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# COSMOS WORKING PAPERS

## Reluctant Rulers and the Negotiated Transition: Mobilizing for Democracy in Hungary

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## **Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society**

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.



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# ***Reluctant Rulers and the Negotiated Transition:***

## ***Mobilizing for Democracy in Hungary***

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Cosmos Working Paper 2012/9

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**Abstract:** Among the Eastern European democratization processes of the 1989 period, Hungary stands out as the least dramatic transition in the region. Whereas other countries experienced massive demonstrations in favor of democratic demands, or violent upheavals resulting in the execution of dictators, Hungary experienced neither and has been referred to as an “uncomplicated” case. While some mobilization from below did occur, the Hungarian transition was characterized by elites – new and old – and the *intentional* exclusion of the population at large. Why did the democratization process unfold this way, and why did a seemingly stable regime give up without a fight? These are some of the questions this report seeks to answer.

**Key words:** Democratization; Transition; Hungary; Civil society; Elites

“In contrast to the rest of the East European countries, mass movements did not topple the old system in Hungary, and in the course of the Hungarian transition it was not so much the mass support enjoyed by the opposition but rather the passive rejection of the old system that played the decisive role.” (Bruszt 1989: 386).

Among the Eastern European democratization processes of the 1989 period, Hungary stands out as the least dramatic transition in the region. Whereas other countries experienced massive demonstrations in favor of democratic demands, or violent upheavals resulting in the execution of dictators, Hungary experienced neither and has been referred to as an “uncomplicated” case (Munck & Skalnik Leff: 352). While some mobilization from below occurred, the Hungarian transition is characterized by elites – new and old – and the *intentional* exclusion of the population at large. Why did the democratization process unfold this way, and why did a seemingly stable regime give up without a fight? These are some of the questions this report seeks to answer.

## Periodization

While it is always difficult to establish the starting point of a transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, the peculiarities of the Hungarian case make this truism even more salient. Unlike its counterparts in Czechoslovakia and East Germany, the Hungarian leadership had in part been characterized by a propensity to reform since at least the 1960s. Although these early reforms, such as the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) program, had focused mainly on economic as opposed to political interventions, they still represented important steps toward a less centralized system. As I will show below, these reforms, enacted without any significant pressure from below, allowed at least some individual economic autonomy from the state. However, despite this progressive development towards democracy in Hungary, which stands in sharp contrast to the abrupt ruptures in Czechoslovakia and the GDR, several important turning points can be identified.

One could argue that the earliest of these turning points is represented by the aborted 1956 revolution. While ultimately a failure in the strictest sense of the term, the 1956 revolution was at least a partial success as it forced the Hungarian communists to abandon their Stalinist course. As Bruszt and Stark (1991) explain, “although suppressed from public attention, memories of the lost revolution of 1956 were never forgotten over the decades, and signs of crisis were the surest stimulant for recalling this haunting past. ... Thus, with little exaggeration, we can say that the end of 1988 still marked a period of the “long 50s” in Hungarian history” (213). Nevertheless, the 1956 revolution probably played an ideological and psychological role at best, and the road to democratization can more appropriately be traced through the actual political steps taken in that direction. For example, after the Hungarian economy fell victim to the crisis of the 1970s, the government eventually felt forced to act. Following the suggestions of its own economists, some of whom were themselves reform-minded, in 1977 the government not only returned to some of the liberalizing reforms that had been abandoned earlier in the decade, but also decided to move “more radically towards the market economy, to abandon import-substituting industrialization and to stimulate export capable sectors to production for a world market” (Kontler 2002: 456). Importantly, the reforms also included provisions for the “abandonment of earlier reservations relating to small-scale enterprise in general, and the lifting of earlier restrictions that concerned it in industry” (Kontler 2002: 456-7). While not explicitly steps toward democratization, these reforms certainly signaled the government’s recognition that the integration of Western elements had become a necessity.

In the early 1980s, reformist members of the communist elite began to consider alternatives as to how to accomplish “socialist pluralism” in Hungary. As I will discuss below, the Hungarian communists sought to shape their opposition in a way that would allow them to remain in power while

simultaneously moving the country in the direction of pluralism (Munck & Skalnik Leff 1997: 351-2). Again, this courting of the opposition occurred over a period of years, but even within this process one can identify important milestones. One such landmark was the removal of the party's long-term general secretary, Janós Kádár, in favor of the more progressive Károly Grósz. The change of guard took place at the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party (HSPW) Congress in May 1988, where the now senile Kádár was "honored" with the ceremonial - and inconsequential - title of "president of the party." While Grósz was by no means the most reform-oriented member of the party's leadership, he was joined in the revamped politburo by reformers Imre Pozsgay and Rezső Nyers. This transformation of the HSPW leadership helped set the stage for the political transition (Schöpflin 1991, Saxonberg 2001; Stokes 1993; Swain 2006).

If the starting point of the transition is difficult to establish due to the relatively long duration of reform in Hungary, it is easier to identify potential end points. The formal transition occurred, as in most other Eastern European countries, through a National Roundtable (NRT). The NRT, which will be discussed below, was agreed upon on June 10 1989, and deliberations commenced three days later (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 228; Sajó 1996: 79). While an important date in Hungary's path toward democracy, it may make more sense to highlight September 18, 1989 – the day the NRT agreement was signed by both the party-state and the opposition and the road to free elections in 1990 begun upon (Bruszt & Stark 1991: Garton Ash 1990: 57). Yet another important date to consider is October 23, 1989, the thirty-third anniversary of the outbreak of the 1956 revolution. On the evening of that day, Mátyás Szűrő, the speaker of the parliament, announced the ratification of important constitutional amendments and proclaimed the new Hungarian Republic (Garton Ash 1990: 59; Kontler 2002: 468).

Perhaps a more direct expression of Hungary's new democratic aura is represented by the November 26<sup>th</sup> referendum initiated by two of the more "radical" opposition groups. Unhappy with a provision in the NRT agreement that would allow the president to be elected directly by the population rather than by parliament, the Alliance of Free Democrats and Fidesz (the "student party") gathered enough signatures to force a referendum, which they subsequently won, thus dealing a blow to the reformed socialists' chance of taking at least the presidency in the new Hungary (Sajó 1996: 88-9; Swain 1992: 27). Finally, one could of course propose March 25, 1990 - the day of the first free parliamentary elections - as the completion of the transition, while the election four years later where power was transferred back to the socialists could be considered the consolidation of Hungarian democracy (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 240-1; Welsh 1994: 330). Regardless of which date one settles on, Munck and Skalnik Leff's (1997) conclusion is worth contemplating: "Hungary's transition was relatively uncomplicated. ... While Poland's transition dragged

on over two and a half years, Hungary's was complete in less than nine months” (352).

