every book; ecclesiastic publications were approved by the State Office of the Churches (Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal, ÁEH); and private publications had to be presented to the Ministry of Culture in manuscript form. The preliminary censorship of the publishing directorate was abolished only in 1988.

Retrospective adjustment was the function of the agitprop department or those supervising the press within the Information Bureau. If some articles that the political leadership regarded as undesirable did slip through the intricate net of preliminary control, those controlling the press availed themselves of the technique of retrospective adjustment. The means employed were the following: (1) Lecturing over the telephone; (2) Demanding a report

13 Németh, *A Mozgó Világ története*.
15 Murányi, “Nyomdafestéket tűrt csak.”
of justification from the editor-in-chief; (3) “Dressing-down” after summons to appear in person; (4) Pillorizing in front of a professional audience; (5) Refusal to pay bonuses; and ultimately, (6) Dismissal.\footnote{Hegedűs, “Sajtó és irányítás a Kádár-korszak végén,” 32.}

However, by the late 1980s, both these agencies and the top party leadership were working with less and less coordination; if the censor was a reformer or a conservative, the assessment was different. One politician praised the press, while another criticized it for the very same thing. All this expanded the room for tactical maneuver. The four deputy editors of \textit{Népszabadság} rotated weekly and they undertook responsibility for the contents of the paper: one allowed more, another allowed less. Thus, a journalist with a sensitive article would wait for the week when the politically more tolerant editor was in charge.\footnote{Hegedűs, “Sajtó és irányítás a Kádár-korszak végén,” 35.} More critical articles could appear one week and “softer” ones the following week, in one and the same paper. Indeed, the threshold of tolerance often differed within the same issue.

Notwithstanding these tactical tricks, the above-described system of control did enforce self-censorship. No freedom of writing existed in the press until 1988. What developed was a kind of latent pluralism through the readers’ ability to read between the lines. In the 1980s, \textit{Magyar Nemzet} was the favorite newspaper of the intelligentsia who were not members of the communist party. \textit{Magyar Nemzet} usually did not publish straightforward propaganda articles or pieces excessively supporting current party politics; it radiated a hidden, though tangibly solid, civic tone, which was based on the themes, voices, and the views of the intellectuals who contributed to it. After Kádár was removed from power in 1988, it was this paper which published most of the news about the new parties and movements. This was partly due to the fact that the editors of the newspaper enjoyed Imre Pozsgay’s support as chairman of the Patriotic People’s Front (\textit{Hazafias Népfront}, HNF) and later as minister of state. Of the weeklies (aside from the university weeklies which had a limited readership) it was the reformist economic weekly \textit{HVГ} which went furthest, still using a refreshingly neutral language of the economic technocracy. Among the monthlies, \textit{Valóság}, a paper on social theory tolerated by the influential culture boss, György Aczél since the 1960s, and still retained its popularity, took the lead. Although \textit{Mozgó Világ}, which
managed to slip out of party control (between 1979 and 1983), as well as Medvetánc (from 1981) and Századvég (from 1986), which were launched as university periodicals, were far more critical and radical.

1.3 The collapse of selective repression

At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, a new problem was posed to the controllers by the appearance of an underground opposition press (samizdat), which did not seek any license to publish bypassing censorship altogether. In 1979, when István Bibó, the independent political thinker of the greatest influence in the post-1945 decades, died, a group of the opposition published a samizdat volume to which several eminent intellectuals contributed. Party headquarters classified these contributors along a scale of political loyalty and opposition; here again the objective was to hinder the development and broadening of an alternative political camp. Consequently, certain contributors to the Bibó Festschrift did not suffer reprisal, primarily those whom party headquarters wanted to retain in the first, official public sphere. Others were summoned to party headquarters, where they were subjected to severe “discussions.” A third group was allowed to retain their jobs but not to teach at university. There were some who were removed from their jobs and were unable to find state employment for years. Finally, there was a group who had had no jobs to begin with, and who were subjected to official monitoring. The Party had their phone tapped and other methods of intimidation, such as the withdrawing their passports.¹⁸

The Kádár regime typically applied the tactics of selective repression and social isolation against the opposition. These tactics have been used relatively successfully for some years: those active in Hungarian democratic opposition did not increase in number and they were unable to communicate their message to the rest of society in the way their Polish counterpart had succeeded in doing. Members of the democratic opposition for years felt that they had been living in a hermetically isolated “intellectual ghetto,” and they also voiced their frustrations.¹⁹ Parallel to this however, the circle of those who became producers of oppositional ideas gradually expanded. What typ-

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¹⁸ Csizmadia, *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék.*
¹⁹ Kenedi, *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék vállága.*
ified them was irony, escapism, ideological value-neutrality, and/or a radical attitude best described as *épater le bourgeois*.

