

# From Monologue to Trialogue among Party, Academy, and Society: The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dam Issue in Socialist Hungary in the 1980s

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The issue of the dam constructions in the Danube at Gabčíkovo in Slovakia and at Nagymaros in Hungary (GNDams) is well known among specialists of international environmental law, because the issue was the first case of the International Court of Justice in Hague over environmental protection, though the conflict did not end with the ICJ's conclusion in 1997.<sup>1</sup> More than ten years later, the issue again became hot in the inter-

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1 Hungary claimed that giving up the dam construction was justified for the protection of the natural environment, and Slovakia claimed that Hungary's one-sided breaching of the agreement of 1977 was not justified. The ICJ accepted Slovakia's claim, but it did not accept Slovakia's one-sided operation of the dam system, which started in 1992 on the Slovak side. Libor Jansky et al., *The Danube: Environmental Monitoring of an International River*, UN University Press, Tokyo/New York/Paris, 2004. 村上雅博「国際河川のガバナンス(3)ヨーロッパドナウ川とダム問題、環境問題と水政治学」『水をめぐるガバナンス』東信堂、2008年、長興進「ドナウとスロヴァキア」浜口晴彦編著『ドナウ河の社会学』早稲田大学出版部、1997年、川名英之著『世界の環境問題 第3巻 中・東欧』緑風出版、2008年。Bukhosi Fuyane & Ferenc Madai, The Hungary-Slovakia Danube River Dispute: Implications for Sustainable Development and Equitable Utilization of Natural Resources in International Law, *International Journal for Global*

national arena, since the European Union is once more heading eastward through promoting the navigation facilities of the Danube in order to realize a regional integration policy, the Danube Strategy, connecting East and West. Thus, the European community requires that the two countries, Slovakia and Hungary, finally solve the long-lasting issue, so that it will not be an obstacle to smooth navigation on the Danube.

The first international debut of the issue was, otherwise, as early as in the 1980s, when the Right Livelihood Award, the so-called alternative Nobel Prize, was given to a Hungarian NGO, the Danube Circle, in Stockholm in 1985. The civic circle was evaluated for its opposition activities to protect the natural environment of the Danube against the communist project, the GNDams. The GNDams was at that time a hot socio-political matter in communist Hungary and Slovakia (Czechoslovakia at that time). Especially in Hungary, the civic protest movements against the GNDams construction mobilized thousands of people even in the mid-1980s, when the Hungarian communist party (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) still had power over the people. The civic movements against the GNDams, however, played a clearing role in the process of the Hungarian reform movements in the 1980s, which ended with the systemic change from the communist regime to democracy in 1989.

This paper highlights the history of the issue of GNDams in Hungary, especially its beginning stages, because, for one thing, the issue was the most critical element in the Hungarian political transformation ending in 1989, though the significance of the issue has been underevaluated as minor or negligible, compared to other factors such as Imre Nagy's rehabilitation.<sup>2</sup> The other reason that the paper highlights this issue concerns the relationship between the civic opposition movements and the

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*Environmental Issues*, vol. I, no. 3/4, 2001, pp. 329-334; Stephen Stec & Gabriel E. Eckstein, Of Solemn Oaths and Obligations: The Environmental Impact of the ICJ's Decision in the Case Concerning the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project (Symposium: The Case Concerning the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project), *Yearbook of International Environmental Law*, vol. 8, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Bihari Mihály, *Magyar Politika 1944-2004*, Osiris, 2005; Ripp Zoltán, *Rendszerváltás Magyarországon 1987-1990*, Napvilág Kiadó, 2006; G. Swain & N. Swain, *Eastern Europe since 1945*, MacMillan Press, London, 1993; 南塚信吾『ハンガリーの改革』彩流社、1990年。

ruling communist party. The relationship seemed and has been understood to be antagonistic,<sup>3</sup> but in reality it was “cooperative,” too. To be precise, they worked cooperatively with an intermediating actor, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS). The paper, based on archival documents, original materials of the Danube Circle, and interviews with the individuals involved, elucidates the relations among the communist party, the HAS, and the civic movements in the issue of the GNDams. The paper especially focuses on the role of the HAS, since no light has so far been thrown on its significant position in the issue.

## **I. Background to the governmental agreement on the GNDams project in 1977**

The idea of the GNDams started very early. According to the *Memorial of the Republic of Hungary* submitted to the ICJ on May 2, 1994,<sup>4</sup> the Hungarian communist party began to discuss the project in the very early 1950s, immediately followed by Czechoslovakia, who also formulated another idea of dam construction in the Danube. The basic concept of the project was very extensive, including energy, water supply, flood control, navigation, and so on. The Soviet leadership and the COMECON were also involved in the idea of developing the Danube’s potential altogether. As a result, the GNDams was reformulated as a part of a wider concept prevailing over the whole region of the “Danube from Bratislava to the Black Sea.”<sup>5</sup> After the long process of negotiation among the countries in the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviets reached a conclusion in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Pipp Zoltán, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

4 *Memorial of the Republic of Hungary* submitted to the ICJ on May 2, 1994.

5 *Memorial of the Republic of Hungary* submitted to the ICJ on May 2, 1994, p. 19.

