Jaws on the Danube: Water Management, Regime Change and the Movement Against the Middle Danube Hydroelectric Dam

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Introduction

This article deals with the history of the Hungarian movement that emerged in opposition to the Gabcikovo (Bős) — Nagymaros Barrage, and in particular tries to trace the changes in the patterns of conflict involved. It sets this within the longer story of attempts to harness the energy of the Danube. The story stretches over decades, with new pairs of actors stepping onto the stage from time to time; the conflict developing between them appears to be the main conflict in the whole matter (Vargha, 1989). The longer-term perspective reveals some perhaps surprising lessons. On the one hand, it becomes clear that the value of an analysis based on identifying separate periods is limited, and that an examination of a longer time-cycle in its entirety makes it possible to learn different lessons, for example, bringing out the links with major political changes. On the other hand, it can be seen that it is not at all certain that the conflicts which appear to be at the centre of events at any time are the real ones.

Prehistory 1: hydro-engineers versus nature (until 1950)

The century up to 1950 was the period of triumphant river control. The Tisza — the fickle running river meandering through the Great Hungarian Plain (the Alföld) — was first controlled by cutting across the loops, then by straightening the channel, thus forcing the water to leave the Plain as quickly as possible. A further period of river control was necessary in the twentieth century to make it possible for part of the water to be caught in the reservoirs created in the arteries; that is, to make it recoverable. In the case of the Danube, in the last century, the most significant intervention on the lower stretch took place at the Iron Gates, where the goal was to ensure navigability. Besides this, significant dead branches of the river — but not those connected with the main channel — were drained.

This control, and the rivers' periodic inundation of increasing areas of territory resulting from the waterworks connected with it, made it necessary to provide for ever greater masses of water to move through the original channel by raising the embankments. Thus in the end the danger of flooding became rarer in the controlled rivers, but on the other hand unprecedented quantities of water and water-levels occurred, endangering territories which had not previously been affected by floods. To an outsider, the problem became absolutely

baffling, while the floods strengthened the water management's position against others: it could sound the catastrophic danger alarm in response to every claim against the government. But the fruits of this would ripen only in a later period.

First, however, another strand of the story must be picked up — the use of rivers for energy — which is, of course, a development inextricably bound up with control.

Before the first world war Hungary filled the entire Carpathian Basin; that is, the rivers' alpine and high-incline sections then belonged to the country. Since hydro-energy needs not only a large volume of water, but also an appropriate slope and difference in heights, it was these alpine areas, with their precipitation, which were first considered for energy production. It is significant that the territories detached from Hungary as a result of the 1920 Paris Peace Treaty included 94.5% of the country's hydraulic power reserves. In spite of this — and in accordance with previous foreign examples — throughout the period between the two world wars, Slovak and Hungarian water management specialists continually called on their governments to accept one — or several — Danube barrages as energy-creating works. On the Slovak side, support for the plan included an element of territorial expansionism: the Danube formed the newly agreed state boundary between the two countries, but already at the peace talks Slovakia would have liked to win the right to exclusive use of the river-boundary water power reserve.

The plan

Before continuing, it is necessary to provide a technical description of the main player in the story, the Water Barrage.

Leaving the Alps, the Danube falls 50 metres along each 100 kilometres of the Austrian stretch. Along the full 417 kilometres of the Hungarian stretch, the fall is about the same. Arriving in the flat regions, the Danube slows down, deposits its alluvia and creates islands. In these conditions, a dam built in the channel, even if it dams up the river for several dozens of kilometres, can succeed in creating a difference in level of only a few metres. The side-channel is intended to improve on this ratio. Here, the river would move into an artificially constructed, asphalted canal, running parallel to the original channel, in which the mass of water, proceeding with a very slight fall, would be containable at the side-branch level. For this the water level of the side-channel must be moved even further from the original ground-level, flowing between a 5-10-15-metre-high dam. At the end of the dam would be the power station: it would be used precisely when the mass of water returns from this level to the level of the original channel. Thus the power station would not be built in the river channel, but rather next to and above it, and the river would be brought to it. In the event, this side-channel was built on the Slovak side, and was about 20 kilometres in length (see Figure 1).

In the case of the Gabcikovo power station, even this solution was not attractive enough from the energy production point of view, so the plan had to be filled out in such a way that in the peak period, that is in the morning and afternoon electric energy peak consumption periods, the power station would be used to its maximum capacity. To do this, the waters of the Danube have to be held back for half a day, and then released to the power station during the peak periods. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to build a reservoir capable of holding about an average two-day flow of the Danube above the power station. This was the Dunakiliti reservoir, two-thirds of which was to be on Hungarian territory and one-third on Slovak, with the controlling sluices on the Hungarian side.

