

# The Anatomy of the Slovak-Hungarian Underground Protection of the Danube in the Eighties

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## First, poetry?

To set the tone for a short review of an underground Slovak-Hungarian collaboration against the development of a cross-country hydroelectric power station system, within the period of the command economy of the eighties, we turn towards poetry. We read the last paragraph of a poem – valid before World War II as well as in the socialist era or even now – of Attila József (1905-1937), “By the Danube,” written in June 1936, translated by Peter Zollman.

... Én dolgozni akarok. Elegendő  
harc, hogy a multat be kell vállalni.  
A Dunának, mely múlt, jelen s jövőendő,  
egymást ölelik lágy hullámai.  
A harcot, amelyet őseink vívtak,  
békévé oldja az emlékezés  
*s rendezni végre közös dolgaikat,  
ez a mi munkánk; és nem is kevés.*

...I want to work. It's hard for human nature  
to make a true confession of the past.  
The Danube, which is past, present and future,  
Entwines the waves in tender friendly clasp.  
Out of the blood, our fathers shed in battles,

flows peace, through our remembrance and regard:  
*creating order in our common matters,  
this is our duty; and it will be hard.*

## **I. No environmental protection without participation**

Public participation in the narrow sense might mean the formal invitation of certain target groups or stakeholders to take part in a decision-making process (public hearings, forms, letters, etc.). It might be a pseudo activity, taking the time of all stakeholders, without any social impact.

In the broader sense, participation might refer to certain target groups or stakeholders wishing to take real part in the elaboration of decision making (receiving and giving information and/or opinions, cost-benefit analysis, offering alternative solutions, identification of direct and indirect winners and losers of the decision, indicating compensation needs, etc.)

In both cases, the first thing is publicity, openness, tranquility, and the simultaneous presence of all stakeholders in the discussion. A third party (facilitating the course of decision making) might be useful. In exchange for making all these efforts, the constitution guarantees the right of every citizen to a healthy environment. Horizontally, more and more EU documents claim „partnership” as well!

## **II. There are legal conditions and guarantees for participation!**

Such legal conditions and guarantees are in place so as to at least answer questions, raise alternative solutions, and especially give reasons when suggestions are refused. We can remember spontaneous green one-issue movements in Hungary in the early eighties when these requirements were sometimes fulfilled and sometimes not.

One local issue was around Mount Szársomlyó, where the „stakeholders” were the very rare flower, the Hungarian crocus, on the one hand, versus the continuous production of a stone mine on the other. The question raised was, “Why make an economic sacrifice in exchange for a few rare flowers?” The case finally was successful on behalf of biodiversity.

The Conservation Club of the Communist Youth Organization made a public notification in 1984, and some early media interest was raised because of the hill being protected at the national level since 1944, of 754 plants living here, among which forty were protected and four had increased protection, like the magyar kikerics. Mining was stopped.

The outcome of a broader international project, which was present at the national level of two countries, was the public protection of the Danube and the huge drinking water potential under the area against the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dams, identifying the consequences of the decision on further economic and social issues as well. Without the minimum of public participation, the process became an underground opposition protest case.

Research should be conducted to know more about the early elements of this protest movement for the Danube in both contemporary Czechoslovakia and Hungary. As far as we remember, Slovak scientists wrote brave articles in periodicals and in not widely read quarterlies against the development project earlier than anything published on the issue in Hungary. In the Czechoslovakia's Charta 77 in 1977, the state authorities were approached to re-examine the project. Also, a working group on the environment stood up from 1978 offering a primary source of independent information on the environment.

For the Hungarian public, the case became visible via a publication of János Vargha: "Egyre távolabb a jótól" (Valóság, 1981.) It was a journalistic overview of all the possible negative consequences of the construction. In the meantime, various professional committees of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) examined the different dimensions of such a development under high confidentiality. These negative results were integrated by the Presidential Council of the HAS as a total professional as well as political refusal of the undesirable construction – in a top secret document!

### **III. The social movement for the Danube**

This movement started in January 1984 with several fora organized by the "cons" side, inviting the others, the "pros" side, in vain. The indignation raised by such a refusal to engage in dialogue led to a decision by

some volunteers. They formulated a petition written to the Presidential Council to suspend construction in order to conduct research on the ecological and economical as well as social interests connected with the river. In February 1984, the Social Committee for the Danube (SCD) stood up. It was a spontaneous, professionally heterogeneous group feeling more and more responsibility for the complicated set of issues involved. The rationale behind the petition became increasingly known, and satisfied the huge demand for information. Now, professional debates gained wider publicity: articles, lectures, and panel fora followed each other, and new underground channels were used to make the public understand the irreversibility of certain processes. The SCD initiated a collection of subscriptions under a letter to the Presidential Council of HU to suspend construction first of all in order to protect the clear potable water reservoir for and under the two countries. Collection of signatures for the petition became popular. To sign the petition needed less and less courage.

The SCD also intended to establish a civic organization protecting the landscape of the Danube but no application among several received permission, or even an answer. Along with this obstruction by the authorities, meetings of the SCD and others were closely observed by the secret police.