There was a writer, Péter Esterházy, who incorporated the words “self-censorship” into his text, making it visible and hence ridiculous. When he reached a point in a sentence, which could be regarded as sensitive, he put the word “self-censorship,” and then he continued the sentence. As this was a recurrent motif, reading was like doing a crossword puzzle, which the author deliberately built into his thread and made it a part of the novel. All this was already a step forward compared to the parables with overtones favored by writers in the 1970s. Parables in a historic setting were a typical product of the compromise between intellectuals and authorities. Taboo subjects could not be discussed explicitly but it was possible to write veiled criticism, taking one’s examples from the distant past, thus sending messages to one’s contemporaries. Some well-written parables kept the attention of intellectuals on the boil for months, especially when the “message” with overtones left it an open question whether the author is critical or apologetic to the system. No doubt the parable had its own unequalled masters, but the real skills of the authors and the savor of the genre laid in the ability to wink in two directions, inviting the “conspiratorial” agreement of both the authorities and the public. That is why some tart and disrespectful writings that stood apart from the consensus but nevertheless legally published, as well as the jaunty neutrality of the new irony that related to the existing “consensus” in any way (but fundamentally questioned it) came as a breath of fresh air.

Since the dissidents appealed to human rights acknowledged by the Helsinki conference, pursued a strategy of self-limiting radicalism, and later became relatively well known because of Radio Free Europe, it became increasingly difficult for the political leadership to take stern measures against them. The names of the leading opposition figures were well publicized in the West as well, which provided them some protection.

The policy of “Prohibit, Permit, Promote” was not rigid. For “good behavior”—that is, making gestures of loyalty—a writer could move upward in category, and conversely, for “bad behavior” one could move downward. It happened that some, otherwise frequently published, authors were condemned to one year’s silence, others were put on a list of prohibited works for

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20 Esterházy, *Kis magyar pornográfia*. 
a longer or shorter period of time.\footnote{Csizmadia, \textit{A magyar demokratikus ellenzék}.} In addition, those in charge of cultural policy made efforts to widen those fault lines (populists vs. urbanists) which had long existed within the Hungarian intelligentsia, with the view of dividing the opposition and semi-opposition groups.

In Hungary in the 1980s, there was no formal censorship office working under a uniform pattern. The censorship was exercised through different, preliminary and subsequent screening systems. Editors-in-chief, and the party apparatchiks monitoring them, were the censors at printed papers, while the publishing directorate censored book publishing. This office stopped certain books from being published for years, but it could permit some of them as “closed publications” with restricted circulation.\footnote{Murányi, “Nyomdafestéket tűrt csak.”} There was always a chance of a politically delicate product to get through, but this could not be counted on in advance. The soft dictatorship of the late Kádár era had an indirect censorship, which was “velvet” in its operation.\footnote{Haraszti, “Emlék és panasz 1956-ból.”}

The changes of the structure of the public sphere have been analyzed by several scholars from a theoretical perspective. We can differentiate between the periods and structures of “tolerant repression” and a “double public sphere” by the dimensions of legal-illegal and political-nonpolitical.\footnote{Sükösd, “From Propaganda to Öffentlichkeit in Eastern Europe.”} The concept of a double public sphere was introduced by the sociologist Elemér Hankiss, who argued that it was a manifestation of a typical feature of the system, the detachment of formal and informal structures.\footnote{Hankiss, \textit{East European Alternatives}.} The concept of tolerant repression regarded as valid until the mid-1970s, while the double public sphere characterized the subsequent period until 1988. This differentiation carries important heuristic value, but selective repression seems to be a more accurate concept than tolerant repression. For certain topics (such as the interpretation of 1956) and certain media outlets regarded as particularly important by the party leadership, repression remained intolerant up to the end of the 1980s; in spheres regarded as marginal, creative authors enjoyed greater room for maneuver.\footnote{Bozóki, “Censorship and the Structure of Public Sphere.”} Control of the press in comparison with the totalitarian period can be described as “tolerant repression”, however, this did not hold true equally for every paper. It was more tolerant inso-
far as it was selective. For instance, policymakers consciously permitted certain periodicals to perform a safety-value function for the intelligentsia, and in this manner a regulated flow of criticism could be maintained. Thus, criticism in the official press was almost automatically treated as “constructive criticism,” and what was not included in it was necessarily called “destructive.” Censorship held often the means and place of publishing more important than the content.