6 Hungary has endeavored to cast a certain suspicion, particularly by means of its constant allusions to pressures allegedly applied by the Soviet Union at the time of its conclusion. Leaving aside the fact that these alleged pressures are entirely theoretical, just as the Court has held in relation to another party in a recent dispute, Hungary “has not however taken this argument so far as to suggest it as a ground for invalidity of the Treaty itself, nor has Hungary suggested that a new peremptory norm of general international law has emerged which could have

Moreover, the Soviets also proposed a significant financial contribution to Czechoslovakia and Hungary, because the Soviets saw a significant value in the GNDams, for the dams would develop the Danube's facilities of navigation.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet Union utilized the Danube considerably for traffic in those days, and her share was 29.4% in 1971. Besides, the Soviets could expect fewer obligations on supply of energy resources to Czechoslovakia and Hungary after completion of the GNDams. "In view of Soviet interests, it was suggested that Hungary and Czechoslovakia receive a 100 million transferable Ruble loan, with a favorable interest rate. The loan would consist of technical plans for the project, as well as the generators, turbines, and other parts."<sup>8</sup> One transferable ruble was worth one USD in those days; therefore, the assistance would be considerable, since it would cover one-tenth of the entire cost of the GNDams project.<sup>9</sup>

The governmental agreement in 1977<sup>10</sup> was, therefore, the result of the decades-long negotiation among the Soviet Bloc countries. It is also worth mentioning that the negotiations in the 1950s and 1960s were held in the very period when the ideology of "reshaping nature" (a sort of gi-rendered the Treaty void." See also pp. 21-22 on the Slovak understanding of Soviet pressure. *Memorial of the Slovak Republic*, December 5, 1994, p. 3.

7 A Hungarian document is evidence of Soviet intervention in the GNDams in terms of navigation: "The size of the lock gate for ships – 22 m (depth)×34 m (width)×275 m (length) – is too large. ... The loss of water due to the lock gate would be bigger, and the expected volume of the Soviet East-West transit transportation is unknown." Consequently, the size of the lock gate should have been decreased to 22 m×24 m×230 m.: Melléklet, MTA 1985. Julius 1. Az elnöki véleményezés Havasi Ferenc az MSZMP KB titkaranak. In this document, Iván T. Berend suggested that the HAS regarded the 1983 statement as effective.

8 *Memorial of the Republic of Hungary* submitted to the ICJ on 2 May 1994, p. 28

9 The *Hungarian Memorial* puts significant stress on Soviet assistance and pressure, describing the significance as though Hungary might not have agreed to the project without them. The Slovaks, on the other hand, estimate Soviet pressure rather less decisively, saying that "these alleged pressures are entirely theoretical" (*Memorial of the Slovak Republic*, December 5, 1994, p. 3).

10 The original texts of the treaty are accessible at <http://www.gabcikovo.gov.sk/doc/it1977en/treaty.html>.

antism mania) was alive, and it was very popular in communist countries. The Hungarian communist party was especially ambitious in the ideology of giantism mania, expressing it, for example, as “to transform Hungary into a country of iron, steel, and machinery, with a correspondingly increased need for electricity.”<sup>11</sup> Eventually, Hungary launched not only the huge dam construction on the Danube, but also started another big state project: the construction of nuclear power plants at Paks from 1974 with, again, Soviet financial support,<sup>12</sup> using the Danube water to cool down the hot water from the reactors. Moreover, we may talk about a third large national project of the Hungarian communist party in these decades: the policy of “appeasement” introduced by the party leader, János Kádár, to realize social peace after the revolts in 1956, which required considerable budget to meet the needs of the people’s daily lives. This policy was one of the main reasons that the country took out considerable foreign loans from the West in the 1970s.

The GNDams project was, thus, not a mere bilateral dam construction project between Hungary and Slovakia, but part of communist international cooperation and among the ambitious challenges of the Hungarian communists from the 1950s to the 1970s.

The total cost of the GNDams in the Hungarian part was 32.8 billion forints estimated in 1982, without loan interest.<sup>13</sup> This scale meant a serious burden, even with Soviet support, in contrast to the size of the annual state budget in those years, 400-600 billion forints, along with a chronic deficit of some billions of forints yearly.<sup>14</sup> Besides, the country was al-

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11 *Memorial of the Republic of Hungary* submitted to the ICJ on May 2, 1994, p. 16.

12 The Hungarian government started the construction of nuclear power plants, two reactors in 1974 and then another two reactors in 1978, and the reactors began to operate in 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1987. The total cost of the constructions might be more than that of the GNDams.

13 The costs increased even up to 54 billion forints estimated in 1987.

14 In 1980, the national budget was 447.5 billion forints for the revenue and 452 billion forints for the expenditure with 4.5 billion forints of deficit. In 1981, revenue was 472.6 billion forints, expenditure was 482.1 billion forints, and deficit was 9.5 billion forints; in 1982, revenue was 485.8 billion forints, expenditure was 498.0 billion forints, and deficit was 12.2 billion forints. In 1983, revenue

ready heavily suffering from external debts due to the so-far borrowed loans in the 1970s from the West, and in the 1980s the Hungarian National Treasury was depending on continuously increasing foreign financial assistance to cover the annual deficit.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the 1980s, the total loans reached 25.5 billion USD. This meant 2-4 billion USD of yearly payment obligation for the principal loans and the interest. Considering the average exchange rate, 30-50 forints to one USD, as much as 15-30% or more of annual revenue was assigned to loan repayment. The positive balance of foreign trade could help the National Treasury, but it was far from sufficient, being less than 1 billion USD annually.