The peak-time running, that is the power station's periodic operation, would change the water-flow relations not only above the power station, but also below it. Since it is not permissible that at those periods of the day when the power station is not in operation the section of river below the power station should be emptied, a second dam is necessary, with the help of which the stretch after the first power station — the so-called sub-water

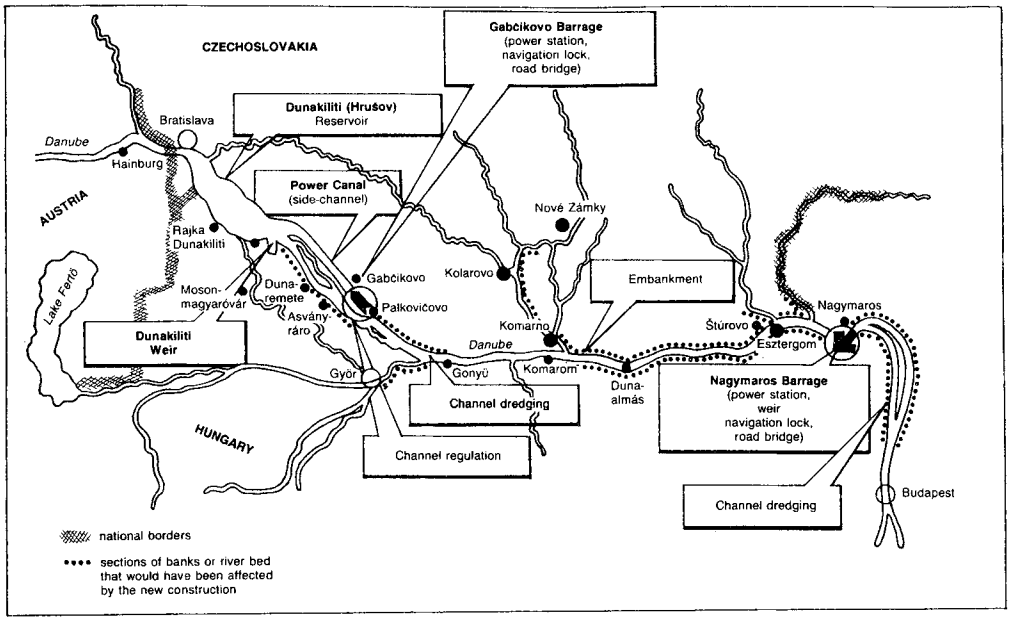

Figure 1 *General layout of the Middle Danube project*

— would also become controllable. This second dam is the Nagymaros dam, which falls on the Hungarian stretch of the Danube, where the Danube is no longer a border-river.

Prehistory 2: water management versus government (1950–75)

Let us return to the period preceding the concrete plans. Notwithstanding the significant proportion of the period 1950 to 1975 that was devoted to international negotiations (Czechoslovak–Hungarian, Soviet–Hungarian, Austrian–Czechoslovak and Soviet–Czechoslovak talks following one another), from the Hungarian point of view two prime ministerial decisions can be considered as real landmarks. The first of these was in 1953, when Prime Minister Ernö Gerö, the second man in the Hungarian party leadership to be confronted with a virtual fait accompli dictated by preliminary water management talks, nevertheless rejected the plan for a side-channel on the Slovak side; by this action he delayed by 10 years the time when a similar plan received a signature at the government commissioner level. The second landmark of the period was in 1975, when the Hungarian Council of Ministers accepted the plan put before it, which was in essence the version still debated today and briefly outlined above. From here, a straight path led to the signing of the intergovernmental agreement in 1977.

Meanwhile, in the intervening two decades, the Hungarian water management organization had become significantly swollen (by 10 times, that is, 70,000 people) and its powerful position had been strengthened. The key element in this was the 'good management' appropriate to floods at all times — that is, clever tactical use of the periods of flood danger in intragovernmental bargaining positions. The Danube barrage itself ran as a sort of side show for most of the period; its preparation was reported not through open planning, but rather by professional representation at international talks on the matter, and through hints hidden in international specialists' declarations. Meanwhile, a barrage was completed on Hungary's second biggest river, the Tisza (1954, at Tiszalök) and yet

another reservoir came under construction (at Kisköre in 1973), which to this day has not been entirely filled.

It is probable that everywhere in the world there are provisions in the records of the contracts of large state investments as to what must be kept secret, and for how long. It is, of course, in the government's interest that before it commits itself, it should have its position checked by as wide a professional opinion as possible. The investor thus has to try to get the government interested in secretiveness. In this respect it is very useful if behind the investment, military and strategic interests can be lined up. In eastern Europe even less than this was enough. Indeed, it was sufficient that 'foreign interests', 'energy considerations' or something similar should be introduced, indeed anything which would be better not coming to the attention of mere mortals cut off from the culture of great politics, who 'would hardly understand anyway'. In itself, however, this would have been too little in the absence of a great political turn, when the government had virtually begun to look for an opportunity to demonstrate its resolution.

Today it is difficult to reconstruct exactly and in detail what background considerations led to the political hardening and conservative workers' power wave which coincided in the period 1974–7, when the agreement to accept the dam plan came about relatively smoothly. Still, to use a cliché, it is no coincidence that this occurred precisely in a period when a centrally directed force to restore order was gathering strength in opposition to the limited economic reforms which had been unfolded since 1968; when sociologists who had begun to connect social problems with the peculiarities of the political regime were forced to emigrate; and when the (one-)party ideology declared that the economists were wrong and that the impact of the oil price explosion could not affect the socialist countries. Despite this, in a curious parallel, while for example in France the atomic lobby succeeded in gaining acceptance of large-scale atomic energy plans, in Hungary the plan for the barrage reached the point of signature.

Neither the hard-line communist politicians nor anyone else yet guessed how well the plan would come to symbolize the circumstances of its production.