#### **IV. Informal funding of the Danube Circle**

In September 1984 came an answer to the delay of the authorities in the funding of a legal, registered organization. The Danube Circle worked in conspiracy, with excellent professional connections. Its activities covered the illegal editing of a *samizdat* publication, the “Duna Kör Hírei.”

#### **... To be burnt BEFORE reading?!**

The newsletter published confidential documents and released secret information printed in a few copies. The contents were greatly multiplied by Radio Free Europe. Underground activity and no fixed membership characterized the Circle, which tried to analyze the possible dangers of the project in a narrow but open dimension.

Abstracts in the newsletter were also published in the Slovak, Ger-

man, and English languages to communicate with others living along the river.

In 1985, the Danube Circle submitted a list of the signatories of the petition in alphabetical order to the Presidential Council of Hungary. There was no meritorious answer to the letter of around 10,000 citizens.

Also, simultaneously, Charta 77 released the text of the Danube Circle's appeal to the Czechoslovakian public:

The hysterical industrialization of the 1950s and the continuous plundering of the economy have caused irreversible damage in many regions of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and Hungary. The construction of the planned hydro-electric barrage system at Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros is likely to have irreversible consequences which will affect all the nations living along the Danube. ... We appeal to the Czechoslovakian public to join us in our fight to defend ecological values and the Danube region.

(Palach Press: Summary of Available Documents, October 1985)

Though there was no official publicity for the issue of counterproductivity of the dam, it became ever more political. The Danube Circle succeeded in thematizing the issue of the hydro-electric power station at the national elections in 1985 in Hungary. For this effort, the Danube Circle was awarded the „alternative Nobel prize” of the Right Livelihood Foundation in 1985 in Stockholm. Even after that, the exit visa of one of the two delegated persons, VJ, was denied by the Hungarian authorities: „It is against public benefit of Hungary” (minister of home affairs).

After that, a large number of actions, with an ever-widening public – and with less and less visible Slovak protest – created the sequence of opposition activities ending up at the final decision of the Hungarian parliament not to construct the Nagymaros Dam. Gatherings, educative walks to discuss „our everyday potable water and the dams” prohibited by the police, media releases, letters to MPs, and other civic methods were first used in the state-party system. The Danube movement became a civic academy of democratization.

The Danube movement became wider and more political. „It's being done by people who a few years ago wouldn't have thought of taking

such a stance. And it is showing that civic courage is increasing” (Judit Vasarhelyi, *Washington Post*, Dec. 15, 1985, Diehl: “Danube plans rile Hungarians”). A more political wing demanded an immediate referendum. „The Blues” wrote a letter to every MP, initiating the discussion in parliament. The „Friends of the Danube” made a compromise: being ready to oppose only the Nagymaros Dam instead of the whole system. The „Living Szigetköz” was a program of university students surveying natural resources. Among all these initiatives, an informal umbrella organization, the Nagymaros Committee, tried to coordinate.

Finally, on October 31, 1989, the HU parliament decided to halt construction.

## **V. Contribution of environmental movements to developing a democratic procedure**

The environmental movements opposed the symptomatic treatments and aimed for a more analytical, systematic approach to their issues. Very spontaneous networking for self-defense developed among the participants, while working towards their commitment. It was always difficult to balance between the constant pressure to choose between fundamentalism and real political compromises, especially because in the state-party system it was very often an ethical mistake to make compromises, while in a participative community, where consensus making is important, the task was to make good compromises. To fight for a healthy environment led directly against Marxist roots: this ideology had no grasp of ecological problems. Open criticism relies on publicity, and the ways to reach it were sophisticated. To make a correct and neutral analysis of the problems, the right experts were needed.

## **VI. Why continue Slovak-Hungarian participation for a natural river and how should it be done?**

EU offers partnership, even with the Danube strategy. We wonder if it is used to the fullest extent. On the basis of a short survey of Slovak-Hungarian cooperation for a natural Danube and among others, for the protection of drinking water, a modest proposal could be to examine the topics

of the Danube Strategy for still-relevant issues overlapping those of the movement. Also, to try to work together again, local issues seem more promising. We may find a number of remaining important tasks:

## **European Union Strategy for the Danube Region**

### ***ACTION PLAN***

#### **A) Connecting the Danube Region**

- 1) *To improve mobility and multimodality*
- 2) *To encourage more sustainable energy*
- 3) *To promote culture and tourism, and people-to-people contacts*

#### **B) Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region**

- 4) *To restore and maintain the quality of the waters*
- 5) *To manage environmental risks*
- 6) *To preserve biodiversity, landscapes, and the quality of air and soil*

#### **C) Building Prosperity in the Danube Region**

- 7) *To develop the Knowledge Society through research, education, and information technologies*
- 8) *To support the competitiveness of enterprises, including cluster development*
- 9) *To invest in people and skills*

#### **D) Strengthening the Danube Region**

- 10) *To step up institutional capacity and cooperation*
- 11) *To work together to promote security and tackle organized and serious crime.*

*... creating order in our common matters,  
this is our duty; and it will be hard...*

(Kapolcs, September 30, 2012.)

