INFORMAL PRESSURES, MOBILIZATION AND CAMPAIGNS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CENTRALLY PLANNED ECONOMIES

by

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Introduction

The starting-point of this paper is that plan instructions and financial regulation are not the only or even the main means of management /control/ of today's centrally planned socialist economies. The basic means of control, the basic way of functioning are informal mobilization and campaigns. A specific kind of mobilization is called a campaign.

The paper analyzes the nature, the functioning and the effects of mobilization and of campaigns.

Shortcomings of plan instructions and financial regulation

The formal means of central management /control/ of today's centrally planned socialist economies are plan instructions and financial regulation.

These means of management have serious deficiencies. The disaggregation of plans - the elaboration of plan instructions - is a complicated, slow and rigid process, with bargaining between the various levels of the control hierarchy /central planning board, sectoral ministries, branch directorates, enterprises/. Plan instructions are always partial indicators, they always leave "unregulated" details; they are often contradictory. The exact fulfilment of plan indicators is practically impossible because of their mutual contradictions and for other reasons, so that it cannot be really mandatory. I do not want to go into details,
because these problems are well-documented in the literature.\(^1\)

Regarding "financial regulation", the key problem is that it functions without being backed up by the discipline of bankruptcy and by a rationally functioning - i.e. profit-oriented - capital market. The bankruptcy discipline and the capital market are specific, at least in principle impersonal, regulation mechanisms of enterprise behaviour in western market economies. Contrary to this, "financial regulation" in today's socialist economies is not impersonal. It is a separate branch of bureaucratic control, exerted by financial organs: banks /usually the "monobank"/, the Ministry of Finance, and the latter's subordinate bodies.

The control by these organs focuses primarily on the input side of enterprise activities: the main role of financial organs is to try to force enterprises to economize on scarce resources. This specific kind of "responsibility for economizing" implies a permanent pressure on firms for austerity. This role is different from the expansion-oriented attitude of other actors /e.g. the ministries, firms/ in the system. In the author's view, the role of the financial organs is more important than is usually supposed in the literature.\(^2\) Their role becomes specifically important when economic tensions arise from the excessive run-up of investment and industrial growth. Overly expansionist strivings then have to be reined in at the macro-level and therefore have to be checked more rigorously at the micro-level. Financial organs are very active during these austerity periods.
Still, the one-sided, basically input-oriented character of financial regulation reflects its secondary importance in a system oriented mainly toward output maximization. And the secondary importance of financial regulation entails the secondary importance of the organs exerting it. Their role is secondary in good times, and becomes more important only during periods of austerity. In other words, their role "varies with the weather" - which means that financial regulation influences enterprise behaviour with uncertainty.

To the statement that financial regulation is an uncertain means of management, we have to add that plan instructions are also uncertain because - as we underlined it - they cannot be always fully mandatory.

The deficiencies of plan instructions and of financial regulation are striking. Still, we cannot say that they are the deficiencies of the given system as a whole. Why?

For the simple reason that plan instructions and financial regulation are not the only and not even the main means of management of the socialist economies. With a certain exaggeration we could say that neither plan instructions nor financial regulation are conditio sine qua non of the system.

For a historical test of this statement we could go back in time and examine the socialist economic system in statu nascedi - e.g. Soviet Russia, 1918; Hungary, 1947-1948. Then both plan instructions and financial regulation were operating in quite embryonic form. And still, the basic shape, the basic functioning of the system were very similar to what they are
today. What represents the fundamental continuity in the system? The answer: mobilization.

What is mobilization?

Mobilization has been the basic means of control, the basic means of transmission of economic policy decisions in centrally planned socialist economies.

Mobilization is based on the declared unity of society. Mobilization means that people have to identify themselves with the objectives declared by the leading organs of the society.

Here we are not interested in the problems of this identification in the case of "ordinary citizens": workers, engineers, etc. Our topic is the role played by mobilization in the functioning of the management hierarchy. Enterprise managers - and also the leaders of supervising organs: branch directorates, etc. - have to follow not only formal plan instructions and formal financial rules of operation, but also the declared general lines of behaviour. They have to participate in the implementation of the general priority tasks determined and declared by the leading organs of the society.