The big ambition and the very tight financial conditions were the background to the GNDams issue at the initial stage and, in fact, the critical financial conditions did not change in the whole period by the end of the 1980s. Moreover, the second oil shock in 1979 and the cancelation of the Soviet loan due to the „deterioration in the economy of the SU” made a further attack on the country.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it was a natural consequence that the Hungarian government decided as early as in 1981 that the dam construction should be suspended, and it looked for new financial resources such as the introduction of income tax and value-added tax within the socialist regime, or, again, external loans. The documents of the communist party prepared in the early 1980s confess the details of the dilemma and difficulties of how the party could and should manage the GNDams construction financially.<sup>17</sup> The next section shows the reality from the

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was 543.7 billion forints, expenditure was 549.8 billion forints, and deficit was 6.1 billion forints. In 1984, revenue was 572.9 billion forints, expenditure was 576.6 billion forints, and deficit was 3.7 billion forints. In 1985, revenue was 593.5 billion forints, expenditure was 609.3 billion forints, and deficit was 15.8 billion forints. *Magyar Statisztikai Évkönyve, 1985*, KSH, 1986, p.359.

15 1.9 billion USD in 1982, 1.8 billion USD in 1983, 3.5 billion USD in 1984, 4.5 billion USD in 1985, 4.1 billion USD in 1986, 3.4 billion USD in 1987, 2.8 billion USD in 1988, and 3.3 billion USD in 1989. *Ibid.*

16 *Memorial of the Republic of Hungary* submitted to the ICJ on May 2, 1994, p. 43. One of the Slovak memorials also recognizes the fact of Soviet assistance (*Counter-Memorial of the Slovak Republic* submitted on December 5, 1994, vol. 1, p. 306).

17 MOL. M-KS, GPB iratai (288f.24/1984/5.ö.e, 1-25).

perspective of the communist party on the GNDams issue based on party documents.

## **II. The GNDams issue from the perspective of the communist party**

It was only in 1980 that Hungary could start the dam construction. Czechoslovakia accepted the delay, having no other choice. In the following year, October 1981, Hungary again asked the neighboring country to agree to another delay due to the further worsening economic conditions. This time, the Czechoslovaks did not say „Yes.” The two countries began to negotiate over the Hungarian requirement. Hungary proposed that she restart the constructions in 1990. Czechoslovakia did not accept the proposal, because construction on the Czechoslovak side had progressed and they had completed their part on schedule. Without the facilities in the Hungarian territory such as Dunakiliti wier, the Czechoslovak dam at Gabčíkovo could not work (see the map). Therefore, the Czechoslovaks required compensation from Hungary for the ten years' delay. Or, the Czechoslovaks proposed the alternative idea that the whole project could be completed by Czechoslovakia, if Hungary could not fulfill her obligations in time.

The two parties tried to make a compromise, such as the dam at Gabčíkovo starting to operate in 1990 and the dam at Nagymaros, in 1993. At any compromise, the Czechoslovaks should build a significant part of the construction works on the Hungarian side in replacement for Hungary. The two parties, however, could reach no agreement on how to compensate for the construction works Czechoslovakia would complete for Hungary. At last, after long negotiation, the two parties agreed in July 1983 to no changes, keeping the original project proposed in 1977, but with four years' delay in finishing the whole project. The two prime ministers signed the new contract in Prague on October 10 in 1983.<sup>18</sup>

Czechoslovakia, starting the construction as early as in 1978, completed 35% of the whole project by the end of 1983, altogether spending 4.25 billion korunas (about 11 billion forints), compared to the 7.5% or 2 billion forints invested by the Hungarian side. Hungary's major input was

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18 *Ibid.*

the weir at Dunakiliti. Dunakiliti weir was a facility to dam up the old Danube, and if it worked as the original project had described, Czechoslovakia would not need to build a dam at Cunovo, located nine kilometers up from Dunakiliti and ten kilometers down from Bratislava, which is now operating as the replacement weir for the Dunakiliti facility.

The Hungarian government, while negotiating with Czechoslovakia, had to look for financial resources to continue the GNDams project on the one hand, and on the other hand it began to mention the “negative influences” of the GNDams on the natural environment. Thus, the Hungarian government gave instructions to the head of the National Water Agency “to find a solution for environmental protection along with continuing the construction” of the GNDams.<sup>19</sup>

The communist party also asked the HAS to prepare impact studies of the GNDams project on the natural environment, hopefully in 1980 or at the latest in very early 1981.<sup>20</sup> This timing is very important. In fact, when the party started the construction in 1980, the party had already considered a seemingly contradictory policy against the project, which might hinder the construction. An excerpt from the communist party documents, however, demonstrates well the equivocal position of the party.