### **Structural Conditions**

As mentioned above, the Hungarian case differs greatly from those of Czechoslovakia and the GDR. Unlike the latter countries, the Hungarian transition occurred with minimal mass mobilization and societal pressure from below. How can this divergence be explained? It seems socialist Hungary's relatively liberal history may be the key to solving this puzzle. Like its Eastern European neighbors, Hungary came to be ruled by communists of a Stalinist persuasion in the wake of World War II. It was not until 1949 however that the Stalinists secured control of both the party and the state. In that year, the Communist Party, which in 1945 had 2,000 members, boasted a massive membership of 1.5 million. In addition, the state was protected by 140,000 political police officers and an army of 210,000 soldiers by 1952, naturally backed by Soviet advisers. Formerly autonomous organizations including churches were nationalized and brought under the control of the Party (Ekiert 1996: 42-3). As in other communist countries, government excesses eventually caused the population to rise up. In Hungary's case, Ekiert (1996: 45) has argued that a combination of factors - the collapse of the forced industrialization scheme and the economic breakdown that followed, intra-elite struggles between Stalinist and anti-Stalinist forces, and the uncertain future of the region following Stalin's death - led to the outbreak of the 1956 revolution.

While the revolution was relatively short-lived, lasting anything between 12 days and a few months depending on one's definition of a revolution/revolt, its consequences were “profound” (Ekiert 1996: 37). The old Stalinist regime “experienced almost complete institutional breakdown and was de facto overthrown by the revolutionary popular movement from below”, and only the Soviet invasion prevented a fundamental political transformation from taking place. Moscow installed Janós Kádár, the head of the newly formed HSWP, as Hungary's new leader. While not as reform-minded as Imre Nagy, who had briefly assumed leadership of communist Hungary for the few days between the old regime's collapse and the Soviet invasion, and who was executed in the revolution's aftermath, neither was Kádár a Stalinist. Rather, he was fortunate enough to come to power at a time when Nikita Khrushchev was consolidating his own more liberal form of communism in the Soviet Union following Stalin's death. As a consequence, no major purges took place within the post-revolutionary communist party and it thus became “the only East European [communist party] which after 1956 and 1968 not only abstained from liquidating the reformist wing but integrated it” (Kende 1982: 7).

Ekiert (1996: 101-4) has convincingly argued that the outcome of the



1956 revolution provided Kádár with a unique opportunity to rebuild the socialist state without much internal pressure from either the left or the right, nor from Moscow. One outcome of the revolution was that both the Stalinists and the reformers had been purged “naturally” from the core of the party. The old regime had fled to Moscow and Nagy and his collaborators were neutralized, at times through execution. Despite a brief moment of post-revolutionary violence, Hungary’s new leaders managed to consolidate power astonishingly quickly. Once that had been accomplished, Kádár moved Hungary away from either extreme on the socialist spectrum, and managed to create a relatively successful form of state socialism.

The fact that Hungary turned out to be the most liberal of the Soviet satellite states can be explained by its unique relationship with the Soviet Union at this formative time. Unlike East Germany, which experienced its 1953 “revolution” at a time of great Soviet uncertainty following Stalin’s death, and Czechoslovakia, whose 1968 “Prague Spring” occurred after the more authoritarian Brezhnev had outmaneuvered Khrushchev in 1964, Hungary’s 1956 revolution and consolidation benefitted from Khrushchev’s less intrusive approach to Eastern Europe. In short, it was Khrushchev who helped Kádár come to power and gave him relative liberty to construct post-revolutionary Hungary. As Felkay (1989) explains,

Kadar never forgot his indebtedness to Khrushchev and found his de-Stalinization policies admirable. To prove his loyalty, Kadar never made any major decisions without Khrushchev’s approval. Thus, the sixty-three-year-old Khrushchev and forty-five-year-old Kadar gradually grew fond of each other. As a consequence of this personal and working relations, Hungary received favorable economic considerations from the Soviet Union, while Kadar was granted more freedom to manage the country’s domestic affairs. (113)

The fact that the special relationship between Hungary and the USSR is more accurately captured as a relationship between Kádár and Khrushchev has also been highlighted by other scholars. Vali (1961) notes that “Kadar and his group aligned themselves so closely to Khrushchev’s policies and leadership that the Kadar regime depended, for its stability, more heavily on the personal successes and prestige of Nikita Sergeyevich than any other Soviet satellite regime in East-Central Europe” (401). As a consequence, Bruszt (1989) concludes, “among all state-socialist systems it was Kadar’s system that removed itself most from the basic model established in Stalin’s time” (383), and Stokes (1993) asserts that “of all the Communist parties in Eastern Europe, the Hungarian was the most reform minded” (79). The price for domestic freedom was “adherence to Moscow’s line in foreign policy” (Falk 2003: 113), a relatively manageable political levy. Thus, by the mid-1960s, Hungary had emerged as “the happiest barrack in the Soviet camp.” The near-complete destruction of the old regime in 1956 had allowed Kádár to build a socialist

state its citizens could live with (and in). I suggest that this structural context goes quite some way to explain the lack of visible mass discontent in Hungary as well as Party reformers' willingness to engage with the "opposition."

While still politically closed, Hungary manifested openness to economic liberalization as early as the 1960s. Cooperatives were allowed to experiment with auxiliary business schemes, a society-wide "second economy" developed without much resistance from the government, and cultural diversity was tolerated (Stokes 1993: 81-3; Hankiss 1990: 15). Kádár himself was before all else a pragmatic politician who lacked the ideological dogmatism of many of his Eastern European colleagues, as evidenced by the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). When it was enacted in 1968, the NEM contained reforms that provided industrial sector enterprises with autonomy designed to result in profit maximization, schemes for increased economic planning on the local rather than the national level, as well as price and wage reforms (Falk 2003: 113-4). Thanks to the application of certain market economy mechanisms to Hungary's command economy, the country experienced considerable progress in the late 1960s and early 1970s: "Hungarian grain yields exceeded the average in the EEC countries, per capita meat, fruit and vegetable production came second only to the most advanced economies of the world, and in terms of the general standards of agriculture Hungary was esteemed to rank closely behind the eight most developed countries of Western Europe" (Kontler 2002: 440). Despite its impressive advances, Hungary remained unable to withstand the downturn that came with the worldwide economic crisis and the five-fold increase of oil prices in 1972-73. But perhaps more importantly from a 1989 perspective, Hungary was still doing better than its Eastern European counterparts (Stokes 1993: 79).

One of the main problems associated with the economic downturn was that the state was forced to take out loans on the international market in order to meet its domestic obligations. The country's debt rose from \$1 billion in 1970 to \$9.1 billion in 1979. This development forced politicians to listen to Hungarian economists and open the economy to the global market. Preceded only by Romania (1972), Hungary joined the IMF in 1982. Internationally, membership was facilitated by the fact that the country had already introduced some of the austerity measures the IMF favored. Domestically, "a report discussed by the central committee in October 1977 explicitly recognized that Hungary was going to have to improve its position in the world market" made the transition smoother (Stokes 1993: 80). In short, the country's economic difficulties did not prevent it from persisting in its economic liberalization policies. On the contrary, this state of affairs made liberalization more feasible.