We have to underline here the informal character of mobilization. Official declarations often speak about the "mobilizing power" of plan instructions. However, with our definitions of the concepts the previous statement loses its meaning. Plan instructions are formal legal prescriptions supported by formal legal sanctions in the case of non-fulfilment. Of course, they may be determined ambitiously and, because of that,
force enterprises to work hard. But this is not "mobilization", "mobilizing power" in the sense of the words used here, because plan instructions are not informal – mobilizing – measures, pressures.

The informal character of mobilization has important consequences. Speed and multiplicative mechanisms are among them. Regarding speed, the legal formalization of the tasks obviously needs much time because the determination of the tasks of individual enterprises has to pass through several layers of the control hierarchy, which entails bargaining between the different levels, bureaucratic formalities of disaggregation, etc.

Mobilization as another transmission mechanism is different from this rather slow process. The formal management hierarchy also participates in it. But its activity in this case consists of mediating and repeating general rules of behaviour and the priorities to be applied by enterprises (and by other subordinate levels of decision-making). The slow functioning of the management hierarchy in disaggregating plan instructions does not hold for the same hierarchy’s mobilization activities. Mobilization involves the ceaseless restatement and elaboration of the slogans. It transmits the tasks from the top to the bottom quickly, because it is exempt from formal bureaucratic rules.

Still, mobilization has other, even faster mediation systems: the mass media which reports the speeches of leaders, party and state resolutions and other documents. Besides that, a never-ending repetition (in editorials etc.) of the main principles, general priority tasks, and behavioural rules stated
in these documents is an important part also of the activities of the mass media.

It may seem doubtful that the latter activities of the mass media amount to more than simple propaganda, that they are a part of the system of economic management. Of course, the "repetition" activities in question would not represent in themselves a means of management. Mass media - besides the "repetition" - also gives accounts of good and bad examples: in one enterprise managers do behave as expected, in another, they do not. The latter kind of activity of the Hungarian Press was presented by the country's literary weekly as follows: "Just having a look at the newspaper, one can see the confirmation of his own hypothesis, according to which Hungarian domestic policy journalism works with two models. With a small model and with a big one. The small model is the enterprise, the farm, the institution. The big model is the country (irrelevant from our point of view - K.A.S.). The enterprise, the farm, the institution appears in two basic variants. Either it does not work properly (this is less usual), and then it plays the role of the bad example. Or it works properly (this is more usual), and then it plays the role of the good example. Anyway, the aim is to warn the reader: follow this, do not follow that."³

Such "labelling" activities of the mass media - as well as its "repetition" activities - seem at first glance to be means of simple propaganda, not of economic management. The same holds for the role played in mobilization by social
organizations other than the party: trade unions, the communist league of youth, etc. Enterprises are not subordinated to these organizations, the latter cannot really exert control over the former. All they can do is to repeat the rules, principles, general priorities and point out examples of good and bad behaviour.

These activities of the mass media and of social organizations (other than the party) become an integral part of economic management because - and only because - enterprise leaders are responsible before their superiors - party superiors and sectoral ministries - for obeying the instructions which are mediated also by such non-superior institutions as the press, trade unions, etc.

So, subordinated decision-makers have to obey and are accustomed to obey such "instructions" which are not given to them as formal orders but which are mediated to them by informal channels, or are often simply "in the air". Under these circumstances the "good examples" themselves also become means of management. Enterprise leaders pay attention to each others' activities. Each of them tries to adapt to the expected behavioural pattern, to take a more intensive part in the implementation of the declared general tasks than others. So, even such "horizontal" inter-enterprise relations become parts of informal hierarchical control - mobilization.
The economic role and importance of mobilization

In order to overcome the country's economic difficulties, the Yugoslav government started a stabilization policy at the beginning of the 1980s. A part of this policy was the call addressed to enterprises to increase exports and diminish imports. Aleksander Bajt expressed doubts concerning the real effects of such calls:

"The calls for stabilization that we hear nowadays (even if such calls may have a role in economies better organized than ours) lack realism when they suppose that all agents of the economic life will automatically subordinate their interests to the general interest that they otherwise do not even know. These calls are also signs of the unsatisfactory functioning of the economic system." ¹⁴

Bajt's doubts seem to be exaggerated: the calls are not simple wishes, because power is behind them. In the period in question, the pressure exerted by the Yugoslav government played an important role in the increase of exports ⁵ (even if there had been other, less costly ways of increasing exports — e.g. currency devaluation which was taken later, but that is another question).