These instructions [for the impact studies] did not mean questioning the appropriateness of the GNDams project or its related technical concepts. Our reason for the suspension of the investment was, first of all, economic consideration, but we want to refer to the unavoidability of further analyses of the ecological impact studies, so that we could make our insistence [postponement] more reasonable.

This was why the vice chairmen of the cabinet required the HAS to

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19 As for environmental protection, the original treaty says in the nineteenth chapter, “The Contracting Parties shall, through the means specified in the joint contractual plan, ensure compliance with the obligations for the protection of nature arising in connection with the construction and operation of the System of Locks”

<http://www.gabcikovo.gov.sk/doc/it1977en/treaty.html>. (2012.08.20)

20 The HAS established a working committee for the impact studies of the GNDams at the latest in March or April in 1981, and the committee submitted the impact report in October of the same year.



give us help, which would justify our position in the negotiation.<sup>21</sup>

The environmental issue and the impact studies were not a sincere commitment from the Hungarian communist leadership, but just a good excuse to persuade the Czechoslovaks to accept the compromise, or a significant postponement of the construction works of the GNDams. The Hungarian political leaders, except for a very small number of reformists in the party, had no idea of giving up the GNDams at all. The reformists, such as Imre Pozsgay and Rezső Nyers, being against the GNDams and playing significant roles in the second half of the 1980s, were still very weak in the party in the first half of the decade, and had no societal background, either.<sup>22</sup>

### III. Impact studies and position of the HAS

The HAS had no significant influence on the political decision making in socialist Hungary. Thus, when the GNDams agreement was prepared before 1977, the academic institution played no role. István Láng,<sup>23</sup> a secretary of the HAS in the 1980s, recalls that the HAS was once asked by the party for its opinions on the GNDams in 1975, but the condition for a reply was that the HAS give one within a week. Accordingly, the president of HAS gave no answer to the party, having no possibility of completing the mission meaningfully.

In 1980 or early in 1981, the HAS's opinions on the GNDams were again demanded by the party. This time, however, the demand of the

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21 MOL, M-KS,GPB iratai, 288f.24/1984/5.ö.e, 1-25.

22 Imre Pozsgai and Dezső Nyers, for example, were representatives of the reform groups. They organized alternative political platforms, such as the March Front (Március Front), the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum), and so on in the late 1980s. János Berec, on the other hand, was the second person after Kádár in the communist party, and he was the locomotive driving forward the GNDams. See 拙稿「変わる東欧の環境:ドナウ川ダム建設をめぐって」野町素己編『変わる東欧』近刊、及び拙稿「ハンガリー政治改革の軌跡と現状(1)-(7)」『未来』1990年-1991年。

23 Interview with István Láng, prepared on June 22, 2010 at the library of the HAS.

party was not nominal, but substantial. What the HAS should complete this time was almost opposite to what was formally required five-six years before. The demanded impact studies of the GNDams on the environment should satisfy both of the almost contradictory requirements: for one thing, the impact studies had to be sufficiently scientific and persuasive for the Czechoslovaks to accept a decade-long postponement of the project and, at the same time, the studies could not be a real obstacle leading to the abandonment of the GNDams project.

The archival documents of the HAS Presidential Board demonstrate well the “equivocal position” of the HAS’s leaders, as follows:

The working committee, established by the HAS Presidential Board, evaluated the draft of the report given on October 31, 1981 as relieved [which meant that the GNDams project had no serious impacts on the environment]; therefore, the committee accepted it with a single objection. The Presidential Board, however, considered that the draft was still to be supplemented with a comprehensive study on environmental protection, which was necessary because the negotiation with the Czechoslovaks required it.<sup>24</sup>

First of all, it was not usual to record “objections” in the minutes in the communist era. The person who made the single objection might have insisted on recording it in the minutes. However, the more important factor is the attitude of the Presidential Board. Namely, the board did not regard the committee’s report as final, though it could have been final because the committee’s entire members except one agreed with the conclusion. The Presidential Board, instead, decided to continue the impact studies. This decision suggests the HAS leadership’s consideration or a sort of “tactic,” according to which the whole process of preparing the impact studies at the HAS was controlled and elaborated by the HAS leadership in order to meet the requirement of the party. The obvious aim of the tactic is shown in the last words of the above-cited minutes, which clearly admit that “the negotiation with the Czechoslovaks required it.” Thus, “the single objection” could also be a part of the scenario written

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24 A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia (MTA) levéltára (LT), elnökség iratai.

by the HAS leadership. The essential concern according to the mission the communist party demanded of the HAS was not impact studies, but postponement of a final decision on the issue. The HAS leadership had to find a good reason in the committee's report for further continuing the impact studies. To this end, a unanimous agreement in the working committee would be unacceptable.

