Rolling Transition and the Role of Intellectuals

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Chapter III

Dissident Intellectuals: The Culture of Critical Discourse

This chapter examines the self-reflection, identity, and strategic concepts as those developed in the public discourse of the democratic opposition in Hungary. By public discourse I mean “the forms of expression typical to an era or the collection of rules related to the usage of these forms, generated and maintained by a smaller circle of intellectuals, the elite of humanities.” Since the state socialist regime was constructed on an all-encompassing, salvationist ideology, culture was always an important terrain of control for communist leaders.

As state socialism was originally based on ideology, the first ones to criticize it were revisionist philosophers who wished to correct the mistakes of the theory. This formed the core of the dissidents, the philosophers inspired by György Lukács. Later the group of critics expanded with those sociologists who, analyzing reality, were not interested in the problems related to the coherence and false presumptions of the theory but rather stressed the contradiction between theory and practice. This had a crucial effect on the groups outside the dissidents, including literature, drama, and film as well. This effect also became mutual, which further reinforced the critical culture of the decade. In the end, the similar ideas of various interacting groups led to a new philosophical base, the doctrine of human rights. This was no longer a correction to the earlier paradigm but rejected it altogether. The stance

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1 Kuczi and Becskeházi, Valóság ’70, 68.
2 Cf. Tismaneanu and Luber, One-Hundred Years of Communist Experiment.
3 György Lukács was a leading Marxist philosopher of the 20th century. On his impact on the dissidents, cf. Csizmadia, A magyar demokratikus ellenzék.
of “provocative exercise of our human rights” was philosophical, moral, and political at the same time. This helped the democratic opposition represent the culture of criticism on the level of politics as well.

For large segments of the Hungarian society, the 1970s meant a decade of “welfare socialism,” and the rise of petty bourgeoisie. However, the end of the decade saw a series of events that often shocked the public. Among these were the first significant increase in prices of the Kádár era, the growing burden of debt, and the beginning of the Hungarian credit crisis. Internationally, the Soviet intervention to Afghanistan, the NATO double-track decision about missile deployment, and the consequent series of peace demonstrations in Western Europe are worth mentioning, as well as the Western boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and, most importantly, Poland’s self-limiting revolution. All of these changes had an impact on the rise of democratic opposition.

The changing situation narrowed the room for communist politicians to justify the “legitimacy” of their power. They could no longer claim that state socialism would create greater freedom and equality than the capitalist democracies of the West. They no longer referred to the “justness” or “better future” of the system. The superiority of the communist ideology was no longer mentioned. The picture of straight line of development that had been prevalent was now refuted. A growing number of people only wanted to maintain their existence, to survive. Increasing prices and low wages also prevented the leaders of the regime from referring to the inexpensive products. What had indeed seemed cheap was suddenly, in a societal sense, rather expensive. For the 1980s when the communist leadership was becoming more open toward discussion, it was lacking the arguments it could lay out.

1. Opposition groups

Dissidents and critical intellectuals turned public discourse to a critical direction, therefore creating the kind of speech community that Gouldner described as the “culture of critical discourse.” This speech community, that gained strength in the 1980s, was not only the community of the dissi-

4 Kis, Mi a liberalizmus?
5 Ascherson, The Polish August; Staniszkis, Poland’s Self-Limiting Revolution.
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dents; young people with degrees in humanities and social sciences, reform economists, and some members of the népi (populist) writers were involved. The culture of critical discourse was characterized not by respect for authority but the room for rational debates, in which presuppositions had to be justified. This presumed the presence of a relatively free and independent subculture, where the people engaging in discourse could argue with general approaches, independent of the given context.

To maintain the “legitimacy” of the system, János Kádár and his followers often used historical arguments, presenting an undifferentiated picture of the past, particularly the period of the interwar Horthy regime.7 Beyond history, they also often used comparisons to neighboring countries, which always put Hungary on the positive side. They tried to stress that Hungary retained solvency, the supply of goods was ensured, and the Kádár regime was still more flexible and livable than other regimes in the Soviet bloc. They underlined that the intelligentsia was less exposed to censorship, and experts were let in the circle of leaders as well. They desperately tried to prove that the leadership was in good hands, and they were able to manage the deepening crisis in a pragmatic way, and to increase the country’s “competitiveness.” They believed that they—unlike other Soviet bloc leaders—had accumulated enough trust of the society to speak to them “honestly.” Indeed, they found fewer principles of legitimation when it came to discussion with the public.

1.1 The flowers of decay

The transformation of social conditions quickly gave rise to various types of critical behavior. This was not pluralism yet, rather an embryonic manifestation of critical, opposition attitudes and forms of behavior. However, behind the formal structures, in the realm of informality the collective forms of detachment, exit, and protest appeared more prominently. Independent art which had emerged in the 1960s took on an increasingly more political character a decade later.

The resurgence of cultural pluralism was marked, at first, by certain new art groups and the subcultures of underground music. The charm of rep-

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7 Szabó, Politikai kultúra Magyarországon.
representative bands was only increased by the serious directorial preparations observed at concerts, that their songs were not played by the radio, and that they could not issue records for a long time. Beyond the lines that could be interpreted as opposition messages, the lyrics of the better bands also reflected on global problems related to the survival of humanity. The various anti-system underground rock and punk bands broke away from the allegoric, metaphorical forms of expression typical to the literary and artistic parables of the 1970s. Some rock bands were banned but most of them could exist on the periphery of the music world. At this time, direct political confrontation was less important than the strengthening of independent culture. The cultural space that was forming in the informal world involved various literary-artistic groups. These circles often overlapped and maintained vibrant communication.

The demand for noncommunist, self-serving art and pure aesthetics was fueled by the plethora of sociographies and various forms of documentaries which were created in the exploratory zeal of the second half of the 1970s. For investigative sociographies, while they did try to raise public awareness, typically stayed beyond the boundaries of reformist illusions. Their writers believed that pointing out the discrepancies between theory and reality will convince the party officials about the necessity of reform. For the artists, however, the approach of reforms was replaced by escapism. The representatives of the new aesthetics believed that sociographic disclosures that investigate separate cases can only have a partial effect. The critical element of this behavior was precisely the rejection of reformer illusions, and it led to new artistic experiments. At this point one should mention the strengthening alternative lifestyle movement, which could be politically dangerous in a regime based on monopolistic power. What they had in common was the intensification of escapist tendencies.

This was the context in which the political opposition initiatives appeared. Who belonged here were the ones barred from academic life; the ones who lost their job on a gesture of solidarity (such as a signature in a

8 Kürti, "Rocking the State"; Szemere, Up from the Underground.
9 Those included the wider circle of the Fölöspéldány (Excesscopy) group, the Attila József Circle of young writers (JAK), the avant-garde István Órley Circle, the Studio K, the Lajos Vajda Studio, the Mácsarnok Art Kino, New Wave punk-rock groups, and the Club of Young Artists. Cf. Szőnyei, Az új hullám évtizede; Klaniczay, Ellenkultúra a hetvenes–nyolcvanas években.
petition campaign); the ones who protested out of their religious belief; the ones who were officially harassed as marginalized artists; and those ambitious youngsters who wanted to become scholars but were not accepted to state university.

The ideology of the group developed only gradually. The leaders of state socialism argued for a long time that history is none other but linear development, leading to the realization of idealistic socialism. In the official ideology, “real existing socialism” was one step on the road to social harmony. Every real wrongdoing of the regime was trivialized as such “mistakes” that meant no diversion from socialist development. It was difficult to break away from this way of thinking, and to develop an alternative ideology. The revolution of 1956 in Hungary was anticommunist, but it was not antsocialist. Many revolutionaries believed that the Stalinist dictatorship could be replaced by a humanitarian, cooperative, democratic version of socialism.10 In other words, they refused to believe in central control and the omnipotent state, but they believed in the socialist market of voluntary associations and cooperatives. The ideological situation was similar in 1968 as well. In Czechoslovakia, Dubček and his followers rejected the Moscow-type communist road but continued to believe in “socialism with a human face.”11 They believed that democracy and communism can be reconciled, and communism can be reformed on these grounds.

The circle of populist writers was strong and influential. This group gained increasing importance in the 1970s, mainly through the balancing politics of writer Gyula Illyés. The populist writers regarded the sociographic, exploratory tradition of the 1930s as their intellectual fountainhead. The members of this middle-class group saw themselves, following the populist-nationalist ideology, as the drafters of the issues of the fate of the people. They found the left-right division irrelevant in face of the problem of the nation’s collective identity and the dimension of social “up” and “down.” They took on the role of representing the social “down” by emphasizing anti-elitism and declaring the prevailing elites “aliens,” that is, ones against the true interests of the nation. While they were called népi writers in Hungarian, literally meaning “of the [general] people,” they were often called populist due to their rhetoric

11 Golan, Reform Rule in Czechoslovakia.
in Hungary as well as the West. The populist writers rejected the open denial
of state socialism, but despite events of tactical cooperation with the author-
ities they were trying to form an independent political line. Their criticism
of the regime was moral: they claimed the system failed to see that crisis
comes from the moral crisis of the nation. Populist writers occupied signifi-
ccant positions in the cultural life, and the writers who were not communists
predominantly found their place among their ranks as well.

The populist ideology was an original proposal to overcome the disad-
vantages stemming from the “late,” half-hearted social development of the
region. This had appeared earlier in Russia in the first half of the 19th cen-
tury, in the debates of *zapadniks* (Westernizers) and Slavophiles, and later
evidently among the *narodniks*.

The idea had been prevalent among the predecessors in Hungary as well, in the debates between the authors of two
journals: the populist *Válasz* and the urban circle of *Szép Szó* in the 1930s.
This division split the reform era’s program of “homeland and progress” and
stressed the opposition of these two values of integrity and modernization.
The populist system of values was based on the idea of organic development
and its promoters argued that the nation must not follow global ideas which
would alienate it from itself but create its own ideology fitting to its collec-
tive identity.

The populist writers had a significant role in art, especially in the field of
lyric poetry. They formed a rather hierarchical camp, at the helm of which
was the “prince of literature,” an intellectual leader of unquestioned legiti-
macy. This structural position was fulfilled by Gyula Illyés until his death
in 1983, after which Sándor Csoóri took on his mantle and maintained the
position until the mid-1990s. They believed that in the issues of national fate,
they should cooperate with anyone: with the dissidents, with other groups of
social scientists outside the opposition, or even with the reform communists.

The normative ideal of the group was the people, built from small com-
munities and recognizing itself primarily by national values (and less by indi-
vidual or international ideas). The mission of the people in this utopia was
a third-way program of “Garden Hungary,” rejecting both capitalism and
socialism. The model was based on a romantic vision of history, in which
liberty appears as the shared commitment of individuals and communities

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12 Walicki, *The Controversy over Capitalism.*
to a specific purpose. Personal liberty was not an end in itself; the nation was. Accordingly, liberty that does not serve the prosperity of the nation, but makes some rich and some poor, is not genuine but barefoot liberty, which was counterpointed by the program of “to Europe, but each of us.” Change that leads to “barefoot liberty” is not real transformation, only a change of surface: not social revolution, but the color change of a servant elite.

For the populists, society was a fundamentally moral phenomenon, and the economic and political changes are to be judged from a moral perspective as well. As they believed that the moral deep structures of national existence are not influenced by the political and economic spheres per se, they saw every ideology regarding the latter as external, ideas that only scratch the surface of the essence of national existence. They were interested in the congruence of ideologies and the “nature” of the people, and what social cost or effect an ideology would bring. The populists represented the issue of national minorities in the neighboring states, and the negative consequences of industrialization: the decrease of population, the growing number of divorces, the dissolution of families, the early deaths, the questions of birth control, and any deviance in general that could be interpreted in an ethnic-national framework. They had an ambivalent, critical as well as compromising attitude toward every government as they had an ambivalent attitude toward politics in the first place. For them, the only acceptable form of politics was moral or moralizing politics. They denied both the state and irrationalism of the East and the “cold” political rationality of the West. Populist attitude toward reform was defined not primarily by market-oriented change or party pluralism but the values of solidarity understood on a national basis.

Strive for the balance of constructive criticism was a characteristic feature of an early representative of the peace movement, the Dialogue Peace Group (Dialógus Békecsoport) yet this apolitical attitude was soon changed by the more radical stance of Danube Circle (Duna Kör) in 1985. Demand for autonomy and readiness to be constructive merged in these groups, which promised with the emergence of a new political culture. When the members of the Dialogue debated whether it should become an organization, grassroots, anarchist, and representative democratic principles clashed in the opposition of the “radical-autonomist” and “moderate-constructive”

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13 Csengey, Mezitlakas szabadság
Although they could not achieve political results in the short run, the demand for a new type of collective action was important. The memory of the movement and its values was kept in the collective memory of the participants, which meant significant political experience for the transition to democracy. A group of activists who learned a culture of dispute and techniques of movement organization was trained and later, in other forms, reorganized. This is proved by the story of Danube Circle which made an environmental issue an issue of genuine democracy. Against the party state’s plans of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros dam the Danube Circle protested with a slogan that resonated with many: “dam or democracy?”

What these movements shared was the openness, flexibility, and the refrainment from explicitly stating any end goals in political ideology. They did not expect their followers to give their life for the movement and therefore create a kind of movement elite. Their arsenal included direct action and using the streets as open demonstrations, reminiscent of the traditions of early labor movement and the 1968 student protests in the West. The peace group carried out numerous collective, peaceful demonstrations in Budapest at busy squares and the pedestrian streets of the city center. Contrary to the previous decade, the 1980s saw single issue movements advocating the protection of life and the environment. The weakening influence of Marxism gave way to an aspiration to learn about the Hungarian national past, as well as the liberal tradition. The third-way ideas and the ones that were historically closer to the tradition of Western philosophy became visible. But not even the third-way movement was unidirectional, as it included both populist and liberal socialist ideas. Populism advocated the synthesis of contradictory ideas on the basis of understanding national character; liberal socialism tried to transcend two evils, capitalism and state socialism, and attempted to mix the advantages of liberal and socialist thought.

The real political alternative to the regime, however, appeared when the dissidents formed the Hungarian democratic opposition. The history of the opposition is well-documented in Hungarian language, particularly in the monograph of Csizmadia, his interviews, as well as the works of other

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14 Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison*.
15 Körösényi, *Értemiségl, politikai gondolkodás és kormányzat*. 
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authors. The circle that defined themselves as democratic opposition involved the strongly anti-system philosophers, historians, and sociologists, who were fired from their jobs and fought for radical reform. Describing the ideological development of this closely knit group of mainly Budapest-based people, we need to distinguish two stages: (1) From the Marxist revisionist philosophy of Lukács to the liberal socialism and democratic humanism emerging from the writings of István Bibó (the 1970s); and (2) from Bibó to Western liberalism (the 1980s). The ideological turn came about when critical intellectuals in Central Europe were able to step out of the Marxist framework of criticism. Gradually, they were able to drop the idea that the system could be reformed.

The attitude of the dissidents toward politics changed a great deal between 1977 and 1981. The beginning can be characterized as cultural or “lifestyle opposition,” meaning the provocative behavior of a group of mainly freelance intellectuals. Upon the state of emergency in Poland in December 1981, the dissidents were at crossroads: detachment from the system morally and financially and being generally irritating for the party bureaucracy were no longer enough. In 1981, the group focused, preserving its cultural elements, more on offering a program, finding alliances—practically, becoming political opposition. They aimed to follow the path of the Polish dissident intellectuals, in a country which was not characterized by the same circumstances. They were realists so they would not become revolutionaries, and their group would not become a radical sect. Realizing that their social base was moderate they tried to be more open toward, and start a discourse about the idea of radical reform.

The example of the Polish opposition spurred the dissidents to elevate the ideas of human rights and civil society to the level of opposition politics. These concepts turned out to be powerful ideological instruments in their fight against late socialism. First, they had to formulate a strategy that brought them closer to Havel’s ideal of “living in truth.” Secondly,


17 Falk, The Dilemmas of Dissidence.

18 Arato, From Neo-Marxism to Democratic Theory.

19 Havel, Living in Truth.
they had to organize themselves outside the system of institutionalized mendacity. Thirdly, they had to turn into a force that can represent the majority, one that can credibly call for the end of the system. While they characterized themselves as an independent, anticommunist group, the dividing line between “us” and “them” had to be made visible in the eyes of the people.

1.2 The rise of samizdat

Cultural opposition in the early years meant that opposition intellectuals showed its independence, first of all, through its behavior and lifestyle. This meant more than parties or solidarity projects in which they defiantly practiced human rights. For example, by organizing the Fund Supporting the Poor (Szegényeket Támogató Alap, SZETA), part of the opposition tried to give particular and practical help to the needy. This was accompanied with some early works like the samizdat volume *Marx a negyedik évtizedben* (Marx in the Fourth Decade), edited by András Kovács;\(^\text{20}\) the private journal call *Napló* (Diary) started by Mihály Kornis in 1976;\(^\text{21}\) the anthology *Profil* (Profile) by János Kenedi;\(^\text{22}\) or the book of György Bence and János Kis, on Soviet-type society.\(^\text{23}\) The need for self-definition and the forming of identity dominated the dissidents’ discourses. By the beginning of the 1980s, these activities were gradually accompanied by the first samizdat publications, the “flying universities” that was organized in private flats,\(^\text{24}\) and the various solidarity acts in form of petition campaigns.

In the 1980s, the various groups of the nascent opposition increasingly sought the opportunity for dialogue with those circles of the intellectuals which were inside the system. Although it took a long time until their messages reached the general populations, they found immediate resonance with mainstream reform intellectuals. Four samizdat journals (*Beszélő*, *Hírmondó*, *Demokrata*, and *Égtájak között*) played an especially important process in this. Radio Free Europe amplified and disseminated these ideas to the wider public. In the following I briefly describe these journals, then

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\(^{20}\) Kovács, *Marx a negyedik évtizedben*.

\(^{21}\) Barna et al., *A Napló*.

\(^{22}\) Kenedi, *Profil*.

\(^{23}\) Bence and Kis, *Határolt forradalom*. Published under the pseudo-name Marc Rakovski.

\(^{24}\) Szilágyi, *A Hétfői Szabadegyetem és a III/III*. 

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I turn to examining opposition groups with respect to their strategic goals, relationship to power and society, declared policies, and identity-forming relations and views in various social and political phenomena.