Water management and government versus professional opponents (1977–84)

It is a fact that for a long time after the signing of the agreed plan, even a degree of professional openness gave rise to little criticism. Such points of view were presented at professional forums by a few specialists who were generally not limited directly to the water management: for example, one was an engineer working on the capital's civil engineering, one was a railway engineer and one a hydrobiologist at an academic research institute. However, from 1980 on, several employees of the Scientific Research Institute of Water Management were also involved in matters of detail.

It must be noted that professional criticisms did not call into question the fact of the barrage's construction or the objective of energy production. Rather, they concerned individual details. It would be difficult, naturally, to say what would have happened if the planners of the investment project had paid attention to these criticisms and opened them up for debate; this would have meant not only another investment project, but another story, too. Anyway, when in 1981 biologist János Vargha, a journalist with the *Búvár* (Diver) nature protection monthly, raised the subject, it was not the professional debate that shocked him most, but rather the realization that the affair was full of hurt, shelved people, silent and silenced opinions, and publications that had been ignored (Vargha, 1981). There were no questions of water management, environment or energy being raised: it was simply a political affair that streamrollered ahead, grinding opposing opinions beneath it. The tools of repression were out of all proportion to the weight of the opposing opinions:

and it was precisely this that betrayed the plan's partisans' fear that the system, improvised with such difficulty as it was, might reveal how weak their base was.

At the time it was obvious to the competent circles of government that something was not right. In 1981, everything was done to slow down the preparations: the Economic Committee passed a decision by which the Hungarian-Czechoslovak Economic and Technical-Scientific Cooperation Committee would agree to interrupt the construction of the barrage system. As the Kádár-era dictatorship entered a 'softer', more sober period, the second oil price explosion of 1979–80 finally forced the leadership to abandon its mistaken strategy of the 1970s, and the influence of economic specialists within the government temporarily increased. As to the power station, the examinations began in 1978 with the announcement of a Győr-Sopron County Central People's Supervisory Committee to look at the shortcomings of the plan. In 1979 and 1980, the debate continued in various committees or programmes of the Patriotic People's Front, the Hungarian Hydrological Society and the Association of Technical and Natural Sciences Societies.

After this, right up to the middle of 1983, various scientific committee investigations followed one after another. Among others, the National Technical Development Committee and the National Environmental and Nature Protection Office prepared opinions, and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was also asked to comment. In an odd way, in most of the committees decisive roles were played by university specialists or specialists from banks with an interest in the construction, and the opinions that were emerging were to say the least ambiguous.

The struggle within the government continued. Without even waiting for the announcement of a few preparatory committees, in summer 1983 the Hungarian-Czechoslovak Economic and Technical-Scientific Cooperation Committee took a position favouring continuation of the construction works, and in the autumn of the same year the agreement was signed at the heads of government level. In December, the viewpoint of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences presidency, which favoured postponing or completely cancelling the investment, was ready. But since political decisions had already dismissed such a possibility, the decision was kept secret, and the Academy itself was not allowed to publicize it.

Water management and government versus germs of the movement (1984–8)

By the beginning of 1984, the water management authorities felt as if they had won the battle. Behind their back, a political decision was taken to begin an information campaign; but even here the authorities wanted to avoid a real debate: when on 27 January 1984 the deputy office director of the National Water Management Office was due to take part in a debate with János Vargha, the Office withdrew at the last moment.

In place of the debate, János Vargha told everything he knew about the barrage. Numerous specialists attended the presentation as listeners and commentators, and they recounted how they had been sidelined by various methods. Afterwards, a few of the audience stayed behind, and they decided to initiate a movement, an educational and signature-collecting campaign to call attention to the dangers of the barrage. This moment can be considered the birth of the Danube movement (Sólyom, 1985; 1986). It is remarkable that in the same year, the Hungarian Architects' Association took a position at its general meeting calling for reconsideration of the barrage system, and the Budapest City Builders' Association and the Communist Youth League committee of the Eötvös Loránd University's Humanities Faculty also made an appeal.

From then until May 1984, clubs from many Budapest universities and institutes offered space for the debates organized by the new movement. It turned out that the water

management was unable to produce presenters capable of debating, and to avoid further struggles, it ordered an 'information embargo'. (Later, in many cases, they claimed that they had been blocked from informing the population about the advantages of the investment.) The information embargo naturally affected every publication connected with the barrage. Thus by the middle of 1984, it was obvious to the water management that political support was not enough to defend the construction in open, 'democratic' debates. Every effort to move the construction along was made in this knowledge. The defence of the compromised economic policymakers was always that of 'sincere' surprise: they did not know, but if they had known, and so on.

In the beginning, the movement targeted these 'sincere' decision-makers. The initial strategy was to use every legal means, offer petitions, and ask for official permission to operate. These tactics forced the authorities to decide that they could not pretend to be well-meaning and misled anymore. It is true, too, that for other reasons as well they were inclined to a tougher stance. Successfully surviving the beginning of the 1980s (avoiding the balance of payments crisis that threatened) made the holders of power conceited, and in preparation for their new party congress those who felt they had given too wide a sway to more liberal economic policies gained the upper hand. It was time to tighten the reins. But the mid-1980s cannot be compared with the situation 10 years earlier: just as Gorbachev's Soviet Union did not have the same harsh authority as Brezhnev's, the intended hard line turned out to be softer than planned.

