Chapter VI

Negotiated Revolution: The Strategy of the Opposition

In this chapter we arrive at a new scene of rolling transition, the Roundtable talks, which brought new actors in the spotlight. In the following, I shall discuss the dynamics of the Roundtable negotiations by highlighting the strategic choices of the opposition and elaborating the interactions between the delegates of EKA and the MSZMP. The negotiations covered several issues; here I will examine the stages of the negotiated revolution and the constitution-making process in the negotiations of the decaying and the ascending political elite. After the Roundtable talks, some issues still left open, those were solved by the referendum of November 1989. This chapter covers the most crucial period of transition, from the Act on Associations of January 1989 until the free elections of March 1990.

1. The meaning of the Roundtable talks

The Roundtable negotiations of 1989 were part of the bargaining process between the outgoing and incoming political elites, but their substance was a change of revolutionary importance. As a renowned scholar of negotiated revolutions, Jon Elster wrote:

The Roundtable talks were a peculiar political phenomenon. They embodied a form of bargaining between the government and society that bore no resemblance to the usual relationships between those two entities. In democratic political systems, society restrains the government through electoral mechanisms. In non-democratic systems, the restraint is indirect and implicit, through the government’s calculations of how far it can go without creating social unrest with all its costs and risks. […] It is very different, however, from the explicit bargaining of the Roundtable talks. By accepting an overt confrontation, the regime admitted what everybody knew—that it had no claim to represent the interests of the society over which it was governing. This unmasking of hypocrisy had major psychological and political consequences.²

Ending the old regime had to start with the process “unmasking,” since the system was ideologically based on promises of enlightenment which contradicted to its everyday political practice. Everybody was aware of this discrepancy and knew that dictatorial politics is based on a lie. By “unmasking of hypocrisy” the opposition had to present a democratic alternative to participate in the negotiations and to compete successfully in electoral politics. The fact that the then organizing opposition broke with the idea of reforming the party state, and they turned to society, also made clear that they distinguished legitimacy from legality. The notion of “radical reform” the Hungarian democratic opposition often referred to also meant this. However, the fact that several similarities could be observed in their political language facilitated the congruence of the democratic opposition and the new reformist intellectuals. The formation of a counter-elite, and its social base, aiming at peaceful and democratic change made it possible to proclaim that the system was not legitimate but legal, that is, transition to a legitimate system is possible within the framework of the law.³

The peaceful transitions hallmarked by the Roundtable talks took a novel approach to the issue of starting a democracy, and thus set new challenges to the political thinking about revolutions. Distinguishing legality from legitimacy, the members of the opposition expressed that the system was illegiti-

³ Kis, “Between Reform and Revolution.”
mate. And yet, they did not go and “storm the Bastille.” Instead, they created the possibility of an elite arrangement by maintaining the fiction of legality. They put the principle of rule of law before revolutionary justice-making. Maintaining legal continuity in terms of the process, the negotiating parties avoided continuity with the dictatorship in terms of the content of cardinal laws.

This process was a witty solution to the problem of political regime change, but later it raised moral problems in the period of democratic consolidation. For even if the transition was not unequivocally revolutionary, its result, the democracy, was fundamentally different from the previous system. Many people realized only later that informal networks and structures survived in the new democracy. Moreover, as the transition in several countries, including Hungary, was not about going back to democracy, but this was the first time a fully fledged democracy was established, it was questioned whether informal practices were just the legacy of the communist system or indeed deeper phenomena that had been developing for centuries. The negotiated transition was an informal way out of state socialism, but the world of informality necessarily prevailed.4

From this point of view, distinguishing legitimacy and positive legality may be problematic. The opposition was adept in exploiting the gaping hole between the informal-political rules of the dictatorship and its formally declared constitutionality. But in the old system, neither the citizens, nor the communist politicians in power saw this discrepancy as important. On the one hand, the system was not seen legitimate in the first place, because they know that it is ultimately based on sheer force. On the other hand, they knew that its legality is only the right of the stronger, and positive law per se deserves no respect as not even those who created it took it seriously. The legal culture of the system was not characterized by facing the duality of constitutionality and legality but by relativizing the law and finding personal loopholes. This is deeply engrained in post-communist societies as well. Thus, we can interpret the distinction between legality and legitimacy as a useful fiction created for the success of the regime change, but it was not backed by popular consensus. On the level of the elites, it was easier to get rid of the old system with the distinction, but it had the disadvantage of not making the

moral content of the regime change sufficiently perceptible for the broader society. Many people believed that the old practices go on within new frames. The debates following the regime change—on issues such as corruption, democratic deficit, the deficiencies of the social acceptance of democracy, social justice, or the relation of the new system to the past—helped the citizens face this problem afterward.

2. From model change to regime change

The structure the Hungarian Roundtable negotiations was complex: It included political and economic talks on three levels between three main negotiating partners (MSZMP), Opposition Roundtable (EKA), and the so-called Third Side which was a group of the satellite organizations of the Party. Topics of political talks were centered around the following six major themes: constitutional issues, party law, electoral law, criminal law, media and publicity, and the political guarantees of nonviolent transition.5

At first, the participants of the 1989 Hungarian Roundtable talks wanted to create the cardinal laws necessary to hold free elections and therefore to peaceful transition. They wanted to leave constitution-making to the freely elected parliament. However, this initial plan was overwritten by the dynamics of the regime change. Eventually, opposition forces did not avoid the constitution-making process which they previously refused but later accepted. This is how the democratic constitution came into being together with institutions which proved to be durable. The political outcome of the elite settlement was passed by the old parliament, and the so-called “Four Yes” referendum settled the still open questions. The constitution-making process was closed by the April 1990 agreement between the MDF and the SZDSZ, which guaranteed governability, and by the new law on municipal governments in summer 1990.

While the preamble of the 1989 democratic constitution explicitly stated the constitution was only temporary, this indicated only the bashfulness of the “founding fathers” and not that they regarded the constitution-making process invalid. Those who wanted to start constitution-making again in the decades after 1990 always cited this passage about the constitution’s formal

5 These topics were discussed in detail. Cf. Bozóki, The Roundtable Talks of 1989.
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temporariness, but they also stressed that constitution-making was not exigent. Therefore, they also accepted that the democratic constitution, created in 1989–1990 and informally reinforced by the referendum, was appropriate to create and protect pluralist democracy.

2.1 Tactical maneuvers

The need for formulating a new constitution was first raised in the May 1988 party conference of the MSZMP, when János Kádár was removed from power. On January 1, 1989, a constitutional draft committee was formed within the Ministry of Justice with the task of revising the constitution. The ministry’s draft was accepted by the parliament in March 1989, but the detailed elaboration of the legal text was postponed due to the emergence of opposition parties, the formation of the Opposition Roundtable, the preparatory meetings of the Roundtable talks, and the accelerating political changes in general. Opposition forces entered the political arena as challengers to the MSZMP.

However, constitutional change could begin already before constitution-making was on the agenda, by accepting a few important laws. In January 1989, the Association Act was passed in the parliament. The existence of various political organizations—which had all referred to the constitution—was thereby legalized. The Association Act meant that party formation was liberalized in Hungary, and the creation of legal framework opened the political opportunity toward a multiparty system. However, the leaders of MSZMP tried to detach political parties from social organizations, arguing that the legal conditions of party operation would be set only in the later Party Act. According to the recollection of the then Deputy Minister of Justice and member of the constitutional draft committee, Géza Kilényi, “after the law

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6 The 1989 constitution of Hungary started as follows: “In order to facilitate a peaceful political transition to a constitutional state, establish a multi-party system, parliamentary democracy and a social market economy, the Parliament of the Republic of Hungary hereby establishes the following text as the Constitution of the Republic of Hungary, until the country’s new Constitution is adopted.” A Magyar Köztársaság Alkotmánya. (The Constitution of the Republic of Hungary) Budapest: Novissima, 2006.
7 Halmai “Az 1949-es alkotmány jogállamosítása”; Tordai, “A Harmadik Köztársaság alkotmányának születése.”
8 MSZMP, A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, 261.
9 Kilényi, Egy alkotmány-előkészítés dokumentumai.
10 Bozóki, Politikai pluralizmus Magyarországon.
on the right of association categorically stated that political parties can be founded on this legal basis, the party leadership was alarmed and wanted to buy some time. The Ministry was ordered to put a sentence in the Act saying the operation and registration of parties will be set in another law. It was clearly for the purpose of buying time.\footnote{11}

The supporters of Imre Pozsgay proposed a constituent assembly. The plan—in the version of creating “national committees”—was also entertained by New March Front (Új Március Front, ÚMF) which was a reform group of intellectuals close to MSZMP and informally led by Rezső Nyers.\footnote{12} Eventually, the plan failed because of the lack of agreement on who should convene the assembly and who should be invited. There was a risk that some of the opposition forces would not be invited to the constituent assembly, and therefore the constitution it makes would not reflect the will of the people. The proposal was thus quickly removed from the agenda.

At this point, only internal pressure and political courage were needed for the ruling party to recognize the multiparty system. When the MSZMP leader Károly Grósz traveled abroad at the end of January 1989, Minister of State Imre Pozsgay used the opportunity to proclaim—referring to the findings of the historical committee he had convened—that 1956 was a popular uprising. Although the notion of popular uprising was not equal to revolution, the sheer fact that the genesis of the Kádár regime was revised surprised the society. For one of the taboos of the system was, as mentioned above, that the interpretation of 1956 as a “counter-revolution” cannot be questioned. Because if the leaders of the system acknowledge that 1956 was not a counter-revolution then they cannot deny that the regime of Kádár, and its coming to power was paved by Soviet tanks, oppressed the people, and served foreign interests. The top bodies of the state party discussed the disloyalty of Pozsgay in February 1989. Contrary to expectations, the fight strengthened the reformist wing and the communist participants acknowledged that what happened in 1956 was a popular uprising. It was even more important,

\footnote{11}{Interview with Géza Kilényi, 1997.}
\footnote{12}{According to the recollection of László Antal, the New March Front wanted to fulfill a role of integration vis-à-vis the official party line. It was the idea of György Aczél that a political organization should have a legitimate way which is not directed by the MSZMP. The founding document of New March Front was accepted and Rezső Nyers was announced as its leader. But it was forbidden for Nyers, a member of the politburo, to sign it. The statement was published in October 1989 only, when the initiative had long failed. Interview with László Antal, 1997.}
however, that MSZMP accepted the idea of multiparty system, which could finally be codified.

Yet this did not mean that the party state was ready to run in free and fair elections. In February 1989, MSZMP leaders thought that they only encourage the operation the parties which accept the current constitution which recognized the leading role of the state party, and that multiparty system can exist only as “socialist pluralism.” They wanted to keep the reorganized historic parties—primarily the Independent Smallholders’ Party, the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, and the Hungarian People’s Party—as potential allies for a future coalition. In addition, they maintained good relations with the strongest new party, the MDF. Pozsgay, as the populist-leaning representative of the reform wing of MSZMP had been cooperating with MDF since the 1987 Lakitelek meeting, and he had good relations with some smaller groups from that camp as well.¹³ Minister of State Rezső Nyers tried to link reform communists and social democrats by promoting the New March Front.

Independent political organizations issued a joint statement to welcome the multiparty system was recognized by MSZMP, although they resented that the state party still refuses to officially recognize 1956 as a revolution. The same organizations began preparations for the independent, worthy celebration of March 15 (the revolution of 1848) and called the government to officially declare October 23 (the revolution of 1956) a national holiday. The leaders of the Danube movements announced that they had collected 124,000 signatures to hold a referendum in the issue of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros dam. In the weeks before March 15, 1989, MSZMP speeded up the negotiations it separately held with each opposition organization.¹⁴ These talks were criticized as tactics of “divide and conquer” by numerous opposition organizations.

In 1989, March 15 was a national holiday for the first time in decades. Adjusting to the rituals of the previous years, the official celebration in

¹³ Like Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Friendship Society and Hungarian People’s Party.
¹⁴ On the turn of February–March 1989, the representatives of MSZMP held bilateral negotiations with the representatives of the Independent Smallholders’ Party, the Veres Péter Society, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), the Hungarian Social Democratic Party (MSZDP), the Münnich Ferenc Society, and the Hungarian Federation of Resistance Fighters and Antifascists (MEASZ). In addition, they met the delegates of the National Committee of Hungarian Youth Organizations (MISZOT), the Hungarian People’s Party, and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ).
Budapest was in the garden of the Hungarian National Museum. The opposition side gathered at the statue of 1848 revolutionary Sándor Petőfi and followed its path that became traditional in the 1980s. At various stations, political speeches were given. In the evening, the opposition organized a torchlight procession to Buda Castle. The demonstration in Budapest was attended by more than a 100,000 people—which was five times the attendance of the official celebration—and attendance rates were similar in every country town as well. As a result, opposition groups felt legitimate: they were justified in thinking that they are not only backed by isolated groups of student and intellectuals, but supported by greater and greater circles of society as well.

The celebration of March 15 was a fight for historical memory. On the streets, demonstrators linked the demands of 1848 and 1956 visually as well as verbally, and they applied them to the situation in 1989 as well. An emphatic point was to contrast János Kádár and Imre Nagy, recalling the genesis of the Kádár regime and underlining its moral indefensibility. The successful demonstration channeled the changes that had taken place mainly on the level of elites to public discourse, and further encouraged the leaders of new political groups to cooperate and jointly realize the common demand of the two revolutions: the freedom of Hungary.

2.2 Preparatory talks between the Opposition Roundtable and the MSZMP

The successful demonstration of March 15 had landslide political effects for both the MSZMP and the status of the opposition. As for the state party: the dissolution following the January statement of Pozsgay accelerated. From April, reform circles of the party were formed all over the country and several hardline leaders were removed from party leadership. Representatives of MSZMP met, behind closed doors, with the representatives of the freshly formed Opposition Roundtable in April to discuss preparations for the National Roundtable talks. The government of Miklós Németh, which was practically composed by a bunch of technocrats by that time, stopped the building of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros dam in May 1989. The cabinet dis-

15 Hofer, “Harc a rendszerváltásért szimbolikus mezőben.”
tanced itself from the statement of Grósz who talked about the possibility of an economic state of emergency. The division between the Party and its government led to a stalemate in which MSZMP could not bloc the reburial of martyr prime minister Imre Nagy anymore. The reburial was recognized as a political event which made clear that the conservative forces of the party were unable to reverse the transition.¹⁶ In parallel, the opposition parties resisted the temptation to make separate agreements with the MSZMP, which thus could not divide them. The political conditions of opposition cooperation were created right after the March 15 demonstration.

On March 22, 1989 the Opposition Roundtable (EKA) was formed by eight organizations in Budapest, at the Faculty of Law of Eötvös Lóránd University.¹⁷ It was preceded by the beginning of the Polish Roundtable talks in February with the representatives of the most important political forces of Poland (Solidarity, the communist party, the Catholic Church, official trade unions, and satellite parties).¹⁸ The Hungarian opposition believed that following this model—the only model at the time—was reasonable despite the differences in the political situation of the two countries.¹⁹ The question at this point was: Who will initiate the cooperation of the opposition forces?