Mobilization does have real behavioural effects. In order to show to what extent the members of the management hierarchy are accustomed to this kind of obedience, let us take a not strictly economic but rather typical example. In Hungary in 1958 the construction of 10,000 flats for miners was promised
and would have had to be implemented as a kind of popular action of the government. But because the task was too ambitious, only its partial implementation seemed possible. In order to come nearer to the objective, enormous efforts were made. In addition, some accounting manipulation was employed, too. The local councils of the areas where the flats for miners were built were "requested" by central authorities to ease the conditions under which the inhabitants would be permitted to occupy a new flat. Normally, the occupant could move in only if the walls were painted; now, for the miners, the occupying permit might be given without the walls having been painted, etc.

The interest of the story here is that local councils eased the conditions of occupying not only for the miners' flats but for new flats generally. And even those local councils followed suit which had no miners and hence miners' flats constructions in their territory. Of course, they were not asked by anybody to do so. But the change was "in the air" - they simply had the feeling that it was the right line of action to take. (Cf. Ungvárszki /1975/.)

Let us come back to the role of mobilization in economic management. Before the building up of a complex and sophisticated system of mandatory plan indicators and financial regulation, informal mobilization had been the predominant means of management of the socialist economies. The building up of formal bureaucratic procedures of disaggregation of national economic plans and of the financial regulation of enterprise activities were meant to complete mobilization or to substitute for it as a means of management of the economy.
Was it meant to complete mobilization or to substitute for it? The intentions of the authorities, as far as we can judge it, have never really been fully clear, unambiguous in this respect; they are ambivalent. Mobilization as a means of economic management obviously has harmful effects, basically because it means an extreme simplification, uniformization of economic tasks. Because of its obvious harmful effects, to a certain extent the authorities strive to reorganize the functioning of socialist economies so that mobilization should not have a real place, a really important role in it.

However, these strivings are problematic and have always been inconsistent. Mobilization is a way of life of the social organism, of its control apparatus; it is an everyday confirmation of the declared unity of society. It is a permanent practical confirmation of the systemic principle of hierarchical subordination. So, it is readily understandable that even such relatively radical reforms as the 1968 Hungarian NEM did not unequivocally try to abolish mobilization in economic management, although it tried to reduce its importance. Here we are faced with a dilemma of the basic socio-political structure, about which we as economists do not have much to say.

But tendencies towards eliminating mobilization, towards making it superfluous in the functioning of the socialist economy are also problematic from another – and this time economic – point of view. Namely, the deficiencies of plan disaggregation and financial regulation – deficiencies which are mentioned at the beginning of this paper – make mobilization
an unavoidable means of economic management; in this sense, they reproduce it.

The literature about the socialist economy discusses frequently this problem. Joseph Berliner in his classic /1957/ book analyzes the problem of the unavoidable decentralization of a certain part of economic decisions. A full centralization of all decisions is impossible for several reasons; many of them have to be taken at subordinate levels and partly by enterprise directors. So, enterprise directors have to know the preferences of central organs and to be motivated to follow those preferences. Under these conditions, the unavoidable degree of decentralization may be acceptable. These conditions are fulfilled, and namely, in Berliner's description, they are fulfilled because of what we call mobilization. In this respect Berliner underlines that enterprise directors have to read the newspapers very carefully, to find the new general priorities, "campaigns", in them.

In his /1983/ article Gregory Grossman discusses the two kinds of externalities in the socialist economy. "Externalities-1" are what economists traditionally call externalities. "Externalities-2" are such environmental effects of enterprise behaviour as deterioration of product quality, etc. which, as a rule, do not exist in market economies, and which are the consequence of the system of management and incentives. The party's integrating role in the system is to a great extent keeping such harmful behaviour within limits, through pressures exerted on decision-makers. This is a part of what we call mobilization.
Peter Wiles /1962/ underlines the importance of the adaptation to "general expectations" in the case of contradictory plan instructions: in this situation the enterprise director has to figure out which of the instructions is more important in the given period.