The system of selective repression can be best described as one of concentric circles, where political control was the strictest in the circle closest to the center (that is the party headquarters), and control gradually weakened moving outward. Specialist periodicals without political features, published at less frequent intervals and small in readership were in the outer circle. These journals played an important role in the dilution of the dominant narrative by offering samizdat authors a chance to enter the first, official public sphere. Literary periodicals enjoyed as much attention as the social science periodicals; control of periodicals of small circulation devoted to music, fine arts, natural sciences, and hobbies was quite slack.

Indeed, the periods of selective repression and double public sphere cannot be separated from each other distinctly. Although the spread of samizdat meant the emergence of a double public sphere from the 1980s onward, selective repression survived within the official sphere. It was the objective of orthodox forces inside the party to make the availability and resonance of samizdat literature insignificant, and when this failed, the practice of “double publishing” (i.e., in both spheres) was prohibited. Yet, in the attempt to prohibit any crossover between the two spheres, the very existence of the other sphere was implicitly acknowledged. The dualism of the legal (first) and the illegal (second) public sphere mainly characterized the period between 1981 and 1986. The Press Act of 1986 still meant no guarantee of freedom of the press, but it was more liberal in certain respects like allowing associations to found new outlets. Nevertheless, the license had to be approved by the Information Bureau. A positive feature was that legal remedy could be sought at the courts in cases of dismissal, and the Act imposed an information obligation on the state bodies.²⁷

²⁷ Halmay, “Kell-e nekünk sajtótörvény?”, Monori, “Média és rendszerváltás.”
In the 1980s, a dual objective was discernible in the party control over the press, and this reflected the struggle between hardliners and reformers within the party. Living standards were declining and the Party responded primarily by economic liberalization. However, this liberalization simply made the regime’s lack of legitimacy even more transparent. State socialism, it turned out, was only acceptable by the society as long as it brought improvement in living conditions. It was at this time that there was a backlash of the long successful Kádár’s strategy, which—lacking political legitimacy—tried to maintain social peace through political neutralization and material compensation. As the performance of the regime fell off, people automatically turned away from it. Parallel to this, regular samizdat publications began to appear in Hungary from 1981. These underground periodicals had a very limited circulation, but since they were featured on Radio Free Europe, their uncensored articles reached broader and broader groups in the country. The political leadership could not afford to have brutal showdown with the emergent opposition groups among the intelligentsia. On the one hand, this would have put into danger the possibility of drawing on foreign credit needed to keep up the level of consumer consumption and social tranquility. On the other hand it would have destroyed the positive international image the reformist outlook of the Kádárian MSZMP which grew out of the practice of liberalizing the dictatorship. Hence, the objective of the communist leadership was to divide the emergent opposition groups and to isolate them within society.

The readership of the samizdat periodicals grew in number, and the proportion of authors publishing in these papers under their real name and not a nom de plume also grew. The topics and the critical tone gradually influenced the press after 1986, which accordingly became increasingly critical. More attempted to violate the ban on “double publishing,” writing to both the first and the second public sphere. The gray zone, with its mediating role, which developed around 1986, had an important role in this, as the ideas expressed in the underground were brought to a broader public. Members of the opposition received invitations to address different university clubs and meetings that were organized by individuals acting without official sanction. The most memorable case was a public debate in the autumn of 1983, organized upon

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28 Szabó, Politikai kultúra Magyarországon.
the dismissal of the editors of Mozgó Világ and attended by approximately 300 university students at the Faculty of Law of Eötvös University. The event turned into a political face-off between the deputy minister of culture and the present members of the dissidents and university students, and it ended with a loud opposition victory.29 At the same time, the economist reformers who mainly had contact with state officials also radicalized.

The reformers thought that the one-sided, propaganda role of the press, oriented from the top, should be changed and its mediating function should be allowed to work in both directions. It was the hardliners who held that precisely because conditions becoming more difficult and people becoming more uncertain direct control of the press needed to be maintained, as an important task of the press was to strengthen “confidence in socialism.” At that time there was an open dispute going on in the party about how the press could meet contradictory requirements: the objectives of the political leadership and the demands of the public opinion. These reformers and the hardliners reacted differently to glasnost initiated by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union: reformers demanded further liberalization and even democratization, while hardliners wanted to limit the effect of Gorbachev’s position to the process of Soviet internal policy only, saying that glasnost was simply a delayed version of what had already been accomplished in Hungary in the 1960s.