The most important samizdat journal was *Beszélő*. It was first published by the editorial team in late 1981, after the events of self-limiting revolution and state of emergency unfolded in Poland. The journal published high-quality analyses and the writings of many of the dissidents who later became political actors during the regime change. *Beszélő* was published, using stencils, in 27 issues between 1981 and 1989. The editorial team was made up by the leading figures of the democratic opposition. The journal combined theoretical, strategic, practical, and investigative articles and reports, and a great number of leading opposition figures published in it. Thus, the journal was closely associated with various opposition groups, especially Ottilia Solt’s SZETA. It supported the poor who did not even “exist” officially, as the regime’s language only knew of people with multiple disadvantages.

The editors and authors of the underground *Beszélő* took everything the system hypocritically claimed about constitutionalism and the freedom of speech seriously. They discussed subjects that were regarded as taboo, and the journal always had the name, address, and phone number of the editors on its first pages. The risk they took regarded not only their freedom and job, but it also involved a range of unpleasant consequences, such as the revocation of their passports, continual supervision by the secret police, or the confiscation of their writings.

In the introduction of the first issue of *Beszélő*, János Kis wrote that their goal was to communicate with the general population. “To the best of our ability,” he wrote, “we wish to assist the quietly clamoring masses in painting a better picture of themselves in a period when two tiny minorities—the country’s leadership and the opposition—are loudly arguing with each other.”

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25 The editors of the samizdat *Beszélő* were Miklós Haraszti, János Kis, Ferenc Kőség, Bálint Nagy, György Petri, Ottilia Solt, and Sándor Szilágyi.

26 *Beszélő* was published in 1,500 copies, but its circulation reached 8,000 by the end of the 1980s. Monori, “Média és rendszerváltás.”

27 The authors were mostly belonging to the democratic opposition. Those who had official jobs typically published under pseudonyms.

28 *Beszélő* was first a samizdat publication (1981–1989), then a legal weekly (1989–1996), and finally a monthly (1996–2012). This book deals solely with the samizdat period of the journal.
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This introduction did not define a clear political program. The editors did not want to give a program, but worked at disseminating information so that “the quietly clamoring masses” would be able to understand and disseminate it further in the future. It was truly the effort of intellectuals whose trust was in the power and influence of words on social processes. The first couple of issues mostly disseminated information about different social groups and different areas of life. The function of these articles was to find out who would react to them, to know who the editors could contact and commission articles from in the future. The journal’s profile was shaped by the feedback it received and the political events that were under way in the first year of the journal’s existence. At first, Beszélő reported on those social groups who disobeyed the rules, thus bringing practical examples of challenging the rules of a dictatorial regime. It showed the areas of life where society expressed opposition to the regime. The hope was that by publicly acknowledging these isolated attempts, Beszélő would help people who were active on one area learn about and get in contact with others. In the long run, they hoped, isolation could slowly give way to the opportunity of joint opposition action.

Given that Beszélő was not only a journal of social criticism but also a forum of the democratic opposition, another aim, namely that of a political program, soon surfaced. The twentieth, 1987 special issue of Beszélő published the comprehensive program.\(^\text{30}\) It demanded constitutionalism, freedom of the press, social security, human rights, but first and foremost the replacement of the party general secretary János Kádár.\(^\text{31}\) They call attention to such taboos as weakening the ties between Hungary and the Soviet Union, the problems of Hungarians living outside the borders, and the place of the real history of 1956 in collective memory.

The second samizdat journal worth mentioning is Hírmondó. It first appeared in November 1983, and 26 subsequent issues followed until 1988.\(^\text{32}\) It was the successor of Tájékoztató, which only appeared three times in the

\(^{29}\) Kis, “Lapunk él.”

\(^{30}\) Haraszti et al., Társadlami szerződés.

\(^{31}\) Csizmadia, A magyar demokratikus ellenzék, 391–95.

\(^{32}\) Hírmondó was edited by Gábor Demszky and Róza Hodosán. In the early period András Nagy and Ortília Solt were also part of the editorial team.
In the introductory issue, its goals were defined in the following way: *Hírmondó* “wishes to focus on the efforts at the democratic renewal of the countries of the region.” This promise was kept to the end. More than half of the articles in each issue were devoted to topics about Central Europe. They published articles that had appeared in the underground media of region (especially Poland). Full reports and analyses from emigrant publications and Western papers were regularly featured. These reported on the situation in Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. The two most published free thinkers were Adam Michnik and Václav Havel. The editors of *Hírmondó* also incorporated articles on democratic and progressive developments in Yugoslavia. Finally, they also regularly published reports on illegal grouping and those persecuted in the Soviet Union as well as made interviews with those emigrated from the Soviet Union to the West.

The third samizdat journal to be mentioned is *Demokrata*. It had 41 issues between 1986 and 1989. The paper published articles of authors regardless they used their real name or not. It was, however, reluctant to publish “fascist, racists and chauvinist writings as well as articles that advocated violence as the primary means of the domestic political struggle.” Most of the articles were penned by the editors who, except the chief editor, preferred to remain unidentified. In the first issue they committed themselves to pluralist democracy. “*Demokrata* greets its entire democratic readership [...] whether they be advocates of bourgeois, Christian, social or popular democracy. [...] Thus, *Demokrata* aspires to be the practical outlet of the struggle for democratic freedoms. This is what we wish to add to the samizdat press. That is, we do not intend to be competitors to the already existing journals of the samizdat movement. Rather, we intend to supplement their theoretical content and message. We aspire to be both activist and up-to-date.”

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33 András Nagy edited the journal in 1985–1986. The most frequent authors were Gábor Demszky, András Nagy, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, Pál Szalai, Mihály Vajda, György Konrád, György Krasó, and György Gadó.
35 *Demokrata* was edited by Jenő Nagy.
36 *Demokrata*, 1986b: 1.
38 *Demokrata*, 1986a.
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because of its practical, shorter, and easy-to-understand content that Radio Free Europe described Demokrata as the “tabloid of the opposition.”

Unlike Hirmondó, which concentrated on explicating the intellectual heritage of Central Europe, writings in Demokrata concentrated on uncovering the workings and lies of the power elite in Hungary. Instead of being broad and analytical, most of its content was critical, subjective, and related to current events. In their writings, opposition figures belonging to Demokrata’s circle displayed provocative, conflict-oriented, radical behavior, which was in contrast with the restrained attitude of large parts of the democratic opposition.

Finally, Égtájak között was run by younger people, originally as an outlet of the Vox Humana Circle, a student community in Budapest. It first appeared at the Faculty of Arts of Eötvös Lóránd University in November 1984 as a Central European essay journal. In 1985, censorship forced them to type, and later use stencils, to duplicate their independent issues. As a university paper, it published six issues and a special literary issue legally. Later, 13 samizdat issues were published until 1989, and every issue had a distinctive subtitle. A Demokrata’s column, “From the history of the samizdat press,” published a self-analytical piece about Égtájak között. This said that Égtájak között did not want to be a conventional journal. Instead, it was devoted to “be documenting human fates. [. . .] Most of the contents of the journal are devoted to life situations and the extremity of social existence [. . .]. We mostly publish self-defensive imprints of lives which insist on maintaining individual autonomy.” Égtájak között regularly reported on police persecutions (warrants to appear at and shadowing by the police, police raids, and confiscations) and paid concentrated attention to the conditions of the imprisoned and the fate of “the dismembered Hungarian people.” Dialogues over peace and problems relating to culture, education, and the arts also had a felt presence in the issues. Égtájak között was the only samizdat publication that regularly published fiction, poetry, and graphics.

39 The editors replied as follows: “Radio Free Europe recently introduced our paper. Demokrata was called the tabloid of the opposition [. . .] we believe this is not true, neither to the facts nor to our intentions. We want to make a simpler, more popular, more fresh paper for the readers than our appreciated samizdat competitors, but not a tabloid.”

40 Égtájak között was edited and written by Gyula Bartók, Mikolta Bognár, Olga Diószegi, Zsolt Keszthelyi, Ervin János Lázár, László Rusai, and József Talata.

Égtájak között enriched the opposition discourse by giving voice to alternative ideas. Instead of a party-centered democracy, the editors advocated the idea of a community-centered democracy where attention was not concentrated on power and its holders. They recommended that besides creating local democratic forums, the societal energy released by the groups that aimed at broadening the public sphere and not at grabbing political power should be utilized.42

Several short-lived journals and samizdat published existed in the 1980s, some of which also published significant opposition writings.43 These journals and publishers created the infrastructure for the readers of the second public sphere.44 An underground band founded an alternative record label, breaking the monopoly of the state’s Hungarian Records Company.45 The democratic opposition and the people around them spent years so that uncensored thoughts could find their way to the public. They also tried to inform isolated readers about each other, to bring them together, and to form a community of counterculture in the end.

2. The dissidents between state and society

One of the most conspicuous features of the position of the nascent democratic opposition was that they placed themselves between the communist party state and the society. While opposition figures with close ties to Hírmondó linked democratic values to Europe’s intellectual heritage, those publishing in Demokrata reached back to the national past, the 1956 revolution, which they described as a national democratic revolution and viewed as an absolute ideological and moral capital. This was the pillar that they relied on in their regime criticism.

42 Talata, “Feladataink.”
43 The samizdat journals were the following: Huány (Shortage), Közép-Európai Figyelő (Central European Observer), Magyar Figyelő (Hungarian Observer), Magyar Oktober Szabadságó (Hungarian October Free Press), Magyar Zsidó (Hungarian Jew), Másbólanas Beszélő (Speaker from Elsewhere), Széria (Sphere), Tájékoztató (Prospectus), Tűléleli (Survival), Túlpartról (From the Other Coast). Among samizdat publishers, one needs to mention AB Független Kiadó (AB Independent Publisher), ABC Független Kiadó (ABC Independent Publisher), Hitel Független Kiadó (Credit Independent Publisher), Artéria Kiadó (Arteria Publisher), Katalizátor Iroda (Catalyst Office), Magyar Oktober Kiadó (Hungarian October Publisher) and Szabad Idő Független Kiadó (Leisure Time Independent Publisher).
44 On these papers and publishers, see Hodosán, Szamizdat történetek.
45 It was the Trottel Records. Cf. Szemere, Up from the Underground.
The dissidents believed that the public sphere could be widened only if they become mediators between the power holders and the society. According to their views, “a truly democratic thinker must not think about his own wishes, but rather the means by which he can facilitate the expression of the popular will.” They believed that “the writers of the ‘second public sphere’, cannot undo the boycott of the 1984 Olympics, but still can shout at the Hungarian Olympic Committee.” Beyond the expression and the transmission of public opinion, those publishing in Hírmondó also saw their role in shaping public thinking. “The semi-Orwellian man, the schooled peasant, is very useful for those in power. […] We should do something so that the ambition for professional and human productivity goes hand in hand with the desire to be free and emancipated citizens who are equal before the law.”

Ironically, it was often the writers who talked about the necessity of mediation and the expression and shaping of the public will that most often questioned the possibility that they could, indeed, do something meaningful to this end. As they recognized, intellectuals cannot take over the people’s burdens, for “the intellectuals are very far from the common man.” This distance was partly created by the regime and partly was the result of their intellectual superiority vis-à-vis ordinary citizens. Their social image was based on their idea of superiority and rationalism. Mihály Vajda wrote about this, saying “We must not seek to our basic problems a universal solution in the name of some abstract rationality; every society […] must find the solutions fitting to its traditions.”

They saw it as a privilege to be able to voice their views. Gáspár Miklós Tamás wrote, “The freedoms we achieved for ourselves are unfair privileges as long as others do not have them. I think it is better that we have them than if no one has them, but only if we use them to expand these rights to others.”

The plurality of the articles makes generalization difficult, but it was not uncommon that dissidents referred to the people and the popular will as abstract constructs, not taking the internal stratification of society into account. The authors of Hírmondó described themselves in terms

46 Tamás, “Van a Bajza utca sarkán egy kis palota,” 27.
50 Vajda, “Megcsalt nembelség vagy megvalósult orosz történelem,” 54.
of being excluded from and defenseless in the face of power as often as they defined their role as mediators. “Paternalism is prone to equate opponents with enemies. [. . .] This way of thinking is best exposed in writings where opposition is carelessly identified with adversity in one and the same sentence. If this identification is real [. . .], then writers fall outside the realm of the law and constitutional protection. From then on it is a matter of political will to treat them as outlaws.”

When discussing their stubbornness in fighting power, they primarily highlighted the emotional and moral aspects. In the face of the falsity of power, they viewed themselves as the holders of moral justice. They thought that power could not touch the moral justice. “Regardless of the softening of power, it is unimaginable that [for them] an opposition figure is right, and the police is wrong. [. . .] Gábor Demszky was not simply arrested by the police, but they also tried to cuff his hands. Demszky protested vehemently and finally he prevailed. Those who like symbols may even find one in this story.”

The intellectuals of Hírmondó regularly reported and analyzed the atrocities committed by communist power elite: keeping people in custody illegally, bureaucratic atrocities, and corruption. Not only did they see themselves as being excluded from and stigmatized by power, but they formed a group that “neither hopes nor desires the responsibility to govern.” They did not discard dialogue with power, but they excluded the possibility of exercising it.

As opposed to this, those with close ties to Demokrata did not think that such self-limitation was possible in the long run. The authors of Demokrata, with mostly plebeian attitudes, identified the nation with the people of which they were a constitutive part. Their goal was not to mediate between power holders and the society but to give voice to the people by expressing their alleged demands to help them to come to power. While Hírmondó stressed the importance of the political and geographical chances and limitations, in Demokrata concerns about the relationship with the power elite was dominant. They defined themselves in opposition to power and the status quo. There were several defining features to their opposition to power.

authors of Demokrata saw themselves less as excluded from power and more as robbed and suppressed by it. For being robbed and suppressed is a more serious grievance than simply being excluded. The opposition being robbed from the chance to organize has been central to several articles.\footnote{55} Accounts of police atrocities, house searches, and interrogation were often published in Demokrata. Those publishing here saw their situation to be quite dramatic. This was related to the fact that they did not apply the rules of conspiracy, which resulted in their being subjected to police atrocities more often. In contrast, Hirmondó had a strict system of conspiracy, always separating the circles of editors, suppliers, mediators, and manufacturers. They were especially careful to conceal the last link of the chain, the printers, from the eyes of the police.

There were a wide range of issues discussed on the pages of Demokrata: the role of the church, emigration and emigrants, Hungarian minorities abroad, problems concerning the Roma population, the presence of the Russian army, those who refused to serve their compulsory time in the army, Judaism, environmental protection, and popular culture. But, regardless the chosen topic, their discussions always ended in the criticism of the dictatorship and thus every issue was defined as crucial for deciding the nation’s fate. Unlike them, those writing for Hirmondó preferred to talk more generally about questions that were crucial the fate of this generation.\footnote{56} We are much more impressed by how millions in Poland stand by their free trade unions that have been defamed, squelched, and forced underground, and by the way they protect and hide the leaders of Solidarity. [. . .] We send them our greetings on the occasion that their hard times in prison are over. We wish them strength as well as health to their future struggle. We also long for the appearance of hundreds of such intellectuals as Kuron, Michnik, Lipski and such workers as Walesa, Bujak and their colleagues here in this country.\footnote{57}

\textit{Hirmondó} only used pathos in articles that they penned about others. They never went so far as to talk about their own achievements in this

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{55} F. Reymund, “Tartsuk be a játékszabályokat,” 22; Gadó, “Nem húznak karóba,” 4.  
\textsuperscript{56} Vajda, “Megcsalt nembeliség vagy megvalósult orosz történelem,” 54.  
\textsuperscript{57} R-ő, “Emberi arcú rendőrállam?” 1–2.}
fashion. As opposed to this, Demokrata often described Hungarian politics and their own oppressed situation in dramatic terms. Those writing for Demokrata felt it to be their duty to uncover the workings of the regime. Their discourse concerning the regime was based on the use of concepts such as mock democracy, socialist democracy, and enlightened absolutism.

If you wish, the Hungarian regime maybe seen as liberal: after all opposition thinkers and activists do not face political trials. There are other methods. “Let’s take his fingerprints, take a numbered picture of him, with this we can humiliate him and make him feel the smell of prison. We show him that if he does not accept the carrot, we’ll use the stick.”

These opposition figures approached compromise, which the opposition makes with the dictatorial power elite in mock-democracies, in moral terms and, hence, refused to consider it. “Would an honest political movement accept a compromise? In the foreseeable future there is no reason to expect such a compromise between those in power and in the opposition that would allow the opposition to maintain its political integrity.” Another author added: “With all respects to the intellectual legacy of István Bibó, the failure of his suggestions signal that compromise is not among the political means in this region.” The opposition categorically refused the idea of compromise, understood as a negative that can bring unforeseeable consequences: “No. This regime is made up of cheaters. We should not aim at fair play and consensus with them. Rather, we should tell the truth. The louder and clearer, the better.”

The ultimate and often-voiced goal of Demokrata intellectuals was to bring down the regime: “What is the value of an opposition that cannot bring down either the government or the regime?” “Democracy can only be victorious
when party dictatorship is abolished.” Assessing their relationship to power, however, those with close ties to Demokrata mentioned their fear regularly. As often as they mentioned their own fear, they also expressed their belief in their ability to raise fear in the power elite. They attributed the fear of the power elite to the moral superiority of the opposition: “the situation is such that Goliath must be afraid of David. Besides, this fact makes it even more pronounced that Goliath’s power is a morally fallen one.”

The relationship of the opposition to society was not free of contradictions. It followed from the atomization and neutralization strategies of the Kádár regime that the dissidents could not equate themselves with society and could not express their own demands as the demands of the society. Occasionally they expressed their dissatisfaction with the silence of society. They were afraid that society would not identify with their goals and that it would not even understand them. They were torn by dilemmas that were never even raised in Solidarity in Poland. So how did they see their own value for society?

They took upon themselves to be the torchbearers whose task was to pronounce value judgments: “The torch must be held up high even if it cannot perfectly substitute sunshine and the torchbearer cannot rush the sunrise. But the light of this torch must always be directed at real values and not at cheap imitations and scrapheaps.” Demokrata returned to the metaphor of light frequently. They believed they can lead by example, spurring the people to act. They believed that it was their responsibility to talk about the suppressed past as well.

This past mainly referred to the suppressed revolution of 1956, which was brought up not only because of its thirtieth anniversary. The year 1956 was the most obvious point of reference to question the legitimacy of the Kádár regime. They gave practical pieces of advice to help efficient demonstrations. These included the description of how to make leaflets and stamps, or painting templates. These members of the opposition did not speak from the position of an elite, but followed the inner call: both the moral and the practical were integral parts of their identity. The conflict between the so-called elite and the radical-plebeian opposition became especially intense in 1988–1989.