Reinhard Bendix /1960/ interprets the phenomenon that we call mobilization as a "permanent pressure for overfulfilment". If by overfulfilment we mean something very general – saying that by the means of mobilization the party and state leadership of the economy wants to reach generally better results than those which could be reached using only the formal means of management – then here we find formulated our own message. But the author’s interpretation of the phenomenon is narrower: by the "pressure for overfulfilment" he means the rush for quantitative growth, quantitative performances. The staff of enterprises and also of ministries strives to resist this pressure partly in the simple sense that they hold back their performances, but also in the sense of resisting such demands as are irrational from the professional point of view, such as the pressures to increase the quantity of production so rapidly that it leads unavoidably to a deterioration of product quality.

The findings in this paper partly complement, partly supplant the message of the previous paragraph. As concerns the problem of professional rationality-irrationality, Bendix's statement is often true. But its opposite is often true also: mobilization is frequently meant to hold back strivings which are irrational from the professional point
of view (vide Grossman’s ideas quoted).

In connection with the "pressure for overfulfilment", Bendix underlines a very important phenomenon - still, his point of view seems to be one-sided. Namely, it is true that the quantitative growth of production is always an important indicator for firms of the socialist economy - even if economic policy becomes not one-sidedly quantity-oriented, as it did generally after the mid-fifties. Still, one should not connect mobilization exclusively with quantity-orientation. In a situation when previous excessive quantitative growth led to economic tension, the aim of mobilization may be to hold back quantitative growth (as we shall see later). Mobilization originates not from one-sided quantity-orientation, but - let us repeat it - from the declared unity, the declared unique objectives of society on the one hand and from the deficiencies of management by plan instructions and financial regulation on the other.

A further interesting statement of Bendix is the connection of mobilization with the variability of behavioural norms. In the circumstances of rush work, work treated as battlefield task, the norms of economic behaviour cannot be stable and steady; mobilization serves to transmit the changes of behavioural norms to enterprises. In our view, this is a specific side of a more general phenomenon. Mobilization has more or less steady elements - among them is, e.g. the "struggle" against the deterioration or the excessive deterioration of product quality. Still, changing elements of mobilization are also very important. In this respect we speak about campaigns.
Campaigns

We call "campaign" the massive use of the means of mobilization for the implementation of new general priority tasks, recently adopted national resolutions. In a broader sense, we can also include in "campaigns" the formal measures (adoption of new laws, changes of plan instructions, banking, credit and fiscal measures) taken parallelly with informal measures, for the implementation of the same tasks.

The systemic necessity of campaigns can be readily understood. Among the deficiencies of plan disaggregation we underlined its slowness and rigidity. Because of them, plan disaggregation is specifically weak as a means of adaptation to any new situation. Imagine, for example, that owing to a rapid growth of investment expenditure, the country's foreign trade balance deteriorates rapidly - as often happens in the upswing phases of investment cycles (cf. Bauer /1978/, Soós /1975/). Consequently, now, exports have to be found quickly. Export plans of individual enterprises have to be increased. But planners do not really know which enterprises have material possibilities to do this. And even if they knew it, the issue is more than simply increasing export plans, since in the previous period the non-fulfilment of export plans was an accepted behaviour. The increased importance of exports has to be declared, decentralized export initiatives have to be encouraged, which means that export becomes an important criterion for evaluating the performance of enterprise managers; everybody speaks about
exports and everybody has to promote exports, "unearth the reserve export possibilities". This is a campaign. For example, in 1964, after the serious foreign trade disequilibrium of the previous year, Hungarian sectoral ministries were called to elaborate "action programmes" for increasing exports; enterprises were called to undertake "export initiatives". 