This was when the Independent Lawyer’s Forum (FJF) entered the scene. Originally, it was formed in November 1988 with the aim of mobilizing the passive stratum of layers to help the democratic and peaceful transformation of the system. FJF did not belong to any opposition organization but to the opposition in general, and it wanted to facilitate the process which would lead to free elections. After the successful demonstration of March 15, an FJF representative, Imre Kónya proposed to the forces of the opposition to start negotiations immediately about the most pressing issues of the transition, particularly suffrage. The Lawyer’s Forum offered to organize the negotiations, and to contribute to the elaboration and reconciliation of the stand-

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¹⁶ Kalmár, “Modellváltástól a rendszerváltásig.”
¹⁷ The eight organizations which created the Roundtable were the following: Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre Friendship Society, Alliance of Young Democrats, Independent Smallholders’ Party, Democratic Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Hungarian Democratic Forum, Hungarian People’s Party, Hungarian Social Democratic Party, Alliance of Free Democrats. The Christian Democratic People’s Party—as a ninth member—joined the Opposition Roundtable only in June.
¹⁸ Osyatinski, “The Roundtable Talks in Poland.”
¹⁹ Interview with László Bruszt, 1997; Interview with Csaba Kiss Gy, 1997.
points of the different sides. This meant that the political activity of the opposition moved from the movement period to a new dimension: an intellectual group literally undertook a legislative, constitution-making role.

The members of the Opposition Roundtable (EKA) agreed unanimously at the inaugural meeting, that only such organizations can be part of EKA which regard popular sovereignty as one of their goals, reject the privileges or power monopoly, and do not form alliances with such organizations. To ensure their unity, the participants agreed in procedural rules which ensured that the decisions of EKA will be consensual, that is, the negative vote of a single organization could mean the use of veto power. This rule proved to be a force of unity. From here on, every member organization of EKA needed to consider whether its own, different vote is important enough to insist on it and prevent the decision making of EKA. This did not mean the member organizations could only vote “Yes”: they often abstained or expressed that their “No” vote is not a veto but only serves to make EKA’s internal lines of power visible. The principle of consensual decision making, which was later extended in a more sophisticated form to the National Roundtable as well, had a great impact on the then forming democratic political culture.

With respect to constitution-making, EKA proposed that an agenda item of the negotiations with MSZMP must be “guaranteeing the democratic conditions of constitution-making, given that the Opposition Roundtable does not consider the current process of constitution-making democratic and expedient.” The EKA also wanted to discuss “creating the conditions for free and democratic elections that ensure constitutional development, given that the Opposition Roundtable considers the current Parliament, established through non-democratic elections, unsuitable for constitution making.” The early documents do not state that the EKA itself wants to be part of the process of constitution-making. Indeed, they only called the MSZMP to stop preparations for one-sided constitution-making.

The reaction of MSZMP to the formation of EKA was increased activity. Although the separate negotiations it wanted could not be concluded,

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20 At the same time, SZDSZ also had the same initiative, but they eventually had withdrawn it, believing the proposal should not come from one of the opposition parties.
21 This realized in concrete terms what Zygmunt Bauman, Legislator and Interpreters had expressed metaphorically: the intellectual as “legislator.”
22 Bozóki et al., A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve.
23 Bozóki et al., A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve, 86, 87.
the MSZMP tried to convene a consultative forum where every opposition organization, with the exception of Fidesz, while most of the organizations of the later Third Side were invited. This was a tensile test for EKA. If they attend without Fidesz, they give up unity and the first step of the “divide and conquer” tactics of MSZMP succeeds. The opposition parties decided not to accept the invitation. As a result, they fortified solidarity between the new parties, ensured the maintaining of the Roundtable, and reinforced its operation of consensual decision making. EKA now existed as a genuine political force.

At the same time, MSZMP continued to weaken. Within the party, the reformist movements gained ground and urged the state party to give up not only its power monopoly but its hegemonic role to ensure its own reformation. It was upon their pressure that the party leadership lifted the ban on internal factions, renounced the direct control of the press, and dissolved the cadre lists (the nomenklatura) which listed fields of employment where positions could be fulfilled only with the prior approval of the party. In April 1989, the reform circles of MSZMP convened a national party forum. They had great expectation toward this event and thought that the reform wing would secede from the state party. However, Pozsgay rejected the proposal. He probably believed that he would be able to crowd out the hardliners and therefore by leaving, splitting the party, and starting a new one would be beneficial only to his opponents who could get rid of him this way. True, a reorganized left-wing movement outside the party could have had more credibility but splitting the state party might have endangered the success of peaceful transition.

In May–June of 1989, the internal pluralization of MSZMP accelerated. Reform circles all over the country called for negotiations, and they even contacted the Opposition Roundtable. On May 1, independent trade unions organized a picnic in the People’s Gardens in Budapest with tens of thousands attending. Local opposition roundtables emerged in the country, and the joint opposition became a countrywide movement. The paramilitary Workers’ Militia was put under the control of the government. The party leadership organized a party conference to the autumn of 1989, which eventually became—upon the pressure of the reformist groups—a full-fledged party congress. The party leadership was caught between a rock and a hard place.
Following the increasingly radical steps of the Németh government, some people with close ties to the cabinet argued that negotiations should be carried out not between MSZMP and EKA but the government and the parties so the declining MSZMP would not appear with too much weight. However, it was important for EKA to negotiate with the real possessors of power and thereby have a change to draw a clear line between itself and the representatives of the old regime. Thus, the EKA rejected the negotiations with the incumbent government, and maintained the idea of bilateral negotiations with the communist party. This is how the opposition wanted to distinguish “them” and “us.” Had the regime been already happened, the opposition could have negotiated about political questions with the government. But this was not the case in the summer of 1989: the opposition had to negotiate with MSZMP, the “ruling force of society” as the communist constitution put it. At this time, the Németh government did not strongly oppose democratic transition, and therefore it could not be a symbol of the old regime either. The state party, possessed of the monopoly of power, was the manifestation of the old system, as well as the main obstacle of the regime change.

A reformist ministerial participant remembered with regret: “I felt that our ministry followed a rather strong reformist spirit, and we shouldn’t let this reformist spirit go. [...] But this was in the interest of neither political force. For the MSZMP, because it knew that it can no longer control the government, the government’s fight for independence had already been won. And for the EKA, because it was not interested in recognizing that the government follows independent politics, it was interested in blurring it with MSZMP.”24 However, as two of the most important leaders of MSZMP (Németh, Pozsgay) were also important members of the government, ministerial officials showing their independence from the party state had no political credibility. On the other hand, although they had to represent the MSZMP in the negotiations they were given remarkable freedom, almost a free mandate to do so. “Directly, we felt that we were subject to a single political instruction, the instruction of Pozsgay, that we must reach an agreement.”25

24 Interview with István Somogyvári, 1997.
As part of the preparatory, non-public consultations between the EKA and the MSZMP in April 1989, the issue of constitution-making was discussed, but at this point the EKA delegates refrained from constitution-making before the formation of a new, democratically elected parliament.

In the view of the Opposition Roundtable the goal of the negotiations is to reach an agreement between the parties about the legal acts which are prerequisite for the democratic transition, as well as the date of general elections. [..] The Opposition Roundtable considers the current Parliament unsuitable for constitution-making, therefore it does not want to make a political agreement about this issue, because that would mean narrowing the room for maneuver for the new Parliament. Based on the same considerations, it finds continuing the discussion about the institution of the president of the republic and the constitutional court untimely.

As the passage of time only favored EKA—as both the reformist circles and certain groups of society mobilized—the MSZMP had to take a step: the reburial of Imre Nagy on June 16 and the July visit of US President George Bush were coming. While in the beginning of June millions of TV viewers saw the bloody suppression of the student demonstration for democracy at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the Western pressure on the Hungarian political leadership became more explicit. US foreign policy, which followed a rather cautious policy of Eastern Europe when Bush was elected, now realized its growing room for maneuver. The US Ambassador to Hungary, who visited opposition parties personally several times, made it clear that the American president supports the peaceful, democratic way of transition, but in case of unsuccessful negotiations the financial support of the US may be questioned. So MSZMP decided to pre-empt the events.

But even within the member organizations of EKA, the opponents to negotiations needed to be convinced. The writer Dénes Csengey tried to persuade the delegates of MDF this way:

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26 The preparatory talks were attended by László Sólyom and Péter Tőgyessy from the side of EKA, while MSZMP was represented by Imre Forgács, István György, and András Tóth.
27 EKA – MSZMP, “Az Ellenzéki Kerekasztal.”
28 Ambassador Mark Palmer.
Dear friends, now this is about a political agreement, we must put our revulsions aside. [...] If we say “without trauma”, if we say “without fight”, if we say “without blood”, and this is what we say, then we must say “with negotiations”. And then we must not show our revulsion but be there at the negotiations, we must make our demands clear, and take what is rightfully ours anyway: Hungary.²⁹

On June 10, 1989, the agreement about starting negotiations between MSZMP and EKA was signed in the building of the party center. Both parties felt that they had to explain why they started negotiations with each other. Speaking in the name of EKA, a legal scholar, László Sólyom reflected on the problem of legitimacy:

Considering the future, we must see that neither party here represents the Hungarian people. At the same time, it is obvious that beyond their own membership [...] they enjoy significant support of the population. Who supports what and how much should be decided by the elections? This whole series of negotiations is legitimate if [...] its most important task is to create the conditions of free elections. [...] These negotiations will be truly substantive because we will formulate legal acts indispensable to democracy, and the governing party has committed itself in this document that legislation must not precede political agreements.³⁰

The only question that remained was which rules need to be repealed so the popular will can manifest without prior restrictions in the free elections. The parties agreed that power is based on popular sovereignty, and sovereignty cannot be monopolized by political force. This opened the way toward substantial negotiations.

2.3 The reburial of Imre Nagy

MSZMP leader Károly Grósz promised in July 1988 that, if the family wants to bury Imre Nagy he would not want to stop them, but he underlined

²⁹ Csengey, Mezőtábor szabadság, 53.
³⁰ Megállapodás.
that the political rehabilitation of the former prime minister cannot happen. Family members insisted on a worthy burial for Imre Nagy. It was organized with the help of the Committee on Historical Justice (TIB) which arranged the excavation of the unmarked graves of the convicted fifty-sixers. This made it possible, as well as the accelerating political changes, to exhume the ashes of the martyr prime minister and organize a worthy reburial. In the beginning of June 1989, the Central Committee of MSZMP issued a statement which lauded the life and work of Imre Nagy and expressed its wish to make the last honors and worthy burial a symbol of national reconciliation. The leaders of MSZMP were afraid of this day. They understood that they had to reach an agreement with EKA about the timetable of the negotiations before the day of the burial, otherwise they might face crucial political defeat. They wanted to avoid that the burial becomes a social “day of judgment” of the party. Thus, the coming reburial had a beneficial effect by accelerating the negotiation process.

The burial on June 16, 1989, was the symbolically most significant event of the transition. Two hundred thousand people gathered on the Heroes’ Square in Budapest, and the event was broadcast live on TV so it could be followed by millions. Five coffins were placed outside the Arts Hall, five of which contained the earthly remains of martyrs of 1956.31 On the proposal of Árpád Göncz, the sixth coffin was left empty: it represented all those “lads of Pest” who gave their life for the revolution. The ceremony was opened by Árpád Göncz, former 1956 convict and the president of the Hungarian Pen Club,32 who later became the President of the Republic. After him, speeches were given by other fifty-sixers, including convicts and people who had been sent away from the country. Miklós Vásárhelyi emphasized the consequences of the democratic transition, Béla Király underlined the personal example of martyrdom, Imre Mécs spoke about the necessity of reconciliation, whereas Sándor Rácz emphasized the issue of foreign military groups stationed in Hungary. It was the speech of the young Viktor Orbán, who spoke “on behalf of the Hungarian youth,” which caused the greatest political resonance. His speech was based on the realization that 31 years after the execution of Imre Nagy it was not only about a ceremony of burial but

31 Imre Nagy, Miklós Gimes, Géza Losonczi, Pál Maléter, and József Szilágyi.
an event which had direct, regime-changing political consequences beyond
the mere act of remembrance. The speech was the first open attack on reform
communists, who were described by Orbán as people who still share party
membership with the executors of the retaliation after 1956. The novelty of
the speech was that it did not try to distinguish Pozsgay as a “good commu-
nist” from the “bad communists” of the party. On the contrary, it treated
MSZMP as a single bloc and rejected it as such. This was in sharp contrast to
the strategy of most of the opposition parties.

The event on the Heroes’ Square was a turning point in the Hungarian
transition. First, psychologically it helped people get rid of fear: from here
on, not only party leaders and reform committees but the society could
speak freely about 1956. Second, after the burial, 1956 was once again inter-
preted as a revolution in public discourse. The burial rehabilitated not only
Imre Nagy but, through him, the revolution itself, and provided a powerful
argument for removing the system which was born out of crashing the rev-
olution. In short, the burial was the burial of the regime as well. Third, the
taboo of Soviet military groups stationed in Hungary fell also. Although dis-
cussion about potential solutions for troop withdrawal had already begun
behind closed doors, the issue was on the agenda of the country’s popular
discourse from June 16. Fourth, as an important result of this day, not the
“national reconciliation” which MSZMP had propagated came into being33
but a new stage of democratic transition began. It became clear that genuine
national reconciliation means none other but democracy. Fifth, the burial of
Imre Nagy can be considered as a turning point also because it revealed that
substantial groups of society had been committed to democracy, while the
reformists of MSZMP still spoke about model change at this point.

The lawful revolution of Hungary cannot be understood without the
anti-regime demonstrations of 1989, that is, without the role of the forces
outside the elite. The transition could be peaceful precisely because the
MSZMP realized that the use of force could have provoked resistance on
the streets. The Roundtable talks proceeded smoothly not only because of
the self-limiting behavior of the participants, but because the majority of cit-
izens was behind the demands of the opposition parties. While democratic
legitimation on free elections was missing at the time, the opposition parties

33 Kenedi, Kis állambiztonsági olvasókönyv I–II.
could rely on the support of the people. While the formation of EKA cannot be understood without the success of the demonstration of March 15,\textsuperscript{34} the June reburial of Imre Nagy which was seen live on TV by millions, played a huge role in the retreat of MSZMP. Finally, the quick withdrawal of the party from workplaces and the dissolution of the Workers’ Militia cannot be understood without the autumn 1989 petition campaign, which was followed by the success of the “Four Yes” referendum. What mattered was not just the distance which undoubtedly existed between the people and the elite but also the interaction between them which dynamized the regime change.\textsuperscript{35} In critical moments, the elite-driven transformation was pushed on by popular support.

The reburial was not followed by counterattacks of the hardliners within the communist party. Thus, the reformists had a chance to realize their victory over their opponents in personal changes on the top of the leadership as well. Accordingly, from July Károly Grósz was no longer the first person of MSZMP: the single-person control of the general party secretary was replaced by a party board of four members.\textsuperscript{36} In this arrangement, for a few months Rezső Nyers became the “first among equals,” and the reason for change was the vertical spreading of power. After June 16, the internal political fights between the reformers and hardliners of the party became less important vis-à-vis the peaceful fight of the powerholders and the opposition in the eye of the society. It did not matter that the reformists won over the opponents of reform if the society, by bidding farewell to the reform communist Imre Nagy, bid farewell to reform communism as well. At this point, the reformists went so far in the reorganization of the structure of power that there was no turning back for them: they declared by the beginning of the negotiations that they support the principle of free elections and the program of complete regime change. From here on, popular opinion was less interested in the renewal of MSZMP because they focused on the opposition parties instead. Later, this led to the breakthrough of MDF and SZDSZ in early autumn, respectively, to the Fidesz becoming known, as well as the

\textsuperscript{34} Hofer, “Harc a rendszerváltásért szimbolikus mezőben.”
\textsuperscript{35} Renwick, “Az eliten kívüli erők szerepe a rendszerváltásban.”
\textsuperscript{36} The four members of the party board were Károly Grósz, Miklós Németh, Rezső Nyers, and Imre Pozsgay. The Political Committee of MSZMP was replaced by a 22-member political steering committee which was led by the board quartet.
success of the by-elections, the referendum, and finally the parliamentary elections.