67 F. Reymund, “Tartsuk be a játékszabályokat,” 22.
68 Sasváry, “Ellenzék a hódoltságban,” 19.
In 1989, the opposition agreed to a compromise with the power elite that the plebeians found unacceptable. The latter group remained in a marginal position and police atrocities toward them intensified.

To sum up, dissident intellectuals in Hungary wanted to give voice to demands for freedom, and to those who had no chance to present themselves in the public sphere. In *Hírmondó*, emigration was not a characteristic subject of the opposition’s discourse either. The only exception was the issue with opposition philosopher, Gáspár Miklós Tamás who had immigrated to Hungary from Transylvania and was offered an emigration passport by the officials. This particular case was selected for discussion on purpose. Tamás did not see emigration as one’s free choice, but as something one was pressured into by the power elite. The opposition categorically refused to back such a solution. With the words of Gábor Demszky:

> To the hell with such offers! [...] The power elite may live with this method again in ten years against those who could not be controlled by other means—job loss, ban on their employment, atrocities—in the meantime. In the end, the cultural police would simply force them out of the country. What else can be said upon seeing this bad omen then, “Let the power elite leave. We’ll be fine without them.”

Unlike *Hírmondó*, *Demokrata* regularly had the issue of emigration on its agenda. When analyzing cases, authors expressed their acceptance of emigration. Emigration was thought of as something individuals had the right to choose. They did not judge emigration negatively from the point of view of a collective responsibility for the fate of the nation. *Demokrata* continued “holding the hands” of the emigrants by urging them to keep in contact with the opposition. From this they hoped to grow intellectually and that the emigrants could maintain their Hungarian identity. “We welcome,” they wrote, “the writings of the democrats living in emigration on our pages. This may be beneficial for both parties: this would enrich us with new ideas and reasoning and help them preserve their ties with the country and think like Hungarians even when abroad.”

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69 Demszky, “Menjenek el talán Ők,” 14.
70 *Demokrata*, 1986c: 19.
Chapter III

The democratic opposition in Hungary saw the influence of the emigrant intelligentsia larger than their own. They often overestimated their impact. They opined that widening the flow of information between the emigrated and domestic intellectuals will help those at home in their anti-system activities.

The intention of mediating between the power holders and the society was a problematic strategy to start with for the groups of the opposition. The dissidents knew that their place, in opposition to the system, was on the side of the society, but it took them years until they found their voice that the people actually heard. They had to find those topics, keywords, and strategies that made them real molders of critical discourse, that is political actors.

3. The topics of the samizdat journals

Apart from the new types of discourse and their anti-system stance, the samizdat journals differed from the party state’s media also in their selection of topics. Dictatorship deprived politics from its original meaning—a form of acting for the common good of society—but the dissidents wrote about moral politics. If topics like nationality and Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries were regarded as taboo, this was the reason opposition journals reported about them. If the official media did not discuss the activity of the corrupt and neutralized churches, the innovative role of alternative base groups, the unofficial peace movements, or the group of conscientious objectors, these topics did appear in the banned journals of opposition intellectuals. The authors shed new light on the topics of environment and culture as well. In the following, I give an overview of these forbidden topics and approaches.

3.1 Moral politics

The politics of the opposition was moral, but not moralizing. It was looking for those political fundamentals upon which the opposition to the oppression can be built. As one of the most active members of the dissidents recalls, “we accepted the theory of nonviolent revolution of Martin Luther King, a human rights revolution, and a liberal change. It was made clear that every generation must participate in this change, there cannot be violent change,
there cannot be exclusionary change. The only qualitative change I hoped for and brought an infinitely, truly radically new quality to the society, was the free press.”

In the debates of the opposition circle close to Hírmondó, the ideal of a democratic East-Central Europe based on the respect of human rights was one of the most often discussed, basic topics. “We, the Hungarian opposition, must turn to the democratic traditions of Eastern Europe and the democrats of the other Central European states should do the same. [...] any tendency toward isolation would only make the already questionable prospects of democracy in Eastern Europe more hopeless.”

The opposition circles of Hírmondó, Demokrata, and Égtájak között were committed to nonviolence and the protection of human rights. Among them Hírmondó turned out to be the most influential. “Hírmondó is an independent publication and is free of censorship. As a matter of principle, it only refuses to publish writings inciting racism or war with other people.” Among their leading authors Tamás claimed that “individual and collective human rights must be demanded for everyone, including national minorities.” Konrád added: “We are more interested in the right of the minorities to existence in a democracy than the power of the majority. We demand respect for freaks.” They took a decisive stand by the Roma population, which was most affected by discrimination, As Ottília Solt stated: “I believe that today the Roma need the protection of the democrats especially. [...] I wish to call attention to the fact that today there is no organization representing the Hungarian Roma: whoever speaks up for them must do so as a private individual.” They believed in the strength and power of the written word. They defined themselves as members of the civil society, that is, they saw themselves as people who do not delegate responsibility to their superiors, like soldiers, but accept responsibilities.

For the authors of Demokrata the single most important historical point of reference, which was regarded as a moral achievement, was the revolution of 1956. “In the current standing of the economy, political matters and

71 Interview with Haraszi Miklos, 1997.
72 Szalai, “Amivel nem tudok egyetérteni,” 55.
73 Beköszöntő, 1983: 1.
74 Tamás, “Nyílt levél Mihai Korne-hoz,” 27.
75 Konrád, “A tömbrendszer halálos dramaturgiája,” 5.
76 Solt, “A korlátoltás vagy a faji uszítás rabja,” 54.
the public sphere, the recognition that the national democratic revolution of 1956 was one of the most important events of Hungarian history in the seventy years passed since 1918 is more and more widespread. It left such an ideological and moral capital to us that it can be successfully invested for a long time by the political forces working for national renewal.” The authors of Demokrata continuously discussed the false official picture of the revolution. “In the face of multiplying troubles, it became obvious that the rights and property we still own is due to the anger, determination and sacrifice of 1956.” They stressed the need for pluralism and independence: “The democratic opposition must aim at shaping public thinking and raising awareness to the need for democratic progress and national independence.”

The authors of Égtájak között picked autonomy as their most important value, which they felt to be the precondition to make everyday life livable and bearable. They distanced themselves from those who, startled by independent existence, “tried to follow through the official censorship, which often results in the distortion of personality and leads to alcoholism, the need for psychiatric treatment or suicide.” The practice of “one party vs one opposition” did not fit their quest for autonomy, either. The different opposition groups of Égtájak között positioned themselves outside the “monolithic opposition” and voiced their criticism from this position. The criticism consisted in disapproval of intolerance and the assimilation of independent groups, which the monolithic opposition used to strengthen itself. According to an editor, “Should autonomy exist, they immediately strive to abolish it. Autonomy has no tradition. There are only reservations and misunderstandings. We do not even know what taboos we violated with our existence.”

Morality and the demand of politics based on truth were not quite as much part of the identity of the authors writing in Égtájak között than they were for the authors of Demokrata. Yet these themes regularly appeared on the pages of Égtájak között: “General moral premises as well as getting to

77 F. Reymund, “Tartsuk be a játékszabályokat,” 22.
78 Név nélkül, 43.
know the suppressed national past and culture can serve as points of orientation. We must keep banging our fists on the table.”

3.2 The question of national minorities

The authors of Hirmondó often called themselves cosmopolitan to oppose provincialism. The democratic opposition was described as only having interest in domestic minorities whereas the populist writers were said to focus on Hungarian minorities abroad. Yet this was not the case. Hirmondó articles give evidence to the fact that the democratic opposition wrote about the problems of the minorities abroad as often as they wrote about the problems concerning the discriminated minorities at home. It is a different question how it related to the problems of those abroad. In this respect, the authors of Hirmondó did not only differ from populist writers but also from the Demokrata circle. The former did not necessarily linked concerns about the situation of Hungarians abroad to the discourse over national consciousness. Rather, they associated it with universal human rights, which was also an often-mentioned theme in Hirmondó.

Another defining element in the discourse of the opposition circle of Hirmondó was their identity as Central Europeans. The introduction of Hirmondó, which was an attempt at self-definition, defined Hungarians living abroad as an integral part of the nation both from a cultural and an ethnic point of view. “Hirmondó is going to publish a great amount of news about the oppression of Hungarian-speaking minorities outside our borders.” However, “we do not agree with those of our fellow countrymen who place the national issue above all other problems. The problems of the Hungarian minorities abroad are inseparable from the global problems of the region.”

The two opposition groups disagreed in the solution. The circle of Hirmondó put their trust into the democratic movement of the region. As they wrote, “We agree that the Hungarian government should intervene to prevent their forced assimilation, but […] we expect the solution of the issue to come from the democratic movements.” In contrast, the Demokrata cir-
cle considered the interference of the Hungarian government as the key to improve the situation, less idealistically.

Regarding the question of borders and the situation of ethnic Hungarians living outside the Hungarian border, Hírmondó intellectuals did not get submerged in reviving the past and rejected even the theoretical possibility of border revisions. Instead, they advocated more “permeable” borders, that is, more freedom for individuals. “If borders could be crossed freely, it would do a service by making the exchange of information about each other and equal development possible, which would ease the revisionist tensions.” Instead of states, they were thinking in terms of peoples, and believed that the proposal for open borders emphasizes the rapprochement and the joining of forces of the people, and not the states, of Central Europe.

The nation as a concept and the idea of 1956 as a linchpin or a positive force that would shape the nation’s future were pronouncedly present in the discourse of opposition figures close to Demokrata: “Many signs give evidence to the fact that the capacity for a fresh start exist and the nation is finding its way back to the heritage of 1956, which is the only path toward self-esteem and liberty.” As another author claimed: “How insincere was the calculation through which the beneficiaries of 1956 hushed up the soul and ambitions of the nation!’ [ . . . ] Oh, when will October 23, the persistent light—the eternal spring—in the national autumn, finally be a red-letter day?” However, the fact that the opposition was committed to the national question did not mean that they propagated one single solution. They opined that progress in Hungary must be void of “integral nationalism,” for the belief in “the absoluteness of one’s own nation” is none other but chauvinism.

In sum, the circle around Hírmondó believed that the solution to the problems of Hungarian minorities would come from the democratic movements of the region, while the circle around Demokrata expected the solution from the Hungarian government. The latter defined themselves primarily through their relationship to the power elite. Of course, they did not think that a word from the Budapest government would solve the problems

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87 Öskü, Demokrata, 34.
in Transylvania, but they condemned the government for not advocating the case of Hungarian abroad on international forums.

### 3.3 Churches and peace activism

In the first issues of *Beszélő*, Christian communities, national identity, and the problems concerning Hungarian minorities abroad were not subjected to debate in the way that the task of the opposition, its relationship with society, and the power elite did. From this period, writings about the Adventist church\(^{88}\) and Catholic dissidents\(^{89}\) are worth mentioning. The article concerning the latter made general conclusions about the relationship of identity and ideology in the context of discussion over the possibility of the free development of the “clerical profession” and the effects of a compromise between the state and the church. As it formulated:

> The state exercises total control over the churches and directs their lives indirectly. No longer do we have a chance to protect ourselves legally. [...] Some try to do something by making themselves believe that the power elite is ready for the dialogue of good will and only awaits their signals. The politics of bluff of the “peace priests” deceive many other priests who deserve a better fate. These people do not think about the fact that the agreements published in the framework of pompous ceremonies only gives them crumbs of the rights that Christ’s church and men had been entitled to all along. In return for these concession they serve the state, which has not given up on silencing dissidents. Their mantra is “compromise” and “realism”.\(^{90}\)

The opposition discourse did not evaluate the efforts of the Catholic Church as something one should identify with. The church was mostly described as an integral part of the power elite. “Since the Mindszenty trial\(^{91}\) the Catholic church has been in the deadly embrace of power. Its leadership has clung to power to protect their positions in this world. We see the recre-

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88 Iványi, “Kitaszított adventisták.”
89 Wildmann, “A magyar katolikus másként gondolkodókhoz.”
91 Cardinal József Mindszenty was imprisoned by the communists after a show trial in 1948.
ation of church figures who desperately cling to power. We do not expect any progress from above.” At the same time the opposition was also concerned with the chance of religiousness in the world of power after the failure of religious institutions. They saw hope in those Christians, and the communities they formed, who found the deeper dimensions of religion and accepted smallness and service to others.

What the dissident authors of Demokrata thought about Judaism as a religion was condensed in the way they welcomed their sister publication, Magyar Zsidó in 1987. Many did not understand the need for such a journal. Nonetheless, they expressed their opinion in the framework of pluralist, democratic ideals. According to them, “in the orchestra of growing democratic public thought, there is not only room for a new instrument, but it must also have an important role.”

Jewish religion was seen in the light of faith and the search for values, and its followers were placed alongside Catholics and Protestants, because all three groups were seen similar in their desire to live by their faith in a world that is in search of values. The Demokrata supported religious Jews in their desire to openly accept their religiousness.

The samizdat Beszélő devoted regular attention to peace movements and conscientious objectors, that is those who denied military service. An entire article was devoted to peace movements within the Catholic Church. The authors of Égtájak között named the withdrawal of Soviet troops as the fundamental condition of peace. They raised their voice as the spokesmen of the occupied nation and their reasoning often referred to 1956. Their argument resembled in many ways the thoughts of one of the emblematic figures of the opposition, György Konrád. “Is the situation where no country’s troops stay at the territory of another country only a dream? On October 23, 1956, Hungarian youth happily shouted their catchphrase: ‘the soldiers of every country should go home.’ I love this catchphrase ever since and find it even more actual from the distance of a quarter century than I did back then.”

They also spoke up against armament from time to time. They believed that who should rule the world is a senseless question. First, no country has the

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93 Demokrata, “Megnyugtatták,” 22.
94 Harasztí “Nem ütni és nem visszaütni.”
95 Konrád, “A cenzúra reformját?” 5.
right to do so, and second, the victory of neither would survive the destruction of nuclear holocaust. Besides the senselessness of the race of superpowers, the opposition often returned to the weakness of the Hungarian army as well.

*Demokrata* paid special attention to those who refused to serve their time in the armed forces. They saw it to be their task to follow these cases and inform the public about them: “the disinterest of the public—partially due to lack of information—is also responsible for the imprisonment of thousands and thousands of young and peace-minded Hungarian men for years by the Kádár regime just because they denied to serve in the army.”\(^{96}\) A few members of the democratic opposition had committed themselves in a public announcement to follow the case of Zsolt Keszthelyi and his fellow sufferers. They also suggested policy change that would allow these young people to complete their military service in the form of civilian service, such as nursing. “Until the new legal guarantees are not in place, people who were sent to prison for being conscientious objectors should be given amnesty and set free.”\(^{97}\) The issue of human rights was repeatedly mentioned but not discussed theoretically. Rather, the practical relevance of these principles for the opposition was examined.

### 3.4 Environmentalism

*Beszélő* started to deal with environmental issues after 1984. This step was mainly due to two issues: the international agreement between the Hungarian and the Czechoslovak communist parties about building a dam at Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros on the Danube and, later, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. Environmental protection quickly got on the agenda of the democratic opposition. Besides supporting articles, soon environmental circles, groups, and movements also appeared. These organizations did not resemble political parties and supported a cause that the communist party could have supported just as well. They did not fight for a multiparty system, they only wanted clean air and water. Their power of regime criticism did not

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\(^{96}\) Typically, the cases that were named were those where the denial of military service was not based on religious or pacifist motives. One of these cases was that of Zsolt Keszthelyi: he refused to serve in an army that was not controlled by a democratically elected government. Cf. "Keszthelyi Zsolt börtönbüntetése."

\(^{97}\) "Keszthelyi Zsolt börtönbüntetése."
come from their political ideology but was due to their potential to organize. For citizens, it was less risky to attend green protests than to attend events directly organized by the opposition. Protest against the building of the dam at Nagymaros was based on public civilian action, advocacy by the Danube Circle and the petition campaign for a referendum. These helped do away with the society’s fear of the system step by step.

*Hirmondó*’s articles on environmental issues can be divided into two groups. There were the articles that stood up against political, economic, and technological concentration of power; and there were the ones that called attention to the dangers of a hypothetical “green dictatorship.” Environmentalism became an important element for the identity of the journal when a column devoted to the subject was started. Again, two stances appeared within the opposition. One group defined themselves as environmentalists; the others, while they also emphasized their commitment to the issues of the environment, were critical toward the “apolitical” environmental movement.

The former saw their advocacy of environmental issues as a part of their opposition to the political, economic, and technological concentration of power. “Atomic energy is dangerous and its use results in a totalitarian, centralized police state. [. . .] The deep motivation behind the protests against the use of atomic energy is rooted in the disillusionment of technological and economic development [. . .] Thus, the decentralization of the use of technology has a great political impact, which may be a cure against the worldwide tendency of economic and political power concentration.” This environmental discourse was characterized by strong value judgments. At one point it was directed against Austria which decided to invest in building the dam at Nagymaros. On the other hand, it was precisely the moral implacability of the environmentalists the other opposition group criticized. “The greens present their professional reasons with moral pathos, protecting and demanding fundamental right to healthy life. The ideology of the green movement reviews the practices concerning production and consumption, which raises our concern. [. . .] We find it important to make it clear that an

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98 Haraszti, “Duna-dosszié.”
99 Endreffy, “Atomenergia, demokrácia, decentralizáció.”
alternative terror over necessities, a hypothetical green dictatorship, is also a negative utopia.”

The Demokrata dissidents eagerly identified the environmental problems but criticized the environmental movement. The democratic opposition agreed with green goals but took exception to their means that they regarded as amateurism.

Environmental issues were supported by some authors on principle, interpreting them in and of themselves as ecological problems. Others, however, believed these issues to be of practical importance to undermine dictatorship and expand the realm of free speech.

3.5 Cultural criticism

In its first issue itself, Beszélő reported about the Bibó Festschrift, which was the first joint and comprehensive intellectual effort in Hungary ever since the existence of the Petőfi Circle in 1956. In the memorial book dozens of authors praised and analyzed the views of the social philosopher, István Bibó, who had been imprisoned and then were neglected by the Kádár regime.