During the first half of 1984, the movement gathered more than 10,000 signatures for a letter to parliament and government urging postponement of the construction and the elaboration of new plans. At the same time, the struggle for registration as an official association began, for which the official organs were unprepared. All they knew was that they did not want to register the movement. Thus they tried to buy time through a method not yet recorded in law, by challenging the movement's competence; and in the end, after a change of personnel, they reneged on the earlier verbal agreement.

The name 'Danube Circle' first appeared at this time on various documents and newsletters. This branch of the movement was supported by specialists opposing the construction, which, together with the presence of János Vargha, ensured familiarity and continuity with its past history. The Danube Circle also developed foreign ties; indeed, in October 1985, János Vargha and the Danube Circle won the annual alternative Nobel Prize, the Right Livelihood Award, for its activities.

The official media reacted to the prize with a prohibition. (This fact itself characterized the situation: the Information Office of the party's Central Committee could bring to the attention of the editors of every press organ, periodical and other media what it was *not* permitted to transmit — and they complied with this!) At the same time, it became ever more clear to the authorities that silence was not enough. They wanted to make the activity which the movement conducted their own, and transform it (HSWP, 1986; Persányi, 1988).

However, as long as the population's right to know about matters relating to the environment remained unrecognized, naturally organizations could not be formed to control the activity from above. The authorities thus had simultaneously to take the first steps to acknowledge the existence of environmental problems, while denying the existence of the movement which had formed from below. In 1984, an 'umbrella' organization integrating environmental protection groups came into being within the Communist Youth League. This was followed in 1986 by an Environmental Protection Council in the Federation of Technical and Natural Sciences Associations, which sought to draw together, channel and take in hand the social expression of professional views connected with the environment. Finally, in 1988, when the Danube Circle again applied for official registration as a national association, the 'Hungarian Environmental Protection Union' was rapidly cobbled together under the aegis of the Patriotic People's Front, which, monopolizing the problem area, according to the official declarations would be made responsible for every other national-level, that is not territorially limited, environmental protection organization. This action,

however, was so amateurish that even at its founding sessions, with their exclusivist organization and political choice of invitees, the organizations managed to discredit themselves.

The sequence of events of these years would not be completely comprehensible without taking a wider view. In the autumn of 1984, a Czechoslovak–Austrian debate about a power station being negotiated on the stretch of Danube below Vienna was reported at diplomatic level. The Czechoslovak side favoured joint use of the hydraulic power thus generated, and recommended building the power station near Bratislava. The Austrian side, however, proposed Hainburg, which lies on the completely Austrian stretch. In spite of the preparations already under way, Prague made official protests, referring to the destruction of the ecological balance and the danger of flooding in Bratislava. The Austrian environmentalists stepped in, protesting strongly against the destruction of the flood-plain forests, to which the government answered by bringing in the police, in scandalous circumstances. This path could not, however, be followed, and the Austrian government suspended the works, cancelling the power station.

The result was that the Austrian construction industry interested in building the barrage was left without work. This played a big role in the fact that in 1985, preparation of a second agreement was accelerated: at Nagymaros, the works undertaken by the Hungarian side were to be completed by Austrian firms with Austrian state credit guarantees, which the Hungarian side would repay over 20 years, beginning in 1996 with electric energy produced by the power station (or from some other source).

The Austrian Greens protested alongside the Hungarian movement against Austrian participation in the construction, and especially against government support for this, and they took part in organizing many Hungarian protests. In 1986 and 1987, the police liquidated or dispersed Budapest environmental protests and leafleting. In the latter case, they arrested for a short time a few Austrian citizens protesting against the construction of the power station. But in spring 1988, the situation was still the same. Today it is clearly evident — though it was not obvious at the time — that the weakening dictatorship's last display of strength was at stake, that the police were already incapable of dealing with conflicts that could not be handled by police means; but at the same time, that the authorities were not capable of dealing with them by any other means.

Water management and government versus political opposition (1988–9)

In 1988, the Hungarian leadership was trying to present itself as reform communist, and to flirt with Europe, not least in the interest of upholding the economy. At the same time, a decidedly conservative wing within the party brought about the removal of János Kádár, whose person symbolized the past three decades. These two dissonant facts caused daily tensions and contradictions. One of the telltale signs was the barrage itself: while the appearance of the social movements became freer, and the expression of views began to follow European patterns, water management affairs were entrusted to a newly created ministry. The ministry was brought into existence by merging the former Water Management Office and the Environmental and Nature Protection Office, under the leadership of a high-level conservative party official demoted (!) to minister. Here it was possible to create a kind of island where the leaders could convince themselves that the changing times did not affect them: over more than a year — as we can see with hindsight — they perfected the earlier symbolism of the barrage as a model of the rigid communist dictatorship, but now as a caricature of the original.

The model worked to force the party apparatus and the Grósz government to show their true colours. Indeed, in autumn 1988, after long and exhasting debates in the press

and on television, many spectacular open conferences, and a 30,000-strong demonstration in front of the parliament building, the parliament finally had to deal with the power station. After a sharp parliamentary debate, the party — which feverishly wanted to prevail at all costs — forced MPs to vote according to the traditional practice of 'machine-voting'; this made clear the Hungarian parliament's own position: it had openly, spectacularly and completely discredited itself.