Three weeks after political rehabilitation, on July 6, 1989, Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs were legally rehabilitated as well. The Supreme Court acquitted the innocently executed former leaders, and on the same day János Kádár died. The Kádár era ended in political, intellectual, and personal terms. The burial of the soft dictatorship’s leader was attended by 10,000 people, basically thanking the former party leader that his politics in the 1960s and 1970s did not go on as it started after 1956. Besides this strange gratitude of survival, the need for peace, and nostalgia one could also feel relief. The eyes of the people turned to the Roundtable talks which defined the internal political life of the country.

3. Constitution-making at the National Roundtable talks

Unlike in Poland where there was only one Roundtable for all political forces, in Hungary the opposition parties formed a Roundtable of their own to find common political platform for the remaining part of the transition. This was the Opposition Roundtable that entered negotiations with the MSZMP and its satellites, called the Third Side, in the summer of 1989. These talks, formally trilateral, were called as National Roundtable talks. In the period from the Polish elections in June till the East German political landslide in November, Hungary was at the focus of international attention. At this time, the Hungarian Roundtable talks represented hope for the continuation of democratic turn in Central Europe.

As EKA did everything to avoid the success of “divide and conquer” tactics, it always sought to conduct bilateral negotiations with MSZMP. It did not want to negotiate with the government or the ministers but directly with the party, which the current constitution declared the possessor of power. The opposition parties wanted the two groupings to sit across each other: the state party on one side, and EKA on the other side. The leaders of EKA wanted to present the negotiations as dialogue between the power and the society, which would have illustrated that the powerholders did not belong to the people. One of the main protagonists of the opposition gave the following assessment:
The MSZMP had a double goal. First, to divide EKA into its pieces, and second, to manipulate the public to believe that it represented not simply a party but the mass of organizations which represent the citizens. [...] In other words, to hide as much as possible the fact that there are two opposing sides, namely the side of democracy and striving for freedom and the side of dictatorship and the system of privilege. [...] The EKA defined it clearly: we see one single task of these negotiations, to make free elections happen even without constitutional legitimation.\(^{37}\)

MSZMP did not agree to bilateral negotiations. György Fejti, who argued for a tougher negotiation strategy for the MSZMP, insisted that “if we must negotiate then let us avoid bipolar negotiations—that ‘power and opposition’—and have a third side as well, and then everyone who counts in the country can be involved.”\(^{38}\) For EKA, it was difficult to accept that the negotiations would not be bilateral but, with the participation of the satellite organizations MSZMP invited, trilateral. In response, they built in two checks which ensured the negotiations would be substantive: each side had to have a single position (need for consensus); and the Third Side cannot prevent the first two sides from concluding an agreement. Eventually the parties agreed to have the MSZMP-invited social organizations—as a separate side, representing a consensual position—at the negotiating table. This is how the Third Side became part of the negotiations, while they announced right in the beginning that they would support the agreement of MSZMP and EKA, and therefore they accepted their limited negotiating position.

3.1 The structure of the talks

On June 13, 1989, the negotiating parties signed a memorandum of understanding in the Parliament. On one side, the representatives of MSZMP sat,\(^{39}\) on the other, the EKA represented by nine organizations.\(^{40}\) Finally, the

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37 Interview with György Szabad, 1997.
38 Interview with István György, 1997.
39 MSZMP was represented by Károly Grósz, Imre Pozsgay, and György Fejti.
40 The EKA member organizations included BZSBT, Fidesz, FKGP, Liga, KDNP, MDF, MNP, MSZDP, and SZDSZ.
Third Side consisted of the representatives of seven organizations.\footnote{The Third Side included: Left Alternative, Democratic Youth Community (Demisz), Patriotic People’s Front (HNF), Hungarian Federation of Resistance Fighters and Antifascists (MEASZ), National Council of Hungarian Women (MNOT), Münnich Ferenc Society, and the National Council of Trade Unions (SZOT).}

The first plenary session began with the opening statements of Károly Grósz (MSZMP), Imre Kónya (EKA), and István Kukorelli (Third Side). Grósz cited the requirement of peaceful transition and emphasized that the process had been started by the party state. As he explained, “we need to find a peaceful way of transition to democracy which is based on multi-party system and the competition of parties. […] The Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party aims, together with other political forces, at developing a democratic and socialist constitutional state that enforces the will of the people.”\footnote{Grósz, “Felszólalás,” 16.}

Representing EKA, Imre Kónya underlined that Hungary belongs to its people and the negotiations are not about the distribution of power among the participants but finding the way toward free elections.

It must be pointed out that the goal of the negotiations is to ensure peaceful transition from the dictatorial system of rule to a representative democracy which truly enforces the will of the people. During the negotiations, we do not want to distribute power between us and the current holders of power. We do not want to be part of the exercise of power above the people’s head, without asking them first. Our goal is that the citizens of our country can and will decide on who, what political forces they entrust with the exercise of power for the period between one election and another.\footnote{Kónya, Felszólalás, 19.}

Given the negotiating parties agreed in the goal to be achieved already at the beginning—a representative democracy based on a multiparty system and formed in free elections—their task from here on was “only” to discuss the way of transformation. EKA insisted on holding the negotiations in the Parliament building. This had a symbolic meaning, which was explained by a leading figure of the negotiations as follows: “What we wanted to negotiate was not the future of Hungary but the conditions which are needed for free elections. […] We wanted to show this symbolically by not going
to a neutral place but negotiating in the Hungarian Parliament. Indicating that, while there is no legal authority vested in this something to be formed, it will indeed essentially fulfill the task which is a task of a parliament.”

The Opposition Roundtable did not consider the communist Parliament as legitimate.

After the opening ceremony of the National Roundtable talks, the parties put forth the points and the order of the negotiations. They agreed to form 6–6 expert working committees to discuss certain political and economic topics; their agreements are sent on the so-called middle level of the negotiations to the leading politicians of the parties; finally, conclusive agreements could be reached in the plenary sessions of the negotiations. The working committees of the political negotiations covered the following topics: (1) issues regarding the constitution, including the legal standing of the president and the institution of a constitutional court; (2) the principles of the party act and party financing; (3) the principles of electoral law; (4) the principles of modifying criminal law and rules of criminal procedure; (5) the issue of the public sphere and the principles of the information act; and (6) the guarantees of nonviolence of the transition.

In the following months, the old and new political groups developed Hungary’s new constitutional system. In a way, they took on the role of the parliament as well as the function of a constituent assembly by creating a constitution that was new in its substantive items. In a somewhat elevated tone, we can say that the intellectuals of EKA carried out the special project that had been described in various ways by many from Plato to Bauman: the project where the philosophers, the writers, or the politically active intellectuals planning the future behind the “veil of ignorance” are given the opportunity to develop the institutional order of the country.

On the other hand, the economic negotiations were less significant than the political ones, and they were not successful either. Originally, the MSZMP politicians believed that the political results can be made conditional on the economic negotiations and the resultant sharing of responsibility. Whereas the technocrats of the party wanted to win the support of

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44 Interview with Péter Tölgyessy, 1997.
45 The idea to have economic committees with a same weight as political ones came from the MSZMP, and it was supported by the organizations of the Third Side and even the independent trade unions represented in EKA.
opposition parties to the unpopular measures of the economic liberalization program. Other participants sought the opportunity to discuss economic democracy, worker self-management, and the creation of social property in these committees. Finally, the trade unions tried to compensate for their decreasing weight in the population this way. All these expectations turned out to be illusions. One of the reasons might have been that the government had already passed the laws that helped spontaneous privatization (Company Act, Act on Transformation), so the most important issues had been dealt with before the entering of EKA. Another reason was that the opposition was not completely willing to participate in the development of economic alternatives for the new system without knowing the real situation of the country.

According to a participant, “the economic negotiations did not make too much sense. What really made sense were two things. One was to achieve that the opposition would not say something radically different from MSZMP about debt repayments. The other was the property reform. The spontaneous privatization had already been happening, the power transformation of MSZMP on every level, especially in the major companies. The position we reached on this was that pillage must not be permitted.”46 Another participant said that “in the committees working on the economic front, the implicit strategy of EKA was not to make agreement.”47 According to a third opinion:

The real cleavage was not between the MSZMP at the time and the opposition but between these two groups and the Third Side with quite leftist views. […] But the reformist spirit had already been there Hungary at the time, and everyone was infected. I can say that on the level of generalities everyone spoke the same language. Multi-party system, private property, market economy, […] The representatives of MSZMP were reformers, the followers of the liberal line of economics. […] The economic team, especially the team of Fidesz, was doctrinaire liberal. We were devout libertarians, but we condemned spontaneous privatization because we said it was the transformation of power. MDF better considered the

46 Interview with Bertalan Diczházi, 1997.
conditions of Hungary in its program, there idea was a more balanced transition. [. . .] It was never even raised that sooner or later a layer of owners would emerge, and from them who would become the great capitalists, major entrepreneurs, or what role should foreign capital play. We discussed a thousand things, but not the most important issues.\textsuperscript{48}

In the Roundtable talks, the half traditionalist and half third way and alternative socialist economic views of the delegates of the Third Side were overshadowed by the latent alliance of the reformist-technocratic-liberal groups of MSZMP and EKA negotiators. Negotiations about the issues of economic transition took place only months later at the attempt of the Blue Ribbon Commission (\textit{Kék Szalag Bizottság}) and the Bridge Group (\textit{Híd-csoport}). The members of these groups were either independent economic experts or ones with ties to the opposition parties.\textsuperscript{49} They published the results of their work in 1990.\textsuperscript{50}

3.2 \textbf{Shifting positions}

Already after the opening session, EKA had to realize that it will have to deal with constitution-making to a much greater extent that it had planned. Only a few days passed since the ceremonial opening of the negotiations when EKA changed its position. They realized that peaceful transition was not possible with the old constitution, only revolution, and therefore they had to discuss constitutional changes in a systematic manner. The Ministry of Justice had started the elaboration of the finer points of a new constitution and was not happy to see that the work had to be stopped because of the starting Roundtable negotiations. MSZMP was interested in setting the presidency and the constitutional court, so that it can preserve its power at least to some extent.

However, the main reason the negotiators of EKA had to change the constitution was to remove the mention to the leading role of the state party, and

\textsuperscript{48} Interview with István Harmati, 1997.
\textsuperscript{49} Interestingly, George Soros was member of the Blue Ribbon Committee (\textit{Kék Szalag Bizottság}).
\textsuperscript{50} Híd-csoport, “Híd a közeli jövőbe”; Kék Szalag Bizottság, \textit{Gazdasági programjavaslat}; Lengyel, \textit{Végkifejlet}. 
to institute the legal guarantees of multiparty system and free elections. As Imre Kónya of the opposition said:

Previously the rights which had been part of the constitution were not enforced. But now the multi-party system is really working [. . .] so it needs to be modified. These problems, however, can be solved by a few changes. That is why we need to change the constitution. We simply need to remove the paragraph which says that the leading force of the working people is the party of the working class [. . .], we need to remove, for example, the limitations which are written next to each freedom that [they] cannot be exercised against the interest of the society. [. . .] And there are a few such passages of the constitution, if we solve this, then the constitution will work very well until a new constitution is not made.51

The paradox of legitimacy was created by that, in theory, powers with no legitimacy had to create legitimate political situation in the country. The creation of a legitimate political situation required active intervention: a constitution had to be created which allows the Hungarian people to express their will in free elections. There were some even on the side of the opposition who believed that “because of the question of legitimacy, the whole negotiation cannot really be regarded as democratic.”52 Others, however, opined that the later “feedback from the voting population was terribly important, and the fact that there were no demonstrations whatsoever against EKA meant to us that the country is indeed happy that changes are happening on the grounds of negotiations. There were no voices that questioned the legitimacy of this group.”53

EKA could not return its mandate, saying its legitimacy can be questioned. For if they did that, there would not have been democratic transformation. The possible withdrawal of the organizations of EKA would have meant putting the decision in the (still not legitimate) hands of MSZMP, who would have been unlikely to go further than model change. During the negotiations, EKA applied two lines of argument to bridge the problem of legitimacy. On the one hand, it referred to the support of the people,

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51 Kónya, Felzóaláí 1989. június 20-án, 123.
52 Interview with Csaba Kiss Gy, 1997.
53 Interview with Imre Furmann, 1997.
and they believed this was justified by the various mass demonstrations and other kinds of support from the people. On the other hand, EKA referred to the historically existing, traditional methods of the Hungarian legal system. In uncertain situations, they tried to choose the kinds of solutions which had a precedent in the legal history of Hungary. The reference to the “historical constitution” has become a substitute for the missing legitimacy, and thus the involvement of EKA in constitution-making happened in a cautious, step-by-step manner. If there was no other argument, earlier precedents and historical analogies emerged. This required negotiators who knew these precedents and understood the analogies.

The argument of György Szabad in a middle-level negotiation on June 21, 1989, showed the change of the opposition’s position. Szabad underlined that the creation of a new electoral law is the most important, but this requires changing the constitution as well, to remove the constitutional reference to single-party rule. He added that EKA was ready to discuss other institutions as well (i.e., the presidency and the constitutional court) provided that the discussions do not aim at legislation but the elaboration of principles: “Let us note that we expect the laws about the introduction of the institution of presidency and the setting up of a constitutional court to be created also by a new parliament, composed on the basis of the results of free elections. However, this is far from saying that we are not ready to formulate such basic principles at the current inter-party negotiations which would facilitate the legislative work of the to-be-elected parliament in this respect.”54 The Third Side wanted to create both institutions before the free elections, because it regarded the constitutional court and the presidency as the guarantees of stability, the manifestation of national unity.55

The expert-level negotiations in the working committees which started in the end of June showed the efficient cooperation of the delegates of the three parties. Several people emphasized the collegial, intellectual character of the working committee negotiations. “It had a different atmosphere, there was no rigid political opposition, because the one sitting opposite me was not a politician. They were lawyers, a university professor sat half opposite me from the third side, and two officials from the side opposite me.”56

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56 Interview with Katalin Kutrucz, 1997.
case of every issue where the parties reached an agreement it was approved by the middle-level negotiations without a substantive review. However, in the case of the issues where no agreement was reached the delegates at the middle-level negotiations had a decisive role: they had to find a political compromise solution for the controversial issue.

The I/1 working committee of EKA was the most important committee it dealt with the issues of constitution. It set an example for the other committees, and the negotiators included the top figures of the Opposition Roundtable. The representatives of MSZMP were not apparatchiks either but university professors and lecturers, who were mainly coming from the public administration and constitutional law departments of ELTE Faculty of Law. According to the recollection of an MSZMP negotiator,

This was a very hard fight because we had to revise great many things. It required extraordinary attention because the other side was very well prepared. [...] It was not like that there was a text, and we debated that text. No, there were theoretical and ideological trends behind this. We had to constantly adjust ourselves to what the other side said. These things were terribly enjoyable from a scholarly point of view, as we practically went through the constitution paragraph by paragraph.

In the first statement of the committee, the representatives of EKA stated that Hungary should be a republic, a democratic constitutional state, where power is based on popular sovereignty and popular sovereignty is exercised by the people directly or via elected representatives. They declared that public authority shall not be possessed exclusively by a single person, social group, or political party; that political parties may be formed freely, but parties may not exercise public power directly; and that no party shall act with the aim of acquiring or exercising power by force. The constitutional proposal of EKA rejected war as a solution to international conflict and recognized the supremacy of international law, and emphasized that the Hungarian state

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57 The EKA delegation to the I/1 working committee included József Antall, historian; Imre Boross, lawyer; Imre Kónya, lawyer; Péter Tölgyessy, legal scholar; and Viktor Orbán, lawyer.