Beszélő also discussed the movements of university students described as “hesitant rebels,” which was inspired by the self-limiting revolution of Solidarity and protest against censorship, early on. Later the journal devoted a long article to book censorship practices, stressing the point that, despite the official propaganda, censorship did exist in Hungary. Another article analyzed in detail the judicial proceeding against a punk band in Szeged that displayed a critical attitude to the regime. In general, however, the opposition was not interested in the underground cultural scene and only mentioned it occasionally. Punk bands were mentioned sporadically and only when they were subject of judicial proceedings.

The Writers’ Association, which sharply criticized the cultural policies of the regime and the practice of informal censorship at their pentannual meetings, occupied a special place in the Kádár regime. As I already mentioned,
at the 1981 Congress of the Writers’ Association, the well-known opposition writer, István Eörsi, suggested with irony that formal censorship should be introduced, because then at least writers would know what they can and cannot write about. He reasoned that in Kádár’s “soft dictatorship” the censorship rules are not clear, which leads to arbitrary editorial censorship as well as to self-censorship. He believed that instead of the internalization of censorship, it would have been better to have formal censorship, because in that case authors could more clearly see where power lies and could better preserve their integrity.

As much as it could, the democratic opposition followed the problems that the editors of literary magazines faced, including the official attempts to replace chief editors and take over certain magazines. Beszélő dealt with the problems concerning the monthly, *Mozgó Világ*, already in its second issue. Beszélő also paid attention to the conflicts involving the József Attila Circle, a group of young writers, disseminated information about the publications of the second public sphere and the samizdat boutiques that sold opposition publications, and kept publishing documents relating to the 1956 revolution. Understanding culture in the broader sense, including the typical norms of social coexistence as well, we need to observe that in the debates and journals of the democratic opposition the situation of women and feminism did not appear. The world of dissidents, just like the rest of the society, was characterized by male dominance. Women as a social group was first mentioned only in 1988 when the Madzsar Alice Group of Fidesz organized an all-female demonstration against the building of the dam at Nagymaros. Feminism was understood at the time as a synonym of being hostile to men, and several participants the opposition circles also shared this interpretation.

Cultural issues were rather forced in the background by social issues in the samizdat journals. On the other hand, the authors of *Égtájak között* regularly discussed their relationship to the arts, viewing themselves as friends of the arts. They did this in a context where publishing in the legal and illegal public spheres and the underground publication of artistic and literary mate-

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106 Szilágyi, “Zaboláltan szerkesztők.”
107 It brought news about the appearance and content of Magyar Füzetek, Magyar Figyelő, and Szféra—all published in Paris, about the Monday free university of the opposition and the cultural programs of SZETA.
Dissident Intellectuals: The Culture of Critical Discourse

rial had no practice. They published the works of such artists that were marginalized or silenced by the official canonizers. These two sentences give testimony to their attitude: “We could fend off the responsibility. But we were all accomplices, after all.”

4. The historical memory of the democratic opposition

In the following, I examine the vision of history appearing in the writings of the democratic opposition in their samizdat publications of the 1980s. Which were the most important elements of the historical memory of the opposition, and how did it differ from the interpretation propagated by the Kádár regime? I believe the answer to this question sheds some light on the politics of the democratic opposition during the regime change, and even on the sociology-inclined political discourse that appeared in the late Kádár era and became dominant in the 1990s.

Obviously, the democratic opposition that originated from the dissidents had a different vision about the 20th century than the communist party. The identity of the democratic opposition was rooted in ideas that were in opposition with the official ideology: without an independent memory there would have been no opposition. It was characterized by a truth-seeking attitude that differed from the party state’s propaganda regarding key moments of Hungarian history. Samizdat publications in Hungary mostly dealt with current affairs rather than historical ones, yet these journals were linked to the desire for the existence of an alternative, independent memory. This independent memory was not the consequence but the cause of the establishment and the functioning of the opposition.

I reconstruct this memory with special focus on those points of the opposition discourse that reflected on the most emphatic elements of the historical vision of the communist party. At this point, I do not aim at placing the opposition discourse in the context of the various groups of the intellectual public sphere of the 1980s. It is true that some scholars published regime critical writings in their academic community even before the samizdats, more-

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108 Égtájak Között editors, Égtájak között, 2.
109 I primarily focus on publications in Beszélő, but I contrast them to the articles of Demokrata and Hírmondó.
110 Szűcs, Az antalli pillanat.
over, so these publications could build on each other in hidden ways. Here my goal is only to outline the historical vision of the opposition vis-à-vis the prevailing communist power.

Beszélő mostly dealt with current affairs, and it focused on the changes that concerned Central and Eastern Europe. The topics the journal covered can be classified into four broad categories: (1) The examination of and debate over current political and economic issues; (2) The characteristics and role of the Hungarian democratic opposition; (3) Raising and examining issues that the regime treated as taboos; (4) Reviews and descriptions of books that were published either illegally or abroad and talked of political or moral questions; and lastly (5) The introduction of legal and illegal democratic organizations, their documents and activities.

In the examination of all these issues aimed at serving present needs, the focus was on issues that were relevant and problematic in the 1980s, including the crisis of the economy and possible solutions to it; censorship and the opposition press; the situation of Hungarian minorities abroad; the relationship of the churches and those in power, coercions and persecutions; the military power seizure in Poland in 1981 and the illegalization of Solidarity. History was not among the focal issues of these journals. The only exception was the revolution of 1956 in Hungary. Not only did the opposition take it upon itself to articulate its own interpretation of the revolution on the pages of Beszélő, but also aimed at introducing its events through the eyes of the participants in the form of interviews, memoirs, and documents. This way they made 1956 an event open to research, which would not have been possible without the publication of information that was not open for research. However, the contributions about the revolution did not look upon this event as history, because they thought that it was an unresolved, thus living problem of the society. They believed that the silence surrounding the memory of 1956 and the retaliations after the revolution were the fundamental lies of the Kádár regime. Therefore, if the opposition could tell the truth about the revolution, then they could substantially contribute to the deconstruction of the regime.

111 Institutes of history, sociology, economics, and philosophy were among the regime-critical think tanks in the second half of the Kádár era.
The description of the past and present of Hungarian minorities, the situation of the churches, the political and economic periodization of the years following 1956 and the descriptions of the characteristics of these periods were frequently discussed in Beszélő. Furthermore, it openly talked about issues that the Socialist regime treated as taboos: the 1947 coming to power of the Communists and the fate of the other parties, the situation of the Jews, and Hungarian emigration after 1945.

Besides questions directly concerning Hungarians, the contributors of Beszélő reflected on the social, political, and economic processes of the neighboring countries, particularly Romania and Czechoslovakia. The Polish changes preceding the 1956 revolution by a few months, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the military coup in Poland in 1981 also played an important role in the analyses.

4.1 Revolution, retribution, and capitulation

The dissident intellectuals who contributed to samizdat publications demanded democratic freedoms, which was without a doubt going against the mainstream. What must be seen is that most intellectuals of the Kádár era broke with the independent, critical, and democratic tradition of intellectuals. The opposition referred to the “Bibó forgetting” phenomenon, which also mean that the opposition discarded the 1956 demands for democracy and independence.

In the beginning, the opposition gave up its illusions upon the shock of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, although this was true mainly to the younger generations. As years passed by, the revolution of 1956 became an increasingly important starting point in the historical memory of the opposition. Fifty-sixers played a large role in this, constantly reminding the younger generation that 1956 should have already crushed their illusions about the system. Miklós Haraszti expressed it in the following way: “Since ideals do not, but only tanks matter, everyone seeks his or her own recipe for getting on in life. Mine could only be a private recipe: we treat spinelessness with

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112 Csurka, “Bibó-felejtés.”
113 Fifty-sixers included István Eörsi, György Krassó, György Litván, Miklós Szabó, Miklós Vásárhelyi, and others.
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reading forbidden literature.” While the Communist regime referred to 1956 as a counterrevolution incited by imperialists against “people’s democracy,” the opposition talked about a revolution that was the result of social unity and that demanded democratic changes and political rights.

What was the 1956 revolution in reality? Was it a revolution, national uprising, counterrevolution, war of independence, a crushed rebellion? The demand for pluralist democracy? Or did it demand independent, self-governed, democratic socialism instead of state socialism? The opposition offered several alternative interpretations. One of these claimed that the revolution in 1956 in Hungary was the first loud outcry of the people of Eastern Europe. It was a radical expression of demands that, as Sándor Szilágyi wrote, has not been heard in any other countries of the region ever since. “It was the 1956 revolution that expressed the squelched will of the peoples of Eastern Europe, living under Soviet occupation and in Communist regimes for 1. national independence, 2. multi-party system, 3. representation of the workers’ interest (through workers’ councils), and 4. freedoms of speech, assembly, religion, and press.”

According to another interpretation, 1956 was a spontaneous cooperation of the workers. Thus, it was not possible to talk about 1956 as the overthrowing of the power of the people. One of the workers’ leaders of 1956, Sándor Rácz expressed this the following way:

What I believe is the greatest shame is that the regime did not aim at increasing and deepening the self-awareness of the workers after 1948, but ruined workers’ unity, on which the power of the workers should have been developed, by the institution of the informers’ system. In 1956, the deceived workers clearly realized this and supported and defended the revolution as long as they could. They did so, because they understood that it was possible to build a society that was free of exploitation in Hungary. I consider as my obligation to fulfill their commitments the most important political-historical deed in the history of the Hungarian workers’ movement.

115 Szilágyi, “Legyünk az emberi jogok őskeresztényei” 696.
The third possible interpretation of the revolution is also closely linked to the role the intelligentsia played after 1956. *Beszélő* did not only claim that intellectuals played a decisive role in the revolution but also that this role influenced their post-revolution behavior. In his ironic introduction, János Kis, a leading figure of the democratic opposition, wrote:

It is said that nothing is happening in Hungary. The people are happy that it is left alone and do not have to deal with politics, can built their houses in their free time, raise the poultry, and bungle. The intellectuals shut themselves off into the ivory tower of culture, and leave politics to politicians. The churches collaborate with the state. Old-fashioned reactionaries and civil democrats died out and the revisionists of the Communist movement could never rebound again after their defeat in 1956.\footnote{Kis, “Lapunk elé,” 11.}

Among other things, *Beszélő* wanted to disprove this. They wanted to prove that dissidents are present in national politics again. They follow and criticize the steps taken by those in power, and continue in the democratic tradition that appeared to be lost. This led to surprising victories: by the early 1980s not even the country’s leadership denied the existence of the democratic opposition. János Kárás, the general secretary of MSZMP, speaking at a meeting of party activists in 1985 described the situation in the following way:

As for intellectuals, most of them have a positive attitude and support our socialist goals. A small minority, perhaps following fashionable trends, has a tendency for effusiveness and only see the negative side of everything.\footnote{Kádár, *A békéért, népünk boldogulásáért*, 5.}

For a long while after 1956, politics was characterized by the absence of opposition, and the silence of intellectuals. That is why it was a novelty that at the end of the 1970s the democratic opposition got organized. The *Beszélő* circle sensed that after 1956 the relationship of the leadership and the opposition changed fundamentally. The communist leadership redefined its politics: It left space for various “progressive ideas,” and wanted to pre-
serve the monopoly of Marxism by persuasion and not by coercion. This was Kádár’s “Hungarian way.” The economic boom that followed the repression after 1956 made a certain kind of compromise between the regime and the intelligentsia possible. In exchange for the unquestionability of its political monopoly, the party made allowances to culture, consumption, social habits in everyday life. The leaders of the regime saw this as their own success.

The Kádárist compromise, or better to say, social capitulation, was the fundamental point of reference for the democratic opposition. This capitulation was often presented as a deal which was made after the 1956 revolution, a symbolic agreement between Hungarian society and the leading political elite. It was interpreted differently in various samizdat publications, yet the authors agreed that the revolution must not be forgotten. For if society forgets 1956, that will be the greatest victory of the regime over the contemporary and future opposition forces. To prevent the revolution falling to oblivion, the editors of Beszélő made it a policy to mention 1956 in each issue. At the 1985 Monor meeting of dissidents, István Csurka described the situation that was the consequence of the “deal” in the following terms:

Hungarian society today is the result of a bad, one-sided, opportunistic, yet also efficient and useful compromise. This forced compromise was made after the crushed revolution and war of independence. We were forced into it but the deal was not entirely useless or ineffective. The nation also gained with it. The country gained the “happiest barrack” image as a result of the compromise. For sure, life in the 1960s and 1970s became more human and bearable. [. . .] The happy barrack life went on above a huge barrel covered by a thick lid to hide its rotting contents. After November 4, 1956, blood, heroic death, workers’ council, the beauties of the revolution, the ecstasy of one week’s freedom, and self-consciousness were thrown into the barrel. Later the thousands who were hanged, and the beatings and humiliation of the imprisoned were also thrown into the barrel only to be covered by the lid of forgetting. The main condition of the deal was to forget and be silent. “Who is not against us is with us,” said János Kádár. But it was only possible not be against them if one was able to forget.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{119} Csurka, “Új magyar önáptés,” 28.
According to the narrative of the democratic opposition, the decade after the revolution passed by the silence of the Hungarian intelligentsia. This was the consequence of the crushing of the revolution and the imprisonment of the activist intellectuals. Those who had resisted emigrated, became mute, or served those in power to secure a livelihood. In the 1980s, the old communist and revolutionary intelligentsia no longer existed. The leaders of the opposition, moved closer to the strategic aim of liberal democracy step by step through the chosen policy of radical reforms. They all agreed that most people were disillusioned by the regime, but some served the power elite while others tried to find a way out of the general economic and political crisis. As Konrád put it, the vacuum of “block nationalism” sucked in most of the official and opposition intellectuals alike in both the East and the West.

Thus, the opposition’s view of the compromise of the 1960s was fundamentally different from the official interpretation. As the poet György Petri said—and most of the opposition agreed with him—it was not possible to speak, in the given circumstances, about a compromise:

Since the social compromise no longer exists, it is time to call attention to the fact that it never existed. What we called a compromise—and many people called it so—was indeed just common resignation. A compromise necessitates partners of comparable standing. The post-retribution society in the 1960s was only able to acknowledge things rather than to agree to them.

Petri thought that opposition intellectuals took part in public life in the 1960s not because they were persuaded that Kádárism was right, but because they were willing to silence their own conscience for certain concessions.

Another writer, István Eörsi believed that the compromise did exist, but it was based on the fear of the events of the period before 1956 rather than on the success of Kádárist politics.

Those whose fate was to be silenced or persecuted during the Rákosi era did not fare any better. Fear was written in their bones and now

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120 Faragó, *Nyugati liberális szemmel*.
121 Konrád, “A tömbrendszer halálos dramaturgiája,” 225.
122 Petri, “Az unalmas válság,” 112.
they serve in silence and with resignation those whom they despise. “It can only get worse”, they say with a whisk when they meet the desire for change. The mute compromise that the Kádárist state made with its citizens is based on the memory of Rákosi, Soviet intervention, and the gallows.123

Both opposition writers, Eörsi and Petri, agreed that intellectuals subsided into silence in the 1960s. They disagreed on whether this was the outcome of the regime’s concessions, or it was based on the fear of the Rákosi regime. Interestingly, while the official propaganda and the democratic opposition agreed that the 1960s was characterized by the lack of open opposition, the communist leadership differed on this point privately. János Kádár’s speech at the MSZMP Politburo in 1982 testifies to this:

[...] many in this room referred to the fact that opposition has constantly existed since 1956. That is true. And the problem with it was that we tried to fight it in our own way. I am not sure how the hell to say this, but in the political active part of society the opposition was in majority around December 1956. I think I can say it this way. And how did it become a minority? Think of what methods we used and how we use them at the time. That leaves us with some experience for today. [...] But if you remember, we persecuted the big fish: those who murdered an individual or masses of people. We did not care what people said on trams or anywhere else.124

According to Kádár, the opposition was not mute after 1956. The leadership did not use total retaliation against some of them. No wonder that the democratic opposition found such an understanding of the post-revolutionary consolidation entirely false. Using documents available at the time, historian János Rainer M. published an article in Beszélő, in which he counted the number of people who fell victim to the retribution and see who these people were. His findings contradict the concept of limited retribution. In reality retribution was rather broad, it targeted certain large social groups: young

and middle-aged workers, and the intellectuals who supported them. Rainer’s estimates showed that 350–400 people were executed in Hungary between December 1956 and the end of 1961; about 90 percent, for their participation in the revolution. He added, “Sixteen thousand people were imprisoned, several hundred executed, and tens of thousands were sanctioned in other ways after the government promised impunity for participants.”

The interpretation of retaliations was closely linked to the criminal trials of the post-revolutionary period. The opposition questioned the regime’s claim about “fair retributions” where only the “traitors” of the people were called to account. Post-revolutionary retribution did not initiate show trials, a known practice of the Rákosi era, but the free interpretation and constructive classification of facts continued. The process of retributions was most likely started by the political leaders because they had no other means to break social opposition. The desire for revenge of the pre-revolutionary old party apparatus that came to power again made this process especially brutal.

The opposition also called into question the claim of the representatives of power that even those who committed major crimes were given the opportunity for a fair trial and to defend themselves and that the people were adequately informed after trials. This was simply untrue. For example, the people did not get fair information about the execution of the former Prime Minister, Imre Nagy, after the events. The leaders of MSZMP said nothing about when and where Imre Nagy was arrested, when and where interrogations took place, who the prosecutor and the members of the court were. “They did not list the names of the witnesses. The picture they gave of the proceeding, the evidence, and the defense strategy of the defendants was confusing and incomprehensible. Twenty-five years passed since then, yet the outlets of power have added nothing to the fragment and false information published in 1958.”

According to one of the most important self-justificatory narratives of the Kádár regime, the regime broke with the political practice of Stalinism. The editors of samizdat publications saw it differently. They thought that there was a perceivable continuity between the Stalinist dictatorship of Rákosi and the Kádár regime. They found the proof in the fact that the political prison-

125 Rainer, “Adatok,” 656.
ers of the Rákosi era were not rehabilitated as late as the 1960s: “The present political leadership has claimed since 1956, that it broke with the sins of the past. However, it did not compensate the victims of those sins (apart from a few rehabilitations) or the cruelly punished opponents of that regime in any way. What is more, the present regime only continued punishing them.”

The other manifestation of political continuity was the eagerness with which the Kádár regime used the skills and the desire of the police and judicial cadres for revenge in order to solidify its own power. What set the democratic opposition apart from the official policy makers was that they disclosed this continuity and turned against it. This characterized the dissidents as well.