As a result of these struggles within the MSZMP, control of press lost its “principled” nature, and more and more unpredictable “manual control” became typical of the 1980s. From that time, even the party resolutions lost their practical relevance; as a symptom of the disintegration of the system, control of the media was characterized by rapidly changing and often contradictory orders. All this broadened the room for maneuver of those working in the official press, and thus the accelerating process pluralizing the press was able to get under way. Through the rapid growth in the number of those demanding political change and through the increasing strength of the mediating sphere that gradually filled the “gap” between the two spheres, the earlier model of a “double public sphere” became obsolete by 1987. The transformation of this structure of public sphere took place similarly, but

29 Németh, *A Mozgó Világ története*. 

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incomparably faster than, the 18th-century evolution of political publicity as described by Habermas.\(^{30}\)

From 1988 onward, political taboos were challenged one after another. At first the need for Hungarian membership in the Soviet-led Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) was questioned, then the need for reform was increasingly changed to a demand for a change of the regime. In October 1988, the Publicity Club (\textit{Nyilvánosság Klub}) was founded, which primarily brought together journalists working in the official press but critical of the system. The reformers inside the party were speaking of the need for consensus; this demand took on a critical edge in the party internal struggles. However, by that time it was evident to the journalists who founded the Publicity Club that no consent could be imagined under the given circumstances and consensus with the orthodox wing of the party was simply not possible.\(^{31}\)

By the end of the 1980s, the dual public sphere with its latent pluralism was replaced by a public sphere openly plural in its structure. In 1989, a multitude of new outlets was formed as the earlier licensing obligation had been replaced by a notification obligation.\(^{32}\) The latent pluralism of intraparty lobbies, interest groups, and intellectual camps were replaced by articulation of politics through the multiparty system.

2. Strategies of co-optation: “Intelligentsia-policy” in the one-party system

The rise and the fall of cultural politics of Kádár’s Hungary is hallmark by two communist politicians, György Aczél and Imre Pozsgay. They held different views on the cultural and political public sphere of the Kádár-system. Aczél tried to integrate the high-standard but not “hardline” tendencies into the system, while Pozsgay was more apt to let the different intellectual tendencies be articulated independently. In the decades following the amnesty of 1963, a sort of consolidated communism appeared in which it was mostly Aczél who actualized the “intelligentsia policy” of the Kádár regime.\(^{33}\)

\(^{30}\) Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation}.  
\(^{31}\) Gálik et al., “Javaslat a nyilvánosság reformjára.”  
\(^{33}\) Révész, \textit{Aczél és korunk}.  

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Pozsgay, on the other hand, started to question and break down this consolidated compromise in a time when the one-party system was declining. In the following, my observations about the policy of György Aczél are presented in contrast to the policy of Imre Pozsgay.

In the time of the Kádárist interest-seeking and symbolical politics built on half-said, half-hidden ideas, the figures of Aczél or Pozsgay had become almost mythical in the eyes of the older generation. But these ties did not bind the new generation. The revolutionary process in Poland that was stopped by the introduction of the state of war had a great effect on the majority of the generation that was already becoming politically conscious. The Kádárist anti-Polish propaganda campaign, which was to emphasize the advantages of the Hungarian “reconciliation” model, seemed to be unsuccessful among younger people. In these matters neither Aczél, nor Pozsgay dared to risk even speaking in any other tone than the official. Because of that, many young people believed that there were reformers among the more influential members of MSZMP, but nobody could count on them in more serious matters.

The Kádár regime was a dictatorship even when it was declining. Obviously, it was not the “dictatorship of the proletariat” but of the one and only Party over the society. It was not accidental that later the first and most important demand of each Eastern European anti-regime movement was that the sentence declaring that the Party was above all laws should be erased from the constitution. Hungarian communist leaders, including Aczél, considered the Soviet Union their “brother” in their speeches. Compared to this, it was secondary that Aczél was not liked in Moscow, and Kádár was suggested to dismiss him. Kádár was aware though that if he had dismissed Aczél, the next one to go would have been himself.

Kádár was raised by stepparents and Aczél in an orphanage, so their childhood had many things in common; they were both outcasts. Neither of them was a Muscovite within the communist movement. Both of them were imprisoned in the Rákosi-era of the 1950s, they were even in the same prison for a short while. They could trust each other, since they got disillusioned from Stalinism at the same time and in similar circumstances, and they were both suspicious of the reform-communists of 1954–1956. As the

Huszár, Kádár János politikai életrajza.
The Political Context: Censorship and Co-optation

party leader after 1956, Kádár knew that Aczél was devoted to the communication with the intelligentsia. He also knew that his system would be bearable until he can favor some social groups, and until he can maintain the pretense of communicating with them. Kádár knew that he would need Aczél because Aczél was able to speak the language of the intelligentsia. The career of Aczél started to boost when the restoration of the communist regime was finished, that is, in the beginning of the 1960s.