The HSWP continued to liberalize the economy throughout the 1980s. Shops could be leased from the state, and by 1986 ten percent of the country's restaurants were privately owned and turning a combined profit equal to that of

the remaining (state owned) 90%. Similar developments took place in other branches of the economy, yet still Hungary could not resolve its dangerous economic situation (Stokes 1993: 84-5; Swain 2006: 145). More and more Hungarians were forced to work both in the formal and the informal economies, and by the middle of the decade “the second economy was so extensive in Hungary that virtually the entire citizenry engaged with it in the routines of daily life” (Falk 2003: 117). While this allowed people to continue to make a living despite the ever harsher economic context, the second economy incurred a heavy cost: “in the mid-1980s, the country ranked first in international suicide statistics, and second in those relating to the consumption of spirits and liquors” (Kontler 2002: 458). Despite its best efforts, the state was unable to reverse the negative economic trend. At the Party congress of 1985, “Kádár had to admit that the standard of living had declined, and speaker after speaker criticized the government for its inability to prevent inflation or to provide adequate housing” (Stokes 1993: 87); so that “by 1988 the economy was as bankrupt and exhausted as the theory of reform economics” (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 214). Still there was little political reform to boast of. In 1985 the Party reformed the electoral rules, giving the citizens a choice on the ballots, but naturally all candidates still represented the Party. Nevertheless, this was an indication of things to come. As we shall see next, Hungary’s precarious structural situation combined with contingent factors to propel the initiatives of those Party leaders most inclined to reform not only the economic system, but also the political one.

### **Contingent Political Opportunities**

As in the case of both Czechoslovakia and the GDR, Hungary’s transition to democracy cannot be understood without considering the wider regional and global changes that took place from the mid-1970s (the Helsinki Accords) and culminated with the emergence of Gorbachev as the new (in every sense of the word) leader of the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s. However, the effects of both of these events are different in the Hungarian case as compared to Czechoslovakia and East Germany: while the Hungarian opposition benefitted from reforms and sought to exploit the changes emanating from Helsinki and the Kremlin, political opportunities in the Hungarian case are probably best understood in terms of possibilities for *reform from above*. Whereas the new emphasis on human rights and political and economic liberalization emboldened dissidents in Prague and Leipzig, its impact in Hungary was not limited to the opposition. Rather, Hungarian reform communists interpreted these new currents as an opportunity for *them* to accomplish a controlled transition to the pluralistic polity they considered a necessity if Hungary was to solve its economic problems. Furthermore, while the Helsinki Agreement’s emphasis on human rights combined powerfully with Gorbachev’s call for *glasnost* and *perestroika* in much of Eastern Europe to stimulate dissent, the accords had only

an indirect impact in Hungary. Rather than creating human rights groups of their own, Hungarians responded to the human rights provisions by protesting against the crackdown on Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia. This can likely be explained by the fact that the human rights situation in Hungary was considerably better than in the rest of the region since the Hungarian state largely left its citizens, including dissidents, alone (Kis 1995). Consequently, on January 9, 1977, thirty-four intellectuals sent a message to Pavel Kohout in Prague in which they declared their “solidarity with the signers of Charter 77” and their condemnation of “the repressive measures used against them” (Falk 2003: 128). While important, this response suggests that Hungarian activists were comfortable enough to be able to concern themselves with the human rights of others.

Rather than triggering decisive action among the opposition, then, the reform winds of the 1970s and 1980s had an important impact on the communist leadership. As Bruszt (1989) explains,

In Hungary, just as in other East European countries, the dramatic change in the external environment enabled factors within the country to play a decisive role in formulating the system. For the first time since 1948 an opportunity presented itself to openly suggest a change in the model, and for the first time it became possible to make a fundamental change in the power structure. While previous Soviet leadership groups almost instantly sanctioned any deviation from the basic model by way of direct and indirect pressure and interference, the new leadership under Gorbachev let it be known to Hungarian leaders that its primary objective was not to upset social peace in Hungary, and that it regarded social stability as more important than adherence to the Soviet model. (381)

Moscow’s new approach to its satellites provided reformers within the party with a powerful trump, as “Gorbachev’s rise to power deprived Kádár of part of his pragmatic acceptance,” meaning that “he could no longer claim the Soviet Union was preventing him from going further with reforms. Since the Hungarian Communists had based their pragmatic acceptance on testing the borders of what the Kremlin would allow, the younger Communists were willing to go even further and to democratize society” (Saxonberg 2001: 284). For its part, Hungarian society welcomed Gorbachev’s reforms. As early as June 1986, following a visit to Budapest, Gorbachev showed such interest in Hungarian reformers’ willingness to take on his proposition that he sent one of his most trusted reform minds, Abel Aganbegyan, to assist Rezső Nyers in the Hungarian liberalization efforts. As Stokes (1993) summarizes, “by 1987, the question was not so much reform versus recentralization, but rather what sort of reform to implement and how fast it should proceed” (91). In short, unlike in Czechoslovakia, the GDR, and Romania, Gorbachev’s reform ideals met with little resistance in Hungary (Stokes 1993: 99).

In addition to political opportunities offered from the East, Hungarian leaders came under pressure to reform from the West. As mentioned earlier, Hungary had attempted to resolve its financial difficulties by opening itself up to the West and by borrowing money from the IMF. In order to secure the continued in-flow of Western capital, Hungary was under pressure to “meet the human rights criteria set by the West” (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 211). This resulted in an unlikely scenario where Soviet and Western pressures on Hungary converged, and made it relatively easy for its leaders to advocate reform on both the political and economic levels. When Grósz replaced Kádár in 1988, the speed of liberalization increased further. Whereas the latter had once proclaimed that “what Gorbachev is trying to do now, we already accomplished decades before,” the new leader recognized the importance of staying ahead of the Eastern European curve. Otherwise Hungary would risk “losing millions of dollars and Deutschemarks in potential aid and credits during a period when its hard-currency foreign debt had doubled in only two years” (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 211). As one scholar elegantly concludes,

During 1987 and 1988 the Hungarian leadership “managed” to double the indebtedness repayable in dollars, and while the threat that Hungary could become insolvent appeared every day, Western creditors gave increasingly [*sic*] direct indications that they would be willing to continue financing the Hungarian economy only in exchange for significant changes in the economy. In other words, as Gorbachev stabilized his position, a situation evolved in which Hungary was subject to simultaneous pressure from both the East and the West. Pressure from the East aimed for political changes to prevent societal crisis, while the forceful “pull” from the West called for a radical transformation of the economy, also implying changes in the political structure. (Bruszt 1989: 382)

Clear the path towards reform even further, as Szabó (1995: 395) explains, it had become impossible for observers to determine whether Moscow considered Hungary’s increasingly unabashed courtship of the West a security risk, or whether the leadership viewed Western aid to Budapest as “something that served Soviet ends as well.” In short, there existed few external obstacles to liberalization in Hungary. On the contrary, Hungary experienced a unique set of international factors that made reforms not only possible but positively appealing to both Cold War camps. In addition, elite factors served to aid this development. As the economy headed toward bankruptcy in the 1980s, the Party and its leaders began to lose their ideological legitimacy. Furthermore, Hungary’s leaders recognized that its current difficulties could not be solved within a Soviet-style system. While elite factions disagreed over whether true democratization was a necessary part of reform, virtually all of them agreed that “radical market reform” was essential (Saxonberg 2001: 284). However, those advocating only economic liberalization soon found themselves in the minority,

as few Party members, many of whom were younger and more reform inclined, wanted to be on the wrong side of history as the country prepared to enter a new phase. The reform wind from the East was thus probably the most important political opportunity for democratization in Hungary, as it allowed elites to speed up reform processes. Naturally, such reforms indirectly benefitted the opposition as it provided them with more room for maneuver.