The decision was followed as early as October by continued demonstrations, and a new signature-collecting movement was initiated to demand a referendum on the barrage affair (Szekfü, 1988). In the wake of the action, at the end of February 1989, the movement was already able to hand 140,000 signatures to the parliamentary president.

Miklós Németh, the reform communist prime minister who took office in December 1988, naturally sensed the tension, and he wanted at all costs to avoid a referendum against the barrage, which would demonstrate the masses' dissatisfaction with the regime. As a first decisive step, over the barrage affair he found it necessary to sharply separate himself from the party leadership that continued to bear the stamp of Károly Grósz. In March, he was already hinting in parliament at a necessary re-examination; then on 13 May 1989, suspension of the Nagymaros river works was announced at a government session. The final decision was fixed for a date two months later. In the meantime the final implications of a decision to halt work on the dam were to be considered.

Government versus water management (May 1989–April 1991)

It would be difficult to say what would have been the result in 1989 if a referendum had actually taken place. Perhaps believers in the barrage were right to think that they would have suffered certain defeat as victims of a demonstration against the regime. In any case, the Nagymaros council president initiated an unusual signature-collecting counter-campaign: signatures were collected by water management enterprises and offices from their own employees, protesting not only against suspension of the construction works, but also against there *not* being a referendum on the matter!

There was a short period immediately after the announcement of the suspension of the construction work when the representatives of the water management themselves awaited further decisive measures. High-ranking water management representatives announced that they had already said ... already written ... it was just impossible ... Afterwards, several weeks passed, but nothing happened. Nobody was moved, nobody responded to their questions. The office-leader who had previously supervised the construction in the National Planning Office was named government commissioner. The specialist committees were set up, and among these three water management specialist committees were formed in the ministry favouring construction. It turned out that everyone could still be present, and could continue the earlier debates and methods.

True, the order setting up the committees specified by name several organizations, including the Danube Circle, which were to be involved, but this came to light only after the first meetings. Thus, the movement's representatives were brought in to work only after the work programme had already been initiated and allocated. In many instances, massive documents accompanied invitations to meetings for the next day; in others, it emerged at the meetings that new materials had been prepared in place of the ones that had been sent out, and that these were to be discussed at the meeting. The head of the committee bringing together the economic analyses wanted to avoid polarized positions in any case, and the costs of suspending or continuing construction somehow always ended up to be just about the same. If a mistake favoured one side, immediately a correction was made favouring the other side. It is interesting that results similar to this stalemate generally characterized the activity linked to the government commissioner and the government.

Formally, only the Environmental Protection and Water Management portfolio spoke against the government decision, but in reality the government carefully arranged that only neutral steps should take place: the fact that the Dunakiliti works should be suspended was one of these, as was the decision that within half a year the Austrian contract should be finally settled. The original two-month decision-making deadline was formally lengthened to twice that period; in reality, however, it grew to three years, as no step could be taken in the direction of either destroying existing dam works or building further. (Naturally, the bills from these latter two years were already a burden on a different government.)

In autumn 1989, the government commissioner ordered two summaries of the committee's statements, one from the Oviber investing group, and another from independent specialists. The government and parliament in the end accepted a decision in which they agreed to suspend construction, but on the basis of the committee's work they did not move in any direction, beyond agreeing on the need for further studies.

That autumn, the reform wing of the communist party practically liquidated its own party. As a result of obviously mistaken judgement, it provoked such a vote at their congress that at the end barely 5% of the earlier membership joined the two newly formed successor parties. The Németh government similarly erred in assessing its chances during the next elections: it can be said that its activity was in large part subordinated to a previous image of popularity, and that it failed to carry out numerous steps which would have been in its power. This kind of vacillation in an attempt to please everybody was characteristic of the government's position on the barrage, too. One example of its was the prime minister's many progressive letters and exchanges of messages with the Czechoslovak head of government, Marian Calfa, at the beginning of 1990, in which he wrote about the details of the parliamentary decision, and about the suspension of Hungarian work on the river on Slovak territory, even though the steps mentioned in the letter had not been started.

The movements which in 1988 had worked together against the barrage as the Nagymaros Committee were now branching out into different roads. The Hungarian Democratic Forum became a party, which after the elections became the governing party. In the case of smaller groups, some or all of the membership chose direct politicking and were absorbed into the political parties. Many took part in the not very successful formation of the Green party, dogged by continual internal political battles. Finally, the period in which leading members of the Danube Movement had to take part in (unpaid) specialist committee work absorbed so much of their energies that in effect it brought an end to the movement.

If, in this period, technically little happened with the barrage, the relevance of outside events cannot be ignored. In autumn 1989, the east European communist powers collapsed like dominoes: this was the time of the disappearance of the Berlin Wall, and in Czechoslovakia and Romania we witnessed rapid changes of personnel. Just as in Hungary during the short Grósz era after Kádár, in Slovakia, too, changes in attitude to the barrage heralded like a sensitive instrument what lay behind the promises of new power.

Interparty skirmishes? (May 1990–April 1991)

Although from the point of view of the situation of the barrage it is not justified, we will treat the first year of the period of the Hungarian change of regime and government as a separate subsection. It is not the events linked with the barrage, but rather the expectations involved, that had changed by this time.

In 1990, western observers sensitive to environmental questions generally took it for granted that in eastern Europe, where the environmental movements had played such a significant role in motivating the masses, and hence in eliminating the old regime, the development of environmental consciousness had now begun. In eastern Europe too, everyone expected the emerging new parties to pay more attention to environmental problems

than the previous policy-makers had done. Those very people who had fought to the end in actions against the barrage were often to be found in leading positions in various parties.