Aczél was able to talk to those members of the intelligentsia who, after years of defeat and humiliation, accepted the consolidation of the 1960s. They were the basis of his policy in the next two decades. On the other hand, he had problems with others. For example, the attendees of the 1981 student conference in Budapest, influenced by the revolutionary events in Poland, had almost gotten to the point of establishing a new youth organization, independent of the Communist Youth League (Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség, KISZ). Aczél believed neither changing KISZ, nor establishing a new organization was a real option. In the beginning of the 1980s, Aczél represented outrun compromises against those who were seeking a new, democratic beginning.

Many people gained hope from what Pozsgay did in the 1980s. His independent views and sometimes brave rhetoric suggested a careful but determined politician. The populist and reformist communist Pozsgay managed to build bridges toward the groups of the populist intelligentsia. In 1985, the Hungarian electoral law was changed so that multiple nomination was made possible, and the law required nomination committees to accept two candidates. Some members of the opposition took advantage of this case and they ran for candidacy at the parliamentary elections. At several caucuses, only striking fraud could prevent the candidacy of some dissidents. In the room, the dozens of students who supported the opposition candidate sat down next to faithful party members who were sent there by the officials. When it came to the open vote, the official candidate won, although it was evident that most votes went to the other candidate. The local electoral committee, working under the aegis of the Patriotic People’s Front (HNF) and obviously following party orders, “forgot” to count a few dozens of votes. The fraud itself was not so unusual; that it was so arrogantly obvious was. Many

35 Namely László Rajk, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, János Tóth, and others.
could not come over the feeling that, as the leader of the HNF, Pozsgay was responsible for the events. This was when it became obvious that his policy was defined by a “reformers okay, opposition not okay” principle.

2.1 Celebrities, seigneurs, confidents, and his “court”

The period of the significant political influence of Aczél was between the middle of the 1960s to the middle of the 1980s, which coincided with the successful years of the Kádár regime. In contrast, the age of Pozsgay was the 1980s that saw the decline of the system. The cultural policy of the restoration after 1956 was hallmarked by the name of István Szirmai, while Aczél’s name meant consolidation, Kádárist compromises, the world and political culture of obligations and interest seeking. Aczél tried to achieve in intelligentsia policy what Kádár achieved in social policy. Thus, Aczél did not have an independent policy, and his name became inseparable from that of Kádár. He was a “reformer” in the same way, if we can use the word reformer at all in connection with him, as Kádár: he was interested in making the dictatorship more bearable. He did not wish institutional changes but that the system would go swimmingly. He did not consider the democratic deficit as systemic problem but the consequence of smaller mistakes that needed to be corrected. He never looked for solutions in institutional reforms but in the informal deepening of the Kádárian political culture. He softened the dictatorship by the Byzantine type of policy based on personal relationships, individual rewards, and punishment.

Aczél wanted to convince the prominent artists of the age to serve the system or, if they did not want to, at least get them to live peacefully in the regime. Aczél did not want to organize a team for himself but a “royal household,” and he even wanted to keep the symbolically most important people near “the court.” He made every effort to make it impossible to go round him if one wanted to apply for favors or benefits. That is why his political style can be called Byzantine, as it was based on “favor-management.”

36 Standeisky, Az írók és a batalom.
37 Révész, Aczél és korunk.
of the intelligentsia would follow them and would accept the situation. He called this model creation and imitation “consensus.” To achieve this, it was vital for Aczél to be on communicative terms with the most important and excellent, appearing as their patron.\footnote{Like the composer Zoltán Kodály, novelists like Tibor Déry, László Németh, and István Órkény, the philosopher György Lukács, the pianist Annie Fischer, the poet Gyula Illyés, the film director Miklós Jancsó, and others.} Maybe he thought: if the “court” had not taken censorship so seriously, while quality culture is patronized (within certain limits), the intelligentsia would not miss democracy. Aczél knew the nature of human vanity perfectly well and thus he influenced the greatest through their vanity. He attempted to espouse prodigious talents as soon as possible.\footnote{Pianists Zoltán Kocsis and Dezső Ránki got the prestigious Kossuth Prize in their twenties. But there were others, like novelists Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy, István Eörsi, the poet György Petri, or the leading figures of avant-garde culture, with whom he could not do anything with.}

The intellectuals around Aczél can be classified into different groups. The above-mentioned excellencies, from Kodály through Lukács to Illyés, can be called the \textit{celebrities}, by which I mean people who became nationally and internationally famous and highly esteemed, irrespectively of political systems. In his dealings with them, Aczél chose to ask, flatter, carefully threaten them but he could not direct them. For example, the philosopher György Lukács openly told him that if he had not been allowed to publish his books in Hungary, he would go on smuggling them abroad. Irrespectively of these incidents, the communication between Aczél and the celebrities was cordial. He endeavored to achieve the state of “mutual appreciation” for himself—and the system represented by him.