## **Elites**

As noted in previous sections, Hungary stands out from many other Eastern European countries due to the fact that its political elites affirmed the necessity of reform early on. In the late 1960s, the Kádár regime had already begun to show greater tolerance to both opposition and society as a whole. During this time the unofficial “second economy” emerged while the government made minimal effort to constrain it (Hankiss 1990: 15). The economic difficulties of the 1970s did little to slow down the process of reform, as suggested by the changes decided at the HSWP’s Twelfth Congress held in March 1980. Some of the most important conclusions drawn at the congress are reflected in the words of Sándor Gáspár, the head of the trade unions’ national council, who argued that Hungary could “best strengthen the country’s economic power... if we rely on democracy, on the clash of opinions and interests, and on the increased participation of the working population” (Stokes 1993: 84). This link between economic progress and a democratic order came to dominate the mindset of the leading Party members in the second half of the decade. In short, it seems clear that the aim of the reforms was not democracy per se, but rather an avenue towards economic recovery. Democracy was simply seen as way to accomplish this more important goal. Evidence that the HSWP prioritized economic rather than political reform is represented by the fact that the 1980 Congress also legitimated the second economy, and in 1981-82 several laws were passed to facilitate the proliferation of autonomous businesses (Stokes 1993: 84).

The state’s inclination to reform soon began to manifest itself on the political level. Although choice was limited to candidates from the Party, the 1985 elections represent the country’s first “multiple choice” elections. For the first time in socialist Hungary, the election ballot presented a choice of candidates rather than the option of either approving or disapproving the slate as a whole. Taking advantage of this novelty, the Hungarian people immediately expressed their discontent with the party by removing *all* incumbents on the ballot. While the Party had made sure that the most radical reformers never made it on to the ballot in the first place – a result of the stellar work of the Party organization known as the Patriotic People’s Front (PPF) – the election sent a clear message to those in power, and in particular to would-be reformers: the citizens of Hungary were not content with the Party’s accomplishments, and given the chance they would remove anyone associated with its failures (Falk

2003: 140-1; Stokes 1993: 90-1). Although Hungarian democratization transpired gradually, the 1985 elections mark an important point in the process.

In part because of the wake-up call provided by the elections, reform minded Party members sought to take advantage of Hungary's new political reality in the 1980s. "By April 1986, the pro-reform economists László Antal, László Lengyel and Márton Tardos decided that the economic crisis was becoming so grave that they should put together some sort of document spelling out their case for renewed economic reform" (Swain 1992: 16-7). Their effort, which gained the support of two leading reformers, namely Imre Pozsgay and Rezső Nyers, helped initiate the intra-party debate that would eventually culminate in the events of 1989. Through the PPF, of which he was the chair, Pozsgay thus commissioned a report that listed the economic problems facing Hungary in an objective and unapologetic manner. *Turning Point (or Turnabout) and Reform* addressed such issues as

the squandering of labor, energy, raw materials, and capital; the inability to adjust to world trends; and wasteful investment allocation. It went on to make a startling proposal to fix them: introduce the profit motive through marketizing reforms. ... For this to happen, the report concluded, political change was needed. No party should be above the law, individual rights should be protected, and an independent judiciary should be introduced. (Stokes 1993: 91)

While the document was debated by various academic entities, it was rejected by the Central Committee, which established that it was the Party's, not the PPF's, job to guide the country. The document was thus officially ignored, but the damage had already been done: *Turning Point and Reform* further established a divide between those Party members in favor of political reforms and those against.

The struggle between reformers and conservatives culminated in the extra Party Congress of May 1988. At this point, Saxonberg (2001: 285) suggests that the party still consisted of *three* factions: reformers, conservatives, and centrists. At the Congress, the long time party leader Kádár was removed from power and replaced by his prime minister, the centrist Károly Grósz. As general secretary, however, Grósz took an ideological turn to the right and became increasingly conservative. This move upset existing alignments with the consequence that other centrists felt forced to choose between becoming either reformists or conservatives. As it turned out, although the new general secretary had become a conservative, the other three most powerful members of the revised Politburo were all reformers, namely Miklós Németh, Nyers, and Pozsgay. Few other major changes took place at the conference, but following a "summer of inaction," the fall witnessed some substantial changes: "at the beginning of November the Central Committee opted less ambiguously for political pluralism, the lifting of censorship and the transfer of most party privileges to

government. Grósz also relinquished the premiership to Németh, while Pozsgay submitted to parliament the ‘democracy package’ of July” (Swain 2006: 146).

These dramatic changes within the leadership structure produced near immediate results in the lower levels of the party. As early as November 1988, the first of many “Reform Circles” was announced in Szeged. Reform Circles were groups of party members from the local branches, and thus not party officials, who worried that drastic changes to the system could jeopardize their careers and livelihoods. They therefore began to distance themselves from the Party leadership and to seek controlled change from “below.” By April 1989, these Reform Circles were popping up everywhere, targeting their local leadership and ousting conservative leaders. In May 1989, the National Council of Reform Circles held its first meeting (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 225; Swain 1992: 20-1). While not elites per se, the reform circles were certainly not outsiders or civil society actors, as they belonged to the party and organized on that basis.

A final episode that illustrates how far the Party had moved in its reform efforts before the opposition convinced it that negotiations about the country’s future were necessary is represented by a report submitted to the Party’s central committee in January 1989. Pozsgay was the main author of the document, which condemned Hungary’s communist past, and while it failed to gain official recognition, the central committee was forced to recognize that the Party had moved from the idea of “socialist pluralism” to “a position of rejecting the basis of its own existence” (Stokes 1993: 100), and had done so with minimal pressure from non-party groups.

Why were Hungarian communists so open to reform? Three main possibilities emerge from the literature. First, many of the younger members of the Party had grown up in a relatively open environment *after* the 1956 revolution. They thus felt little gratitude to the Soviet Union, and little need to defend the actions of their predecessors. In fact, Pozsgay’s 1989 report referred to the events of 1956 not as a “counterrevolution,” which was the officially accepted position within the Party, but as an “uprising.” In short, the communist ideology had ceased to have much meaning for them (Hankiss 1990: 30). Second, the party leaders, everywhere on the spectrum, were afraid. Only some recalled 1956, but all were familiar with the lessons learned, not least important of which was the execution of Imre Nagy. If the leader of that era could be executed so easily, what awaited die-hard proponents of the system responsible for his death (Saxonberg 2001: 288)? The Party was, in one observer’s words, “afraid of the people” (Garton Ash 1990: 49). Finally, there were economic gains to be made by the elites. “In the late 1980s a substantial part of the Hungarian party and state bureaucracy discovered a way of converting their bureaucratic power into lucrative economic positions and assets (and indirectly also into a new type of political power) in the new system based on market economics and political democracy” (Hankiss 1990: 30). These three reasons,



often in combination with one another, gave elites powerful reasons to enact reforms. Without strong incentives to defend the Party, and thanks to a long history of gradual reforms, the HSWP collapsed in the fall of 1989. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, the Party ceased to exist, and transformed itself into the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP). However, at its congress a month later it became obvious that little enthusiasm existed for the successor organization. For example, most party members serving in congress failed to join the HSP.