A few important declarations, promises and slogans on environmental protection made their way into party programmes. But the closer the elections came, the less was said about these questions. Entirely new parties were now emerging, and it became very important for them to begin to differentiate themselves as markedly as possible from the other parties. A few stock phrases on the environment were not too useful in this respect, and these were often more in line with other parties' similar environmental programmes and phrases than with the economic policies of their own party.

As mentioned above, one of the institutional bastions on the side of completing the barrage was the Environmental and Water Management Ministry, formed in 1988. This forced marriage was not questioned. Subsequently Water Management was split off from Environmental Protection and combined with Transport. (Construction and settlement development were removed from Transport and placed with Environmental Protection.) What was less apparent was that despite the changes the pro-dam lobby, consisting mainly of the water management leadership, remained unchanged. More generally, it is true that in contrast to the new and inexperienced political leadership, the various industrial lobbies continued and grew in strength.

The relative strengthening of the lobbies became manifest in the ease with which they were capable of blackmailing the government, which lacked experienced and expert politicians. Unfortunately the government made up for its lack of expertise by supplying it from the ranks of the members of the lobbies, an expensive 'learning cost' which only became public later, after a new political balance had developed. Until then the economic struggle continued, confronting the government with a series of *faits accomplis*, forcing them to rush into cheap and apparently attractive investments and to prepare for situations without considering alternatives, as typified by the Gabcikovo (Bös)-Nagymaros power station. In this situation, the barrage became a lucky exception simply because its symbolic political content was such that it was already so discredited that no political force dare go back on the earlier decision.

Still, the government's recognition of this was not explicable in itself. In September 1990, when the opposition parties recommended to parliament that the earlier, too imprecise government authorization concerning the barrage be made more specific, and that the intention to destroy the work already done be stated, the motion was lost due to rigid party divisions, and the growing governing parties blocked the reintroduction of the question onto the agenda. The proposal would not come forward again until April 1991, when it was able to count on the support of all the party fractions, and thus parliament opened the way for the government delegation at the talks with its Slovak partner to come down unambiguously on the side of cancelling the original agreement.

With this, on the side of the Hungarian parliament, the two-year-long suspension of the decision came to an end, and at least at Nagymaros preparations to return the channel to its original state began, though mostly on paper. From the point of view of the barrage, the whole period was characterized by a 'we can talk about everything, but do nothing' principle, which in a peculiar way the change of regime did not alter.

Government versus Parliament (April 1991–May 1992)

Had the Hungarian government's policy truly moved beyond this stalemate-principle, or has the confrontation merely moved onto a new plane? It was difficult to answer this question. Two different scenarios could be traced. According to the first, like many new governments in eastern Europe, the Hungarian government's legitimacy is based more on a nationalist-national foundation than on its own deeds. Thus, to maintain the tension with Slovakia, to treat it aggressively, to make reference to it but at the same time solve

nothing, is the tactic that according to its own notions makes the government popular, and which makes even a confrontation with the water management lobby unnecessary. Unfortunately, on the Slovakian side, too, there is a readiness to develop such a conflict. This behaviour offers a certain protection against further common work on the barrage in the short term; but in reality it is a more serious policy leading to certain failure.

According to the second scenario, which has less support in the region, if the government is not preparing for an eternity in power, then what will be done in the interest of eliminating the problems will depend on the new elections. Instead of arguing about responsibility for past events the government should look ahead to future solutions: only in this way does it have a chance of re-election. To achieve this, a decisive, purposeful step would be necessary on the Hungarian side, avoiding stalemates and endless confrontations.

Such fears were not groundless. In fact it took another year before the Hungarian government decided on the cancellation of the agreement. At first attacks were made on Parliament because it 'limited to too great an extent the negotiating position of the government'. (This related to a resolution also adopted by the members of the government, the majority of whom are MPs.) Soon rumours started about the possibility of amending the decision. But the political significance of the Danube affair and the awkward memory of the 1988 forced parliamentary vote — even though it related to an earlier parliament — made it impossible for Parliament to go back on its decision.

The government itself was not agreed on what to do. On two occasions during the year parliamentary committees or delegations were negotiating with its Czechoslovak partner while a member of the government was making a contradictory statement. Still, as happened three years earlier, it gradually became clear that further debates were meaningless, and by the end of 1991 it had become evident that the only possibility of moving out of the stalemate would be for the Hungarian side to declare officially what had been implicit for the previous three years: namely, that it no longer considered the agreement valid. After the first announcement to this effect there was a moment in February 1992 when it seemed that both parties acknowledged that the situation had changed; but then the Hungarian government took a step back, saying that the announcement should be reformulated or even postponed, which as on previous occasions encouraged those interested in the construction going ahead.

Finally, after another two months hesitation the Hungarian government officially announced the cancellation of the 1977 intergovernmental agreement for 25 May 1992.

Hungarian government versus Slovak government (?−?)