As an opposition historian pointed out, the authors of Bibó Festschrift represented diverging points of view. “What is the uniting point then? It is that they do not accept the continuity with Stalinism and that they are committed to a future that should not incorporate this historical phenomenon.”

The opposition realized that while there were continuities with the Rákosi era, the attitude of society has changed: it became more fatigued, more resigned, and more opportunistic. It was deprived of its history; things were decided without them and above their heads. István Csurka wrote, “Since November 4, 1956, Hungarians do not live their own history. This did not happen after defeats in previous wars. It happened in the soul of the people.”

The hope that prevailed after 1945 was lost for good after 1956. The possibility of liberty disappeared because none of the superpowers were interested in changing the geographic status quo of the Cold War. In 1956, the United States did not risk a third World War to liberate Hungary. Consequently, Soviet power were cemented in Central Europe for decades. As the dissidents often recalled, people in the region lost their right to shape their own history.

This greatly differed from the famous metaphor of Gyula Illyés, the concept of a “historical lee.” The writer who interpreted the balancing politics of the 17th century Prince of Transylvania, Gábor Bethlen, as a positive example, used that metaphor to express that the nation no longer required martyrs for its survival but rather the everyday work and intelligent acts of the people. For life is more important than liberty. A scholar interpreted the

130 Csurka, “Új magyar önépítés,” 29.
standpoint of Illyés as follows: “We betrayed the heroes, not as part of the nation’s original sin but as a consequence of foreign oppression. To fight this, the 1960s require not the kind of Titusz Dugovics [a mythical Hungarian soldier who made a heroic act of self-sacrifice—A. B.] but the construction workers of the country.”

In connection with 1956, Beszélő mentioned a lot of personalities who were forgotten or disapproved by the regime and people in the younger generation could not hear about. To understand the role fifty-sixers played, interviews were made with the survivors. In case of those who had died or were executed, personal recollections of others, speeches, and court reports were used to remember them. István Bibó was discussed extensively, who was called the only remaining representative of the dissident tradition in Hungary. “In the 1970s there was a Bibó renaissance: his writings were duplicated, published as samizdat literature and served as starting point for debate. The duplicates reached even those whom other critical thoughts rarely penetrated.” The rediscovery of Bibó was inspired, beyond that he was an outstanding democratic thinker, by the fact that he was the only person among the above-mentioned who had no communist past. “István Bibó was not required by the Hungarian consolidation because in his most important essays he pointed out the ambiguous nature of the [Austro-Hungarian] Compromise of 1867 with unambiguous accuracy.”

The Compromise of 1867 was that act of Ferenc Deák which the Kádár system always wanted to compare itself. But after the Festschrift, the MSZMP quickly reappraised the role of Bibó. This was followed by the posthumous publication of his writings by official state publishers.

It had the effect of a great revelation when Beszélő published the minutes of the three meetings of the Workers’ Council of Greater Budapest. It was founded ten days after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, on November 14, 1956, and the Worker’s Council operated until December 9 when its offices were closed, and their leaders arrested. No minutes were made during these meetings; but the possibility that the archives of the Ministry of Interior

131 Vasy, Hol zsinórás van, 68.
132 Besides Imre Nagy one needs to mention the name of Sándor Bali, the leader of the Workers’ Council of Greater Budapest, as well as other key figures such as Géza Losonczy, Miklós Gimes, Pál Maléter, József Szilágyi, and Miklós Vásárhelyi.
have copies of the minutes that were recorded secretly through informers cannot be refuted. The minutes published by Beszélő were put together from the notes jotted down by the participants of those meetings. The message of all this to the late readers was that there were different possible forms of social opposition during the autumn of 1956.

4.2 Anniversary celebrations

Anniversary celebrations symbolically bring back the forbidden event to the world of normality. Acts of remembrance lose their political edge when those become routine-like anniversary celebrations. Thus, collective remembrance can be interpreted as the self-healing or self-defense of a wounded society. The repeated rites of remembrance have the potential to turn forbidden, unusual, or even abnormal events and forms of behavior normal, processable, and acceptable. However, this happens only if the power holders do not want to force their own interpretation of history on society.

The independent historical memory of the democratic opposition and its reconstruction must be distinguished from the academic interpretation of the post-communist era. These works analyzed the position of the past opposition, and its place in the politics of memory. In this book, I analyze the former question but not its historiography. Early documents about anniversary celebrations show that the behavior of the state and the opposition sharply diverged. The opposition tried to canonize what the state was forbidding. Samizdat journals also diverged to some degree: reports about events that can be regarded as anniversary celebrations mostly appeared in Demokrata, sometimes in Hírmondó, and only sparsely in Beszélő. Those events meant to serve remembrance, or rather non-forgetting, on behalf of civil society.

Demokrata and Hírmondó found anniversary celebrations particularly important. In Hungary, these were commemorative occasions; in Poland, Mayday had a similar function, and workers demanded changes when they celebrated Labor Day. Remembering the commemorative events was also a frequent phenomenon in Hungary, as several opposition reports pointed it

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out. Examples are the reports of *Hírmondó* about the 1972–1974 anniversary celebrations of the 1848 revolution on March 15, and those of *Beszélő* about the celebrations of the 1956 in private homes. These made a clear distinction between official and private red-letter days, emphasizing their opposition. The national holidays of the regime were linked to the 1917 Soviet revolution and the Soviet occupation (“liberation”) of Hungary on April 4, 1945. The opposition celebrated the beginnings of two Hungarian revolutions: the one that started on March 15, 1848, and the other, which started on October 23, 1956.

*Beszélő* had a special column devoted to 1956. These were mainly obituaries and various documents. As the opposition writers noted on the 25th anniversary of the revolution, there have always been people who remembered the anniversary of the revolution.

On the first anniversary, a few college students walked through the streets that protesters took the year before. As a punishment they were denied the opportunity to study forever. Commemorations had to be held in private homes. They became intimate personal affairs. They also testify about the fact that some dozen or thousand people did not forget the revolution, gathered with their friends and fellow prisoners, or lit a candle for their dead, the unknown Hungarian rebels and the Russian privates who died. The police were fearful of those October days. On the night of October 21–22, 1957, they arrested five hundred people as a precaution. Similar arrests were made for many years to come even if on a smaller scale.\(^{137}\)

Police action was more visible in 1981 than in the previous years.

For months, the official propaganda whispered that the Party was preparing for a more realistic evaluation of the sad events and wanted to raise the taboo concerning 1956. Then as an anticlimax there was even more intense press propaganda than before, using well-known slogans about the counterrevolution of factory-owners and landowners and the mistakes made by the Rákosi and Gerő leadership. Still, the twenty-fifth

\(^{137}\) Kőszeg, “Egy ícipicit igazítottak a világon,” 96.
In the years of the Kádár regime, the representative body of the Hungarian Writers’ Association met once in every five years. These meetings always had tense moments when the representatives of the power elite and the writers did not agree. But only in 1986 did disagreements end up in open confrontation. No confrontation happened during the 1981 general assembly despite it taking place on December 12 and 13. The second day was memorable because military government was introduced in Poland on that day. Opposition writer György Dalos commented on this in the following way:

> We do not note it to blame anyone, but the assembled Hungarian writers did not feel it necessary to express their concern over the fate of their Polish colleagues. They already knew what their Polish colleagues are only to learn now. They do not raise their voice and do not sacrifice the attainable for their principles. They politely clap when György Aczél tells them that he prefers those who write literature to those who write their names on petitions.\(^{139}\)

The democratic opposition organized a two-day conference at a private home in Budapest on December 5–6, 1986, on the 30th anniversary of 1956. The 70 participants of the conference made the first objective attempt to recall the events of the revolution. The authors, participants of the revolution, and young intellectuals tried to view events from the distance of history and treated it as a subject of scientific research. Participants also called their personal memories and experience to their aid to supplement their analysis of the unclear issues concerning the revolution. The debate was based on studies that had been given to the participants earlier.\(^{140}\) Later, a shortened version of the minutes of the debate was published.\(^{141}\)

The year 1986 was a turning point in historical memory, for after the 30th anniversary became a topic of discussion in the broader public. The debates

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\(^{138}\) Kőszeg, “Egy ícipicit igazítottak a világon,” 97.

\(^{139}\) Dalos, “Írók egymás közt,” 114.

\(^{140}\) Papers were written by Ferenc Donáth, János Kis, Imre Mécs, Jenő Széll, and Miklós Vásárhelyi.

\(^{141}\) Decsy, *A forradalom előzményei, alakulása és utóélete*.
at the opposition conference in 1986 still held the possibility for both the continuation of and breaking with the past. According to the evaluation of János Kis, published in 1987, the anniversary of 1956–1957 was not yet history:

Hungarian society could not come to terms with its total defeat. Similarly, those in power could not shake off the weight of victory. The economic and political crisis that has grown deeper and deeper in the 1980s is the crisis of the regime that has been restored thirty years ago. The restoration sent the demands of the revolution—neutrality, multi-party system, and economic self-governance—into exile. [..] The opportunities of Hungarian society remained at the level where they were in 1947, which made it impossible to catch up with the West.142

Anniversary celebrations right before the transition treated the revolution as part of the history of recent past. The revolution was cemented as part of the “unfinished” past in 1988–1989, when the younger generation that had no direct memory of the revolution entered the political scene. The message of the opposition was clear: the political and economic crisis may end only if society gets rid of the regime that restored after crushing the revolution of 1956. The crisis regards not isolated spheres: it is the crisis of the system. Approximately a year later, when the Committee on Historical Justice (Történelmi Igazságtétel Bizottsága, TIB) was founded in June 1988, the new political actors went beyond mere the commemoration of events. The leaders of TIB made it clear that they found it important to objectively assess the whole post-1945 era, the particularly the revolution.143 This meant the radical acceleration of events. This did not mean that the problem of historical justice was forced into the background. Rather the function of this issue changed. The scholarly interest to the past gave way to the utilization of 1956 for political ends. Demokrata paid special attention to the reports about and remembering the historical forgeries of the power elite when it published its thematic issue about the revolution in June 1988.

142 Kis, “Vég és kezdet,” 617.
Chapter III

What appeared to be a distant ideal for the leaders of the democratic opposition at the end of 1986 became reality. The Roundtable negotiations between the outgoing communist elite and the democratic opposition took place in 1989, a new constitution was ratified, and the democratic republic declared. In that year, many of the participants saw a direct link between 1956 and 1989, albeit this was mainly a theoretical construction. As the political sociologist Bill Lomax noted, revolutions start when ordinary people enter the public arena, and thus actively shape historical events. “However, after the revolution it is the political elite and intellectuals who harness the fruits of victory. [...] the history of revolutions is not written by the masses who started them, but by their intellectual advocates, or the political leadership, that is, those with whom revolutions are identified with in the end.”144 They create the linguistic, conceptual, and visual framework of remembrance, and they canonize the history of events.

4.3 Central Europe rediscovered

Underground publications of the opposition often compared the three violent turning points of the history of Soviet satellite states: The events of 1956 in Hungary, 1968 in Czechoslovakia, and 1981 in Poland. At the least they discussed what results these three bottom-up processes brought. According to Beszélő, the process of recognition of 1956 took a long time, because Central European intellectuals originally defined it as a national uprising and only in 1981 and in the wake of events in Poland was it re-evaluated as a revolution. As one of the editors, Ferenc Kőszeg formulated:

Between the intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the appearance of the democratic oppositions, the Marxist opposition figures saw 1956 as a national uprising at best. They did not think it was a social revolution and they believed that, as opposed to the Prague Spring, the Hungarian uprising did not bring a desire for “socialism with human face” any closer. The weakening of the Marxist socialist utopia, the discovery of ideas about a self-limiting revolution, and the spreading of the hope from Po-

land were all necessary for opposition thinkers to see 1956 as a revolution. [...] The twenty-fifth anniversary represented this turn.\textsuperscript{145}

István Eörsi, who was imprisoned for years after 1956, went further and reasoned that it was only the Hungarian national uprising in 1956 that fought the Communist regime in the ideological dimension. Instead of state socialism, Hungarian revolutionaries demanded socialism with representative democracy, workers’ councils, and the making of state property into public property. He thought that ideals were no longer central in the following two confrontations. Naturally, this can be questioned as the specter of democratic socialism was still alive during the Prague Spring in 1968, whereas the idea of a democratic, Christian-socialist republic appeared in Poland in 1981.\textsuperscript{146} Communists in power promised material gains in Hungary in exchange for consolidation, but they could not do the same in Czechoslovakia and Poland. As Eörsi stated:

For the existing power structures, only attainable or credibly promised goods and allotments served as legitimization. This turn across Europe was brought not by 1956, but the beautiful and doomed year of 1968. It was then that it became clear that there is no Prague Spring or student movements in Paris or West Berlin that could transform the “already existing socialism” into ideal socialism or abolish the adversities of capitalism. In the West, student movements as well as workers’ movements suffered a general defeat when workers abandoned their parties. It was this defeat that the Polish workers repeated on the Eastern part of the continent in different historical and organizational settings in December 1981, when their head was chopped off by Jaruzelski who loudly pronounced that “I am the lesser of two evils.”\textsuperscript{147}

István Csurka, who could still legally publish as a writer but was getting closer to the populist opposition circles, described 1956 as a singular event. According to him, “it is the national consequences of the revolution

\textsuperscript{145} Kőszeg, “Egy icipicit igazítottak a világon,” 97.
\textsuperscript{146} Cf. Garton Ash, \textit{The Uses of Adversity}; Mitrovits, \textit{A remény bónapjai}; Mlynar, \textit{A Prágai Tavasz}; Stanisz-kis, \textit{Poland’s Self-Limiting Revolution}.
\textsuperscript{147} Eörsi, “A másság ünnepén,” 530.
that makes all the difference. Until today this has been the first and largest of explosions. This explosion by nature could not be self-limiting. What followed in Czechoslovakia and Poland were already self-limiting events.” Csurka’s choice of words—“self-limiting revolution”—is interesting not only because it refers to the wording of István Bibó, and the sociologist and Solidarity activist Jadwiga Staniszkis, but also because a few years later the Hungarian transition was described in the same terms, which then referred to the rules of the Roundtable talks and the equality of the participants.

János Kis also called attention to the differences of political consolidations after the three crises in Central Europe. He recognized that, in Poland, the powerholders used different methods than others had during earlier restoration. “In Hungary after November 1956 and in Czechoslovakia after August 1968, the Soviet-type political regimes were restored in their entirety. […] As its revolution, the counterrevolution in Poland also differs from earlier examples. […] Three years after December 1981, this process is far from being completed and it is unlikely that it will ever be.” The Polish restoration was an unfinished process because the Polish leadership had no more power to carry out completely. Contributors of Beszélő opined that the Hungarian communist system had only the coercive capacity to carry out restoration, while it lacked legitimacy; in contrast, the Polish leadership had neither enough capacity, nor legitimacy. This remained so up until the very end of the 1980s.

As for the national issue the dissidents agreed that many political problems were rooted in the fact that the borders of the nation and the state were different, albeit they never wished to establish homogeneous nation-states. Beyond that, the opposition was divided over two contradictory interpretations of the situation. This disagreement was the consequence of the different social traditions that resurfaced as the populist and urban views. In later samizdat issues, the deepening crisis and the maturing of the democratic opposition resulted in a more clearly defined division between the populist and urban groups. According to historian Miklós Szabó, “the main

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149 Staniszkis, Poland’s Self-Limiting Revolution.
150 Bozóki et al. (1999–2000).
152 Bozóki, “The Illusion of Inclusion.”
goal of the populist side was to achieve the appearance of ‘popular democratic nationalism’ as the official policy. [. . .] Contrary to this, the urban position held that if its representatives joined the official anti-nationalism [. . .] they could perhaps carefully hide a few thoughts in their articles about the ideals of the smitten revolution. The populist side did not see this possible.”

On the pages of *Beszélő*, the representatives of the urban, liberal view most often voiced their concern over the lack of legal rights for Hungarians outside Hungary. As opposed to this, the followers of the populist position painted a dramatic picture of “national extinction.” While the former believed that national question was primarily a political issue, the latter built their reasoning on the idea of a cultural nation. Miklós Duray, member of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, wrote about this in the following terms: “When it comes to the question of national minorities, we Hungarians are most interested in the fate of the Hungarians who found themselves outside the borders when historical Hungary was cut to pieces. It plays a decisive role in the relationship of the Hungarian and neighboring nations, that is, the politics of Central Europe.”

Csurka, on the other hand, argued that “there are some who gloat over this process [i.e., the decline of the Hungarian nation—A. B.], whose actions only serve this deadly process. However, to be able to continue with the process of ethnic annihilation, they hide their gloating and blame nationalism on those who dare to raise their voice about national annihilation.”

All contributors agreed that the nation was struggling with problems that was the consequence of the new borders instituted by the Trianon peace treaty. They thought that Hungarians outside our borders lived deprived of their legal rights. Populists argued that the cause behind legal deprivation was the cultural and moral decline of Hungarians in Hungary, which prevented them from successfully lobbying for Hungarian minorities. The followers of the Westernizing tradition attributed legal deprivation to the repressive nature of political regimes. State socialism did not ensure freedom of speech, which could have been the fundamental means of representing and furthering the cultural and legal interest of minorities. At the same time, they pointed out that dictatorships in the region that lacked legiti-

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macy attempted to create it by using nationalist propaganda and victimizing Hungarians. The Kádárist leadership was also held responsible for the situation because it did not advance the interests of Hungarian minorities. Thus, while the populist view saw the Hungarian issue as cultural, for the liberals it was a primarily political and legal problem.