As I have shown, the mid-1980s represent a particularly important time in the political development of Hungary. It was during this period that Party reformers began to emerge as a powerful alternative to the old guard, and, perhaps even more importantly, began to form links with reformers outside the system. As one expert explains:

The transformation in the mid-1980s of informal circles of politicized intellectuals into organized groups and, in some cases, into political minimovements was a complex process. Up to that point the “informal sphere” of the second society and official toleration of individual strategies of “interest realization” had helped ameliorate social pressures for organized interest articulation. Moreover, the Pozsgay-led PPF had recruited and promoted, as regime-sponsored social organizations, intelligentsia groups that agreed to abstain from explicitly political activities. Prior to 1988 the regime and Pozsgay’s networks had succeeded in preventing all but a few social groups from joining the democratic opposition. (Tőkés 1996: 309)

While elites played the arguably most important role in Hungary’s transition, any understanding of the process is incomplete without attention to developments in Hungary’s civil society.

### **Civil Society**

“Although Hungarian society was eventually mobilized in the late and mid-1980s, it never reached the level of mobilization taking place in Poland during the *Solidarność* uprising, or that of Czechoslovakia and the GDR in 1989” (Saxonberg 2001: 211-2). This is puzzling, as we might predict that Hungary’s less repressive environment would stimulate organized dissent. Yet this did not happen on a large scale. As mentioned earlier, it could simply be the case that Hungary’s leaders had found the perfect balance between authoritarianism and liberalism, thus keeping the population adequately content and reducing incentives for civil society mobilization. Another possibility, more historically grounded and perhaps more interesting, is that civil society mobilization against the state did not occur on a wide scale because Hungarians had once before ventured down that road with less than satisfactory consequences. In fact, Hungary’s 1956 revolution may be more similar to what happened in the GDR and Czechoslovakia in 1989 in many ways than the country’s negotiated

transition in that year of change. In 1956, once the brief armed uprising had been defeated by the invading Soviet troops, civil society organizations assumed leadership of the revolution. The Central Workers Council of Greater Budapest, the Revolutionary Council of Hungarian Intellectuals, and the Revolutionary Council of Young Workers all opted for nonviolent tactics in a final attempt to bring the faltering revolution to a successful conclusion. As Ekiert (1996) explains:

Unable to resist with arms, workers brought the country to a virtual halt by widespread industrial action. The general strike that followed the invasion was one of the most full-scale and united worker actions in the modern history of the European working-class movement. The strike was purely political in character, lasted over a month, and represented the most serious challenge to the Soviet invaders and the new rulers of Hungary. (71-2)

In short, 1956 represents civil society's final stand against the communist state. The memory of 1956 had a tremendous impact on events in the late 1980s: not only did the state fear a repeat of that year's events, but it appears that the opposition too was apprehensive of taking the country down that road. Hence, both sides had a shared interest in settling for a negotiated transition.

Still, a Hungarian civil society, albeit self-restrained in comparison to that of other Eastern European countries, did exist. The early signs of a Hungarian opposition can be traced back to the late 1960s and the emergence of the "Budapest School", which consisted of "humanistic Marxist philosophers". By the early 1970s, hardliners within the party perceived the Budapest School to be threatening enough to demand sanctions and disciplinary actions against the intellectuals. Consequently, eight of the group's most prominent students lost their positions within the university, and four of them decided to emigrate. One of the group's leaders, Miklós Haraszti, was sentenced to eight months in prison for "having given a few friends copies of his powerful personal account of the debilitating piece-work system he found in a factory where he had worked for six months" (Stokes 1993: 87-8). Purges of these kinds were unusual in Hungary, as Haraszti's case in 1973 represents the country's last significant political trial (Stokes 1993: 88). This stands in sharp contrast to Czechoslovakia and the GDR where dissidents were routinely sent to prison or condemned to lives as doorkeepers and window washers.

As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the Helsinki accords mark the birth of "an identifiable opposition movement, as opposed to dissident individuals" in Hungary (Stokes 1993: 88; Falk 2003: 128). The country's first typewritten samizdat publication appeared in 1976, and in September 1978 the Hungarian version of the "Flying University" offered its first lecture. Also, the advent of Solidarity in Poland had an important impact on would-be oppositionists in Hungary (Falk 2003: 128). In late 1980/early 1981, twenty-five of them met in

Budapest with the intention of establishing a journal.

Despite the many negative opinions expressed, *the most poignant of which was that they had no vital issue capable of mobilizing popular support* [emphasis added], the meeting led to a year-long series of discussions among a group of about seven persons that in December 1981 produced Hungary's first and most important opposition journal, *Beszélő* (Speaker). Just as KOR did in Poland, the editors printed their names and addresses. "We have nothing to hide," was their motto. (Stokes 1993: 89)

Despite their best efforts, the intellectual opposition failed to garner widespread popular support. In part, this was the dissidents' own fault, as "there were no systematic efforts on the part of Hungarian intellectuals to 'reach out' to independent worker organizations, as no such organizations existed" (Falk 2003: 129). Thus, while relatively free to express their opinions, the Hungarian activists failed to have any large impact on society, perhaps due to the lack of a "vital issue capable of mobilizing popular support." As in the rest of Eastern Europe then, the opportunities afforded by Helsinki did not have societal impact until Gorbachev took power. As we shall see, it was at that point that explicitly political groups began to emerge in Hungary.

### *The Democratization Movement*

Opposition to the party and the state remained limited until 1987. Until then, street protests, on the rare occasions they occurred, were punished with "arrests, detentions, and beatings" (Kontler 2002: 462). However, unlike elsewhere in the region, the government remained for the most part content to respond to less high-profile opposition activities "with occasional harassment: sporadic searches, the confiscation of illegal publications, the rejection of travel permits, silences imposed on writers and the replacement of editorial boards in the 'primary' sphere when they were deemed to have gone too far in cultivating forbidden fruit" (Kontler 2002: 462). Until 1987, opposition groups were composed of "a few dozen individuals, maintaining contacts with a few hundred others among the intellectuals of research institutes, university departments, editorial offices and student circles" (Kontler 2002: 461). These small groups, who had up until the mid-1980s been content to implore the party-state to respect human rights, now began to voice more overtly political demands (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 211). Interestingly enough, this politicization process was not due to mass pressure from below, but "largely the product of elite initiatives" (Batt 1991: 55), placing it in stark contrast to the biographies of Solidarity and Civic Forum (Welsh 1994: 389).