The problem and also the solution of cutting back investment growth in this same situation are quite similar. In the previous period, implementing investments with extra-plan costs, starting investment projects without the necessary approval of higher authorities and other investment-increasing manipulations of enterprises, branch directorates, etc. were normal practice. Now, to cut back investment growth, a simple reduction of the relevant plan figures is not sufficient in itself. A campaign has to be organized which makes it clear for subordinate decision-making levels that in this new situation such manipulations are not allowed. For example, in Hungary in 1971, the important economic leaders were invited for a session. There, Prime Minister Jenő Fock condemned with very harsh words the "investment manipulations" of enterprises, sectoral ministries, etc. Investments which had grown rapidly during 1970 and 1971 and contributed to a big foreign trade deficit, decreased in 1972.

We can conclude: ongoing campaigns provide, in the given time period, the valid interpretation of the formal rules, whose meaning would otherwise remain uncertain. To continue the example, "investment manipulations" are formally always forbidden. Still, in practice, they are tolerated, even more or less encouraged during cyclical upswings. But when their
adverse consequences make it unavoidable, the ban becomes, through "simple declaration", effective or less ineffective for those not having good connections with higher authorities. Hence, campaigns are an important part of economic control.

The price of management by mobilization

One aspect of management by mobilization and campaigns is that it simplifies, makes uniform certain economic tasks. For example, during an export campaign everybody has to increase exports - more or less independently of costs. The objective is usually achieved, but at a high cost. When economic actors are mobilized to subordinate their own interests to the general interest, - which is in our example to increase exports -, it means that they do not have the answer to the question: "how much is one unit of export worth?" So if mobilization and campaigns diminish the uncertainty of the regulation for subordinate decision-makers, if they introduce the capability of fast action to the system on one side, on the other side, they are, of course, not free of costs.

An even more problematic consequence of management by campaigns is its influence, positive feedback effect exerted on the behaviour of central planners. Let us take the upswing phase of the investment cycle, which - as was noted - leads to serious economic tensions. Why does economic policy - regularly, in the upswing phases of successive investment cycles - stimulate fast investment growth until it leads to serious tensions?
At the beginning of this phase—when tensions are yet far away—economic policy stimulates the acceleration of investment growth which previously was held strongly in check. A necessary part of that stimulation is stopping the investment cutback campaign, and creating the opposite kind of environment. The mass media begins to explain the importance of investments, of investment growth, often blaming yesterday’s "anti-investment" policies, or rather the middle- and lower-level organs which "misinterpreted" or "exaggerated" the investment cutback. This is to influence lower-level decision-makers, to make them understand that times have changed, that now they have to behave differently, that now they are encouraged to expand investment activities, that more or less manipulations become, once again, acceptable. The atmosphere created during such periods was well stated in 1965 by Miloš Minić, then responsible for economic matters of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia:

"When difficulties appear in our country, we all become more serious, and begin to work in discipline. But when production increases well (we could see it best in 1963–1964), then expansion begins, then we begin, more or less on the whole front, to elaborate plans, to enter into contracts, to invest, to use such assets which we possess and such ones which we do not possess; the investment front is enlarged, extra-plan costs, insolvency and excessive liabilities appear, financial and plan discipline weakens, and more or less we all exploit the boom or, to be more polite, we become not sufficiently realistic in economic management and entrepreneurship. And it is then sufficient if from among twenty thousand economic units only
a few thousand begin to offend discipline more seriously, to spend assets not yet possessed, to expect that they will get the necessary money from this or that bank, and then they do not get it, and things like that. We lived through something like that in 1960 and 1961, and then again at the end of 1963 and in 1964.**^10

But the never-ending repetition of the new "principle" not only creates a specific atmosphere at subordinate levels; it influences the behaviour of the planning center also. Because the campaign means to a great extent management by repeated declarations, slogans of the moment, it is not really allowed to disturb it by contradicting it - for example, by drawing attention to possible dangers of too fast investment growth in a period of stimulation of fast investment growth. There are people - including members of the planning apparatus - who, on the basis of the knowledge of past experience, could warn of the dangers, but it would be very difficult for them to do so.11 An optimistic atmosphere reigns until the foreseeable difficulties arrive.