The problems concerning Hungarian minorities were framed within the issue of Central Europe as well. Many asked the question whether Central Europe existed but Beszélő’s answer was an unequivocal yes. Not on the level of the states but on the level of the society and personal relations, and as a historical formation. For the opposition, Central Europe was, first and foremost, a cultural bloc. As an opposition critic, Sándor Radnóti wrote,

In the Eastern bloc Central Europe stands for the desire to belong to the West and for anti-Soviet feeling. The division of Europe—if we disregard the bleeding wound of Berlin—is best signified by the differences between Vienna and Budapest or between Vienna and Prague. We cannot pretend that this difference does not exist; it would be self-deception on our part, and from the West, it would be offending tact. If any virtual unity—Central Europe is one—serves the purpose of covering these differences in the name of a beautiful dream, then understanding will remain negligent and illusionary.\(^{156}\)

However, Central Europe came to be artificially sustained as a political-military unity. It was an area ruled by Socialist regimes and the Warsaw Pact. According to Konrád, “our life and thinking were depressively defined by the East-West schizophrenia. The ruling social-political reality of today is no longer that of the nation state but of bloc states. It is not social reality that determines political reality but on the reverse.”\(^{157}\) Members of the democratic opposition agreed in that Central Europe was not created in Yalta. It had existed before that, and it is defined by common historical experience. However, socialism isolated it by forcing Socialism on it and inserted it into the bipolar world order as counterweight to “the West.” This definition was finally accepted by the people of Central Europe because it

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\(^{157}\) Konrád, “A tömbrendszer halálos dramaturgiája,” 123.
corresponded to their experience. However, instead of the official propaganda about an ideal social order, they saw the region as being defined by the lack of freedom. The fact that Europe was torn into two pieces and its Eastern part isolated were accepted relatively easily by Western Europe. East to the Iron Curtain, Europe ended. The authors of the samizdat journals believed that the division was not only the fault of socialist regimes but also of Western European states that renounced the people living in the other part of the continent.

4.4 The taboos fall: The situation of minorities

The Rákosi regime decided to make the issue of minorities a taboo. Earlier, Hungarians living outside the borders were an unavoidable issue for every Hungarian government after 1918. The Stalinist regime could ignore this subject for two reasons. First, communism was an international ideology that did not think in terms of nations but social classes. This suggested that the common goals of the international proletariat were more important than the Hungarian national interest. The second reason was linked to the anti-fascism advocated by the regime. Since communists contrasted themselves with fascism, the revisionist goals of the Horthy era, which was defined in unequivocally fascist terms, fell outside the possible courses of action in foreign affairs. Every policy that fought for the rights of Hungarian minorities or listed their grievances carried the danger of appearing similar to the interwar foreign policy that led to the tragedy of Hungary in World War II. Thus, up until the end of the 1950s, one cannot speak of independent Hungarian foreign policy.

This only changed somewhat in the 1960s, when the communist leadership rediscovered the minority question. Based on the so-called ideology of “dual attachment,” they argued that national minorities have cultural ties with their mother nation, but as citizens of another state they are required to keep themselves to the legal order of that state. The principle of non-intervention prevented the regime from making public attempts in order to improve the situation of ethnic minorities abroad, but behind closed doors negotiations were going on with the Czechoslovak and Romanian leadership concerning culture and education. Nonetheless, in order to preserve the unity of the bloc, Hungarian leaders never made public statements about the
situation of Hungarian minorities or the discriminatory measures brought against them.

The members of the democratic opposition found this approach unacceptable. As early as the first two issues of Beszélő, a report about the history of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia after 1945 was published. According to it, Hungarians in Czechoslovakia were entirely deprived of their rights in 1945–1948, and the Stalinist takeover did not bring any improvement in 1948 either. Deportation, forced relocation, and the confiscation of property characterized the late 1940s. The period after 1965 was characterized by the strengthening of nationalism at the expense of minorities.158 The advocates of the interests of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia159 often expressed their views in Beszélő, which also published their autobiographic novels and an interview with Miklós Duray. In connection with this, István Eörsi bitterly noted that

only from these books did I learn about the fact that after 1945, the Czechoslovak state and its constitution was built on racist foundations. It declared its intention to create a Slavic state and built it on the deprived rights of non-Slavic inhabitants. I am appalled to learn that Hungarian peasants had not been allowed to take part in the land reform and 97 percent of Hungarians had no voting rights, social security insurance or pension. I was even more surprised at reading that the Communist leaders were openly and proudly racist.160

Besides the case of Czechoslovakia, the Hungarian minority in Romania received the greatest publicity in the opposition press. An analysis of the situation of Hungarian intellectuals in Romania proved that, since 1966, the role of minority intellectuals in social and cultural life decreased both in comparison to the ratio of Hungarians within Romania and to the number of minority intellectuals in Romania. “The number of people who belonged to the minorities and had a university or college degree decreased further and this process has hit the Hungarian minority especially hard.”161 Gáspár

159 Miklós Duray and Kálmán Janics.
Miklós Tamás accused the Kádár regime with that the guided and censored Hungarian public sphere was silent especially with respect to Romania. “They describe the famine there with cautious irony, they wink meaninglessly in the distance as they discuss Hungarian literature in Romania, but both poverty and the oppression of Hungarians go unmentioned. [. . .] The most important things—solidarity, compassion, and indignation—are not voiced at all.”162

According to the poet Sándor Csoóri, a leader of the populist intellectuals, Trianon was the cause of the minority neurosis and the divided conscience of and the conflict between the peoples of Central Europe. Yet Csoóri saw the post-1956 changes in Hungary in a positive light. He thought that “finally we are believed” in international politics as consequence of both the revolution and the economic reforms that happened after the revolution. Therefore, he argued, it was time for Hungarian politicians and intellectuals to stand up for the rights of Hungarians outside Hungary.163

Somewhat related to the minority issue, but in a domestic terrain, Beszélő also discussed another taboo of the Kádár regime—the situation of the Jews in Hungary. According to Marxist ideology, capitalism is the result of harmful processes whether they are cultural, religious, or patriotic. Thus, Marx believed that the victory of socialism would end anti-Semitism and the Jewish problem as well. From this respect, Marxism did not break with the assimilationist paradigm of the nationalist movements of the 19th century, which optimistically claimed that the Jewish population would melt into the greater society after their equal rights are granted. Despite this theoretical position, neither the Jews nor anti-Semitism disappeared, which created some tension between the theoretical principles and their realization in practice. The Kádár regime “resolved” this tension by denying the existence of the problem. It claimed that the “counterrevolution” of 1956 allowed for numerous expressions of anti-Semitism, but the consolidation that followed did away with these anti-Jewish tendencies. Although the state accepted the existence of the Israeliite church and under strict limits allowed its operation, it did not acknowledge the possibility of the existence of a religious

162 Tamás, “Éhség és terror Romániában,” 147.
Jewish identity and unequivocally denied the presence of anti-Semitism in Hungary. This taboo was refuted by Beszélő. On the one hand, they called attention to the Jewish participants of the revolution who got more severe punishment because their origin or identity.

It was the origin of Gábor Földes, the talented communist director of the theater in Győr, that caused his downfall. Even though famous colleagues spoke up for him and everyone knew that Földes did not encourage anyone to make public tribunals but tried to save the life of ÁVH agents who fired at crowds and many of whom were later lynched. The Presidential Council decided that it would not look good if of all those on death row it would be a Jew who was pardoned in Győr.\(^\text{164}\)

When the peace movement, SALOM, wrote an open letter to the national representatives of the Hungarian Israelites and demanded the redefinition of the relationship between Jews and Hungarians in 1984, Beszélő did not only publish the letter but also several reactions to it. The critical analysis that János Kis wrote about the letter claimed that

since the turn of the 1960s and 1970s [. . .] the number among Jewish youth who want to openly accept their Judaism, feel togetherness with the Jewish Diaspora of the world and Israel, and have the special Jewish traditions has increased. SALOM voices the claim of these young people when it breaks with the hundred years old principle of assimilation. Although we acknowledge the right of the individual to assimilation, we believe that the Jews of Hungary should not assimilate but integrate into the society of their homeland. That is, instead of doing away with all the differences between Jews and non-Jews, the aim is that Jews preserve their tradition, become a minority and find their place in Hungarian society that way.\(^\text{165}\)

According to Kis, this did not mean assimilation, at least not in the way that official propaganda claimed. This was different, because “Jews almost

\(^{164}\) Kőszeg, “Huszonöt év után,” 422.
\(^{165}\) Kis, “A Salom nyílt levele,” 58.
entirely live and behave like any Hungarians, its environment still singles them out. It is a vain attempt to try to assimilate. It only leads to a compulsion to prove minority complexes, and humiliating exposures.”

The members of the democratic opposition did not deny their urban roots, but they did not want to become the followers of the urban traditions of the 1930s. For they did not accept the application of the urban-populist divide, that was often used with anti-Semitic undertones, for the situation of the 1980s. The communist party from the position of power denied this dichotomy for itself, but it used it to manipulate the opposition into dividedness. Accepting this dichotomy would have only led to the emergence of internal cleavages, and to the disorganization of opposition forces.

4.5 Alternatives in economic policy

In the Kádár regime the question of Soviet alliance was a taboo, as well as everything that connected to it. One could not question the country’s position in the Warsaw Pact just as they could not question its membership in Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). At any rate, the issue of reforming the system of economic planning was officially recognized, which manifested primarily in the so-called “new mechanism” introduced in 1968. The next two decades saw the rise and fall of several reformer and anti-reformer factions, which also constantly fought each other within the communist party. While these debates and fights were naturally framed by the unchangeable principles of socialism, the relative flexibility of the system allowed the question of the relation between “plan” and “market” to be always on the political agenda.

Most of the Hungarian samizdat publications attentively followed the alternatives that were worked out in the area of economic policy. The history of the 1968 “new economic mechanism” was analyzed in numerous comprehensive studies already before the regime change. The beginning of economic reforms in Hungary should be dated to 1963 when Rezső Nyers, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Party, created an informal economic advisory body to start the reforms. His suggestions became the basis

166 Kis, “A Salom nyílt levele,” 59.
167 Cf. Berend, A magyar gazdasági reform útja; Lengyel, Végkifejlet; Ungvárszki, Gazdaságpoltikai ciklusok Magyarországon.
for the comprehensive reform package. Changes were necessary because by the mid-1960s it became clear that economic growth slowed in the Soviet bloc. This included the inadequacy of agricultural production, technological and scientific research and development, and the imbalance of payments. These phenomena were confusing because socialist propaganda claimed that CMEA countries would catch up with the level of economic and industrial development of the capitalist countries.168

Economic reforms were introduced in East Germany in 1963, in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in 1965, and in Hungary in 1968 as answers to the unfavorable economic tendencies that were contrary to official expectations. Hungarian reforms started in agriculture when small-scale private farms were allowed. However, after the democratization in Prague in 1968, repressive measures were made stricter and this did not favor the survival of Hungarian reforms. Although Kádár expressed his official commitment to reforms after the Soviet intervention, he had to make a U-turn in the early 1970s. This, however, was never admitted as official policy. The leadership talked about “corrective measures” and “temporary difficulties,” but these did not correspond to the size of the real crisis. By the early 1970s, “it became clear for Kádár that the reform policy of 1968 cannot be continued and that the leadership in Moscow demanded scapegoats.”169 Kádár realized the threatening nature of the situation, utilized the division in the politburo, and in the end only two reformists, Rezső Nyers and Jenő Fock had to resign, but he could stay in power.

Economic depression of the 1970s called a new reform generation into being. “As the emphasis was moved over to the secondary economy, it became clearer by the day that progress would sooner or later will clash with the biological limits of self-exploitation. It became obvious that for certain groups this was not the right direction: growing inequalities made their mark.”170 That is, in the face of official propaganda, which said that the country was continuously moving forward to “mature socialism” and that difficulties were temporary, the opposition claimed that the difficulties were rooted in the nature of the system. The Kádár regime tried to maintain living standards, at least, but the sources of growth—which were cheap Soviet raw

168 MSZMP, A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt VIII. Kongresszusának Jegyzőkönyve, 579.
169 Huszár, Kádár János politikai életrajza, 197.
170 Huszár, Kádár János politikai életrajza.
material and later Western credits—had dwindled by the end of the 1970s. The regime could only silence the dissatisfied population with further concessions. However, this would have ended in the abolishment of the regime. Yet, it is remarkable that the authors of samizdat journals had not committed themselves to the capitalist system until the late 1980s. Their articles suggested sympathy toward a kind of mixed system. They did not differ from the reform economists in this respect who, out of necessity as well as conviction, had been working on various combinations of plan and market. As capitalism was advocated openly by neither the economic reformers of the party nor the opposition-leaning economists, this area showed the smallest theoretical disagreements between the representatives of the two camps.

In the last decade of the Kádár regime, there was practically no economist who would have defended the orthodox planned economy, just as the opposition did not support free market capitalism for a long time. Matters of economic history and policy showed the least disagreement between the power holders and the opposition. The representatives of the regime emphasized continuous development, whereas the opposition thinkers underlined various crashes and political waves. The agreement in basic questions often meant overlap in membership as well as it was not uncommon that the same economists participated in the party state’s workshops who later visited opposition events.

### 4.6 The perceptions of normality

One of the main building blocks of the Kádár regime was the perception of normality, in which “normal” life equaled the opportunity for an apolitical existence. Thus, normality also equaled the lack of historical reflection. The official media of the time often used the deceiving strategy of normalization, painting unusual or “heroic” deeds in irrational colors.

The official propaganda often used the illusion of normality to prove the futility of resistance after 1956. The story of Tibor Pákh’s hunger strike exemplifies this well. In his case, political activism was claimed to be and treated as a form of mental illness.

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171 Kovács, “Reform Economics.”
Tibor Pákh, the 59-year-old lawyer, was imprisoned for twelve years after 1956 because he wrote political essays. His imprisonment was not longer, because he was declared to be “mentally unfit” for good in 1971 and the rest of his sentence was abolished after he received electroshock “treatment” and was put into insulin-induced coma on a regular basis. For Tibor Pákh went on hunger strike in prison to protest for the human rights of the imprisoned. [. . .] In October 1981, he protested when his passport was illegally revoked. It was then that he was taken to the National Mental Institute. He underwent forced treatment in the hospital: he was intravenously given drugs to modify his consciousness and was fed forcefully. At this point, this could no longer be kept secret, because 57 intellectuals and many international organizations spoke up for the inhuman and dangerous “treatment.” Finally, Tibor Pákh was released from the hospital, but he did not get his passport back.

The authorities treated Pákh’s protests as mental illnesses, that is, paranoia based on false political ideals and schizophrenia which resulted in an eating disorder. It did not occur to authorities that his life could be saved by providing remedy for the legal offenses that were committed against him and not only by “treatments” that endangered his life and destroyed his health. What is more, legal offenses continued, so Pákh went on hunger strike again in October 1982. As one samizdat journal reported, the procedure was the usual. “He was taken to a mental institution by force, drugged, tied down, and fed forcefully. It must have occurred to those who knew the antecedents or signed the petition in 1981 that the psychiatrist might be right. Or as it was posed in Beszélő, ‘Is it not too extreme to risk one’s life for a passport?’ Or another related question: ‘Was it reasonable and right to collect signatures and turn to the domestic and international public on behalf of Tibor Pákh?’”

To answer this question, a French professor Charles Durand arrived in Budapest in 1982 and spent a few days talking to Tibor Pákh on several occasions. He concluded that one was declared mentally unfit for truthful protest.

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172 Krassó, “Dr. Pákh Tibor elmebetegsége,” 480.
We, psychiatrists, have to fight the wrongful use of psychiatry. Tibor Pákh feels that he is being persecuted in Hungary. On the basis of my experience, I must tell that this is not a delusion but the reality. For three days, we were continuously followed by persons who, I assume, belong to the police.\footnote{Pákh, “Beszélgetés Pákh Tiborral,” 83.}

Those publishing in Égtájak között dealt most intensively with the hardship that fell upon the imprisoned. They called attention to the victims of “psycho-prisons” and forced psychiatric treatments. Besides putting pressure on the authorities, they found it important to keep in touch with the imprisoned: “It was impossible to tell when and who will be let in, or which of us could meet and make contact him. It was important to tell him that the outer world is paying attention to his case. While staying there, he was medicated without examination or diagnosis.”\footnote{Vox Humana Kör, “Rusai Lászlóról,” 36.}

Another sensitive issue for the system from the perspective of “normality” was the existence and activities of Hungarian emigrants abroad. Right after 1956, the official communist position classified the emigrants into two groups. Those who emigrated between 1945 and 1947 were described as “the fascist supporters of the Horthy regime;” and those who left in 1956–1957 were called “counterrevolutionaries.” Both groups were positioned as “extreme” vis-à-vis those (normal) Hungarians who stayed home. The attempt to identify the two groups in terms of ideology was perceptible in the beginning, too.

The opposition not only disapproved the position of the regime, but identified the controversies hidden in it. As István Orosz wrote,

Since 1945, more than one million Hungarians have left the country as a result of all those historical processes and social shocks that accompanied the violent imposition of socialism. Vast majority of them were forced into emigration because the socialist regime saw them as enemies. This attitude was accentuated by death threats, prison sentences, forbidding them to practice their profession, and by strict sentences in their absence. The official opinion about the emigrants did not change until the end of the 1960s: communist party propaganda described them as radical rightist, reactionary, fascist, and counterrevolutionary. Following dé-
tente in the 1970s and the Helsinki agreement, the universal condemnation of emigrants was replaced with a less extreme view, which divided emigrants into good and bad ones. The “good” emigrants were those who were ready to cooperate with official Hungarian organizations, and the “bad” ones were those who refused to do so.\footnote{Orosz, “Az idegenbe szakadt demokratikus hagyomány,” 501.}

Thus, the name of the enemy changed but not how it was treated. The criterion of normality remained loyalty to the system. Samizdat publications treated works written in emigration as an integral part of Hungarian culture. However, almost without exception, these works were all to be banned according to the communist power elite.