The composition of Hungary's opposition reflected the country's pre-communist political divisions between urbanists and populists. The urbanists, often referred to as the "democratic opposition" made up the faction most

similar to opposition groups in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, emphasizing as they did human rights and democratic principles in the civic sphere. The populists, on the other hand, were more restrained in their outlook and preferred to focus on less politically charged issues, such as the situation of ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries, crime, religious issues, and demographic problems, but also “the effects of communism on national consciousness in general” (Kontler 2002: 462). Naturally, when the time was ripe for reform communists to choose an opposition faction with which to enter into dialogue, the populists emerged as the most viable option. Hence, in September 1987, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum* - MDF or HDF) was created in Lakitelek with “official acquiescence” (Falk 2003: 139). In fact, Pozsgay and a few of his reformist Party colleagues were even present at the group’s founding meeting. Beginning as “an intellectual and political movement inspired by the populist message” the MDF gradually transformed itself into a political party and emerged as the winners of the first free elections in 1990 (Falk 2003: 139; Kontler 2002: 464). Still, it would be difficult to equate the Hungarian Forum with those of Czechoslovakia or the GDR, since there was such a close and symbiotic relationship between the organization and the state. As Tökés (1996) explains,

The establishment of the HDF was in part the result of the HSWP successor generation’s strategy to fill with nationalist, but proreform, provincial intellectuals the growing space between the rearguard party and the regime’s established policy lobbies. The trade-off for the Populist intellectuals’ support of the Grósz-led party insurgents was the regime’s toleration of the HDF’s low-key nationalism and its advocacy of the cause of Hungarian ethnic minorities in Romania and Slovakia. HDF-sponsored public meetings in early 1988, though quite self-restrained affairs also helped articulate the critical socialist intellectuals’ message. For services rendered in assisting with Kádár’s ouster, the HDF was rewarded by Grósz with the opportunity to be the first civic organization to organize a mass demonstration in [*sic*] behalf of human rights in Transylvania, in June 1988. ... In any case, as a political movement the HDF was more of a human rights lobby for ethnic Hungarians abroad than a champion of political democracy, social justice, and national self-determination for those at home. (Tökés 1996: 309-10)

On May 1, 1988, nearly a year after the creation of the MDF, the democratic opposition reached a similar milestone. On that date, “the Network of Free Initiatives” emerged as the MDF’s urbanist counterpart, and on November 13<sup>th</sup> of the same year it transformed itself into the *Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége* (SZDSZ), or the Alliance for Free Democrats, becoming a political party following the passing of new legislation in early 1989. The organization was Western-oriented, liberal, and advocated “a European-style democracy and Hungary’s withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact” (Stokes 1993: 97).

The last of the most important opposition groups in the democratization

process was the Young Democrats, more commonly known by its Hungarian acronym FIDESZ. Emerging on the political stage only in late March 1988, FIDESZ nonetheless had a long history and was an outgrowth of the “simmering generational rebellion of university and college students that had begun in the late 1970s” (Tókécs 1996: 312). Officially, Hungary had only one youth organization, the Young Communist League (YCL), but as this organization was both ineffectual and uninterested in advocating the interests of young Hungarians, it did not appeal to either its supposed constituents or the state. The organization’s gradual collapse in the 1980s created a political vacuum on university campuses that young radicals, who would eventually come to constitute the core of FIDESZ, were more than happy to occupy. In the 1990 elections, and in the 1989 referendum, the Free Democrats and FIDESZ came together in a powerful alliance.

MDF, the Free Democrats, and FIDESZ became the main political opposition groups in the transition process. However, “at the end of 1988 in Hungary there were twenty-one new or recently founded political associations that identified themselves as ‘society,’ ‘league,’ ‘association,’ or ‘front’ and the Independent Smallholders’ Party (ISP)” (Tókécs 1996: 308), a resurrected political party that had won 57 percent of the votes in parliamentary elections in 1945 (Hankiss 1990: 17). While many of these parties played individually important roles in the transition, their collective effort, in the shape of the Opposition Round Table (ORT, or *Ellenzéki Kerekasztal*, EKA, in Hungarian) was to have a much greater impact on Hungary’s journey toward democracy.

At the end of 1988, despite the large number of opposition groups, the situation looked bleak. Bruszt and Stark (1991) sum the situation up by suggesting that at that point in time,

the independent organizations of Hungarian civil society were neither large, cohesive nor fundamentally committed to challenging the legitimacy of the communist regime. In fact, that the category of “opposition” could be used as a collective noun to refer to such a set of weak, diverse and fragmented organizations would scarcely have occurred to anyone active on the Hungarian political scene. (218)

But things were about to change. The party-state sought to further weaken the opposition groups through a strategy of divide and conquer, engaging in separate dialogues with various groups. In response to this, the EKA was established in March 1989. In one fell move, the opposition thus greatly improved its strength by uniting behind a common front. Although still inferior to the Party in virtually every way conceivable, the new sense of unity had the desired impact. The EKA rejected the Party’s strategy of individual discussions, and instead

called for bilateral negotiations between the power structure and representatives of the opposition, rejected all legislative proposals that would remove from the hands of a future, freely elected parliament the opportunity to formulate a state and a social system, and declared a willingness to enter into negotiations only in regard to laws directly related to the holding of free elections. (Bruszt 1989: 375)

The creation of the EKA was in part the brainchild of the *Független Jogász Forum* (FJF, Independent Lawyers' Forum), a group created in November 1988 with the objective of pushing for "legislative changes in the democratic tradition" (Sajó 1996: 71). The leadership of the Party was naturally less than content with this development and sought to influence the composition of the EKA, but in the end, with the EKA insisting it would negotiate only with the HSWP (as opposed to the state per se), Miklós Németh, the prime minister at the time, had to agree to the EKA's demands. As we shall see in the "protest" section of this report, the EKA came to have a large influence on the transition process, but it is important to understand that this "*ad-hoc* alliance of Hungary's new political elites" was exactly that. Overwhelmingly, the EKA consisted of intellectuals unknown to the general public (Tőkés 1996: 314). Despite this arguably serious shortcoming, the EKA sat down with the Party-state at the National Round Table (NRT) in June 1989 as an equal negotiating party. The fact that it could do so with limited public support suggests that the transition process was initiated from above by elites both keen on reform and afraid of the prospect of another revolution.

### *New Social Movements*

Despite the political opposition's best efforts, Hungarians remained uninterested in their efforts until 1989. Instead, and similarly to other Eastern European countries, "new social movement" mobilization became the most visible expression of discontent in Hungary. As Sajó (1996) puts it, "there was, however, no mass support for the opposition except in one respect. Ecologists managed to mobilize an increasing number of people against the Danube dam project, which was considered disastrous in ecological as well as in business terms" (70). "The Danube dam project" was a gigantic effort intending the construction of "a huge system of dams, resevoirs [*sic*], and canals over a 138-mile stretch of the Danube River" (Stokes 1993: 94). Officially called the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project, it was conceived as a collaborative effort with Czechoslovakia, and had first been proposed in the 1950s as part of plan to provide the country with hydroelectric power through the construction of a massive dam on the Danube. In 1977, Austria was brought in as a third partner and loan guarantor for the project. In 1983, János Vargha, a biologist-activist, created the Danube Circle (*Duna Kör*) with the objective of disseminating information about the ecological threats posed by the project (Falk 2003:142-3).

Would-be political activists eventually “joined the dam issue not only because it was one they could believe in but because they found that a significant number of people otherwise unwilling to enter into political debates, to say nothing of becoming oppositionists, were willing to come forward on this issue” (Stokes 1993: 94-5). Other small groups joined the Danube circle in its activities against the project. After some back and forth discussions in parliament, the decision was finally taken in the fall 1988 for the dam to be built at Bős-Nagymaros. But the environmental movement fought back: in September 1988, 30,000 people demonstrated against the construction of the dam in front of parliament in “the first major public questioning of the legitimacy of the Parliament” (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 220), and in October a petition was signed by over 70,000 citizens. Finally, in 1989, the Danube Circle collected more than 100,000 signatures demanding a referendum on the issue and in May of that year the government declared the project suspended (Falk 2003: 143; Kis 1995: 43; Stokes 1993: 95). Stokes (1993) suggests that “the contrast with Czechoslovakia, which tolerated little or no opposition to the dam, suggests how far Hungary had come by the end of 1988” (95).