The second group contained the \textit{seigneurs}, meaning those intellectuals who got into key positions with the help of Aczél, and thus from an institutional point of view they depended on him. Through them, Aczél was able to control the intellectuals working in the cultural and higher educational institutions (universities, institutes, theaters, editorial offices) in an effective way. Since the policy of Aczél was based on them, I will return to this group analyzing it in more detail.

The third, much narrower, group was that of the \textit{confidents}, with whom Aczél played cards and talked about his political intentions freely. But the members of this group never rose to the level of the celebrities, nor did they...
control the institutional system directly. They were personally important for Aczél.

Finally, the fourth group—which used to be more heterogeneous and loosely organized—can be called the halo. First, this included all those who did all they could to be near Aczél, while he did not find them worthy of including in the first three groups. Second, those can be counted in this group who came into temporary contact with Aczél. These people did not serve his cultural policy regularly but could be used by him at any time in any case. The members of the halo could count on Aczél’s help—in return of their occasional services—in their minor problems.

For circles of the social scientist intellectuals, Aczél’s greatest success in cultural policy was the maintaining, toleration, and the protection of the periodical Valóság. From the middle of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, Valóság was the representative social science journal of the regime. Beside this, the book series Library of Social Science is worth mentioning, for this series gave an insight to Western scholarship. Taking into account that Aczél had no insight on the Hungarian social science as a whole, he attempted to develop a “seigniorial system” and wanted to keep the control over cultural policy through them. If one reads the members of the editorial committee of the periodical and the book series, and one lists the theater-managers of the age, editors of literary periodicals, leading university professors, publishing managers, then one gets the influential network on which György Aczél could depend in controlling cultural life. This of course does not mean that all those members of the cultural elite, who were in institutional top positions at that time, were necessarily the followers of Aczél. There were some who were loyal to him in all aspects, but there were also skeptics, careful critics, or “autonomous” people who “had several irons in the fire” and who looked into many political directions.

Among them were the influential communist actor and theater director of the age, Tamás Major, and the scientist, János Szentágothai.

Among them was the servile journalist János Hajdú, whose article attacked some dissidents (Sándor Csoóri Miklós Duray) and was perfectly in line with Aczél’s intentions.

Like change of flats, car allocation, passport, commission, and so on.

The series involved the Hungarian translation publication of the works by Max Weber, Robert Merton, Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman, Perry Anderson, Alexander Gerschenkron, George Herbert Mead, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, and others.
Aczél did not mean to organize a team around himself, but he wanted to win the symbolically most important intellectual celebrities and attempted to control the institutional system of cultural policy through his seigniorial net. The forming of factions, a pejorative term in the Bolshevik terminology, was far from him.

2.2 Reformers, civilian groups, and sympathizers

Imre Pozsgay seemed to be a team organizer, as opposed to Aczél at least. His main objective was not the stabilization but, first moderately then more and more radically, the reform-like transformation of the status quo. He had tried to draw to himself those who were unsatisfied with the extant situation and wanted to change it one way or another. He wanted such critical intellectuals around him who were not in top positions themselves but had more and more influence on those intellectuals who were indeed in position and yet separated themselves from political opposition and were less and less loyal to the leaders of the system. To surround himself with such people was for Pozsgay hard in the beginning, as minister of education and culture, but as the leader of the HNF it became easier.

Pozsgay later recalled:

I saw this first when I was a minister [. . .] I, too, had to deal with the signature movement of Charta ’77: this was the first time when I had to officially connect to an openly opposition initiative. [. . .] I had private conversations with Sándor Csoóri, then came a small group of mainly movie directors, Károly Makk and others were at my office. Indeed, this was the moment I realized that the opposition and opposition thought live among us, and I would no longer be able to avoid this problem.44

After Pozsgay was removed from the government in 1982, he spent a whole month in the United States as a guest of the US government. He met the Hungarians living there, including the politician and Congressman Tom Lantos, the historian Béla Király, and those Hungarian emigrants who were professors at Harvard, Columbia, and the Rutgers University. He later said

44 Interview with Imre Pozsgay, 1997.
“it was a strange experience to meet all those fifty-sixers in New Jersey, as a guest of the Hungarian Communion of Friends. Well, this was a turning point in my life, no question.”