4.7 Historical memory

The closer Hungary was to the regime change, the stronger the voice of the democratic opposition was and the more untenable the historical vision of the official propaganda became. The opposition’s original intent, to mediate between society and the power holders, gradually gave way to anti-system politics. After 1987, the stability of the Kádár regime was no more and Hungarian politics entered the age of uncertainty.\footnote{Csizmadia, A magyar demokratikus ellenzék, 360.} Ex-communists, reformers and members of the opposition began to discuss the opportunities of economic reform and later the steps of a democratic transition together. While the one-party system \textit{de jure} existed until the new, constitution of autumn 1989, political pluralism \textit{de facto} emerged between 1987 and 1989.\footnote{Bozóki, Politikai pluralizmus Magyarországon.}

As I mentioned, the analysis of historical processes was focal to neither \textit{Beszélő} nor the other samizdat journals. Yet their political discourses did include numerous recurring historical motifs, which allow us to outline the most important elements of the independent memory of the democratic opposition. Virtually every reference in samizdat journals to the past concerned only the period after 1945. The dissidents almost completely refused the official interpretation of post-1945 history but paradoxically they seemed to agree that for them history started, in political terms, in 1945. The differences are summed up in Table 8.
Table 8. The historical narrative of the state socialist system and the democratic opposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>The official position of the regime</th>
<th>The position of the democratic opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>The flourishing of history came after 1945</td>
<td>There is no flourishing, but also focusing on the period after 1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The socialist system</td>
<td>Socialist system started in 1948, although the Rákosi era had errors and vicious mistakes</td>
<td>1948 meant the elimination of the opposition and democracy, followed by the cruel dictatorship of the Rákosi era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>It was a counterrevolution</td>
<td>It was a revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kádár regime</td>
<td>New slogan: “Who is not against us is with us”</td>
<td>There was no substantial break from the traditions of the Rákosi system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strict but just steps after 1956</td>
<td>Brutal retribution after 1956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compromise with society</td>
<td>No compromise, only capitulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Continuous economic development</td>
<td>No continuous development but the circulation of reforms, slowing downs, and crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>Problems are generated by the forces of the past but the situation is improving</td>
<td>Chronic problems exist (e.g., poverty, emigration, exclusion of minorities, and small denominations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation</td>
<td>Problems of nationality are the ruins of history which can be resolved through internationalism</td>
<td>The Hungarian nation is not identical to the territory of the state; this creates political problems, as well as duties for the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National minorities</td>
<td>Problems of national minorities are the ruins of history which can be resolved through internationalism</td>
<td>Populist writers: the issue of national minorities is a cultural and moral problem. Disidents: the problem of national minorities is related to the nature of the political system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>In terms of history, the socialist world system is superior to Western capitalism</td>
<td>Western social order ensures pluralism and human rights, but catching up is possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central-Europe</td>
<td>What matters is the community of socialist people’s democracies; geographical position and cultural similarities are secondary</td>
<td>Definitive events (1956, 1968, 1980–1981) are similar. Cooperation between Central European opposition forces, the Hungarian, Czech and Polish dissidents is needed</td>
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The memory of the 19th century faded, the only events marking its political importance practically being the student protests commemorating March 15, 1848. The official propagandists who described Kádár as a tireless worker of compromises also tried to compare him to Ferenc Deák, the architect of the Austro-Hungarian compromise in 1867. Indeed, neither this nor the Széchenyi versus Kossuth debate of the 1840s, that sometimes emerged, reached the level of politics. The disagreement in the interpretation of the 19th century did not constitute a significant cleavage between the party state and the democratic opposition.

The assessment of the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, if mentioned at all, was negative from both the regime and its opposition. The representatives of the communist power had no right to speak about it officially and tried to resolve the conflict by the rhetoric of communist internationalism. The opposition understood the geopolitical situation created by the Treaty as final, they rejected revanchism and focused on the individual and collective rights of the Hungarian minorities in other countries instead. One reason the Treaty was not in the focus of attention was that the fundamental ideology of the Horthy era (while its representatives signed the Treaty) was the denial of the peace agreement, and nobody wanted that era back: neither the communists, nor the democrats. The idea of national communism was never strong in Hungary, as opposed to Poland and Romania, as they could not go back symbolically to the Horthy era.

Looking back from today, one can also observe the complete silence that surrounded the massive deaths of the people sent to forced labor, the disaster of the Hungarian Second Army at Don River in 1943, and the Holocaust, including the deportation of nearly half million countryside Jews and the period of terror in Budapest in 1944. The Kádárian social policy of appeasement avoided every historical subject that would politically divide or structure the society. The environment of freedom of speech and democracy was required to start the discussion about and processing of the great traumas of the 20th century. The Kádár regime did not want to make such severe issues a topic of social discussion, and the democratic opposition did not have the means to do so.

179 It was a debate whether Hungary should follow the strategy of reformism or radicalism. The former was promoted by Széchenyi, the latter by Kossuth.
180 Cf. Kende, Az én Magyarországon; Egry, Otthonosság és idegenség; “A Fate for a Nation.”
Similarly, the Horthy era was never a question of debate among the power holders and the opposition, which evidently followed from that neither of them wanted to “return” to the Horthy system politically. Communist sometimes painted the participants of the revolution of 1956 as if they wanted to restore the Horthy regime; the democratic opposition categorically denied this. 

Beszélő and other samizdat journals emphasized that 1956 was the uprising of students, the intelligentsia, and workers, all of whom were far from the Horthy regime. While the communist power defined itself against the Horthy regime and dissociated itself from the Stalinism of the 1950s only mildly, the democratic opposition was against the heritage of both the Horthy and Rákosi eras, as well as the Kádár regime.

Of the 27 issues of the samizdat Beszélő, only two mentioned events before the communist takeover in 1947–1948, and only in passim. In one of these pieces, István Eörsi identified the post-1956 period with the oppression of the Bach-era that followed the crushed revolution and war of independence in 1848. He stated, “If we want to sincerely approach the memory of 1956, we have to start out of an independent consciousness. Official political positions help us in this, since—unlike during the reign of Francis Joseph—it cannot even attempt to make the revolution a part of its traditions.”

The crucial year of 1945 was must less discussed. Members of the opposition did not discuss whether that regime change was liberation and/or an invasion, a question debated after 1989. The authors of samizdat did not write about Law I of 1946, which practically created the republic, and had little to say about the semi-democratic coalition period between 1945 and 1947. These were mentioned later by József Antall during the Roundtable talks in August 1989, arguing that the new, democratic republic of 1989 needs to be built on the fundamentals of the laws of 1848 and 1946. The ambivalent position of the democratic opposition later in SZDSZ, the Hungarian liberal party, which did not support the bill that proposed to make February 1, “The day of the Republic,” commemorating the republic of 1946.

Beszélő treated the communist takeover of 1947 and the role of other parties in this in such a way that helped do away with the taboo that concerned this issue. The official communist narrative talked of the “voluntary union”

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183 Cf. Szűcs, “Napok romjai.”
of the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt, MKP) and the Social Democratic Party (Szociáldemokrata Párt, SZDP) in 1948, which resulted in the creation of a united workers’ party, the Hungarian Workers’ Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja, MDP). However, the union was preceded by the so-called “salami tactics” of the communist party, and election frauds in 1947. Beszélő proved these, as well as the opposition of the social democrats, by publishing relevant contemporary documents. The publication of the memorandum of the social democratic Peyer group was also closely linked to the issue of emigration, since Károly Peyer left the country in 1947 and became a prominent member of social democrats abroad.

Beszélő published the full version of the last speech of the Christian Democratic politician, István Barankovics, which he made in December of 1948 and was “the last great expression of opposition in the Hungarian parliament after 1945.”184 In his speech, Barankovics focused on three issues—the relationship of state and church, the issue of small and medium sized private property, and the question of human rights—to criticize the communists.

Beyond the examples above, there were no other references to earlier historical events in Beszélő. What could explain this omission? The reason could be partially tactical: the contributors thought that the facts of the distant past are not efficient enough to pressure the dictatorship for a reaction. On the other hand, samizdat publications focused on current, and not past, problems, especially on those that unmasked the repressive nature of the state socialist regime. The roots of repression could in part be found in the Soviet occupation, and in part in the authoritarian regimes emerging after World War I. Since criticism targeted the Kádár regime, it was obvious that the greatest attention should be paid to events and processes that could question the legitimacy of that regime.

It is clear from the samizdat documents that the democratic opposition was against the antidemocratic history of Hungary just as much it opposed the communist system. They tried to define their identity and political program, not on the basis of the past but detached from it. Rejecting the idea of reviving Marxism, they proposed radical reform, liberal democracy instead of democratic socialism, and the Western model of market economy instead of a third way. They did not believe in “organic” development, which had

often led the country to astray, but in fundamentally “inorganic” (i.e., radical) transformation.

From the point of view of historical memory, the revolution of 1956 was the most important historical theme and the common denominator for the pluralizing Hungarian opposition of the 1980s. There was no common point in the interpretation of 1956 between the regime and Beszélő. The journal already expressed protest by simply calling 1956 a revolution as such, analyzing it, and refuting the silence that the regime forced on society, which the contributors called “national forgetting.” Beyond this, opposition writers systematically rebutted official propaganda. They showed that, in 1956, a revolution erupted based on broad social unity, defining its goal as the democratization of the system. Consequently, Imre Nagy’s government was not made up of traitors, and the retribution and trials following the revolution were not legal in any sense. They showed that the new apparatus in power, which was led by János Kádár, did not entirely break with the traditions of the Rákosi regime. What is more, at the beginning it used the same tactics to consolidate its power. Finally, the democratic opposition pointed out that, following retributions, Hungarian intellectuals subsided into silence in the 1960s, but this was not the consequence of accepting the social compromise. Rather, it was based on the fear of Stalinist restoration and on resignation about what could not be changed.

The assessment about the role of intellectuals relates to this last point. While the early issues of Beszélő described the 1960s as the era of silence, later issues partially reassessed this position and pointed out that among intellectuals the populist and urban views started to appear again. In 1987, Beszélő openly identified these two opposition movements: the followers of the populist position tried to add a patriotic flavor to their statements, whereas the representatives of the urban position tried to communicate an anti-nationalist stance to the public. While the former viewed the problems of the nation from a cultural point of view, the latter treated it in terms of a political program. Thus, the national question was one of the problematic issues discussed by the democratic opposition, and this was the cleavage along which different opposition positions developed. The populist “third way” position believed that the Hungarian nation was in a moral crisis. In contrast, the urban position blamed the economic and political crisis on the regime and its leadership. The differences between these two positions could be most clearly seen in their treatment of Hungarian minorities abroad. The issues
of poverty, the situation of Jews in Hungary, and Hungarian emigrants and minorities abroad found their way to public discussion. The dissidents pointed out that the situation of the Hungarian minorities in Romania and Czechoslovakia could not be treated as solved despite the internationalist nature of socialist ideology. They found similar faults in the traditional treatment of the “Jewish question,” which was based on religious and assimilationist policies. For the opposition, Hungarian emigrants were not a group of “fascists,” as the official propaganda claimed, and could not be divided into good and bad types. Rather, they were treated as an integral part and constituent community of the nation.

The samizdat writers accepted the existence of a division between East and West but renounced the interpretation of the official propaganda. They saw that freedoms were lacking in east of the Iron Curtain, and it was obvious to the opposition that the Soviet bloc would never catch up with Western Europe economically. Although the dividing line in the Cold War resulted from World War II and became unquestionably clear with the building of the Berlin Wall, the economic differences were linked to earlier historical developments. Dissident intellectuals saw Central Europe as a geographic and historical unit. They identified the turning points of the recent past in the events of 1956, 1968, and 1980–1981. Beszélő regularly let Polish and Czechoslovakian intellectuals voice their views, commemorated the anniversary of the Prague spring, and followed the fate of Solidarity—the movement of independent Polish labor unions. Thus, the opposition mostly meant Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary by Central Europe, which had a common historical heritage. These peoples experienced both fascism and communism, and gave life to democratic opposition, critical publicity, and independent civil society.

The democratic opposition refuted the official economic self-definition of the system, which was based on the Marxist evolutionary ideal. According to the opposition, the situation after 1956 was not only characterized by improving economic trends but also by inconsequential reforms that were followed by slowing downs in the process of execution. The democratic opposition sharply opposed the system in all those questions that concerned recent events and future perspectives. But as both the system and the opposition rejected the old world of pre-1945, the democratic opposition did not question the historical interpretation of the Kádár regime entirely. What they questioned was the self-definition of the regime, and its historical, political determinants.
5. The debate of the Beszélő circle on strategy

On December 13, 1981, the Jaruzelski coup d’état ended the Polish self-limiting revolution, suppressed the Solidarity movement and independent trade union, and declared a state of emergency. The showdown happened according to the usual scenario, except for the fact that Soviet troops were not called in this time. Although many relieved upon hearing the news about the state of emergency, which they thought of as the lesser evil, most independent intellectuals and their followers were shocked and saw the Polish change as another severe defeat of democratic attempts.

A decision regarding the questions “Who are we?” and “What do we want?” had to be made by the Hungarian radical thinkers, the intellectuals who clustered around the samizdat journal Beszélő. They had to decide whether they wanted to stick to the traditional behavior of the mainly cultural opposition, laid down between 1977 and 1981, or whether they should attempt to form their opinions through political means. The group of radical thinkers could not be regarded as the opposition until they did not formulate the political alternative of the prevailing power in a coherent program. This was first done in October 1982, in the 5-6th issue of Beszélő. The great debate on opposition strategy starting with the article of János Kis in 1982 had a vital role in their decision of taking up the role of political opposition.

5.1 Perspectives of the future

Although the first issue of Beszélő appeared in November 1981 (i.e., just a few weeks before the introduction of the state of emergency in Poland) the shock evoked by the changes and Jaruzelski’s coup d’état could be felt on the pages of Beszélő. The journal appeared when it became questionable whether it was worth continuing its publication. Based on the experiences of 1956 and 1968, some were expecting an anti-reform, conservative turn, and another long “ice age” of restoration.

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185 Beszélő editors, “Hogyan keressünk kijutat a válságból?”
186 Among the pessimists was the philosopher György Bence who decided to leave the circle of his former co-author, János Kis. That caused a major consternation among the dissidents, but it has not slowed down the formation of the democratic opposition.
Chapter III

János Kis, in his article, argued against such a view of the events. “I would like to convince my friends, that this parallel is deceiving. Whatever the fate of the opposition groups will be, the status quo will not consolidate.” Kis supported this audacious statement by pointing out that the economic decline in the region was caused not only by temporary reasons. Poland’s Solidarity broke the legitimacy of the systems of “existing socialism” for good. The word “reform” was again mentioned in Hungary (although it was not articulated in official circles for a long time), not as a part of a comprehensive concept of economic change but as the only hope for political survival. The legitimacy of the system became relative, and it was more and more based on the provision of material goods. When one accepts the dimension of material rationality, one excludes the dogma of infallibility at the same time, and this inevitably leads to pluralism in the long run.

Unlike its predecessors in 1956 and 1968, the democratic attempt in Poland did not only come out in support of certain principles. It also stood for the guarantee of livelihood. The working-class movement came up against the “state of the proletariat.” Based on this fact, Kis said, the beginning of the 1980s was not only the time of restoration and reaction in Eastern Europe, it was also the era of the growing economic and political crises. And these crises, Kis opined, would not spare the Soviet Union either. Naturally, Gorbachev’s ascendance to power could not be foreseen. But the economic and political bankruptcy made it possible for a character like Gorbachev to step forth within the counter-selected Soviet leadership.

When assuming the disintegration of the political system, what opportunities were there for the opposition forces? The Hungarian opposition started from the supposition that both the revolution and the top-down reform of the system were useless attempts. However, between the two extremes, a radical reformism appeared, the new evolutionism, which did not concentrate on the transformation of the system but on the strengthening of social autonomies. At first, the Hungarian strategy—in contrast to the opposition strategy in Poland—was a legalist one, which took the fiction of the right to freedom, which was declared in the constitution, for granted. In a way, it had some “antipolitical” characteristics. The fact that throughout the

187 Kis, “Gondolatok a közeljövőről,” 115.
189 Michnik, “A New Evolutionism.”
debate neither Kis nor most speakers mentioned “civil society” as an end to the activity of the opposition shows that the Hungarian opposition was not prepared to be effective outside its own realm. What Kis wanted to do was to put an end to this attitude and argue for the need for new forms of opposition activity: “No matter if we have been doing it right or wrong: we cannot continue in this fashion. [...] The provocative exercise of our freedoms is not enough anymore. [...] Either the opposition has things to say about the big issues of politics, or its influence, size and organization will slowly decrease.”

Kis argued that a political initiative could only come from the circle of the opposition, because this was the only group outside the Kádárist “consensus.” The author was happy to see that more and more people engage in opposition activities but concluded that this group could start on the road of political opposition only if it had an ideology. The way he outlined this was quite broad and inclusive: human rights, liberal democracy, national independence, national autonomy, and the useful elements of the socialist tradition were the main pillars. While its starting point for the ideological debate was not fully developed, the article already contained the seeds of a radical, left-liberal political worldview.

The ensuing debate in Beszélő lasted from May 1982 to February 1984. It gradually formulated the strategy that the circle around the Beszélő acted upon in the second half of the 1980s. The debate formed a unique intellectual puzzle and from it the cornerstones of the political and ideological activities of the opposition took shape. Such questions as the evaluation of the situation, the goals and possibilities of the opposition were answered. Except for István Orosz, the rest of the contributors agreed with Kis’s evaluation of the current situation. Orosz argued that “the main goal of Beszélő is to increase the size of the reform-minded dissident intelligentsia.” He argued that not only the Kádárist “consent” made after 1956 should be disregarded, but also “the one made by the radical thinkers after 1973, i. e. the behavior of the bureau-protected opposition.” Orosz was different from the others in that he thought that the democratic opposition did not stand outside of

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190 Kis, “Gondolatok a közeljövőről,” 120.
191 Contributors to the debate were Tamás Bauer, István Eörsi, György Konrád, Csaba Könczöl, Zoltán Krasznai, Zsolt Krokovay, András Lányi, Bálint Magyar, Ambrus Oltványi, István Orosz, József Sebes, Miklós Szabó, Erzsébet Szalai, Pál Szalai, József Székely, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, Mihály Vajda, and András Vízi. The debate ended with a reply by János Kis.
192 Orosz, “A Hivatal-védte ellenzékség,” 188.
the consensus but was on the margin of it. But Orosz remained alone with his opinion in the Beszélő debate, and when Kis rejected his position in his response he voiced the joint position of the opposition.

5.2 Political goals

The idea of consensus appealed to almost all the participants of the debate. Nobody was thinking in terms of “the worse, the better”; everybody wanted to create a consensus with about crisis management and economic reform, based on the openness of the public sphere, the reform of the system of interest representation, and constitutionalism. The expression of the need for a new consensus went beyond the columns of Beszélő and became a part of the political discourse of the “first public sphere” later on. For example, the samizdat debates were quite useful to Imre Pozsgay, who proposed a new national consensus in the second half of the 1980s. However, the program of consensus for Pozsgay was a tool to have the plans of the reformers accepted within the party. While this is not to be underestimated, his Gorbachev-like rhetoric was not enough to attract a genuine majority in the pluralizing Hungarian society. The program of Beszélő had a substantial effect on the forming opposition forces as well.