As in other Eastern European countries, a peace movement existed in Hungary, which Falk (2003) refers to as “an important political force, especially in mobilizing young people,” that “grew rapidly in the early 1980s, and sought to maintain a distinct position, separate and independent from both the democratic opposition and the party-state sponsored peace organizations” (143). Still, it is unclear how organized this movement was. Like their Soviet satellite colleagues, Hungarian peace activists were mainly concerned with the proliferation of nuclear arms, but also sought to combine peace concerns with a call for the respect of human rights. Secondary school students formed the Anti-Nuclear Campaign Hungary (ANC), and in 1982 Ferenc Kőszegi, a seasoned peace activist, founded the Peace Group for Dialogue. Some of the group’s activities included “semi-official public meetings” and “an unsuccessful attempt to set up a peace camp modeled on Greenham Common” (Falk 2003: 143; Lomax 1982)

Women’s mobilizations with an explicit emphasis on women’s situation in Hungary appears to have been absent from the political stage. Swain (1992) states that FIDESZ’s “Alice Madzsár Women’s Group was the nearest thing to a women’s movement on the political scene, and had organized the women’s demonstration against the Bős-Nagymaros dam in September 1988” (22).

### *Ethnic/Nationalist Movements*

Another source of mobilization was the ethnic (or nationalist, but the literature refers to mobilization on behalf of ethnic minorities) movement that took root in Hungary during the 1980s. As in the case of both the environmentalist and the

peace activists, the ethnic movement was able to carve out a space for itself because it was concerned with a largely non-political issue. Furthermore, the ethnic movement's focus was literally outside Hungary, and more specifically in Romania. The MDF was one of the organizations that mobilized in support of ethnic Hungarian villages in Romania purportedly at risk of eradication when Ceaușescu sought to make room for “‘modern’ apartment complexes” (Stokes 1993: 95; Tőkés 1996: 309-10). By June 1988, the perceived situation of Hungarians in Romania had become so bad that, under the umbrella of MDF, “some thirty thousand people demonstrated in Budapest against the village reconstruction plan and the Hungarian government’s lack of action, the largest demonstration in Hungary since 1956” (Stokes 1993: 95). Despite the domestic political connotations of this event, Tőkés (1996) maintains that “as a political movement the [MDF] was more of a human rights lobby for ethnic Hungarians abroad than a champion of political democracy, social justice, and national self-determination for those at home” (310).

### *The Religious Movement*

The role of the Hungarian churches in the transition is disputed. Hankiss (1990) categorically claims that

The Hungarian Churches didn't play any kind of role in the Hungarian revolution; nothing like in Poland or in East Germany. The Hungarian Churches were compromised and became very conformist throughout the forty years of Communism. We didn't have a Polish Catholic Church; we didn't have an East German Lutheran Church. We simply had Churches and Church hierarchies which were deeply conformist – they even helped the State to oppress independent Churches. (18)

Others have been more nuanced in their evaluations. For example, Falk (2003) explains that “anti-militarism and pacifism were reflected by minority voices in the Catholic Church in Hungary,” although “efforts by those such as Catholic priests László Kovács and András Gromon, both of whom delivered pacifist sermons and supported conscientious objection to the required 18 months military service, were met with official church reprisals” (143). Lomax (1982: 30) adds that, in the early 1980s, more than a hundred “local communities” of Catholics followed the teachings of György Bulányi, who preached a Franciscan message of poverty, humility and nonviolence. Despite these contributions, there is little evidence to suggest that the Church or a religious movement played an important role in Hungary. Perhaps Falk's balanced evaluation says it best: “As in Slovakia, the official church supported the regime, but the Catholic faithful found inspiration within their beliefs to oppose it” (143).



### *The Labor Movement*

Organized labor did not play an important role in the revolution. While workers attended some of the large public gatherings in 1989, they never organized on the basis of class. Scholars have explained this by pointing to the country's history. Immediately after the communist takeover in 1948, the independent trade unions were incorporated into the state structure as part of the demobilization of civil society. Still, the Democratic League of Free Trade Unions was established in 1989 to serve as an umbrella organization for the independent unions that were now forming and receiving state approval. While the new organization organized leaflet campaigns to encourage workers to leave the official National Council of Trade Unions, its role can hardly be compared to that of Solidarity in Poland, or even the factory strikes in Czechoslovakia (Falk 2003: 145; Hankiss 1990: 20). As Hankiss (1990) sums up, unions, "which in 1948 had been one of the first, [were] in 1990 the last bastion of Communism in Hungary" (25). Consequently, it would have been surprising to see organized labor lead the march toward Hungarian democracy.

### *The Student Movement*

The Hungarian student movement is perhaps best described as "limited." Although students sought to democratize the Young Communist League (KISZ) in the 1980s, this effort was eventually abandoned. Instead, "an overtly political discussion club," Polvax, was formed in the Karl Marx University of Economics. Polvax attracted hundreds of students who attended debates on political issues (international and domestic), economic reform, human rights, and communism in Europe. Finally, as noted above, on March 30, 1988, FIDESZ was founded by a few dozen students, mainly from the István Bibó College of Law. The activists were mainly stirred by issues of political reform, the Nagymaros Dam project, and young people's issues such as conscientious objection to military service (Falk 2003: 144-5). Like most other branches of civil society, students mobilized late, although they did play an important role in the mass actions of 1989. Also, FIDESZ participated in the National Round Table that began in June 1989.

### **Protest**

Hungary's transition to democracy lacks many of the dramatic scenes witnessed in other Eastern European countries in 1989. As Bruszt (1989) observed,

Unless one regards the "sausage strike" organized by the official trade union to protest meat-price increases as one, there were no significant strike movements. Aside from two important mass actions in March and in June, there were no nationwide antigovernment demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands or

millions of people as in the GDR and in Czechoslovakia. No violent action took place, and no overt threat of the use of force was made, except for one made by a small-businessman member of the Hungarian Socialist Workers party [MSZMP]. Everyone believed he was a mental retard. Well then, what did take place in Hungary? Negotiations!” (366-7)

Others have echoed his point. For example, Kis (1995) explains that “apart from the two months of campaigning for the referendum [*after* the conclusion of the NRT], no large masses took active part in shaping the regime change. There was a public opinion, the fluctuations of which had a strong influence on the relations of force between political groups. But however politically alert, this opinion allowed the elites to decide the transition among themselves” (53). Nonetheless, while not necessarily instrumental to the outcome of Hungary’s negotiated transition, several episodes of protest did occur in the year and a half leading up to the initiation of the NRT. Some of these, such as the environmental movement’s mobilization against the building of the Nagymaros dam and the demonstrations in support of Hungarian minorities in Romania, have been discussed above, and will thus not be dealt with again.

One of the first semi-political gatherings took place on January 30, 1988, when the newly formed MDF held the first of a series of public meetings in Budapest’s Jurta Theatre. Estimates suggest that 500 people attended, with the HSWP instructing its members to stay away on pain of dismissal from the party. March and May witnessed similar meetings take place (Swain 1992: 18; 2006: 146). Also in March, 10,000 people participated in an unofficial commemoration of the 1848 revolution, apparently without significant political overtones (Humphrey 1990), and in June the police “dispersed a small crowd of several hundred people” seeking to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Imre Nagy’s execution (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 219; Falk 2003: 152-3).