This visit reinforced his openness to meet semi-opposition groups on a regular basis. In the Patriotic People’s Front, he continually expanded his network of contacts to the representatives of various social organizations. He was a regular of the salon of intellectuals, organized at a private apartment, and he gained considerable attention when in 1985 he accepted the invitation of the independent *Rakpart Klub*, where he agreed to debate with hundreds of opposition-leaning students.

One of Pozsgay’s most important political appearances took place at the Lakitelek meeting in September 1987, where he provided great help to the Hungarian Democratic Forum in its starting and appearance as an independent political movement. In his own words:

> I never made a secret from that, because of my career, pedigree, intellectual qualifications, origins or limits I sympathized mainly with the populist-national intelligentsia. Aczél and I often debated why he did not give more equitable, greater space to their operation. But up until 1987, I believed that this opposition movement, starting from two directions but going toward the same one, could eventually meet.

It is worth noting that the fall of Kádár meant the fall of Aczél and the rise of Pozsgay. At the 1988 Communist party conference, Aczél anticipated charges by a self-critical speech, and thus he temporarily kept his position in the Central Committee, but it proved to be only his swan song. The great political period of Pozsgay lasted from the Lakitelek meeting in September 1987 to February 1989. After he declared that Revolution of 1956 was a popular insurrection, and not a counter-revolution as the official narrative held, the Central Committee of MSZMP accepted, after long debates, the multiparty system. This was also a personal victory for Pozsgay who risked being expelled from all party functions. As the minister of state of the Grósz gov-

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46 *Rakpart Klub* was a popular music and discussion club attended by students and opposition-minded people.
48 Interview with Imre Pozsgay, 1997.
ernment, Pozsgay played a great part in the liberation of the press. He also supported the acknowledgment of the rights of free association, which made the founding of political parties possible.

It is true though that Pozsgay’s becoming a democrat was not a period free of contradictions. He did not speak out in June 1988 when police dispersed public demonstration of the democratic opposition by force. He also turned against the nascent Danube-movements—which set off the regime change—when he voted for the building of the Nagymaros Dam. The relationship between Pozsgay and the radical opposition was thus spoiled, because the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, SZDSZ) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége, Fidesz) then discerned that Pozsgay wanted to provide privileges to the organizations of the populist opposition. However, this also indicated that Áczél was by then not in the picture; Pozsgay on the other hand was a major character in politics. By 1989, when the time of the Roundtable talks came, there were hardly any major political-social organization which was not in some way connected to Pozsgay through their leaders, who were personal acquaintances or, in some cases, even protégés of Pozsgay.

Pozsgay was a relentless team organizer, but he did not prove to be very effective. He started MDF off in Lakitelek, which “dropped” him as early as the fall of 1989, when a candidate was appointed against him at the elections of the president of the republic, just like at the elections in the Sopron constituency in the spring of 1990. It was in vain for Pozsgay to parley with József Antall and Zoltán Bíró, leaders of MDF, in the summer of 1989, since MDF—run by Antall—by November 1989 did not see the future president of the democratic republic in him anymore. The reformist circles within the MSZMP were only waiting for Pozsgay’s sign to split the party into two. But Pozsgay warned them to be more cautious and thus he became isolated from his followers within the party, missing the historical moment. He played a decisive role in the Roundtable talks in the summer of 1989, in

49 It was a commemoration to the execution of Imre Nagy, prime minister during the 1956 revolution.
50 This circle included József Antall, Sándor Csoóri (MDF), Sándor Keresztes (Márton Áron Association, then the KDNP), István Kukorelli (HNF), Károly Vigh (BZSBT), Mrs. Judith Thorma Asbóth (MNOT), István Stumpf (MISZOT), National Council of Hungarian Youth Associations), János Márton, Gyula Fekete, Csaba Varga (Veres Péter Veres Association, then MNP), Tivadar Pártay and Vince Vörös (FKGP), Mihály Bíhari, László Lengyel (MSZMP), Zoltán Bíró (MSZMP and MDF).
51 Ágb, Géczi, and Sipos, Rendszerváltók a baloldalon.
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the MSZMP transformational congress in October 1989, but after the referendum in November 1989 he was defeated even in his own district, and received a place in the new, freely elected Parliament only from the party list as a weightless politician. After the elections, he became isolated in the MSZP, and he finally left the party in December 1990. His new party, the National Democratic Alliance (Nemzeti Demokrata Szövetség, NDSZ) remained unimportant. After four years of passive work as a representative, he got out of the Parliament as well.