The atmosphere of the era is illustrated by the fact that the neutrality of the country, or Finlandization advocated in 1956 appeared as an unreachable dream. Instead, the economist Tamás Bauer suggested a sort of “Illyrization” of Hungary, that is, the adoption of the Yugoslavian model. In Yugoslavia, the one-party system remained untouched, and the political police was intact, but the role of central economic planning was taken over by market forces and the workers’ collectives. Bauer made it obvious that “while the goal of Finlandization is political pluralism, ‘Illyrization’ is less ambitious: it wishes to create pluralism based on the representation of interests, being faithful to the ideology of Kádárism, but consistently bringing it through.”

Today, it is hard to understand how the collective representation of interests would have been faithful to the ideology of Kádárism. The point of the

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193 Kis, “Másfél év után, ugyanarról.”
system was rather its sloppiness; it functioned as the secret net of informal, order-like, mutual assertion of interests.

As the comments of the debate show, there was no opposition consensus over goals. Many of the contributors to the debate outlined a leftist program. András Lányi offered, as an alternative to the nationalization of society, the socialization of the state. József Székely wanted an alternative socialism that was based on workers’ democracy. Gáspár Miklós Tamás, who was the first to refer to the intellectual traditions of József Eötvös, Oszkár Jászi, and István Bibó, expressed his opinion in the form of a somewhat anarchistic comment: “the ideology of the opposition should be anti-state and anti-authoritarian.”

The national problem appeared emphatically first in the contribution of Zoltán Krasznai and András Vízi, but in relation to the Soviet-Hungarian relationship almost all the speakers referred to it. György Konrád named the self-determination of the society as a goal, while Bálint Magyar emphasized the development of the *citoyen* as a precondition of change.

Political theorist Pál Szalai leaned toward the idea of a multiparty system based on democratic socialism, in which the workers’ collectives owned the means of production. In his ideal, pluralism existed not only among the parties but there was an agreement about the property relations. He seemed to admit the need for market economy, but he also added that “from a political point of view, it would result in a tug of war between the central and the company bureaucracy if it did not go hand in hand with the strengthening of the workers’ councils.”

The sociologist Erzsébet Szalai took a similar view. Her article concerned the social conditions of a liberal alternative, although her definition of the latter differed from what it would mean later, during the regime change. In her understanding, the liberal alternative meant the coexistence of economic units realizing different modes of production, which would have happened

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196 Székely, “Reform és ellenzék,” 268.
198 Krasznai, “Jelszavaink legyenek: haza és haladás.”
199 Vízi, “Kommunisták és ellenzékiek.”
200 Konrád, “Adottságainkóból kell kiindulnunk.”
201 Magyar, “Polgárokká kell válnunk.”
if economic and political institutions had been split. However, she argued that the liberal alternative must be accompanied by a democratic alternative, where “the broadest layers of society—and mostly the large-scale industry workers—will or at least could establish their own institutions,” by which she most probably meant the worker’s councils and trade unions. According to Erzsébet Szalai, “these would mean a guarantee that new—albeit historically well-known—exploiting relationships could not emerge from the co-existence of all sorts of modes of production.” Hence, to prevent the liberal alternative from leading to capitalism, the democratic representation of interests could have meant a guarantee. In her article, democracy and capitalism appeared as mutually exclusive, so the liberal alternative for her did not fully exceed the borderlines of the socialist paradigm.

One of the most up-to-the-point comments came from Ambrus Oltványi, who had already stated in the title of his article that the aim was to fight for and achieve democracy. In his article, Oltványi proved to have an outstanding foresight of the future. He argued that the chances of a democratic, pluralistic development should not be measured in the short run, but “from a decade-long perspective.” Oltványi considered the shaping of a self-limiting market the key question, for “market economy is easily imaginable without democracy but democracy without market economy is hardly achievable.” With this comment, he foreshadowed debates that would come five years later among Hungarian political scientists. Unlike many other contributors then, Oltványi did not believe in the coming of democratic socialism. Referring to a seminal study of Mihály Vajda, he stated that “socialism should be kept alive as a counter-tendency against the main tendency of capitalism, but it should not be ‘realized’.”

The writer and poet István Eörsi did again something similar when he quoted the managerial socialist apprehensions of the economist Márton Tardos.

Mihály Vajda had a distinctly different view from the other contributors of the debate when he wrote: “The new democratic political community does not have to form the opposition itself but, through critical publicity, it should facilitate the formation of a real opposition within the power

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In other words, the democratic opposition must not strive only to grab power, but its goals must also include widening the sphere of critical discussion and dissolving the strict order of the party state.

What mainly distinguished the democratic opposition from the reformers within the system was not their understanding of the situation or their demands. Rather, they differed in their marginalized position, as well as their strategy which concerned a longer run. After the reforms of 1968, the democratic opposition no longer believed that the desired goals can be reached by top-down reforms. When I describe the behavior of the democratic opposition as radical reformers, I do not think mainly of the differences in the content of their demands (while those are also notable compared to the intentionally blurred ideas of the reformers within the system) but of the strategic differences. While the reform-communists of the age who concentrated in different “reform committees” behind closed doors “prompted” mostly to the men in power, the opposition tried to “prompt” to the society as well.

5.3 The possible ways of change

Kis’s proposal about a “more than reformist but less than revolutionary” strategy of radical reformism was opposed by István Orosz, who was the only one to argue for a revolution. “We need to step away from the margin and bear the consequences,” he argued. Orosz thought that there was no middle ground: the opposition had to decide whether it wanted to pursue a popular front policy “with the reformer intelligentsia or with the working classes.”

And it may call itself “opposition” only if it sides with the latter. Orosz’s argument was radical but simplifying for the fault line between those acquiesce in the consensus and those seeking change did not lie between the “intelligentsia” and the “working classes” even at that time.

Indeed, Kis also drew a hard line between those standing outside and inside the Kádárist “consensus.” He did not seem to realize how false the “consensus” itself was and that some of those standing within it were against this false consensus for hypocritical (i.e., existential) reasons. Many contributors pointed this out, emphasizing that the democratic opposition must

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avoid social isolation, because it could lead to a political avant-gardism burdened with a sense of mission. According to István Eörsi, the problem of standing “inside” or “outside” the regime cannot be restricted to a moral question. The good strategy might be, he said, the rapprochement between the radical opposition and the reformists, based on some kind of division of labor, and on the conscious changing of “outsider” and “insider” behavior. Others argued that this insider-outsider division was inexpedient for tactical reasons as well, because instead of attracting the fellow travelers on the inside, it excluded them from opposition activities. Referring to the Polish example, Bálint Magyar suggested the civic tactics of “sticking to the constitution” and the strategy of forcing the power elite to deal with the situation—the opposite of the “proletarian tactics” of confrontation—should be followed. He believed this strategy could avoid compromise since it saw the reform-process that would remove obstacle as its goal.

The dichotomy of “civic” and “proletarian” was problematic not only from tactical but also theoretical considerations, for political behavior was not determined by class status. Yet these observations infiltrated into the activities not only of the democratic opposition, but of the broader opposition of 1989. The peaceful demolishing of the system and forcing the state party, the MSZMP, to deal with the situation through the Roundtable negotiations testifies to this. Following the “civic tactics” suggested by Magyar, the opposition set such an example that could be successfully used by others, for example the members of the Independent Lawyer’s Forum (Független Jogász Fórum FJF), who initiated the Roundtable negotiations in 1988. The rejection of the “proletarian tactics” expressed not only that the dissidents preferred peaceful transition over revolution but also that the opposition, in spite of earlier considerations, renounced the cooperation and joint action with the working class. Indeed, the Hungarian opposition could not repeat the success of their Polish counterparts in this respect.

According to Pál Szalai, the oppositional group should define its strategy on the basis of its policies not on the formal, changing division of inside and outside. He did not think it was advisable to start cooperation with the leftist wing of MSZMP or the anti-liberal, middle-class heirs of noble nation-
alism. At the same time, he suggested, “attention should be given to the
democratic trends within MSZMP” and “to the revival within Hungarian
Catholicism.” Through these comments, Pál Szalai elaborated on some top-
ics, which would become important in the future: (1) The opposition needed
more than one ideology. (2) He called attention to some of the antidemo-
cratic traditions of the aristocratic middle class and pointed out the dan-
gers of cooperating with certain groups within these circles.211 Just like Pál
Szalai and István Eörsi, most of the contributors emphasized the advantages
of cooperation with groups outside the opposition especially at the strate-
gic level. But they put the emphasis on different points. Tamás Bauer stated
that the reform initiatives should come “basically from the ‘good king’, the
party leadership, the government” while the radical thinkers should play a
catalyst role and would have to “reveal and formulate the social needs and
endeavors.” According to Bauer, in the course of reform, it would have been
more advisory to “talk about autonomous social initiatives than about the
opposition movement” and it would have been proper if the underground
press “had come to a half-legal state” and thus it would “automatically lose
its peculiar oppositionist label.”212

Ambrus Oltványi agreed that the first and second public spheres should
be more traversable but argued that legality should not be achieved by the
suppression or abandonment of the views of the opposition. After all, the
acceptance of political autonomy was just as alien to the nature of the Kádár
regime as the open tolerance of the opposition. Oltványi counted on the
power and the opposition “to live permanently side-by-side,” and he trusted
that the autonomous powers of the society would be allowed to take part
in the forming of the reforms coming from above. As if he had foreseen the
future, he stressed that, “although only four decades after the dictatorship
came into power, such a transition proved to be realizable in post-Franco
Spain.”213 To support his statement, Oltványi quoted Adam Michnik: “If
I searched for a suitable example for the tasks ahead of us, I would men-
tion Spain: behold a society, which—thanks to the more sensitive forces of
the power and the opposition—found its way out of a shameful dictator-

212 Bauer, “Az optimista alternatíva körvonala,” 266.
213 Oltványi, “A demokrácia kilátásai Magyarországon,” 279.
ship to democracy.” Michnik wrote these lines as early as the mid-1970s. Thus, we could even say that the transition in Spain—with its democratizing post-authoritarian elite and its strong trade-union movement—was something like the first evidence of the “self-limiting” strategy Michnik elaborated on. With some stretching of the analogy: the first “Moncloa pact” of Central Europe was the Gdańsk Agreement in August 1980. The violation of the agreement was not the fault of Solidarity. It was because Gierek, Kania, Jaruzelski, and their comrades were not backed by the Soviet Union of Gorbachev but that of Brezhnev.

But who should agree with whom in a country where the power was in the hands of an aging clique, and where the word “reform” could be mentioned only in certain periods and even then only with regard to the economy, and where there was no sign of independent organizations for the protection of interests? Erzsébet Szalai mentioned a few social groups that could have been the potential allies of the opposition because those either started or supported change: (1) democratic opposition, (2) the intelligentsia that worked in official social science institutions, (3) the younger, reformist generation of the apparatchiks, and (4) the heterogeneous groups of young skilled workers, university students, artists, technicians, health workers, and small entrepreneurs. The latter had already had minor clashes with the regime, therefore some kind of a net-like cooperation with them seemed imaginable. In addition, she mentioned the generation that was socialized in the 1960s and had just entered the gates because these people wanted to build a career and the ideological attitude was far from them. Out of them grew the second generation of the state party; they formed the new technocracy. Oltványi also emphasized the importance of generation change, through which “possibly more and more of those will enter the apparatus who—unlike those members who dominate and can be there only because of counter-selection—will be able to hold ground among the conditions of pluralism and competition

214 Michnik, “A New Evolutionism.”
215 The analogy is stretched because the Gdańsk Agreement was a precondition for democratic transition, whereas the Moncloa Pact in Spain was an acceptance and guarantee of democracy after it had been achieved.
216 Mainly at the Institute for Historical Science and other academic institutions, while some worked at the background institutions of ministries, like the Financial Research Institute of the Ministry of Finance.
218 E. Szalai, Gazdaság és batalom.
with the help of their training and efficiency. Thus, they will not have to cling to the dictatorial means of power at any price.”

These hypotheses by Szalai and Oltványi have been proved by the changes of 1989, as well as those later analyses which argued that cultural capital was a major element of successful peaceful transition.

Most of those who contributed to the debate in Beszélő found it important to preserve diversity within the opposition. They pointed out that those who want pluralism in the civil society could not endeavor to suppress it within their own circles. In many ways it was the age of resurgence of civil society. In his writings at the time, social theorist Andrew Arato considered the changes in Poland as the rebirth of the civil society. With that in mind it is even more surprising that in the debate only three people used the concept of civil society. In the tradition of the Enlightenment, civil society was imagined as an antidote to the state, with the task to “free itself from the guardianship of the state.” “Civil society and political state are by nature struggling with each other,” stated Mihály Vajda. For Konrád, “the organizational space of civil society was the world of informal relationships,” which is characterized by autonomous speech, and its primal bearer is the young intelligentsia.

The historian Miklós Szabó was on the opposite opinion. He thought that the role of civil courage was to help coming out from passive informality so characteristic in the Kádár regime: “We must be careful not to increase the number of informal organizations” but “to claim strong autonomies.” There was a significant difference between the two approaches. Neither Vajda nor Konrád agreed that the democratic opposition should become a political opposition, because then it would have inevitably had to strive for power. According to the then antipolitical Konrád, the opposition “is democratic when it is not a political but a social opposition.”

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220 Konrád and Szelenyi, “Intellectuals and Domination.”
221 Arato, “Civil Society against the State”; “Empire vs Civil Society.”
222 Oltványi, “A demokrácia kilátásai Magyarországon.”
that it was not a political opposition that needed to be established but a critical public sphere where the “social criticism of politics” could be exercised.²²⁸

Seeing their antipolitical stance, one might think that the democratic opposition was generically anti-power, disapproving not the just the communist power but any power. This is not true—not even in the case of Zoltán Krasznai, who wrote about a moral revolution, and Gáspár Miklós Tamás, who called for a moral reform. Most dissidents did not think in terms of powerlessness but, following István Bibó, in terms of power balance, new consensus, and new social contract. Nevertheless, this resulted in a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the concept of power.

Konrád thought that striving for power was a heritage of communism and he rejected it on that ground. For him, political opposition seemed inherently antidemocratic. “The *sine qua non* of democratic opposition is that it should be democratic, i.e. post-communist in its operation and its self-image, and thus it should deeply revise the traces and habits of the communist opposition.”²²⁹ And Mihály Vajda said, as if he had foreseen the structural problems that would plague the liberal party, SZDSZ that grew out of the democratic opposition: “Do not restrict the basis of the new democratic political community! For it can easily happen that most of the members come from somewhere else. Not only from other outsider circles but also from those groups that earlier condemned the activity of the ‘opposition’.” In his own words:

We cannot take it upon us the new tasks of a new situation just because we are called the “opposition” right now. Even if there really is a new situation, it is not certain that solutions need to be given by those who were in the “opposition” in another situation; it is not sure either, that those who take up the new responsibilities will feel like the heirs of the opposition of 1977–81.²³⁰

Vajda talked as if he had known the future. Konrád said the following words about the same phenomenon: “Our task is to help others gain their

freedom.”

Several contributors agreed with the proposition of János Kis’s article and thus hurried the open undertaking of political opposition. “We need to acknowledge that political goals can only be achieved by political means,” wrote András Lányi. Within the framework of political opposition, Orosz wanted confrontation, Lányi, social pressure, Szabó, two-sided negotiations, and Tamás, besides demanding political reforms, emphasized the need for “ethical renewal.” “Dark decades may come or may not; we need morals that can be upheld both in good and in bad times. We cannot prepare for a certain future, only for the period of a lifetime.”

Krasznai opined that the opposition has to prepare for many possibilities. The time of confrontation, which Orosz proposed, could come, but if the leadership were reform-spirited, then “even a historical compromise can come about between the government and the opposition on the common platform of advancement and national interest.” Indeed, such a compromise would come about in the Lakitelek meeting in 1987. However, it occurred not between the leadership and the democratic opposition but between Imre Pozsgay, who was at the periphery of the party leadership, and populist writers, who worked themselves out of the democratic opposition, seeing themselves belonging neither to the opposition nor the pro-government forces.

The primary significance of the 1982–1984 debate in Beszélő was not the outlining of an ideology but the correct assessment of the situation and the development of an opposition strategy. The contributors could not foresee the collapse of the system. Yet the experience of the Polish “semi-revolution” of 1980, as well as the analysis of the situation in Central Europe told them that the collapse will inevitably happen. Many articulated the conditions necessary for the collapse, especially Pál Szalai. He argued that

Democracy may break through in this region 1. if democratic movements in many Eastern European countries act at the same time. 2. if the process of democratization happens within and without the communist party in parallel. 3. if the Soviet leadership is enlightened enough to settle for the conservation of its military sphere of interest, and it is willing to make a deal with the movements of Eastern Europe to permit at least a limited democracy.\(^{236}\)

The words of Pál Szalai show exceptional clairvoyance. As it later turned out, communist systems in Eastern and Central Europe fell in a domino-like manner. Second, the peaceful nature of the transition was made possible by the fact that the Hungarian communist leadership was divided, unlike the opposition movements. Third, an “enlightened” Soviet leader, Gorbachev, emerged, who gave up the Brezhnev doctrine and allowed these countries to follow their way. While Szalai deduced the conditions of regime change in a correct, logical way, Zoltán Krasznai made predictions: “If the tendency of equalization [stemming from economic degeneration] persists, the crisis will reach the trough at the same time in many countries of Central Europe. This can happen in the second half of the 1980s.”\(^{237}\) The crisis did not happen at the same time and with the same intensity in Central European countries. But the crisis of the Soviet Union provided the opportunity for change. And the legal-minded, critical political culture that the radical thinkers tried to popularize in the course of becoming political opposition had a major role in that the Hungarian story did not unfold as the story of most post-Yugoslavian countries did.

Maybe these dissidents did not realize how stubbornly the values and structures of prewar Hungary, which were thought to be extinct, survived in Kádár’s paternalist dictatorship. Initiators and participants of radical political change tend to underestimate historical path-dependency anyway.\(^{238}\) Maybe they had illusions about the viability of a “socialist mixed economy,” and their ideology was, at many points, unclear. This is understandable as their primary binder was not a positive change of values but their marginal-

ized position and political opposition to the system. What should come as a surprise is not what was missing, but how many things they foresaw. They had to address people very different from them. Even in their marginalized position, the people belonging to groups of the democratic opposition managed to develop those civic methods which allowed them to retain integrity and allowed others to apply them when the time for change has come. The samizdat writings in Beszélő were not cold-blooded contributions to scientific debates. About half of the writings of the above-described debate were published under pseudonyms, in fear of retaliation. These are anguished, bold, passionate, and hopeful articles, written by intellectuals who could not resist autonomy even in the lawless world of wiretaps and house searches.