58 The MSZMP expert-level delegation included György Jutasi, István Somogyvári, Péter Szalay, and István György as professors, and József Kajdi as lawyer in public administration.

strives to achieve cooperation with all the peoples and countries of the world and promotes the nurturing of relations with Hungarians living outside its borders. In the proposal of EKA, the recognition of human rights appeared as an unquestionable starting point: “[. . .] the Republic of Hungary recognizes inviolable and inalienable fundamental human rights. The respect and protection of these rights is a primary obligation of the State.” The proposal stated that “the economy of the country is a market economy, in which public and private property shall receive equal consideration by the State.”

EKA’s understanding of its role changed fundamentally in a mere few weeks. While at the beginning of the negotiations MSZMP wanted more comprehensive constitution-making and EKA was wary of the comprehensive revision of the constitution—saying that only those laws should be repealed which are in the way of free elections—a month later MSZMP started arguing that it is enough to deal only with the most important issues because the finer points belong to the authority of the freely elected, new parliament. The reason EKA conducted a thorough revision of the constitution was that it found it dangerous to agree only in the issues the MSZMP wanted (presidency, constitutional court). For it might have happened—which EKA wanted to avoid—that the new constitutional court would have defended the old constitution, that is, the old status quo vis-à-vis the adherents of democratic transition.

The position of MSZMP was formulated by Géza Kilényi in the middle-level session of the National Roundtable negotiations:

We believe there is a public consensus in the question that this country needs a new constitution built on new, principled bases. Accordingly, we do not consider as a goal the comprehensive reform of the Constitution of 1949. Our position is that now in the transitional period only certain legal institutional guarantees need to be created, or those changes need to be performed in the effective text of the constitution which are indispensable to the undisturbed operation of parties. For this reason, we cannot accept that style of negotiation that aims to make us plow through every single provision of the constitution from the first one to the last, because that could possibly take years."
In contrast, Péter Tölgyessy of the opposition emphasized that, while then only the two issues were important to the MSZMP, the EKA believed that every institution that was dangerous from the point of view of guarantees needed to be revised, lest the constitutional court be used to prosecution of the opposition.

There is no need for setting the President of the Republic in the period of transition; this may belong to the authority of a credible Hungarian parliament with legitimate authority. For this reason, we believe that a temporary solution needs to be constructed, the essence of which is that, by abolishing the Stalin-type Presidential Council, the narrow powers of the head of state be exercised, as a temporary solution, by the Speaker of the National Assembly.\footnote{Tölgyessy, “Felszólalás 1989 július 27-én.”}

The EKA also stated that as the new constitution was not ready yet, therefore they saw the creation of the Constitutional Court to be without cause. In his response, Kilényi argued that if they considered the National Roundtable and the old parliament legitimate enough to create an electoral law then they must see it just as legitimate when it came to creating the law on the presidency. He cited the fact that the April Laws of 1848—which were legislated as part of the revolution with the aim of modernizing the Kingdom of Hungary into a parliamentary nation state—were also adopted by the feudal Diet of Hungary.\footnote{Kilényi cited the 1848/I resolution of the Diet, which stated: “The sessions of the Diet of Estates shall be declared continuous until the creation of all the laws which are needed under the given circumstances to guarantee freedom, order, independent constitutionalism, and ensuring national interests, while legislative work shall be continued in a new council of representatives convened on the basis of popular representation.” Kilényi, “Felszólalás 1989. július 27-én,” 651.} In Kilényi’s view, the trilateral negotiations could happen precisely because doubts can be raised only in relation to the political legitimacy of the parliament elected in 1985, but its legal legitimacy “can hardly be questioned.” He argued it was pointless if the negotiating parties question each other’s legitimacy: “If we go down this road, we will conclude that nobody is legitimate, for if the parliament is not legitimate then the government is not legitimate either, because the government was...
elected by the parliament. But, with all due respect, why are the newly organized parties legitimate, which have been elected by nobody?”

Responding to this point, György Szabad of the EKA argued that the real question of debate between the negotiating parties is not legitimacy but the manner the issues are to be discussed. He underlined that the National Roundtable does not have to legislate in every issue. He reminded of the agreement of the three negotiating parties, which stated that the goal of the negotiations is to define the principles and rules serving the political transformation. There is no need to legislate in everything, there are places where it is enough to agree in principles. He emphasized that in the issues of the presidency and the constitutional court the EKA was ready, not for legislation but the formulation of principles. As an historian, he could not miss the opportunity to answer the argument of the April Laws and cite Lajos Kossuth, who interpreted the situation back then as follows: “We believed that only those laws can and should be created which were to be created by the force of the setting sun, providing the basis which a rising force, which is decided upon by the country of popular representation, can freely build on.”

In the end, the parties agreed that issues of the election of president, the creation of the electoral system, and the date of the elections are to be removed from the authority of the working committees, and they will be decided as political (as opposed to professional) issues, on the middle-level political negotiations. By this time, Géza Kilényi, who supported the initiatives of the government instead of those of the MSZMP, had already gotten into conflict with Pozsgay and Fejti, and resigned from the negotiations. From here on, the issue of legitimacy of the negotiating parties was removed from the agenda.

3.3 Major steps forward, limited results

By the end of August, the negotiations had achieved considerable progress. The negotiating parties had virtually rewritten the constitution, removing every clause that defended the one-party system. A speech by József Antall

66 Tölgyessy, Felszólalás 1989 augusztus 3-án.
67 On the problem of legitimacy, see József Bayer, A politikai legitimitás.
in one of the debates of EKA was a turning point with respect to the negoti-
ations as well. For Antall outlined a legal tradition, or an historical “bridge”
which had its spiritual pillars in 1848, 1946, and 1989. Antall argued that the
genuine predecessors of the peaceful transition of 1989 were the April Laws
of 1848, as well as the Law I of 1946 on the legal standing of the President
of the Republic. Both legislative precedents rested upon the peaceful agree-
ment of opposing forces, and so they represented pattern for 1989. While the
supporters of regime change were filling the streets with the name of Imre
Nagy and the demands of the revolution of 1956, in the negotiations and
regarding institution-building the historical narrative began to gain ground
that emphasized the essential similarities of the bloodless transformations of
1848, 1946, and 1989.68

As I mentioned above, the symbolic starting point of the historical vision
of the dissidents was 1945. It was only years later in the nineties that 1944—
that is the Holocaust as an absolute starting point—would be attached to the
liberals’ collective historical memory. This slightly changed when SZDSZ
was formed, and historical references appeared to some of the outstanding
moments of Hungarian history that followed the spirit of the Enlightenment.
These included some notable events of the 19th century, as well as the activ-
ity of Lajos Kossuth, István Széchenyi, and József Eötvös. However, as the
political philosophy of SZDSZ (and Fidesz at the time) concentrated on the
future, historical references to the Hungarian past were isolated and could
not become a unified narrative. The ones who were able to build such a nar-
rative were the MDF, which had grown out of the group of populist writers.
In the historical vision of the right, the thousand years of Hungarian state-
hood formed the base to which political events connected only as superficial
processes. The historical past of Hungary was surrounded by “pride and prej-
udice”: the conservatives proudly identified with it the attitude of the liberals
was more critical. The liberals wanted to build democracy while avoiding the
mistakes of the historical past; the conservatives wanted to build democracy
by integrating the traditions of the past into the democratic edifice.

From this point of view, it is not surprising that the historical arc of 1848,
1946, and 1989 came from József Antall, who was one of the chief negoti-
tors of MDF. The proposal was felicitous because it offered a common plat-

form for liberals and conservatives. The liberals accepted the construction which connected the progressive moments of institution-building of the history of Hungary. To the conservatives, it provided with the experience of “grand narrative” as it treated 1989 not as a simple exceptional revolutionary moment but as a station of organic development, thereby integrating it into Hungarian history.

Antall’s proposal not just politically rehabilitated Law I of 1946, which cited Law III of 1848, but also elevated it to the rank of fundamental point of reference for democratic institution-building. The proposal was adopted by EKA, and it was surprisingly easily acceptable to MSZMP as well. Accordingly, the parties agreed that the tasks of the President would be fulfilled temporarily by the Speaker of the National Assembly, assuming the powers listed in Law I of 1946. This meant that the President was relatively “weak” by its powers, confined to a balancing role and not constituting an independent center of power. The President was vested with the symbolic power of general-in-chief, and the function of President was defined in a way that the head of state shall be the guardian of the democratic functioning of the state organization and embody the unity of the nation. According to the recollection of an MSZMP negotiator, the issue of the presidency “was a highly sensitive issue. So, it was clear that a pact existed. The people did not speak about this, and yet everybody knew that a pact exists: Pozsgay will be head of state, Antall will be head of government.” Nevertheless, the compromise was accepted by MSZMP.

The member organizations of EKA had an important debate about the issue of the official coat of arms of the republic. The parties realized that if the whole constitution is changed then so should the coat of arms of the People’s Republic. Not that the old coat of arms was an obstacle to holding free elections. But it just could not be justified that, if the regime changes, why the coat of arms of the dictatorship remains unchanged. In his speech, József Antall pointed out that this question might be worth a referendum, but in that case the decision would be postponed by months and therefore the new constitu-

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70 Kalmár and Révész, “Az I/1. számú munkabizottság,” 22.
71 Interview with István György, 1997.
72 This is how the communist Mátyás Szűrös, the Speaker of the National Assembly became the temporary president of the Republic from October 1989 till the summer of 1990.
tion and the old coat of arms would temporarily coexist. The dominant group of EKA demanded the so-called Kossuth Coat of Arms, whereas a minority argued for the historical crowned coat of arms. As a compromise, Antall proposed that the Kossuth Coat of Arms—as the coat of arms of the revolution of 1956—should be the official state coat of arms, but the crowned coat of arms should be allowed in addition for religious celebrations and other events of historical reference. For in 1989 it was without a doubt that the most parties of the opposition stood behind the Kossuth Coat of Arms. Antall also believed this when he made his proposal. “The society will be misled with the coat-of-arms issue. This is an opportunity for manipulation, together with the crowned coat of arms.”

There, Antall was right. Not so much later, MSZMP started publicly arguing for the crowned coat of arms as the more “heraldically authentic” solution considering the entire history of the Hungarian people. Thus, the state party broke the consensus in the Kossuth Coat of Arms. The historical parties also publicly endorsed the crowned coat of arms, and therefore EKA could not have a unanimous position in this issue. In the end, the debate was decided by the new parliament: the crowned coat of arms was chosen.

MSZMP insisted that the new constitution must include the word socialism. However, this was hotly debated within EKA. Radicals like Viktor Orbán saw it as an impermissible moral concession. Their position was that no ideological reference should be allowed in the new constitution because that may expand the opportunities of constitutional interpretation in antidemocratic directions. Yet MSZMP was adamant, and eventually EKA accepted to feature the word socialism on two conditions: if the expression “socialism” is included only in the preamble of the constitution; and even there it is balanced out with the values of “civil democracy.” On the September 4 meeting of the Roundtable talks, the parties eventually agreed to the following formulation in the new constitution: “The Hungarian Republic is an independent, democratic constitutional state where the values of both civil democracy and democratic socialism are realized.”

74 The Preamble of Law XX of 1949 contained it as follows: “The Constitution as the basic law of the Hungarian People’s Republic ensures our achievements so far and our further progression on the road of socialism.” Cf. 1949. XX. A Magyar Népköztársaság Alkotmánya. (The Constitution of the Hungarian People’s Republic) Budapest: KJK.
76 Somogyvári, “Összefoglaló,” 303.
MSZMP had always favored the establishment of the Constitutional Court, which EKA had long opposed. According to the MSZMP’s proposal, constitutional review could be requested only by members of parliament, parliamentary factions, and public officials, but the Court’s decision could be overruled by the two-thirds of the parliament. In contrast, EKA demanded that constitutional review could be initiated by anyone, the Court should have the right to nullify laws, and its decisions could not be nullified by the parliament.

EKA stalled the agreement to the establishment of the Constitutional Court till the end, for its position was that first a constitution should be created that is worth defending. As Péter Tölgyessy put it: “We insist that the constitutional court may be included in the text of the constitution only if the parties agreed on the whole. So, if we reached consensus on every issue of the constitution, then the last among the paragraphs we record should be the constitutional court.” However, a turn had happened by the September 15 middle-level meeting of the National Roundtable talks. There, Péter Tölgyessy and József Antall announced that EKA agreed to the establishment of the Constitutional Court, with the powers they listed, and they were ready to formulate the legal text in the available few days. Antall argued as follows:

Earlier, the position of EKA was too against the establishment of the Constitutional Court, or it did not urge the establishment of the Court in the transitional period. However, the fact that in terms of the institution of the presidency [. . .] and the issue of governance such a construction was accepted, based on the continuity of Hungarian public law, that it can agree to [. . .] meaning the institution of the presidency based on the Law I of 1946, it thus sees the establishment of the Constitutional Court justified.

In his next comment, Péter Tölgyessy contrasted the 1989 constitution-making with the 1949 Stalinist constitution, saying:

77 For example, on the meeting of the I/1 working committee on July 19, 1989 the delegation of EKA firmly opposed the establishment of a constitutional court, arguing that that can only belong to the competence of the new parliament. Cf. Bozóki et al. Kerekasztal-tárgyalások 1989-ben, 666.
Our position was that the Law XX of 1949 was not worthy of protection of constitutional review. This constitution, however, which we have created almost to completion together, is indeed worthy of constitutional protection. Thus, our view of the constitutional court changed, and now it appears precisely as a safeguarding element. [...] now the constitutional court defends a Western-type constitutional state.\textsuperscript{79}

As the assessment of the situation was accepted by both MSZMP and the Third Side, there remained only one condition to agree about: the delegation of MSZMP had to give guarantees that the parliament of the party state will not pack the Constitutional Court with their own people. The solution they developed was that the judges would be elected by several consecutive parliaments, and the first five judges would be elected in a parity system.\textsuperscript{80} The law on the constitutional court was formulated in an accelerated procedure by the experts of the respective working committee, and therefore the negotiating parties could accept it already on the plenary session of September 18. The body came into being right after the new constitution was proclaimed, in November 1989.\textsuperscript{81} By the end of the Roundtable talks it was increasingly palpable on the side of the state party that the government was detaching from the MSZMP. One person recalled, “in August I already felt that only the government was negotiating, and the MSZMP was just exercising weakness behind it. The consensus-seeking politics of the Németh group became more and more dominant.”\textsuperscript{82}

However, no agreement was made about who—the parliament or the people—should elect the president of the republic. The president was going to replace the collective presidential body, the Presidential Council, and hold the powers defined in Law I of 1946. The MSZMP and the Third Side accepted that the president—a position which at the time Minister of State Imre Pozsgay had the most chance to attain—should be elected as soon as

\textsuperscript{79} Tölgyessy, “Felszólalás, Szeptember 15, 1989,” 413.
\textsuperscript{80} Two were appointed by the opposition, two, by the MSZMP, and the fifth member was appointed by the joint agreement of the two parties.
\textsuperscript{81} The parties negotiated about the legal standing of the State Audit Office as well. The body was established in the autumn of 1989, but its president was elected only by the new parliament. In addition, an agreement was made on the working-committee level about the parliamentary commissioner of civil rights (ombudsman), but the related law was created only in 1993.
\textsuperscript{82} Interview with András Holló, 1997.
possible in direct elections by the people. At first, EKA did not even want to negotiate about this institution because they held it was beyond the scope of the transition. Later, EKA took the position that, in a parliamentary democracy, the parliament electing the president is only constitutionally consistent solution, but they did not believe the leaving parliament of the dictatorship had the right to it. Eventually, they argued that until the new parliament elects the president of the republic the Speaker of the National Assembly should be seen as temporary president.