The mission of the HAS for the communist party was clear, though not necessarily all members of the leadership or of the working committee accepted the mission as the party expected. Some of them were really against the GNDams. Szalai Sándor, chairman of the HAS Committee on Interdisciplinary Problems, was one who radically criticized the first draft of the research report submitted to the working committee meetings. He prepared "a draft of opposition opinions" for the discussion on the first and second chapters of the research report, "Long-term Complex Utilization of the Danube." His critical draft was opened to the public later in *News of the Danube Circle* [*Dunakör hirei*]<sup>25</sup> in 1985 after his death in 1983. Szalai criticized, first of all, the style of the impact studies, stating in his draft that

the research report is totally one-sided and reflects old-fashioned theory in many respects. ... The documents [the research report] emphasizes only the profits for Hungary, and do not mention anything at all about the dark shadow, or the expected risks and the harmful effects such as on the natural environment, residential environment, agriculture, soil protection, water supply, or drainage system.

It is not certain whether Szalai's comments were accepted as part of the working committee's final report, but his critical opinions were shared among not a few members of the HAS. At any rate, the HAS leaders established a new committee, whose conclusion was submitted half a year later (on April 28, 1982). The conclusion again illustrated that the HAS leadership still had no will to give any final statement on the issue. Name-

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<sup>25</sup> *A Duna Kör Hirei*, 2. Szám, 1985, pp. 1-7. The second part of the draft was published in the same series of the document, 3. Szám, 1986, pp. 7-12.

ly, the new committee on the one hand evaluated highly the GNDams project as the most mature solution, but again on the other hand proposed further investigations into the influences of the project on the environment. For this aim, the Presidential Board organized one more committee to deal with the ecological aspects.

The HAS leadership, thus, created committees one after another to continuously carry out the impact studies on the environments of the Danube from various perspectives. Among them, “Prognosis of the possible influence on the ecosystem by the original project of the GNDams” was remarkably important. Completed on June 21, 1983, the report evaluated the GNDams project as a whole, including the advantages and disadvantages, and in the end it required comprehensive impact studies on, amongst others, technology, ecology, economy, and risks and their mutual influences, because so far no studies had been conducted on the GNDams project as a total system, and the comprehensive studies, according to the report, should be finished by June 30, 1985.

The establishment of the committees and their reports clearly show that the HAS leadership sincerely carried out the mission for the communist party. However, the last report, or the comprehensive impact studies, whose completion the HAS’s leadership required by 1985, was a little different because it would include some new aspects, that is, “economy” and “mutual influences.” This difference might have been a sign suggesting that the HAS’s leadership had started to rethink the GNDams as a project to be given up forever. The changing mind or attitude of the academic leaders became apparent at the end of 1983. Namely, as we saw in the previous section, the intergovernmental negotiations between the two countries ended in October 1983, and the conclusion required realization of the GNDams according to the original idea in the 1977 agreement, with only a change to the time schedule. By this conclusion, the mission of the HAS for the party should also have ended. The HAS leadership, however, did not regard their mission as ended, and instead prepared a critical message, the “Statement of the HAS Presidential Board on the questions discussed academically about the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dam System,” and sent it to the party on December 20, 1983.<sup>26</sup>

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26 MTA LT, Elnökségi Ülési Dob.72.Dossz.3.Pall.3: Elnökség határozatai 39-

The statement was written basically in the same style as before; nevertheless, substantial contents and conclusions were essentially different. The statement first pointed out four factors of the GNDams issue, as follows:

The academically discussed questions are classified into four groups.

1. politics,
2. technology, agriculture, aqua-construction, navigation,
3. economy,
4. environment, local development.

The first significant point in the statement was the mention of political and economic factors, which were not subjects required by the party. Nonetheless, the HAS leadership engaged in the political and economic questions, and the academic leadership even stated its opinions in the statement on the economic questions. As for the political questions, the HAS leadership held serious discussion inside the board, but they did not directly put the results in the statement.

The statement was, at any rate, very critical of the big state project in all aspects, and concluded that

on the basis of comprehensive consideration of the above-mentioned and *not-mentioned other factors* [italics are the author's], the Presidential Board believes that the investment [the GNDams project] should be significantly postponed, or reasonably modified in its contents, but, above all, given up.<sup>27</sup>

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43.számú határozatok, 55.295/1983. The participants of the meeting were J. Szentágothai (president), Pál Zs. Pach (vice president), Károly Polinszky (vice president), András Somos (vice president), Lénárd Pál (secretary general), Kulcsár Kálmán (vice secretary general), István Láng (vice secretary general), heads of eight departments, one member of the HAS, three vice heads of departments, vice head of the Scientific Education and Culture Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, vice minister of culture, secretary of the communist organization at the HAS, and some others.

27 MTA LT. Elnöki iratok. 24o.Dob. A MTA elnökségének állásfoglalása a GNV-rel kapcsolatos tudományosan vitatott kérdésekről.

The HAS leadership, though suggesting three alternatives, clearly mentioned for the first time that “the investment should be given up,” and even an “above all” (*leginkább* in Hungarian) for emphasis was attached to the last alternative of “should be given up.” The reasons that the leadership concluded so were really comprehensive. According to the recollections of the deputy secretary of the HAS at that time, István Láng, the main discourse at the Presidential Board was not on environmental protection, but on the economy. The environment was less of a concern at the board meetings.