Pozsgay’s and Aczél’s different strategies of political relationships and network building draw an outline of the age—and also their positions—they worked in. In the time of Aczél, the political system was more static and stable. He had more time to confirm his influence and to build a relatively hierarchic network of relationships. The intellectual-political world that surrounded Aczél changed only slowly: in his closest circle, we can find the chosen confidants, then came—with equal importance but different roles—the celebrities and the seigneurs. While the celebrities were important for Aczél because of the symbolic legitimating of the system, the seigneurs were significant in the upper control of cultural policy. Outside of these was the halo, some members of which wanted to use their relationships pragmatically (i.e., for their own interests) and they wished for nothing more, while some others were eager to get closer to the inner circles and thus to power.

The environment of Pozsgay however, mostly because of the speeding political changes, was not so structured. The fluctuation between the political-intellectual circles was much bigger and the circle itself was much more flexible. While Aczél was able to give out positions, Pozsgay could only provide the hope of a position. While it was Aczél himself who stood in the middle of the halo’s concentric circles, the relationships of Pozsgay had no signs of people nucleating around him. Coming out of the state party’s protective shell, he had to fit in to a decentralized, flexible, coreless network. He had to work in such a political-interrelational structure, which he could not only shape but had to adapt to it. Instead of celebrities and seigneurs, Pozsgay had occasional allies and devotees, but in the currents of political confrontations following the regime change all these supporters of his fell away. Those who followed him in 1988 were not necessarily with him in 1989. Those who were his allies in 1989 did not follow him in 1990. Being a reformer in a moment
of a change of regime meant momentary popularity and then rapid unpopularity. The circle of temporary allies could not consolidate into a halo.

György Aczél was a man who wanted to keep the Kádár’s compromise, even in the period of economic decline; Imre Pozsgay, on the other hand, was openly declaring a need for a new consensus. Aczél was talking about “socialist democracy,” while Pozsgay spoke about democratic socialism. While Aczél spoke of “socialist patriotism,” Pozsgay talked about a “rising nation.” Aczél attempted to canonize poets such as Endre Ady and Attila József within the framework of the system, by using the expression “revolutionarism of everyday life,” while Pozsgay tried to recall the words of populist writers from 1956 with growing emphasis.\footnote{Pozsgay often referred to writer László Németh and poet Gyula Illyés.}

It would be an over-simplification if one wanted to describe Aczél as an urbanist and Pozsgay as a “népi” (populist) and distinguished between them only along these lines. Both of them belonged to the nomenclature, to the leading politicians of the dictatorship. But while Aczél wanted to transform it into a dictatorship “with a human face,” Pozsgay wanted to reform and then surpass it. While Aczél could not and would not communicate with the groups standing more or less outside of the system, Pozsgay endeavored to gradually widen communication with the different “half-legal,” semi-oppositional social groups and organizations. Through supporting high culture and dividing the already (historically) divided groups of the intelligentsia, Aczél served the stability of the Kádár system in the 1970s. Pozsgay, however, emerged to a leading position in cultural policy only later, when political stability slipped and the status of the regime became uncertain. He realized that his own political career rests upon his ability to step out of the circles of elite culture, and to expand his circle of supporters among the marginalized groups of the intelligentsia. The name of Aczél will be remembered alongside the party, government, and political system of János Kádár. Pozsgay’s name, even though he fulfilled leading positions in the Kádár regime, will be remembered alongside 1989, the Roundtable talks, and the dissolution of the state party. That is the real difference between them.

The two strategies of co-optation were formed by the different presumptions. Aczél was the cultural politician \textit{par excellence} of the Kádár regime, and every step of his policy served the Kádár’s status quo. His starting point...
was that only worse could follow Kádár, and he built his political hinterland on those with institutional background accordingly. He also devoted special attention to be in contact with the best writers and artists, whom he tried to co-opt through discretionary help, rewards, change of flats, and travel opportunities. Aczél traded with the favors the power could grant to the seigneurs, and this was a successful strategy until the system was stable, there was seemingly no political alternative, and there were no factions in the unity of the central control of the party.

When Pozsgay tried to connect to the populist intelligentsia he was led by various ideas. On the one hand, he wanted to loosen the Aczélian structure of cultural politics, and on the other hand, he wanted to rely on a group he could more easily communicate with, and which was not a beneficiary of Aczél’s cultural policy. These were the people he could trust without a doubt in his fight for a new hegemony, as well as the expansion of his influence. Until the death of Brezhnev in 1982, the Kádárian cultural policy of Aczél was unquestionable. But this hegemony later slipped and was indeed questioned more and more by the emerging opposition pressures. From Gorbachev’s rise to power in 1985, Pozsgay’s policy that focused on building alliances and favoring the coalition of populist “reform” groups gathered steam. As we will see, this policy had its golden age during the erosion of the system but it failed as when the multiparty system emerged.