Notwithstanding the initial agreement, the unity of EKA broke up on this issue in August 1989. Five organizations (the historical parties: BZSBT, FKGP, KDNP, MDF, MNP) began to think that the president should, for the first time and as an exception, be elected by the people. Four organizations (the new organizations: Fidesz, Liga, MSZDP, SZDSZ) opposed this and rejected the proposal, referring to the dangers of presidentialism including the potential to jeopardize free parliamentary elections. Another point the parties could not agree on was when the president should be elected, that is, before or after the free elections. One of the participants remembered, "Pozsgay told us a few years later that they had indeed agreed with MDF that he would become president, there would be direct presidential elections, and in exchange he guaranteed that MSZMP would allow the free elections to take place. They made such a deal, into which the rest of the opposition was not involved." Today, numerous reports about the close connection of Pozsgay, Bíró, Antall, and Csomó exist. In their meetings, they discussed not only the presidency but also the position of the president of MDF and the plans to reform MSZMP as well. It is a fact that the unity of EKA in the issue of the date and way of electing the president had dissolved by August 1989.

The legal regulation of parties was assigned to the I/2 working committee. Its experts agreed that every organization should be considered a party if it has a registered membership and agrees, it is officially registered, to be subject to the legal conditions of party functioning and financing. To preempt the question whether only parties can run in elections, the members of the committee agreed that any organization that runs in the elections

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83 Interview with Gábor Fodor, 1997.
falls under the Party Act. The proposal of EKA argued that MSZMP should account for its wealth and, in the spirit of equality of opportunity, should use it to finance the newly founded parties. Yet the negotiations stranded at this point as the MSZMP refused this method. They had a similar attitude of refusal toward the proposal that party organizations at workplaces should be outlawed. As virtually only the MSZMP was present at the workplaces, this meant that they wanted to ensure one-sided advantages to themselves before the elections.

The I/3 working committee reached an agreement on the electoral law. The result was a two-vote and two-round type Hungarian electoral system, combining the systems of county, individual and national compensational lists. The complexity of the law was later subject to several criticisms. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the electoral system created in the transition worked relatively well for the two coming decades, meeting the criteria of representation, representativeness, and governability at the same time. The negotiations of the I/4 working committee were similarly successful, which modified the dictatorship’s criminal law and rules of criminal procedure. The issue of the public sphere, however, remained unsolved: the I/5 working committee developed the conception of a committee that would have supervised the impartial spread of news, but it failed out of personal reasons. For the committee was unable to find five citizens who were politically “above all suspicion” and accepted by all the negotiating forces. The working committee had to deal with both current issues—the transparency of the National Roundtable itself—and preparing laws such as the Information Act, therefore it could not reach longer-term findings. A reason for this was the problem of the supervision of public media, and a consequence was the so-called “media war” waged between 1991 and 1995.85

Finally, the last, I/6 working committee wanted to create the guarantees of peaceful transition, or more precisely to create legal guarantees to avoid violent solutions. This committee achieved half success. While several compromises were made in the issues of the military and the police, it could not resolve disagreements in some fundamental issues. The delegation of MSZMP did not accept to exclude civil disobedience from the concept of violence, neither did it accept the proposal of EKA to dissolve the Workers’

85 Bajomi-Lázár, A magyarországi médiabáború.
Negotiated Revolution: The Strategy of the Opposition

Militia—which was the state party’s own armed force formed at the end of 1956—immediately and without legal successor. According to the recollection of one an MSZMP negotiator, the party had “one single rigid political claim, taboo, that the dissolution of the Workers’ Militia can be accepted under no circumstances.”\(^{86}\) This latter issue was debated on the middle-level negotiations as well, but the MSZMP firmly resisted the idea to dissolve the armed force immediately and without legal successor.

The parties of EKA had different assessments of the political relevance of these debates. Within EKA, “the Five” argued that the achievements already made must not be risked, and the agreement should be signed to secure them in spite of the disagreements in further important issues. They believed that agreement in the unresolved issues can be achieved later, in a newer round of the negotiations. In opposition, “the Four” held that there were no political guarantees until the Workers’ Militia exists, until the election of the president precedes parliamentary elections, until MSZMP does not account for its wealth, and finally, until it does not leave workplaces. After long maneuvering, the apparent unity of EKA could be sustained until the plenary session of September 18, 1989. Eventually, SZDP decided that they would sign the agreement only if the passage about the election of the president is removed, whereas Liga abstained from signing the agreement. SZDSZ and Fidesz were the two organizations which still refused signing the agreement, but they waived their veto right and did not prevent other organizations from signing it in the name of EKA. On September 18, the plenary session of the National Roundtable talks ended the negotiating phase of the democratic transition.

The agreement reached at the negotiations was, as promised, submitted to the parliament and it was debated by the last parliament before the regime change, where it passed with minor modifications.\(^{87}\) The adoption of cardinal laws meant that comprehensive constitution-making took place in Hungary in October 1989. As a result, the parliament voted to replace the “people’s republic” with the constitutional framework of democratic, parliamentary republic. The laws on party functioning and financing, election of representatives, abolition of the Presidential Council, and redressing “the

\(^{86}\) Interview with András Holló, 1997.

\(^{87}\) One of these modifications changed to electoral law by making the electoral system more disproportionate. This change of the law proved to be fatal later on.
verdicts related to the popular uprising of 1956" were adopted.\textsuperscript{88} It was proclaimed that Hungary was a parliamentary republic, an independent democratic constitutional state, where the values of both civil democracy and democratic socialism are realized.

The year 1989 was the first one when the people could freely celebrate October 23, the day of the outbreak of the revolution of 1956. Although this day had not been declared a national holiday yet, the Németh government scheduled the proclamation of the Third Republic to this day.\textsuperscript{89} “It was an incredible achievement from a constitutional perspective, because it was realized that a proposal born outside the parliament received the parliament’s seal of approval.”\textsuperscript{90} By adoption of the new constitution, the party state legally ended. In this peculiar situation of political vacuum, the Speaker of the National Assembly, who proclaimed the republic, was elected temporary President of the Republic. That night, 100,000 people gathered at Kossuth Square, before the Parliament building, while millions were watching on TV as fifty-sixers\textsuperscript{91} gave speeches to commemorate the revolution and its victims.

The constitutional revolution of 1989 achieved most of the demands of the demonstration of March 15. Social fears were dissipating, and the last, mobilizing anti-communist period of democratic transition began. Little more than two weeks after the republic was proclaimed, Hungary fell out of the focus on international interest because revolutionary changes started in the neighboring countries.

4. From the referendum to the free elections

The main political event of the summer of 1989 was the negotiation series of the National Roundtable. However, the people knew little about the negotiations, they did not know what was happening in the Parliament’s conference room. In their initial agreement, the negotiating parties agreed that the plenary session would be public, but the talks in the working commit-

\textsuperscript{88} The modifications of the criminal law and the rules of criminal procedure had already been passed in the September 27 session of the parliament.
\textsuperscript{89} Interview with György Jutasi, 1997.
\textsuperscript{90} Interview with Péter Szalay, 1997.
\textsuperscript{91} Jenő Fónay, Sándor Rácz, Gyula Obersovszky, Mária Wittner, and György Krassó.
tees led to a closed session. The substantial negotiations took place in the working committees and the middle-level negotiations, and the press was not allowed to attend the middle-level talks until August 1989. In the end of July by-elections took place in the districts which had been given up due to the opposition’s actions of recalling representatives. The candidates of MDF, who were supported by the opposition parties won by landslide and became the first freely elected representatives after more 40 years. These events shook the confidence of the leaders of MSZMP that they could win the parliamentary elections.

In the beginning of August, there were already more than 200 citizens of East Germany at the West German Embassy in Budapest, waiting for entry permits. Every week, further thousands and later tens of thousands East German “tourists” visited Hungary in the hope that they can soon leave for the West. By the end of the month, more than a thousand citizens of East Germany escaped through the green border between Hungary and Austria, and 300 others escaped through the border near Sopron which was temporarily opened for the Pan-European Picnic in August. By this time, the number of East German refugees who did not want to go back to the GDR had increased so much that they were placed in refugee camps. Still in August, Gorbachev officially apologized for the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops. This made it obvious that the Brezhnev doctrine which kept the governments, reformers, and opposition movements of the surrounding countries in fear was defunct. The leadership of Gorbachev made it clear that no one should count on Soviet military intervention, every country should follow her own way.

The Németh government, which had already started intense diplomatic maneuvers for the refugees, was encouraged by the events so much that it decided to coordinate action plans with the West Germans. On September 10, they announced that East Germans are free to leave the country for Austria. The communist leadership of East Germany accused Hungary with the violation of international law, which was refused by Miklós Németh. The refugee question was also a test of the patience of the Soviet Union. As a

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92 Reuters reported that the number of people who escaped through the border grew to 6,000 by the end of the month.
result, the case of the Hungarian transition was now entirely in the hands of domestic political forces.

After the agreement was signed in September, public attention turned to the extraordinary congress of the MSZMP which was held in early October. The delegates decided that the state party would dissolve itself and transform into a new party, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), which was also the legal successor of MSZMP. The MSZMP was the first in the line of the communist parties of Central Europe to make this decision.\(^{93}\) The new party started its first congress immediately. They decided that former membership in the state party did not mean membership in the new party as well, so people had to re-join, but the MSZP regarded itself as legal successor with respect to the state party’s wealth. The congress elected Rezső Nyers the president of the new party. In his first speech, he emphasized the need for party organizations at workplaces. Given the campaign for the referendum which wanted to abolish such organizations had already begun, Nyers’ resolution still questioned the democratic commitment of the new party. The congress proposed the parliament should make October 23 “national commemoration day,” reinforced Pozsgay as the presidential candidate of MSZP and made a promise that the party will account for its wealth as well. The new party charter abolished the rigid, Bolshevik-type party hierarchy, “democratic centralism.” A few months later it turned out that only 30,000 people joined the new party, while its predecessor had had 700,000 members. In October 1989, it could be seen that the successor party would lose the elections.

The political actors who hoped for the continuation of the negotiations after September 1989 thought that some unresolved issues were not enough reason to refuse signing the consensus that had been achieved. However, those who believed the continuation was uncertain argued the democratic transition was not guaranteed until every cardinal issue was resolved. They proposed a referendum to decide in the open issues.

Eventually, the negotiations did not continue, and the open issues were decided in a referendum. However, when the agreement was signed on September 18, and Péter Tölgyessy, the representative of SZDSZ, demanded

\(^{93}\) The example was later followed by the Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, Romanian, and East German parties as well.
a referendum, it was far from certain that this initiative would happen. Then, SZDSZ looked too small an organization to carry out such a campaign successfully, while those who could initiate the referendum *ex officio* did not want to do so. As one of the party leaders remembered: “Back then many people thought that it was just a silly idea. But the SZDSZ proved that it can make the referendum. This was a huge achievement. We organized it and 200 thousand signatures were collected.”94

The question was finally decided on September 24, at the meeting of SZDSZ in Sopron. The delegates were excited to announce that they must give effect to Tölgyessy’s demand, and a signature campaign would be started. According to the recollection of one of the key actors, “we reached the ‘Four Yes’ referendum, which I regard as the most important voting, the most cathartic experience of the regime change. […] This is related to Péter Tölgyessy, for he was the one to convince the attendees of a Sopron conference of SZDSZ to start the movement to initiate the referendum.”95 The four questions of the referendum were the following: (1) Should organizations related to the MSZMP be banned from workplaces? (2) Should the MSZMP account for its properties owned or managed by it? (3) Should the Workers’ Militia be dissolved? (4) Should the president be elected after parliamentary elections? Originally, those who formulated the questions wanted a fifth question as well, about the guarantees of the impartiality of the public radio and television. Yet this was such a difficult issue that it was impossible to make a single yes-or-no question out of it, so they abandoned it.

The referendum initiative was supported by the other party that had not signed the agreement, Fidesz. Although the youth party did not participate in the collection of signatures as intensely as SZDSZ did, its actions created an atmosphere which drove the support of more and more people toward the initiative. The signature campaign was unexpectedly successful, as if the citizens believed for the first time that they can really do something for the regime change. They were standing in long queues just to write their names in the signature sheet. Within three weeks the activists of SZDSZ collected 67,000 signatures already, which was enough by the current rules to compel the parliament to consider calling the referendum. The signatures contin-

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94 Interview with Miklós Haraszti, 1997.
95 Interview with Gábor Demszky, 1997.
ued to accumulate afterward as well, and the unexpected success had strong impact on other actors of the political life as well. MSZDP, the representative of which signed the agreement in September, now joined the petition campaign demanding the referendum.

The representatives of the FKGP signed the agreement in September without exceptions, which was criticized by their more radical members who saw the agreement as simple collusion with the communists. “The members of the Political Committee were almost without exception old smallholders who had been representatives or county leaders. These were people with decades of harassment or imprisonment. To these people, any kind of communist was simply unacceptable. No matter how reform communist, still a communist.” The leadership had enough power to change its previous careful policy, and the party joined the signature campaign.

The success of the initiative affected the government of Miklós Németh as well which, turning against the resolution of the founding congress of MSZP, banned party organizations from workplaces and dissolved the Workers’ Militia. At the same time, the government took action to dispose the members of the Workers’ Militia of their weapons. This way, the success of the signature campaign provided good opportunity for the Németh government to demonstrate its relative independence from MSZP, to detach from the successor of the state party, and, somewhat pre-empting the decision of the referendum, taking away its political edge. In these days it was commonplace among government members that there is indeed no need for a referendum, for its questions have already been decided by the government at its own discretion. However, by the time the parliament conceived a meeting—the last session before the proclamation of the republic, and the session where cardinal laws were passed—the Speaker had already had a massive pile of signature sheets on his desk, which compelled them to call the referendum.

Considering the temporary legitimacy deficit of the Roundtable talks and its participants, the “Four Yes” referendum has a special place in the regime change. This was the moment when society could be mobilized by “yeses” or “noes.” The radicals tried to interpret the event as a referendum about the rejection of the old system and as a manifestation of popular sov-

96 Interview with István Prepeliczay, 1997.
ereignty. Others simply saw it as another station of peaceful transition. A politician of SZDSZ assessed the events as follows: “MSZP would have performed well if Pozsgay had been president, simply because it would have been the president’s party. Not the one to be voted out, not the public enemy, not the party of the old system, but the president’s party. This was the heart of the issue. This was a fundamental issue to us, especially because it was clear that the geopolitical danger had passed.”

The public discourse was divided mostly over the question of presidential elections. SZDSZ, which was the first to initiate the “Four Yes” referendum, did everything to avoid presidential elections before the parliamentary elections. The parties that supported the referendum believed that even if the powers of the president were defined rather narrowly in the Roundtable talks it would not be opportune for Hungarian democracy to deviate from the model of parliamentarism. They did not want a directly elected president who could have argued, before the free elections, that he had stronger legitimacy than the government formed at free elections.

The initiative put the strongest party of the opposition, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) in a difficult position as well. The party wanted to remain loyal to the agreement signed in September. For it feared that otherwise MSZP might also terminate the agreement, which could have also meant that it would not submit the cardinal laws to the parliament. In addition, the first president of MDF, Zoltán Bíró—who had been expelled from MSZMP in the spring of 1988 and had high hopes in the close cooperation with Imre Pozsgay—believed that this nationalist left was going to be the basis for the later cooperation of MDF and MSZP. Eventually, the decision was made in the second national congress of MDF in October. While the delegates expressed their dissatisfaction with the referendum initiative of SZDSZ, they did not want to look as if they were supporters of the communists. They made one of the founders of MDF, Lajos Für, a historian, the challenger of Pozsgay as a presidential candidate. Even more importantly, Antall, who had earned his fame during the Roundtable talks, replaced Bíró in the position of party president. Regarding the referendum, the leadership of MDF decided that they would join neither the pro-referendum small coalition of SZDSZ-Fidesz-FKGP-MSZDP, nor the “three yeses, one no”

97 Interview with Miklós Haraszti, 1997.
MSZP, nor the “four noes” MSZMP. Instead, they called the citizens to boycott the referendum. However, it displayed the MDF as a hinderer of the processes of the most dynamic phase of the transition. It seemed as if MDF did not want to “let the people decide.”