According to the minutes of the meeting,<sup>28</sup> the discussion on December 20 started with a speech of the HAS president, János Szentágothai, a world-renowned authority on anatomy. His speech extended each question of the GNDams issue, followed by some comments of the board members. Then, Iván Berend, a member of the board as head of the Department of Philosophy and History of the HAS, gave a longer talk on the economic situation. I. Berend was the person who became the HAS president after Szentágothai in 1985. I. Berend insisted that though the environmental issue was important, the urgent issue at that time was the economy, which was very bad, and that the investment should be directed to the manufacturing industries, not to infrastructure. The age of infrastructure building was over.

Another main issue at the meeting was „information disclosure,” according to which the GNDams issue should be openly discussed by the citizens, and the citizens should decide on the issue. This point was, eventually, very political, and the statement claimed this issue to be one of the „*not-mentioned other factors*.” President J. Szentágothai openly made this point later in parliament in 1988. In those days, parliament was still dominantly occupied by the old communist representatives, and J. Szentágothai was one of the minor group of representatives elected in 1985 without communist nomination. The general elections in 1985 were the first held under the new election law established in 1983, which made

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28 The minutes of the Presidential Board on December 20, 1983; MTA LT, elnökségének határozata “állásfoglalás-tervezet a Gabcikovo-Nagymaros Vízlepcsőrendszerrel kapcsolatos tudományos vitatott kérdésekről”, Szolgálati használatra, 55.295/1983.

independent candidates possible.<sup>29</sup>

The statement on December 20, 1983 was clear evidence that the HAS leadership had come to regard the GNDams project as one to be really given up, considering that the GNDams would be „economic suicide” (I. Berend), that „if we start uneconomical investments, very little money would be given by the creditors,, (József Bognár), and that „the fears are not of members of the academy, but of Hungarian citizens. We have a right not as members of the academy but as individuals, whom the fears concern, to give a statement on how the economic policy shall be carried out, and how we shall manage the tasks, which would heavily burden us in the future. We cannot close our eyes” (Gábor Petri).<sup>30</sup>

With the economic, political, social, and environmental considerations, the academy sent the critical statement to the party leadership. Retrospectively, this could have been a crucial step forward in the history of the reform movement finishing in 1989, though the academic leaders at that time could not expect the statement to work effectively on the party leadership to rethink October’s conclusion. The political decision had already been made. The statement was prepared for „inside use” expecting no influence on society in the ordinary case. This was the background to the next step by someone inside the academy; namely, a photocopy of the „inside use” statement was sent to „outside,” to society, specifically to János Vargha.<sup>31</sup> According to the recollections of I. Láng, the leak was not organized by the leadership. J. Szentágothai might have been the person who let the „inside use” document out of the academy. The reason that J. Vargha might have been in a unique position as an authorized dissident is seen in the next section, though we cannot know what the reality was, due to J. Szentágothai’s death in 1994.

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29 J. Gergely&L. Izsák, *A huszadid század története*, Pannonica kiado, Budapest, 2000, pp. 432-433.

30 *Op. cit.*

31 Interview with Judit Vásárhelyi in Budapest in March 2012.

#### IV. Impact of the HAS statement on society and creating a public space

The statement of the HAS became a milestone in the history of the GNDams issue and of the political reform in communist Hungary, because for one thing it was the first official objection by the academy to the party's monopoly in decision making in post-1956 Hungary. For another thing, the document gave impetus to the civic initiatives, authorizing almost officially their insistence against the GNDams. The Danube Circle's first publication, *News of the Danube Circle no. 1* [*Duna Kör Hírei 1. Szám*] thus identified and at the same time justified itself with the HAS's authority by introducing the HAS's critical attitude against the GNDams. The first article of the number was entitled "Scholars for the Danube" and through this publication, Hungarian society widely came to know that the academic authorities were totally against the communist GNDams project, and academic institutions even counseled the communist party to give up the project.

János Vargha, a biologist, was already famous as an environmentalist for his articles on the GNDams, which were published in 1981 and 1982 in popular journals.<sup>32</sup> J. Vargha was the first who openly and scientifically criticized the GNDams project for its harmful impacts on the river. His articles cautioned that the official assessments had no factual grounding, and that the Nagymaros dam, according to his own investigations, would result in 60,000 hectares of forest being submerged, 200 species of flora and fauna becoming extinct, and water supply to 3 million people being harmed. He also warned of the expected ecological damage that would not be recoverable and of the picturesque landscapes that would be considerably changed.