Momentum gathered for the democratization forces in the winter and spring of 1989. In January, a new law was passed that officially permitted the establishment of associations, including political parties and labor unions, which naturally encouraged nascent democratic forces. Furthermore, that same month, Pozsgay revealed the findings of his commissioned report on the radio, namely that the 1956 event was not a counter-revolution, but rather a popular uprising. This admission made way for the final nail in the regime’s coffin, namely the rehabilitation and reburial of Imre Nagy on June 16, 1989. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, on the anniversary of the 1848 revolution, twenty-four independent organizations rejected an invitation from the party-state to participate in the official celebrations. Instead, they organized their own demonstration, which drew a crowd of over 100,000 people, thus overshadowing the “official” ceremonies. “This demonstration was the public signal that civil society could also play the politics of confrontation” (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 222). In addition to sending a powerful message to the regime, the March 15<sup>th</sup> demonstration

infused the opposition organization with confidence and was instrumental in the creation of the Opposition Round Table (EKA) on March 23<sup>rd</sup> just a week later. In a similar fashion, the League of Independent Trade Unions organized an alternative demonstration to the official state celebrations on May 1<sup>st</sup>. This time, the unofficial event drew between 60,000 and 100,000 protesters, making it six to ten times larger than the state's official demonstration. Crucially, both rallies were broadcast on state TV, allowing the Hungarian people to witness the shifting of power in real time. The opposition also used this event as the first public appearance of the EKA as a united group (Bruszt & Stark 1991: 222; 226).

Notwithstanding these early events, the most important gathering of the transition process occurred on June 16<sup>th</sup> when 200,000-250,000 came together for Imre Nagy's funeral in what Falk (2003) describes as the "closest thing to [a euphoric moment of popular mobilization in support of a set of political demand] in terms of emotive symbolism, myth making, and mass participation" (152). As early as spring 1988, as the first signs of meaningful political reform were emerging with the removal of Kádár, relatives and survivors of the 1956 revolution created the Committee for Historical Justice and, in collaboration with some of the main opposition groups as well as consultations with Pozsgay and other leading reformists, were able to push for a ceremonial burial meant to represent a "political resurrection" (Garton Ash 1990: 49; Falk 2003: 152-3; Tóké, 1996: 290). The re-burial of Nagy had been planned for quite some time, but its timing turned out to be most fortunate for the opposition. Sajó (1996) explains:

By the end of May, after a long three-week stalemate, it became obvious that there would be a mass demonstration at the reburial of Imre Nagy and the other 1956 martyrs, who were buried in unidentified mass graves after their execution. Moreover, the international media were extremely keen to cover the ceremony. It was also understood by EKA that there was growing tension within the HSWP arising from the fear that they could not control the public demonstration. On May 31, EKA realized that the June 16 reburial could be a vital opportunity for them. Prior to the reburial, EKA power would surely increase, but once the day had passed peacefully, the HSWP would become rigid again. (77-8)

Fearful that June 16<sup>th</sup> would cause a violent repeat of the 1956 revolution, the Party announced on June 10<sup>th</sup> that it would sit down with the EKA for a National Round Table to discuss the transition to a pluralist democratic system. Just three days later, and, rather tellingly, three days prior to the funeral, the NRT commenced (Swain 2006: 149). In his typically poetic manner, Timothy Garton Ash (1990) has described the "Hungarian funeral" as "a landmark in the post-war history of Eastern Europe" that "clearly marked the end of the post-1956 period" (53).

From a social movement perspective, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the NRT has little to do with composition or outcome, but rather with motivation. Because very few links existed between the opposition and the population at large, we are confronted with an absurd situation where it seems the party leaders and the opposition had a shared interest in keeping the people out of the equation. In contrast to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR, where the opposition was backed by the people, no such link existed in Hungary. Rather, both the party and the opposition feared that a popular uprising might well be uncontrollable. Consequently, despite the absence of a threat of violence, both parties acted as if such a threat existed. In the words of one commentator, “the tacit agreement between the outgoing and incoming political elites to exclude the ‘streets’ from their negotiations made political sense. Above all, it permitted both sides to speak for their respective – the no longer and the not yet existing – constituencies without being second-guessed by the subjects of the exercise” (Tóké 1996: 306).

Despite the absence of mobilization from below, the mere threat of street politics and the memory of 1956 went a long way in ensuring a truly inclusive NRT consisting of the EKA, the regime, and the so-called third side which was made up of trade unions and other civil society organizations. The EKA, for its part, was composed of 50 main delegates and over 500 experts from nine opposition organizations (Bruszt 1989: 367). Unlike the Polish Round Table, the Hungarian version made it clear that compromise with the regime – in the sense of trading free elections for guaranteed communist representation in the new system – was not an option. Still, the final agreement signed on September 18<sup>th</sup> contained one concession to the former rulers: the president would be elected directly by the population, rather than by the parliament, as the opposition had proposed. A general election for the presidency would undoubtedly have favored Pozsgay, the HSP candidate, since all opposition politicians were more or less completely unknown to the general public whereas Pozsgay enjoyed near-total recognition. It was this provision that caused the SZDSZ and FIDESZ to demand a referendum late in the fall of 1989. Their efforts were successful, and when the Hungarian people had voiced its opinion, the SZDSZ/FIDESZ side scored a slim but important victory. While the HSWP, now re-created as the HSP, was already facing the prospect of an uphill struggle in the parliamentary elections, the outcome of the referendum sealed their fate – in the short run. In 1994 they would return to power, but ironically that only served to prove that Hungarian democracy had consolidated (Hankiss 1990; Swain 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Can the Hungarian transition be construed as democratization from below? The evidence provided here would suggest “perhaps”, but only with important qualifiers attached. While the rather amicable negotiations between the state and

the opposition effectively excluded the latter's need for popular support, the potential for mass mobilization remained on the minds of both sides. In other words, the fear of popular mobilization affected the transition process, while actual mobilization can only be said to have had a very minor impact. The large demonstrations on March 15<sup>th</sup>, May 1<sup>st</sup>, and June 16<sup>th</sup> did matter, as they showed both the Party and the opposition what might happen should discussions not provide a satisfactory solution. Still, we will never know if Hungarians would have taken to the streets in the manner of their Czechoslovakian and East German brothers and sisters.

So why did the transition occur so smoothly? One answer, albeit an unexciting one, is that nobody who mattered was against democratization. Reformers within the Party had had their minds set on pluralism for years, long before Gorbachev's emergence, and this made for a drastically different trajectory to other Eastern European countries. Throughout my research I have had the feeling that in contrast to communist leaders in Czechoslovakia and the GDR, Hungarian leaders were not upset, shocked, or troubled by Gorbachev's policy change. Instead, they welcomed it as a long-awaited friend. In short, *glasnost* and *perestroika* were not threats to the Hungarian communists – they were opportunities. Seen from this perspective it becomes rather plain to see that mass mobilization in Hungary simply was not necessary. Democracy was already on its way.

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