By November 1989, the international political atmosphere had radically changed since the beginning of the signature campaign. As a result of the protests of hundreds of thousands of people in Leipzig and Berlin, the Berlin Wall fell in the evening of November 9. The image of East Berliners sitting on the top of the wall and celebrating with champagne appeared in every news outlet around the world, and made the fall of dictatorship in Europe both visually relatable and symbolically irrevocable. The process was crowned by the “Velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia, the most spectacular events of which—the protests at Wenceslas Square in Prague, the appearance of Alexander Dubček and Václav Havel in the celebrating crowd, and the collapse of the Czechoslovakian communist system—happened a week before the Hungarian referendum.

The last two weeks of the Hungarian referendum campaign were the most intense weeks of Hungarian politics for four decades. The political scene experienced intensifying anti-communism and also sharpening rivalry between the two leading opposition parties, the MDF and SZDSZ. This raised attention to the events even among the apolitical voters. To the message of the MDF: “We won’t go, we won’t vote!” the SZDSZ replied with the following slogan: “Who stays at home, votes for the past!”

The referendum was held on November 26, 1989. Despite the boycott call of the largest opposition party, the turnout was 58 percent of the voting population, which rendered the referendum valid. In three questions out of four—the questions about the MSZMP’s wealth, the party organizations at workplaces, and the dissolution of the Workers’ Militia—the ratio of “yes” votes was over 95 percent. It was clearer than ever that the support of old communist politics in the country had been gone. In the fourth question, however—which asked whether the president should be elected only after the parliamentary elections—only 6,000 votes out of 4,2 million turned the

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98 Sonnevend, Stories without Borders.
scale in favor of “yes.” Overall, the result meant that the MSZMP’s scenario for the regime change had failed. Pozsgay conceded defeat the day after the referendum.

With respect to the success of peaceful political transition, the dividedness of the opposition did not turn out to be a confounding factor. That the parties signed their agreement on September meant that the consensus they had reached would not disappear, and in October both the cardinal laws and the new constitution could be born—and so did, as a result, the Third Republic. On the other hand, the refusal to sign, the subsequent referendum initiative, and finally the success of the November referendum allowed the Hungarian opposition to avoid a temporary pact with the communist leaders, which would have decelerated the process of transition. The peculiarity of the Hungarian political transition was that it was negotiated until the limits, but it did not stop at that point: by the referendum, society was given a chance to close the past.

On March 25, 1990, free elections could take place in Hungary. Even if the participants did not “foment a revolution,” as József Antall famously put it, they still achieved the replacement of a dictatorial regime by a democratic system. The constitutional court represented the arguments of the lawful revolution and favored, in a controversial ruling, the rule of law vis-à-vis a law on retrospective justice which was submitted by the representatives of the new, democratic government and accepted by the parliament. Nevertheless, the historical line between the old and the new order was drawn clearly by the act of free elections. As a result of the elections, the mandate to form a new government was given to József Antall, historian and the president of MDF, who decided to form a coalition government with the smaller but historically close center-right parties (FKGP, KDNP). The parliamentary opposition was composed of SZDSZ, MSZP, and Fidesz. The governing conservative coalition gained 60 percent of the seats, while the ex-dissident liberal opposition had 30 percent, and the ex-communist socialists 10 percent.

100 The ratio of Yes votes was 50.07 percent, the ratio of No votes was 49.94 percent. Cf. Babus, “Népszavazás 1989.”

101 In December 1989 the last “domino” of the region fell as well: the Romanian revolution caused the fall of the Ceausescu system. On December 24, 1989, tens of thousands of people expressed their solidarity with the Romanian revolution at the Heroes’ Square in Budapest.

102 Kim, The Transition to Democracy in Hungary.
Antall soon realized that the high number of laws requiring two-thirds majority would make democratic governance impossible because legislation would practically become dependent on the opposition’s approval. Yet we can speak about responsible governance only if the elected government may also pursue a policy contrary to the previous government. Therefore, Antall initiated negotiations with the leaders of the largest opposition party, SZDSZ before the formation of the new parliament. The MDF-SZDSZ agreement reduced the number of laws requiring two-thirds majority and stated that “the Hungarian Republic is an independent, democratic constitutional state”—that is, it removed from the constitution both the reference to democratic socialism and the balancing reference to civil democracy. The agreement restored the status of the president according to Law I of 1946. The signatories of the document made it clear that the president would be elected by the parliament, which is the common procedure in parliamentary systems. The agreement also stated that ministers are responsible directly to the prime minister. It also extended to issue of the person of the president: in exchange for the reduction of the number of laws requiring two-thirds majority, the MDF agreed to support Árpád Göncz to become the first president of the Third Republic.

Eventually, Law 1990: XL, which partially modified the constitution was passed by the new parliament, the result of which was the creation of “a liberal basic law that combined the German and Anglo-Saxon public law with the Hungarian traditions.” The constitutional institutions were created by the intentions of the opposition, with expressly parliamentary and rule-of-law content. A constitution was made that helped political rotation, that is, the prevalence of competing parties and the enforcement of alternating policies. A participant summarized the lessons as follows: “I hope to every generation to experience something like this. When things are clear and obvious when one knows that rational things must be done.”

The 1989 constitution allowed for intense political fights within the framework of liberal democracy.

103 The agreement was signed by József Antrall, István Balsai, Imre Kőnya, Katalin Kutrucz, and László Salamon from the side of MDF, and by János Kis, Péter Tőlgessy, and Iván Pető from the side of SZDSZ.
104 MDF-SZDSZ, “A Magyar Demokrata Fórum és a Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége.”
106 Interview with Gábor Bencsik, 1997.
Chapter 5. Imagined Democracy: Fundamental Values

How did the participants imagine democracy? Which were the cornerstones upon which the main actors of the regime change could build a new institutional order? To what extent can the result of these “roundtable revolutions” be seen, not only as a break with the past but as a new beginning?

Of the most salient political values of 1989, the following must be discussed here: freedom, popular sovereignty, representative government, non-violence, and democracy based on extended consensus. The prevailing vision of the framers of the new democracy was that of a democratic welfare society which would “return to Europe,” combining the features of a market economy, representative government, and international neutrality.

5.1 Freedom and Popular Sovereignty

Among the political values espoused by the participants of the Roundtable talks the idea of freedom was primary, understood both as a liberal and a democratic value. Individual freedom as a liberal value meant that people could finally exercise their human rights and civil liberties. They were free to talk to one another openly, both in private and in public. The press would be free, and the right of association and party formation would be guaranteed as inalienable rights of all citizens.

The founding fathers understood freedom primarily in a negative sense, meaning the freedom from oppression, that is, independence from the state, the party, the policy, the military, the government, and generally from every illegitimate intervention there is. Freedom mainly meant individual freedom back then. Freedom was interpreted not as a right to something—although this was too included in the right to travel—but rather as freedom from something, particularly freedom from the party state’s intervention and tutelage. It meant genuine liberation.

This concept of freedom was the cumulative outcome of two major ideological-political influences. First, the legacy of dissent in Central Europe, which valued high human rights and equal human dignity, as well as

107 Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty.”
108 As expressed in the writings of Václav Benda, István Bibó, Václav Havel, György Konrád, Milan Kundera, Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik, Jan Patočka, and others.
innate and inalienable human rights. Second, the impact of the then dominant Western neoliberal, neoconservative ideologies which took the ideal market as a role model and ranked the concepts of individual freedom and spontaneous order before any kind of collective freedoms.\(^\text{110}\)

The democratic conception of freedom was understood as popular sovereignty, reclaimed after so many decades of Soviet domination. The idea of popular sovereignty begs for the definition of political community. Nationalism and democracy are not far from each other as they both refer to the connection between the popular will and the political community, albeit with different definitions of “the people.” Where the civic movements of the political community clearly demonstrated their commitment to democracy the end of communism meant to be a beginning of a regime based on a new system of values. Where, however, the political conditions had not existed, especially in the case of nondemocratic federations, political leaders referred to popular sovereignty to reinterpret the popular will in a nationalist way. Popular sovereignty was interpreted as national sovereignty, by which they meant the sovereignty of the leaders of the system. When the boundaries of political community—and therefore the identity of the democratic state—were questionable, the democratic traits of the new system were easily distorted by the discriminative interpretation of sovereignty which divided the community of citizens.

In Hungary, the concept of popular sovereignty appeared at the time of the regime change in at least three interpretations. The most basic interpretation was that the citizens of the country can decide their future in free elections and elect the government they prefer the most. The minimal requirement of democracy is that the popular will manifests in free elections. Second, popular sovereignty also meant that the people have the right to referendum and popular action in order to express their political preferences between elections as well. It was a consequence of this interpretation that the participants of the Roundtable talks chose the means of referendum to solve the unresolved issues of the negotiations.

Finally, the concept of popular sovereignty was associated with the ideas of self-governance and self-management, which were supported by every

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109 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
110 Cf. Boaz, Libertarianism; Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom; Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism; Hayek, The Road to Serfdom.
opposition party. The opposition wanted to revive the concepts of public administration Ferenc Erdei and István Bibó had developed decades before, building on the principle of territorial decentralization. One of the leaders of MDF believed at the time that the key elements of popular sovereignty were the local governments. The claimed that if the country would be divided into administrative units by the division of labor between the territories, the countryside would no longer be disintegrated. At the same time, these new units would be the cornerstones of a representative democracy building from the bottom up. In this discourse, a conception of freedom and sovereignty appeared which held that individual freedom may prevail to the fullest if everyone can take part in exercising and controlling power as much as possible. Accordingly, local power is not an executor of central commands, but it organizes from below, and expresses the will of the local community of citizens.

5.2 Representative democracy

In the eye of the opposition participants of the Roundtable talks democracy was understood as a representative form of governance, wherein people exercise their constitutional powers not so much directly as through the activity of their elected representatives. If democracy has three major components: competition, participation, and civil liberties, then it is significant that the Hungarian regime changers emphasized the first and the third components and tended to ignore the second. As communism had based itself on the forced, involuntary “participation” of the masses, people grew distrustful of the value of top-down political mobilization. They came to prefer a negatively liberal, “non-participatory” democracy. They emphasized, instead of the republican behavior of taking an active part in public issues, getting rid of government tutelage and acting independently from politics. This tendency correlates with the high value of individual freedom understood mainly as negative freedom.

However, this did not mean that the opposition parties rejected the means of referendum and popular action guaranteed by the state socialist system. The former was exemplified by the above-described “Four Yes”

111 Dahl, Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy.
referendum, whereas the latter, by the initiatives of recalling certain representatives. The movement of recalling representatives contributed to the destabilization of the Kádár regime, and opposition actors used this means successfully to remove some of the most hated MSZMP representatives. To fill up the vacant positions of recalled representatives, the law prescribed the calling of by-elections, each of which was won by the opposition. This motivated the negotiators of MSZMP in the Roundtable talks to renounce the idea of an electoral system based purely on local districts and to accept a half-list, half-district system.

Yet the opposition parties never thought for a second that the system of recalling representatives should be preserved for after the free elections. They argued that this procedure was irreconcilable with the idea of representative democracy based on free elections, the primacy of which was called into question by none of the parties.

5.3 Nonviolence

All three sides of the National Roundtable took the principle of nonviolence seriously. The participants of the Hungarian regime change insisted on peaceful means. Nonviolence was as highly prized as freedom. The participants’ commitment to nonviolence, their genuine desire to reach consensus through negotiations, is one of the legacies of 1989. Ordinary people had no wish to repeat the revolution of 1956, and their behavior was also influenced by the evolutionist strategy of the opposition. The communists, still in power with an increasingly pragmatic mentality, also wished to come through the crisis without resorting to violence. Each side was anxiously anticipating the need to respond to the violence of the other, but no side was going to make such moves. Fortunately for all, no one initiated hostilities.

During the Roundtable talks, a whole working committee was dedicated to the guarantees of nonviolent transition. There, the opposition demanded the immediate dissolution of the Workers’ Militia without a legal successor, as well as the detachment of the security services from the Ministry of the Interior. These issues were partially symbolic, but it would really have been risky if civilians had the opportunity to acquire firearms easily. While MSZMP resisted this demand until the end, the Németh government unexpectedly had the weapons of the Workers’ Militia collected.
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Nonviolent conflict resolution was ensured by the then still living legacy of self-limiting political actions. Even the so-called radical opposition was, in fact, quite moderate by comparison with other radical democratic opposition formations in other transitions to democracy, especially in Latin America. This ideal of moderation was the result of the decade-long cooperation of the democratic opposition groups of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.112

The reason for the importance attached to nonviolence lies in the violent legacy of 1956. In Hungary, everyone wished to avoid another bloody revolution. But even in the countries of repeated mass mobilizations, none of the parties wanted to initiate violence. The movements of the GDR and Czechoslovakia consciously kept their revolution “velvet.”

5.4 Broad consensus

Working hard to achieve a consensus as widely as possible was another, similarly important principle of the negotiators. The legacy of 1980–1981 was a real starting point for the negotiation process, not only in Poland, but, indeed, all over East Central Europe.113 In Hungary, building democratic institutions through negotiations had lasted for three months. As a result, consensual democracy came to be seen as the ideal form of democracy.

This was further related to the style of negotiation adopted within EKA. Its intellectual representatives negotiated with an almost free mandate at the beginning, and they had to reach consensus that way. Negotiating an exceptional, “original position” behind the “veil of ignorance,”114 rational arguments and expertise had a much greater role than party commands. According to a recollection: “All of us were granted quite a lot of freedom. In the end, the whole EKA negotiation created a political culture of negotiation, the essence of which was that everyone negotiated freely, with a relatively broad mandate. We had to tell our organization regularly what we represented, where we achieved success, where we did not, but there was no

112 The high moral value placed on nonviolence among political ideals was discussed and re-evaluated ten years later, in connection with the NATO air strikes in Yugoslavia. One camp felt that the intervention violated the legacy of 1989, while another felt that, in the final analysis, freedom was more important than nonviolence.
113 Kemp-Welch, The Birth of Solidarity.
114 Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 39.
strict control. So as the others couldn’t really understand what we were talking about, those in our parties had not much clue about it either.”

The negotiators consented to the continuation of transitional institutions beyond the period of transition, thereby allowing those institutions to become established as integral parts of the new democracy. This consensus-seeking behavior was later harshly criticized by the radical right, which wanted a more sweeping change in the power relations of the elite. Prime Minister József Antall, leader of the governing MDF at the time, told the radicals that they “should have fomented a revolution.” He expressed his belief that revolutionary justice-making may be done only by a classical revolution, while in a lawful revolution one must respect the principles of the rule of law.

Yet broad consensus cannot be regarded as the only or even the ideal form of democracy. The necessity of consensus also depends on the level of the conflict. A consensus should inevitably be reached on the institutional framework of the democratic system, as well as the forms of democratic procedures: for example, in the constitution and most important laws of the democracy, which require qualified majority. Not every agreement needs to be put in a legal form, democracy has an implicitly accepted customary law. But consensus on policy issues cannot be part of any definition of democracy. A democratic order includes the clash of ideas, open and fearless political debate, as well as the divergence of views and opinions. However, the transition was characterized by a broadly defined notion of consensus, a reason for which was that the agenda involved mainly extraordinary, longer term, constitutional issues.