The Hungarian communist party was relatively tolerant in the communist camp toward the dissidents, though J. Vargha's articles obviously went beyond the limits of tolerance, because he directly criticized the party for the harmful state project. Nevertheless, his articles were published in the official media, not once, but even twice, in spite of media

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<sup>32</sup> „Egyre távolabb a jótól” *Valóság* 1981/11, „Betonpillér oldalra dőlve *Kortárs* 1982/5.



ensorship. This suggests a sort of consideration or tactic of the party, which needed scientific evidence to justify conducting the impact studies, and thus in the negotiation with Czechoslovakia postponement of the GNDams project could be demonstrated as reasonable. In this context, someone to criticize the GNDams project scientifically in public media was necessary for the party, and J. Vargha played this role, functioning as an authorized dissident. Thus, it becomes understandable that he acquired a visa to the West in 1985 when he was invited to Stockholm to receive the Right Livelihood Award to the Danube Circle. Issuing of visas was under the strict control of the party in those days, and no visa was issued to dissidents to travel to the West. Thus, another leader of the Danube Circle, Judit Vásárhelyi, who also received an official invitation to Stockholm, was not given permission to take part in the event in the capital of Sweden.<sup>33</sup>

In any case, the critical statement of the HAS and other related documents of the committees became widely known through the Danube Circle and other civic organizations, such as Friends of the Danube (A Duna Barátai), Committee for the Danube (Bizottság a Dunáért), and the Blues (Kékek).<sup>34</sup> Personally, too, according to the recollections of I. Láng, the leaders of the HAS and the civic organizations had close relations, for instance, J. Szentágothai and J. Vargha, and the academy let its facilities for the use of the civic groups. The good relationship between the HAS and the civic organizations did not change when the new president, I. Berend, came to the post. Evidence of the continuous “cooperation” between them is an article in *News of Danube Circle no. 3*, published in 1986. Namely, this number reported the full text of the “Opinion of the

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33 Interview with J. Vásárhelyi. See the Vásárhelyi ís paper in this volume.

34 The Committee for the Danube, for example, distributed handbills in 1985, which mentioned part of the report of the HAS in 1983: “The report of the HAS Presidential Board states: ‘The fundamental failure of the whole concept of the GNDams is realization of a specious energetic optimum on the Hungarian side, which forces an extraordinary harmful influence, and lowers the Hungarian part of the Danube as a subordinate device of the Gabčíkovo dam.’ ... In 1985, the HAS insisted that “any rational solution is already impossible in accordance with the economic consideration in the issue of the thirty years’ old investment,” ... Please spread this handbill!”

HAS,” which was prepared for “inside use” on June 28, 1985 under the title “Discussion at the closed roundtable conference on the impact studies of the GNDams on the environment.”<sup>35</sup> This report of the HAS also counseled the government to give up construction of the Nagymaros dam, and on July 1, 1985 the report was sent to the party with the signatures of sixty members of the HAS, while 200-250 scholars had the title of HAS member in those days.

The civic organizations also started collecting signatures from citizens in 1984, and by October of the year 6,068 signatures had been collected, with which the statement “Stop the GNDams construction, and annul the bilateral agreement” was sent to parliament and the government. In 1985, the civic organizations began another movement, a petition for a national referendum on the GNDams project. The initiators were János Bába, Sándor Csoóri, Ferenc Donáth, János Kenedi, János Kis, Imre Mécs, and János Vargha. They were dissidents famous for their underground or semi-underground activities and writings, but this time they changed the style of their opposition activities from underground or semi-underground ones to open ones. For this change, László Sólyom, a member of the Danube Circle and a scholar of constitutional law at Eötvös Loránd University, played a significant role, advising the dissidents that the people had a legal right or a public space to state their opinions even in the socialist regime; therefore, they should openly act publicly. The collection of signatures for the petition was an example, because the Hungarian Constitution prescribes national referenda in chapter 30, and the Presidential Council should have proclaimed a referendum in the case that the requirements were fulfilled. The civic initiative for a petition was not illegal under socialist rule.

The collection of signatures for the petition started in 1985 and by 1988 the number had reached 140 thousand, which was more than the official requirement, that is, 100 thousand. An anecdote in the 1970s taught: „Do not think it, but if you have thought it, do not say it out loud. If you have said it out loud, do not write it down. If you have written it

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35 I. Berend’s memoir says that Berend invited J. Vargha and L. Sólyom to a working committee of the HAS on the GNDams as specialist. I.T. Berend, *A történelem ahogyan megéltem*, Kultúrkiadó, Budapest, 1997, pp. 268-269.

down, do not sign it. If you have signed it, do not be surprised.” Therefore, the 140 thousand signatures were a serious societal commitment to the issue of the GNDams in the socialist regime.

The civic societies, having been conducting the signature collection movements, organized various public demonstrations, gatherings on the streets, or meetings at cafes or restaurants one after another from 1986 on. Sometimes, they invited foreign participants such as environmentalists, including their Slovak colleagues. These public events and not illegal activities, with minor conflicts with the police authorities, became part of the daily social, semi-political life since the middle of the 1980s in Hungary. This meant the emergence of a public space where political, academic, and civic actors could behave openly, playing the crucial role of preparing a really free political arena toward the end of the 1980s. J. Szentágothai’s statement in parliament in 1988 that „it is very problematic that an issue as serious as the GNDams was decided in a closed room” was a significant step forward in parliament, but was also a consequence of the wide civic movements in society.