The first Slovak reaction was a public declaration that the agreement could not legally be cancelled, and that the Slovakian party would keep on working on the construction of a unilateral alteration of the Danube — though this was in fact in conflict with the original agreement. These works had been started by the Slovak water management following the interruption of the building of the dam on the Hungarian side, at first as a threat and later as a spectacular construction intended to exert pressure to force the construction of the Gabcikovo dam in its original conception. The strategy was to make the original plan appear as a compromise between the hesitations of Hungarian opinion and the unilateral and arbitrary alteration[1] of the Danube.

It needs time for political feelings to calm down and for the parties to take part in realistic negotiations. But to talk and make agreements after the cancellation of the contract is just as necessary as it was before. On the one hand the final distribution of the costs of the earlier construction under the original contract needs to be clarified; on the other,

1. This unofficial plan would use the Slovakian part of the Dunakiliti reservoir, separated by a special dam. To fill the reservoir, and in the everyday operation of the side-channel and the power station, this solution would unilaterally alter the Danube, the frontier river between the two countries, in Slovakia.

it is important to develop ideas (preferably shared, given the possibilities of trans-frontier cooperation) relating to the future of the region, concerning the distribution of costs relating to the reconstruction.

From the point of view of resolving the question, it is important to make clear that it is neither a Hungarian nor a Slovak affair, and that it would be advantageous if the two governments kept other political goals out of their attempts to reach a solution. Naturally it also requires both countries to have stable governments which do not try to divert attention from failures by demagogy. Perhaps this is not an insoluble task for two countries which want to join Europe.

It is unfortunate that today the tactics on both sides are determined by declarations that are believed to be either advantageous for the authorities domestically, or advantageous from the point of view of its image in the West. The Hungarian government thinks that the ecological viewpoint it has chosen, and its intent to carry out a modern re-examination of the mistaken decisions, ensures western sympathy and even material help for returning the area to its natural state. The Slovak government, however, thinks that the fact that Slovakia is holding to a concluded agreement is such *European* behaviour that the West will somehow respect it, and will even express its support in material terms. Thus, from time to time it is suggested that the questions under debate should be handle by international professional arbiters: however, by 'professional' one side means ecologists, while the other has in mind hydraulic builders and lawyers.

Neither side believes that any self-respecting specialist would step back if s/he recognized what kind of political battles his or her expertise would be used to fight. The danger is that these 'specialists' are likely to be those who in return for necessary payment are likely to support any point of view, and that the course of decision-making will not reach a conclusion as a result of their involvement; only costly lobbying will result, which will only deepen the conflict, rather than solve it.

It is not only impossible professionally, but given the international political stage it would be an illusion, to expect that international professional organizations could take a position as arbiters in an internal conflict between two east European states. (It is particularly unrealistic to suggest that any body should give material aid to one country in opposition to the other.) In itself, this sheds a very bad light on the two countries, as they try to lobby for support for their preferred solution by emphasizing their own 'greater Europeanness'. It is obvious that the proof of *Europeanness* would be if the two countries could reach a consensus in an adult way and through their own efforts. It is also absolutely clear that the professional and material support would start when and if this agreement comes about. It would be much more 'cultured' to use this aid to correct the mistakes committed by the previous regime than to sacrifice it on the altar of unproductive arbitration by specialist.

Moreover, we would point out that there is no professional (technical, economic, ecological, legal etc.) question affecting the bases for judgement of further tasks, for which the professional knowledge available to one country or the other would not be sufficient to provide the answer.

If international consultations are justified in continuing, then they should be the method for handling conflict, for leading talks towards consensus. Because of the fashionable content of the problem, it could turn into the newest example of research (the ecological field, paradigm difference, international players in research changes of regime, the east European background). In this case, the scientific preparation would be international, a few conditions with preliminary assurances (the choice of persons who are competent and informed, and at the same time capable of forming consensus etc.), but the negotiation itself and resolution of the conflict would remain an internal matter, with the result being presented *jointly* by the two sides in the wider international arena.

Summary

There were many who, at the time of the change of regime, as a result of the behaviour they witnessed, overestimated the ecological consciousness of the east European masses. These observers, whether they were analysing the events from the West or on the spot, expected the birth of ecologically-centred societies in eastern Europe, and in the end they were disappointed in their expectations. It must be stated that in eastern Europe today there is still no real mass demand for this.

A parallel can be drawn between this contrast and the difference in the background symbolism of the movement against the barrage and of western anti-nuclear movements. The barrage — the monster made of concrete — was the unintended symbol of political power running rampant over everything; it signified the model of totalitarian party rule. The anti-nuclear movements also carry a very definite symbolic content, for atomic energy involves much more refined direction and control on a high technological level. The struggle directed against it symbolizes disillusionment with industrial society and a revolt against the value-system of this society, in favour of an environmentally friendly postindustrial value-system.

Doubtless the environmental defenders of the east European countries have as their goal this same world of ideas, the priority of ecological values, as their counterparts in more developed countries. Next to the appreciation of environmental viewpoints has come the globalization of such questions on a conscious level, that is the understanding that we live in a common world and must solve our problems in common. This outlook turns environmental protectionists into professional partners with the goal of analysing and solving conflicts. At the same time it must be taken into account that at present the major questions for east European societies concern the transition from central direction to a market economy, rather than the transcending of industrial society. Many signs point to the fact that these societies are moving towards the merciless capitalism of the nineteenth century, in conflict with the post-feudal world of ideas and interests of the present. Values related to dismantling the industrial society are present in people's consciousness, but sociologically they are making only a little progress: in many cases, the problems that will sweep across society, and which must be dealt with, have not even formed yet — we are thinking here of the concentration of data brought into being by a high-level information network, or the concentration of modern technology in the hands of a few people. (It is no accident that in the west this came to be the focus of battle for the anti-nuclear movement.)