This was followed by the principle of minimizing conflict. It was not easy to accept that democracy is about conflicts: conflicting values and interests, the institutional regulation of which is better than if they were suppressed. In a democracy, conflicts are not dysfunctional but constitute the very essence of the functioning of the system. In the roundtable-type of transitions it was not easy to understand that the point is not to eliminate conflicts in the name of consensus, but to channel them through functioning democratic institutions. It is fair to say that EKA was an internally divided politi-

116 Böröcz, “Tetszettek volna forradalmat csinálni…”
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cal union, yet EKA achieved successes as the cooperative, consensual body of the opposition. Its members built their identity around the idea of consensus, which was reinforced by the institution of veto rights. A good example for legislation based on consensus was the regulation of the media. One of the participants remembered that the issues of “the media was included in the MDF-SZDSZ pact. What mattered were two things: first, to include in the constitution the need for two-thirds majority to adopt a media law. Two: until then, temporarily a neutralizing power structure should be created, the essence of which was the law on appointment; the prime minister proposes [someone], the parties agree [. . .] and the president who is also appointed by the pact agrees. We described the mechanism of complete consensus with this temporary law on appointment that would have lasted until there is no media law; this is what failed. This was the reason for the media war. It worked only once, when Csaba Gombár and Elemér Hankiss were appointed, who were proposed by Antall.”

The participants of the Roundtable talks wanted to establish a moderate, smoothly functioning democratic regime and later they tended to stigmatize each other as the enemies of democracy in case of situations with sharpening political conflicts. They were all convinced that only their interpretation of democracy was true. The high prestige of consensual solutions affected the period of post-communist democracy as well. The 1989 “founding fathers” intended to place the building of the new, democratic institutional system on a basis of broad consensus, whereas the representatives of the old system tried to retain some power in forming the agenda even after they were out of power. All sorts of rules strengthening the stability and governability of the system were created, including cardinal laws in a broad scope of political issues. Apparently, the founders believed that liberty would be guaranteed by increasing the number of decisions requiring two-thirds majority. In the end, a democracy was born which virtually cemented governments between two elections: it became practically impossible to overthrow them from the outside, but governance itself became very difficult. Because of the high number of laws requiring two-thirds majority, the government was dependent on the opposition in fundamental issues. The constitution forti-

118 Csaba Gombár became president of the Hungarian Radio, whereas Elemér Hankiss, of the Hungarian Television. Interview with Miklós Haraszti, 1997.
fied the position of the government but at the same time it partially deprived it of responsibility.¹¹⁹

Behind all this was the ambivalent attitude of the “founding fathers” toward power. They wanted strong democratic power based on broad popular mandate, but they also were averse to power. To ensure governability of the country, they over-secured the political system vis-à-vis other subsystems of society. They overestimated the people’s want for stability and did not consider that the illusion of stability would lead to the loss of the system’s flexibility in the long run.

In the formal sense, Hungarian democracy was the most stable system in Central Europe for 20 years because almost every coalition government completed its term. Yet formal stability came with a price: regulation hampered the self-correction of the system. The Hungarian constitutional system, to ensure governability, guaranteed the power of the government for its whole term, but it also hogtied the reigning government with the system of cardinal laws. These solutions elevated to the rank of the constitution were counterproductive. In the 2000s, the illusion of institutional stability stabilized only the prevailing crisis.

5.5 Back to Europe!

Finally, the most important principle was the idea of “back to Europe!” The political visions of the opposition were based on the idea of Hungary’s return to Europe and the new Hungarian politicians, just like politicians of other new democracies, assumed that “the West” would be eager to welcome the newcomers into the world of welfare democracy. Now we can safely state that—in spite of quick membership in the European Council and later associate membership in the European Union—this was not so much the case. It was not until the end of a long historical process that Hungary could join the NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

The MDF initially advocated the idea of a popular third way, small-scale ownership capitalism “with a human face” between the polar opposites of global capitalism and the Soviet system. In the autumn of 1989, however, the party abandoned this idea. When Zoltán Bíró was replaced by József Antall

¹¹⁹ Bozóki, Virtuális demokrácia, 144.
in the position of party president, the party oriented toward Western Europe and followed Adenauer’s and Erhard’s idea of a social market economy which reflected the hope for a gradual and less painful transition.

Liberal parties were influenced by contemporary neoliberalism and advocated the principle of state-free market economy, which regarded deregulation, privatization, and the quick dissolution of state socialist regulations standing in the way of liberal market economy as the primary tasks. In terms of foreign policy, “Finlandization” served as a model for how Hungary might overcome its past, and the example of Austria was repeatedly raised as well. Both cases suggested a neutral military status for Hungary, which was the best opportunity that the opposition could hope for at the time. Only from 1990 did some politicians begin to raise the possibility of joining NATO. At that time, the European Community (from 1992: Union) was still a far more popular option than NATO, because it was identified with social welfare. Initially, the Hungarian population did not fear any external threat enough to be eager to join NATO. This public attitude began to change somewhat after the coup in Moscow in August 1991, and, more visibly, after the war in the former Yugoslavia.

The positive vision of Europe which was shared unanimously on the turn of the 1980s and 1990s requires a more nuanced approach in light of the many criticisms raised in the decades following the regime change. Melegh argues that the strengthening of the Europe discourse was proof for the elitist character of the regime change. While the dominant discourse of state socialism could be described as the paradigm of competing modernities (the fight of the two world systems), this gave way in the period of the regime change to the “civilizatorian, hierarchical mode of speech” which is known from the history of postcolonial capitalist societies. In this mode of speech, the path of Hungarian development was primarily interpreted in comparison to the West and the ideas attributed to it. The question of convergence from and divergence to the West became the most important point of reference for Hungarian analysts. The culture of critical public discourse which had emerged in opposition to the Kádár system reached consensus in the idea of convergence during the Roundtable talks. This mode of speech described the Soviet Union as “Asian despotism” and was successful in discrediting

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120 Melegh, On the East/West Slope.
the system of the countries of the Soviet bloc. The strength of the hegemony of this discourse manifested in the fact that convergence to the West was accepted by the former dissidents, populist writers, socialists, reform economists, and the representatives of the new technocracy as well. It is no exaggeration to say that whole political generations of 1945–1947, 1956, and 1968 supported the idea of back to Europe.\footnote{The liberal-conservative József Antall, the writer Dénes Csengey who came from the circle of populists, the socialist Gyula Horn, the liberal Viktor Orbán and Iván Pető, the Christian democrat László Surján, the smallholder József Torgyán, the entire generation of 1956 and 1968, as well as the economic and cultural elite—they all supported the idea of “back to Europe!”} By the time the country saw the formation of the new parliament, every parliamentary party agreed to the goal of joining Europe as soon as possible. It became a new national goal. In the decade following 1989, the Hungarian political class was unified in its conviction that the consolidation of the new democracy would be guaranteed by joining to the European Union. This does not mean that these expectations must have been grounded; indeed, the unanimous support of the idea and the lack of debates about it indicate how great the illusion was. Later interpreters and critics of the convergence discourse are right to point out the undifferentiated, unreflective nature of the Europe vision of the Hungarian political elite, and also how far this vision was from international realities.\footnote{Csizmadia, Diskurzus és diktatúra; Melegh, On the East/West Slope; Böröcz, “Hungary in the European Union.”} But at that time this was not just the elite’s business; society harmonized with the negotiators of the Roundtable. The introduction of world passport, the elimination of travel restrictions, and the tearing down of the Iron Curtain brought the immediate experience of Western travel to hundreds of thousands of Hungarians. The idea of returning to Europe appeared not just in the elite-dominated public discourse. It enjoyed widespread popular support.

Very few from Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia questioned that these countries were part of Europe culturally. In their eyes, the return to the luckier peoples of the “European family” seemed to be a quick, self-evident, automatic process. They presupposed that Western states would value their long struggle for democracy and would be ready to pay the price of their reintegration. The Central European left regarded “Europeanization” as a process of political and economic modernization. The right, on the other
hand, argued that the major cultural characteristic of Europe is Christianity, which is shared by these countries. Consequently, Europe for them was not a program but a state, which they assumed to be restored almost automatically after the collapse of communism.

6. The past revisited: Historical references

Did the experiences of the past define the opposition negotiators’ vision of the future? Was there any noticeable link between their past and imagined future? What did they want to break with, and what did they want to carry on?

Concerning past references, participants of the Roundtable talks in Hungary were working hard to legitimize the regime change. They tried to use symbols and historical events to emphasize both continuity and change. Images of reform and revolution were utilized simultaneously, alternating between them.

6.1 The revolutionary tradition

In Hungary, most participants of the regime change were eager to avoid repeating the model of action set by the Revolution of 1956. They wanted to make revolution without blood and violence, at the negotiating table. The only exception was the radical-plebeian Hungarian October Party (Magyar Október Párt, MOP), which would not participate in the Roundtable talks—true, it was not invited either—because it wanted to avoid collusion with the communists over the quarry of power. The party opted for a revolutionary strategy, thereby marginalizing itself in the political life. Krassó’s party stated that the parties at the Roundtable talks were only pursuing their own interests and not the common good. All the other parties were determined to move from dictatorship to democracy by nonviolent means, and rejected the revolutionary path.

Yet it had to be considered what can be saved from the legacy of 1956 for 1989. The crushing of the revolution by the Soviet Red Army and the 1958 execution of Imre Nagy, the prime minister of the revolutionary government, made the political position of those who supported János Kádár, and associated themselves with his policies, morally untenable. To remind
the public that the regime had been born in a state of “original sin” was the best way for the opposition parties to evoke the moral lessons of 1956. The reference to the traditions of the Revolution was important insofar as it helped the opposition distinguish itself from the Kádár regime, and to denounce it on moral grounds. The question was simplified to the decision between the truth of Kádár or Nagy. While Kádár was the symbol of the politics of mendacity, the martyrdom of Imre Nagy symbolized the opportunity of “living in truth,” as Havel put it. It seemed obvious: one can be a supporter of democracy only if they choose to “live within the truth.”

While for some speakers at the reburial of Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs Nagy was a political role model, for the young radical, Viktor Orbán, Nagy was an honorable person only because he had renounced his communist beliefs and shared the fate of his people. However, it soon turned out that no one in the opposition wanted to adopt Nagy’s ideas of a democratic socialism or follow the revolutionary practice of 1956. After June 16, 1989, when communism received its moral death sentence, the legacy of the revolution of 1956 faded away as well.

Thus, the participants of the Roundtable talks were obliged to search for historical precedents which were more suitable to the idea of lawful revolution. Hungary’s long history had produced some similar patterns of change, which could offer some symbolic points of reference for the tasks of 1989. First and foremost, there was the “lawful revolution of 1848” when the strata of the lesser nobility initiated a bloodless revolution, that is, the transition from a more traditional to a more civic and liberal regime. In early 1849—just like in 1989—it was the old parliament that passed the necessary bills for change and put in power the notable Lajos Batthyány cabinet. Historians at the Roundtable talks often referred to the example of 1848 as a model worth emulating even at the end of the 20th century.

6.2 The Tradition of Institution-Building

There were no long-lasting institutional achievements of the Revolution of 1956 which could have been used in 1989. The original institutions of the revolution, the worker’s councils and cooperatives, were regarded as romantic, humanistic, socialistic efforts for better socialism, inadequate means for making democracy. One of the slogans of the time stated that there was no economic democracy without political democracy. The decline of Tito’s self-organizing worker’s cooperatives in Yugoslavia just reinforced this conviction.

Hungary and other countries had to reinvent and reconstruct examples of successful institution-building from their history. The rebirth of political life after World War II offered a good reference point, particularly Law I of 1946 on the legal status of the President of the Republic. Adopting this law, the opposition aligned itself with the parliamentary traditions of Hungarian politics over any other presidential system or the tradition of monarchy.

The post–World War II rebuilding of the country was often quoted to compare it to the enormous task of the near future. In line with this metaphor, communism was frequently compared to the destruction of war. Democratic politicians sometimes remarked bitterly that post-communist society lacked the enthusiasm and optimism of the post–World War II generation. The year 1945 was clearly a “new beginning” in the Arendtian sense, even if it had been halted by the communist coup. The year 1945 also offered the legacy of a peacefully established democratic regime, based on a non-communist center-right umbrella party (which was the Independent Smallholders’ Party at the time). Further back to history, 1848, the Springtime of the Peoples provided the idea of national liberalism, which demonstrated that the more traditional values of homeland can be brought into harmony with the ideal of progress. Interestingly, 1848 was more important historical reference as peaceful institutional change than a revolution and nationwide fight for freedom and independence. Both legacies were seen as favoring institutional rearrangement rather than revolutionary upheaval.

It was an important achievement of the EKA to establish the historic continuity of 1848–1945–1989, and thus to present itself as the proper heir of all the peaceful, yet radical, democratic traditions of the history of Hungary.128

Poland rediscovered the legacy of General Józef Piłsudski, while Havel, the newly elected president of Czechoslovakia referred often to an early founding father, Tomas G. Masaryk. The Baltic countries, liberated from the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, tried to dig deeper to reconstruct national, liberal, and/or democratic traditions from their pre-Soviet past, back to the early 20th century.

In Hungary, despite some right-wing governmental efforts to revitalize the Horthy era (1919–1944) and to make it somehow more respected, past nostalgia embraced rather the “peaceful times” before World War I. Many saw Austria-Hungary as the era of economic development, constitutional liberalism, and early European federalism. The common characteristic feature of post-communist transformations as “rectifying revolutions” was that they tried to recover continuities and to reconnect present societies to the broken, pre-communist past.

The idea of Central Europe had a significant role in the rediscovery of the traditions of institution-building. This geographical term had different political and ideological meanings in the 1980s. First and foremost, it was the legacy of dissent and the recurrent fights for freedom in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. These were forged into a regional tradition by the dates of 1956, 1968, and 1980. Second, by the revitalization of Central Europe, most people thought a project to recreate historical similarities between the cities of the region. Third, it had some historical resonance to the Habsburg Europe as a reference in the post-Iron Curtain period. Fourth, and finally, some people revived the pre–World War I German concept of Mitteleuropa advocated by Friedrich Naumann and other German national liberals. The attractiveness of Central Europe was precisely in its versatility. These thoughts have been partly swept away by the attractiveness of a larger unit, the European Union. Yet the idea of Central Europe has not been forgotten: it contributed to the formation of the Visegrád countries, a cooperation between Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, and Hungary. In addition, a new

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129 Fejtő, Rekviem egy hajdanvolt birodalomért.
130 Habermas, "Mit jelent a szocializmus ma?"
131 Borsody, The New Central Europe; Schöpflin and Wood, In Search of Central Europe; Garton Ash, The Uses of Adversity.
132 Neumann, "Forgetting the Central Europe of the 1980s"; Todorova, "Isn’t Central Europe Dead?"
interpretation of the concept appeared in the 1990s, when it was used to distinguish the region from the post-Soviet space and the Balkans.