## **V. From monologue to dialogue and trilogue**

It was a monologue in which the Hungarian communist party asked the HAS for its opinion on the GNDams in 1975, because the asking was one-sided. It was just nominal and either a formal „Yes” answer or no meaningful answer was expected from the HAS; the HAS did not answer. The second demand of the party for the opinion of the HAS in 1980-1981 was still monologue-like, since the party required such a reply as only justified the party’s position in the negotiation with Czechoslovakia. The second monologue, however, developed into a dialogue in 1983, when the leadership of the HAS sent a critical statement against the party’s decision. Receiving the critical statement of the HAS, the leadership of the communist party considered the statement at the political committee’s meeting. The committee, basically rejecting the opinions of the academic authorities,<sup>36</sup> accepted the proposal of the comprehensive impact studies

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<sup>36</sup> The reason that the party rejected the opinions was „considering the experiences of the long-lasting international negotiation, we see no possibility of postponing

to be completed by 1985, which might require a „reasonable modification in the contents” of the GNDams.”<sup>37</sup> Here, we may find some kind of beginning of dialogue.

The minutes of the political committee meeting in 1984, however, demonstrate another consequence of the HAS’s statement, which was much more serious. The document suggests a sense of crisis among the party leaders regarding its rule over the communist party members and society. This was another beginning of dialogue between the party leadership and society. Namely, the party leadership paid special attention to the fact that “many party members, who are faithful to the party’s politics, entertain doubts and take a position against the [GNDams] project. Opposition groups and quasi opposition circles are exploiting this matter, and we have information about their collection of signatures.” The committee decided that “a media program should be prepared for providing objective and well-balanced information to the public, and for making the people agree with the project.” The party leadership, accordingly, had to respond not only to the HAS’s criticism, but also to the people’s disagreement with the party politics on the GNDams project inside and outside the party.

These documents illustrate that the dialogue between the party and the HAS developed further into a triologue among the party, academy, and society as a result of the leak of the HAS statement to wider society including the party members.

The last communist government in Hungary, led by Miklós Németh,

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the project considerably,” and „giving up the whole project would bring unmeasurable consequences due to the results of international politics and international economic relations, the progress of the construction works, and the Czechoslovaks’ requirement for compensation” MOL.M-KS f.5/906.đ.e(1984.03.27)37R/101.

37 MOL.M-KS f.5/906.đ.e(1984.03.27)37R/101. At that moment, a possible modification could be a change of location of the construction site of the dam from Nagymaros to an upper point of the Danube. But, one year later, when the comprehensive impact studies were completed, the political committee denied any possibility of modifying the project, saying that “the comprehensive impact studies do not suggest any reasons to justify giving up the construction, breaching the international agreement, or taking the negative consequences of these changes.” MOL.M-KS.f.5/944.đ.e(1985.07.16)12R/85.

under increasing pressure of the signature collection movement for a referendum on the GNDams project, finally decided to give up the project in May 1989 after consultation with the HAS president, I. Berend. Then, the communist parliament followed it at last. This fundamental change was part of the drastic power shift within the communist party from the conservative wing to the reformist wing, having begun with designating the top leader, János Kádár, in May 1988. He persisted in completing the GNDams by any means, letting no comrades object to his ideas on this issue.<sup>38</sup>

The dialogue and the triologue did not necessarily mean that the three actors would share recognition of the issue. Rather, their perceptions differed from each other significantly. For the communist leadership, the HAS's critical statement and its leak to civic organizations were unexpected factors. The consequence was the loss of their legitimacy in society, since the HAS or the authority on the sciences, having been part of the communist regime, officially criticized or even rejected the party's policy and supported the civic societies instead. It was also an unexpected factor for the party leaders that the underground or semi-underground opposition groups appeared as open opposition groups in the issue. The GNDams issue gave an opportunity for a conversion of the attitudes in the civic activities. We can say that society also began to assume dialogue or triologue such as sending statements to the government, collecting signatures for a referendum for parliament, and participating in the HAS's committees, instead of conducting underground resistance such as *samizdat* publication. This was the social background to the power shift within the communist party, which progressed in the second half of the 1980s. The historiography has not recognized the societal aspect of the power games between the mainstream and the reformist groups in the communist party, emphasizing instead the country's poor economic performance, the significance of the introduction of the new election system in 1983 and its implementation in 1985, and the Gorbachev effects. It might be true that Hungary would have changed her political regime without the GNDams issue in the end as did many other Eastern European countries. However, the process would have been significantly different; for exam-

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38 I.T. Berend, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

ple, Hungary would have followed the Czechoslovak or East German case, though we know that drastic political changes were able to take place in East Germany due to the Hungarian policy of opening the Hungarian-Austrian borders in the summer of 1989. Accordingly, Hungary was needed as a forerunner in the whole process of political change in Eastern Europe.

The consequence of the GNDams issue is a Danube divided into two streams. Now, the old one meanders through Hungarian territory almost as it did, and the other, which is totally new, flows straight through Slovak territory. The two governments do not officially accept the reality of the opposite side, though they are satisfied with the reality of their own side. Basically, society in both countries has accepted the two realities. However, a dialogue is still demanded between the two countries by the Danube. The meeting point of the two Danubes at Sap needs cooperative management over dredging of the riverbed; otherwise, navigation is not at all safe around the meeting point. The dialogue between Hungary and Slovakia is still uncertain even in the triologue involving the EU leadership.

### Maps



The catchment of the Danube



**The Danube between Slovakia and Hungary**



**The Old Danube and the New Danube**