At the same time, there is a very great need for all the lessons that the anti-barrage movement carries to become an organic and conscious part of all strata of society and of the concern of the politicans of the east European countries. Up to now, even those politicians who wanted to take advantage of the barrage movement seem not to have recognized the significance of the symbolism behind it; otherwise they would have realized that precisely on the political level, the barrage can be used in only one direction. Politically the barrage signifies the large, central investments of the old regime. Politicians and political forces who do not recognize this fact and have tried to exploit the issue for their own ends have found that their efforts have backfired and they have lost credibility as an alternative.

Postscript, February 1993; water management versus environmental movement, again?

The history of the Danube dam itself has not yet reached a conclusion, so it is very difficult to finish this story.

A great deal has been heard of the Hungarian–Slovakian debate on this international

conflict, and about the attempts of the EC to bring the conflict to a peaceful end; so it may be surprising that in our view it is the renewed struggle between the water management authorities and the environmentalists that has dominated in the last six months. The reason for this is that the pro-dam section of the water management authorities saw a new opportunity to press its claims.

This is a very characteristic feature of the entire debate. Public opinion became increasingly impatient with the unchanged situation, accusing both the government and the environmental movement for failing to promote a more rapid reconstruction. On 24 October 1992 the Slovakian water management authorities closed the Danube and began to divert the water flow into the side-channel (the so-called 'variant C'). In November, following the Slovakian action, several Hungarian government officials exploited this dissatisfaction, trying to shift responsibility onto the movement by claiming that they had refused to give advice to the government which would have helped avoid it. Pro-dam propaganda has recently extended this criticism of the movement, stating that the movement had caused the whole problem by pressing for a halt to construction. In a strict sense this is true: if nobody had protested against the project, there would have been no conflict. However, this argument requires us to re-examine the actual conflict situation.

The Slovakian dam-builders have continued to demand the implementation of the original agreement, and since, despite their best efforts, they have not been able to shift Hungarian public opinion, as a consequence of their own strategy they have been driven to complete the construction of 'variant C'. The action of the Slovakian water management authorities was hastened by the political situation as much as by natural factors. A strong political reason, in addition to those mentioned above, was the prospect of a separation of the Czech and Slovakian states at the end of 1992, which would have given another occasion for a legal-political debate at the beginning of 1993, when the application of the original contracts required re-confirmation. There was also a physical reason: the closure and alteration of the flow of the river is only possible at very low water-level, and this occurs on the Danube in the second half of October.

Several lessons can be drawn from the Slovakian action. Technically, such action was rash and thoughtless, since the construction work was incomplete and the whole undertaking hazardous. It would take months to carry out the works essential to ensure the minimal level of technical safety, and this work has not yet been completed. A medium-sized flood in November swept away three iron gates: the floodgates did not operate, and there was no chance of letting the water down to the original branch. A barge fully loaded with rocks was sunk in November, closing several gates for an even longer time. These mistakes support the argument that the operation was premature and irresponsible.

Indeed, with regard to the justification for the dam, there is evidence that the whole operation can be considered an irresponsible experiment in terms of its original size and location. Since it is not our task to enter into detailed arguments here, we will simply mention the lowered groundwater level, with its consequences for the vegetation and the different ecosystems among others; the pollution of the water in the original river bed, the reservoir and the asphalt side-channel; and the changes in the stream deposit balances. All these consequences were foreseen by the Ecological Institute of the Slovakian Academy of Sciences.

Turning back to the international conflict, the Slovakians argue that the only valid agreement is the one signed in 1977. Both the suspension of the works in 1989 and the official repudiation of the agreement in 1992 are considered one-sided Hungarian steps, not accepted by the Slovakians, which could have no legal force. In contrast, the construction of 'variant C', the alteration of the frontier river, and the unilateral diversion of the water, even if the construction did not conform to the agreement, are all intended to realize the original idea and hence are legal.

The Hungarian argument states just the opposite. It does not deny responsibility for signing the agreement and accepting its consequences up to 1989, or partly up to 1992,

but it considers that the debate should be decided bilaterally, or if that is not possible, by application to the International Court in the Hague.

The present author's opinion is that the decision on the original debate over the contract, and over the consequences of the ending of the agreement, should not have been confused with a second and quite different question. A protest against physical aggression, that is against the alteration of the frontier river and against the appropriation of the water and the common part of the construction works, would not need further Slovakian approval, and the Hungarian government should have immediately expressed its protest on these grounds before international opinion, to make clear that it had no wish to get involved in the question of what is legally valid.

It can be seen that both governments are constrained by internal political pressures, and that there is very little chance of changing this. But it is even more clear that the EC faces particular constraints. After getting involved in this inconvenient matter, the EC's main aim is to help find a solution. To achieve this the EC is under pressure to accept any solution regardless of its content. In such a case it is practical to put pressure on those who show any willingness at all to accept a compromise. In the case of the present mixture of legal debates and physical aggression, there is a great danger of supporting the aggression for the sake of a successful short-term conflict resolution. The aim of the Hungarian government is to avoid this.

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