Among foreign historical and political precedents, explicit references were made to the Spanish path to democracy, after the 1975 death of Franco. The Spanish path was taken as a model for several later democratizing countries.\textsuperscript{133} In Hungary, both the government and the opposition studied the Spanish transition quite thoroughly.\textsuperscript{134} The most obvious historical precedent for the Hungarians was, of course, Poland. The ideas of an “ethical civil society”\textsuperscript{135} and the new evolutionism were taken from the Polish opposition. Members of the Polish and Hungarian opposition had had frequent personal contacts, and long-standing friendships linked Hungarian dissidents with those in Poland. Activists of the new Hungarian trade unions were eager to establish links with Solidarity as well, in order to learn some of their negotiation strategies.\textsuperscript{136}

\textbf{6.3 Break and the new beginning}

The Roundtable negotiations of 1989 created an unprecedented historical situation in Hungary and some other countries in which a political elite was able to draft a constitution and create the institutional frameworks of a democracy without bloodshed. Dissident intellectuals continually spread the culture of critical discourse in society, and they found allies to this in the more and more critical reform intellectuals. In the shadow of a regime that was growing more and more uncertain, the operation of critical intellectuals first blurred the boundaries between the first and the second public sphere, and later it contributed to the radicalization of media intellectuals working in the state radio and television, as well as the radical change of the structure of the public sphere. The cornerstones of the new system were laid during the Roundtable talks, where intellectual groups in the cloaks of various

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{133} Maravall and Santamaria, “Political Change in Spain”; Casanova, “A spanyolországi demokratikus átalakulás tanulásai.”
\textsuperscript{134} Polish dissidents were already aware of the importance of the Spanish path. In Hungary, a group of Spanish politicians and scholars visited Hungary in the summer of 1989 and met the representatives of the government as well as EKA.
\textsuperscript{135} Linz and Stepan, \textit{Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation}, 255.
\textsuperscript{136} The leaders of Solidarity warned the representatives of Liga not to let the negotiations happen behind closed doors, and always insist on the publicity of the negotiations. Vásárhelyi, \textit{Az árstálság kora}, 116.
\end{footnotesize}
parties could act in the position of a constitution maker. Trying to find their place after the regime change, one group of intellectuals became party members and even members of parliament, while another active group went back to movements and understood its role as contrasting the new democracy to the principles of constitutionalism and the rule of law.

But was fall of the old system, after all, a new beginning of a democratic era? As I have mentioned, according to the classical theory of Arendt\(^{137}\) a revolution has three phases: the first one is the weakening of the legitimacy of the old regime, the second one is liberation from the old regime, and the third one is the beginning of the construction of a new institutional order. Liberation *per se* does not bring freedom: revolution might happen only if the political systems before and after the change are clearly distinguished. Finally, after the caesura the members of society must experience a “new beginning” to truly acknowledge their newly won freedom. The common lived experience of the creation of new institutions and a new constitution, that is, of the “foundation of freedom” is what distinguishes revolutions from aimless revolts.

Contrary to this, the break with the past in Hungary occurred rather symbolically on June 16, 1989, when the prime minister of the revolution of 1956 and his fellow-martyrs were reburied officially. This moment made clear that 1989 fulfilled many claims of the revolution. However, revolutionary changes happened without a revolution taking place again, and also without fulfilling all the demands of 1956, many of which were illusory.\(^ {138}\) Parallel to the continual references to the Revolution of 1956, the participants quietly abandoned the ideas of 1956.

The first phase of reconstruction occurred at the National Roundtable between June and September 1989. These negotiations could be interpreted both in the framework of the old and new regimes. On the one hand, it was a peculiar “social debate,” therefore it *de jure* remained within the framework of the communist legislative process. On the other hand, it was a functional equivalent of a “constitutional assembly,” an emblematic feature of all major revolutions. Participants of this constitutional revolution acted with-

\(^{137}\) Arendt, *On Revolution.*

\(^{138}\) Rainer, “A rendszerváltás és az örvenhatos hagyomány.”
out popular legitimacy, but they had a good reason to presuppose the existence of popular support.

Since nobody elected the participants of the Roundtable talks, they were eager and worked hard to get some positive feedback from the society. As one of the participants put it: "Just like Münchhausen, we had to pull on our own hair to get of the morass, this is the reality of history [...] where not even the parties could find solid soil under their feet." 139 During the course of the Roundtable talks, the establishment of the institutional order of the new regime preceded the popular legitimacy of the “founding fathers.” And that made a difference, because usually the logic of revolutionary action is the following: (1) the destruction of the old regime; (2) the revolutionary (popular) legitimacy of the “founding fathers”; and finally (3) the creation of the new institutions of the new regime. In Hungary, however, after the first step came the third, and then the second one. The institutional order and its creators were legitimized in March 1990 only, at the first free elections.

Perhaps that is exactly the reason why the Roundtable talks became somehow ambivalent legacies, both in Poland and Hungary, in the next decade. The history of the negotiations per se excluded the possibility of thinking about them as “clean” revolutionary processes, for the negotiations of 1989 were tainted by the inclusion of the former communists. MSZMP leaders also had their say in the creation of the new democracy. Although they were sitting on the other side of the table, they were there, and their points were taken into account on several occasions. Some think it corrupted the genesis of the new democracy, because it means negotiations, that is, talks, communications, compromises, interactions, and personal contacts between the outgoing and incoming elite. The interaction and cooperation of these two groups undercut the interpretation of the democratic transition as a classical revolution, which the radical critics of the “velvet revolutions” wanted to see. Paradoxically, break with the past happened with the participation of the people of the past. Many of them were personally interested in change because they managed to amass wealth or they simply avoided moral or legal prosecution. The legacy of 1989, the self-limiting “negotiated revolution” became an uneasy tradition for those who would have preferred to repaint themselves as uncompromising revolutionaries.

139 Interview with György Szabad, 1997.
The moral break of June 1989 was not followed by a widely perceived revolutionary-political break later on. At the beginning, many people did not even realize that radical changes were taking place. As the negotiations of the National Roundtable became public only after one and a half months, the view prevailed that the people of continuity are indeed stronger than the representatives of breaking. Popular dissatisfaction with the regime change also fueled this perception of the negotiations: as a secret, nondemocratic, conspiratorial, well-designed elite-game over the head of, or even against, the masses. The most “revolutionary” phase of the lawful revolution occurred in the autumn of 1989, starting by the signature campaign and closing with the referendum. The revolutionary process was seemingly fulfilled, yet it never received full recognition. Although citizens could clearly distinguish the system before the change and after it, they were reluctant to acknowledge the process which took place between these two systems as a profound change.

There were some in the later political debates who contrasted 1989 with 1990. They saw 1989 as the year of transition with compromises, whereas they regarded 1990 as that of the free elections that embodied popular sovereignty. These reservations might have been related to the fact that the negotiations in 1989 were still dominated by the intellectuals. However, the aim of the “eighty-niners” was, as they made it clear already at the first meeting of the Opposition Roundtable, none other but to lead the country to free elections where the popular will can freely manifest. This was a process which took several months, starting at the beginning of 1989, gaining civil legitimacy from the reburial of Imre Nagy and the “Four Yes” referendum, and ending with the free elections in 1990.

One of the most important topics was the issue of the publicity of the Roundtable talks. A participant opined that this was where EKA committed the greatest mistake:

It was unbelievably bad that we agreed to that the Roundtable talks wouldn’t be public. The commies wanted it, and the MDF eventually came around, this unfortunately gave rise to the idea that the negotiations were happening above the head of the people, that in political style we were being on the commies’ level. They should have been dragged to the public field. Had the debate gone in public TV broadcast for weeks, the people could have experienced the whole thing. But this way? Earlier,
price risings had been announced now that there would be free elections. I think this was a decisive mistake.\textsuperscript{140}

Beyond the initial exclusion of the public from the negotiations, another problem was failing to accomplish a law on the press. This mistake was caused by that, even if the opposition’s groups of different worldviews managed to cooperate successfully within EKA, their mutual mistrust in personal issues did not dissolve. In autumn 1989, at the time of the revolutionary enthusiasm of the international turn, these did not seem like irreparable mistakes. These mistakes became palpable when the radical forces won the “Four Yes” referendum, because Minister of State Pozsgay changed the news programs of the public television, appointing his own man to its helm. This once again deepened the cleavage between SZDSZ and MDF that is the liberal and populist groups. The opposition cooperation of the Roundtable talks broke up in the electoral campaign, and the changes in the media environment questioned the framework of the competition as well. SZDSZ was convinced that Pozsgay would take revenge for the lost referendum, while MDF thought that SZDSZ was supported by the soldiers of the media. This had a poisonous effect in the years after the elections, and it widened the gap between the former opposition parties. The change of the television programs most certainly contributed to that the elections were won by the party growing out of the circles of the populist writers and regarded as a “calm force,” the MDF. Nevertheless, competition went according to democratic rules, and in the spring of 1990 the people were free to choose among the competing parties and decide about the future of the country. In 1989, the rule of law was born; in 1990, democracy.

The price to pay for peaceful transition was not small. The critical approach to 1989 pictured the Roundtable talks as the safety net whereby the younger generation of communists could, at least in the economic sense, preserve themselves for the future. If we study the process in the light of this criticism, we can readily see that the talks were structured to address, at least theoretically, both political and economic issues. However, the political negotiations proved to be far more important than the talks about the economy. Why did that happen?

\textsuperscript{140} Interview with Tamás Deutsch, 1997.
Chapter VI

The EKA, which favored a negotiated settlement, insisted that they were there to legislate new, fundamental bills which lead to the free elections. The major goal of the members of EKA was to achieve popular sovereignty and pluralistic democracy, and they fiercely opposed any alliances between organizations which would have resulted in a power monopoly. The member organizations of EKA were interested in bringing about institutional changes necessary for a new democracy. They did not engage in in-depth discussions about privatization and economic transition because they did not feel entitled or empowered by the people to discuss issues of economic policy. At the very beginning of the talks, the EKA delegates even resisted re-writing the constitution. Later they changed their minds, though, but it tried to limit its role to participate in the creation of cardinal laws. They insisted that decision making about other issues belong to the mandate of the freely elected parliament and the new, legitimate government.

However, economic change was to prove more challenging than political change in the longer run. One can set up a new institutional order in a matter of months, but controlling the processes of privatization, and putting into practice the plans of economic transformation, already require the power of the executive. Indeed, the negotiators of the opposition were not at all certain whether they should control privatization at all—and they were right about that, for they had no opportunity to do that. Quick economic power-transformation began, and the opposition had to deal with this fact. As an activist of the new trade unions said:

Respected economists told us state property must go to private hands as fast as possible. No matter how, the mechanisms didn’t matter, the accompanying processes didn’t matter, we must privatize quickly. There was zero debate on this. While the market transformation was going on a huge scale, month by month, privatization was going on in the perfectly uncouth way prescribed by the company act and the act on transformation. [. . .] Economic processes, redistributive mechanisms just weren’t dealt with. What was dealt with was the revenue which was the basis for redistribution. [. . .] They did not enlighten the society that what was happening was the redistribution of economic positions.141

141 Interview with János Dávid, 1997.
Eventually, the members of EKA acceded to spontaneous transformation. They thought that it was not against the founding of the new system if entrepreneurs, managers, and the business actors can start creating market economy as soon as they could. They thought that, if they wanted capitalism, they cannot hamper spontaneous privatization.\textsuperscript{142} They also assumed that if the communists privatized then there would not be political backlash. And the most important thing for them was to get rid of the old system. For the opposition, the economic “leeway” of the elite groups of the Kádár regime seemed to be the best guarantee against the restoration of the system. In their view, it did not matter much who would be the new propertied classes, what mattered was for such classes to come into being as soon as possible. The most important thing was not whether morally acceptable or politically reliable elements became the new owners, but to cement fundamental political changes. They thought this way, perhaps because they faced a \textit{fait accompli}: the outgoing communist technocratic elite had already secured their role in the economic transformation. New laws dealing with the future of state-owned enterprises and with economic transformation had been already been passed before the negotiations,\textsuperscript{143} and therefore these topics were not at issue at the Roundtable talks. Committees discussed possible approaches to privatization, new agrarian policies and related economic issues, but they did not come to any agreements, partially because of the lack of data. Economic transformation played out without them.

While political and constitutional transformation came under relatively close public scrutiny, the games of economic transformation were beyond social control. The early legislation of the outgoing government and its installation of expert committees to determine the strategy of economic transformation fit the Kádárian model of top-down reform much more closely than the case of the political negotiations. The latter were carried out by considering democratic criteria, while economic transformation was discussed to effect only by the technocratic circles of the reigning power. According to a participant, “the regime change could be made only because the regime-changing elite was naïve. Had we foreseen what would later happen, the

\textsuperscript{142} Laki, “Az ellenzéki pártok gazdasági elképzelései.”
\textsuperscript{143} Law VI of 1988 on economic companies, and Law XIII of 1989 on the transformation of economic organizations and economic companies.
whole thing would’ve been a lot more mazy. We had to be naïve, and we had to pay the price for it.”

In a “cost-benefit” analysis of the outcome of the Roundtable negotiations, it cannot be doubted that the political institutional system of pluralist democracy came into being. In this sense, the investment came to fruition. Still, many people felt that the new system was done without their participation, or even against their will, and that the redistribution of wealth was effected without social controls. While the majority of the negotiators of the Roundtable talks decided to leave politics, in the interviews we conducted with them the critique of the regime change appeared as a very strong motif. For example, one of our interviewees said, contrary to the views that regard the regime change as a success story, the following: “Since the regime change, in a lot of fields, not in actual politics, but on the level of local governments and public administration, or in the relationship of the citizens and the state the situation is worse than it was earlier. Citizens are more vulnerable. Formerly, the bureaucrat was afraid at least, they had a boss, they were afraid. Now in places they feel that there is nothing to be afraid of. And the people do not know their rights better now than they did before. The main problem is that the people do not have a civic consciousness, they have a vassal’s consciousness.”

The primacy of institution-building overruled a number of other aspects at the time of the regime change. According to the recollection of György Szabad, the Speaker of the National Assembly at the time, in the first period the key issue was the creation of the pillars of the constitutional state.

We held the position that such constitutional frames need to be created which are strong enough, so the forces of economy and society can be dynamized within them for the benefit of the transformation. This sequencing was not random. I adopted this thought on the basis of the failure of Gorbachev. [He] did not realize that the regime needs, not to be reformed but changed. And when he finally realized to some extent the inevitability of this, he was already late: the constitutional institutions needed to carry out the reforms were not available to him. For if there is

144 Interview with Gábor Bencsik, 1997.
145 Interview with János Sík, 1997.
no institutional order of constitutionalism, reforms may lead the country into anarchy.\footnote{Kasza, \textit{Metamorphosis Hungariae}, 23.}

As it later turned out, the Hungarian system ended up at the other end of the scale. A relatively quick detachment of the institution-building elite took place from the broader groups of society, the members of which started to alienate from the system. All the citizens for whom the constitutional institutions were developed had harder and harder time to endure the social costs of economic transformation, and it did not take very long for them to turn against the new, democratically elected government. Short of strong trade unions, they felt that the interests of the investors who gained ground after the regime change were more important to the government than their lives. Many of the workers, low-earners, public servants, and pensioners could feel that, while they had been vulnerable to state socialism before the regime change, they now became the victims of post-regime change capitalism and globalization.

Melegh\footnote{Melegh, \textit{Passzív forradalmak}.} argues that the regime-changing elite almost realized the project of a New Class by its Europe discourse and own endeavors of global opening. While this program had enjoyed popular support in 1989, later it became unpopular during the time of high inflation, unemployment, and the breakdown of the labor market. Left-wing parties were discredited already at the starting point of the new regime, and they also fell victims of their own modernizing-centrist policies; their voters, unsurprisingly, turned to the extreme right-wing, populist forces who offered security and protection. From this argument, it follows that the regime change of 1989 as an “intellectual project” brought about a new cleavage in the Hungarian society, which led to the outcome that elitist liberal democracy was replaced by populist “illiberal democracy” two decades later. Institution-centered democratic elitism was certainly present during the regime change of 1989, but it did not characterize the previous period of open network-building of 1988. It would take another book to investigate whether (and if so, how and to what extent) the former participants of the regime change are responsible for the political changes that happened two decades later. This is still a burning question of political debates.
Nevertheless, the old regime had collapsed and the institutions, created in the negotiations of 1989, survived for two decades. The “ending” was obvious, just as the “new beginning.” But the latter turned out to be much more complex, multifaceted, and controversial than it was seen at that time. But however we define the concept of change, there is no doubt that 1989 represents the borderline between the old regime and the new one.