The conclusion is that the utilization of campaigns in the management of the economy makes it difficult to see future economic trends clearly: in the psychosis of campaigns even the results of the planners' own actions can hardly be forecast accurately.
Relatively radical economic reforms and mobilization

Yugoslavia in 1952 and Hungary in 1968 abolished the system of mandatory plan instructions based on the disaggregation of national economic plans. (More recently important steps have been taken in this direction by China and Poland.) Formal plan instructions have a very limited role in Hungary and nearly no role in Yugoslavia. This means a very important change in the economic systems of these countries. Still, it is not automatically clear, what this change consists of: how do these economies function if not by plan instructions?

Reforms in both countries aimed at the introduction of more or less effective market regulation; we have to underline price liberalization tendencies - that is, tendencies towards creating self-regulating markets in both countries, although in the Hungarian case the state control of the market through planning was strongly emphasized.

However, hierarchical subordination of enterprises to the apparatus outlived all reforms - even the most radical reform of the international history of the socialist economy, the Yugoslav one of 1965. Capital market and bankruptcy discipline - as final market-type regulators of enterprise behaviour - were not created. Nevertheless, immediately after the Yugoslav and Hungarian reforms the dependence of enterprises on their actual market performance strengthened.

But when, from 1969 on, recentralization tendencies, anti-reform strivings appeared in both countries, then the relative importance of enterprise dependence on the market on
the one hand and on the bureaucracy on the other began to shift. That is, the hierarchical dependence of Hungarian enterprises on local party organs and sectoral ministries, of Yugoslav enterprises on territorial (republic and commune) party and state organs increased. Still, that did not mean the re-introduction of plan instructions. Informal pressure - mobilization - substituted for the latter.

In Hungary, "responsibility for supply" has been a basic feature of the economic system. Enterprises - whether they function in the field of production, trade or services - are often in a monopolistic position at the regional or even national levels. Hence they are "responsible for supplying their markets". They get anxious telephone calls from their superiors if they do not satisfy the needs of their customers with the usual products. This, of course, is a much more sophisticated, much less rigid means of management than that followed during traditional central planning, involving the tremendous bureaucracy of plan disaggregation. Still, on the other hand, this "responsibility" reflects that we have a rather bureaucratic than market economy. And this "responsibility" can only guarantee a mediocre supply. What is more, it also "guarantees" shortcomings of supply. Because, obviously, in such an economic system an enterprise can obtain additional resources to fulfil the tasks "expected" by the authorities precisely if there are supply shortages - so enterprises are interested in holding back performance.

Responsibility for supply - under the name "responsibility for the situation of the market" - also exists in Yugoslavia.
(correspondingly to the regional decentralization of the system of economic control, rather on regional than on federal level).

The disappearance of plan disaggregation reflects the relative radicalism of the Hungarian and Yugoslav reforms. At the same time, the domination of informal hierarchical management - the most important and obvious example of which is the "responsibility for supply", but we have also presented other examples in this paper - reflects the inconsistencies of these reforms.

**Summary**

Following a short presentation of the striking deficiencies of plan instructions and "financial regulation" - the formal means of control of today's socialist centrally planned economies - we state that in actual fact these are not the basic means of control in these systems.

The basic means of control is mobilization. Historically, this method originated from the declared unity of society. People - first of all economic managers - have to identify themselves with the objectives declared by the authorities. Moreover, the deficiencies of the formal means of control perpetuate the basic task assigned to mobilization.

Campaigns are a specific kind of mobilization, meant for the implementation of new national economic objectives or tasks that have become newly important. Although mobilization facilitates the functioning of the economic system, we
also have to underline two kinds of its negative consequences. First, mobilization oversimplifies the economic problems, "tasks" which in reality are tremendously complex. To be sure, some tasks can be implemented with its help, but certainly at high costs. Second, the never-ending repetition of the prevailing (campaign) slogans and the fact that they cannot be really contradicted weakens the capacity of central planners to forecast the future.
Footnotes

1. The first - and up to now important - systematic descriptions and analyses of the shortcomings in question can be found in Berliner /1957/ and Kornai /1959/.

2. Of course, there are differences in the treatment of this problem. E.g. Kornai /1980/, Wiles /1968/ attribute a very limited role to money and organs of financial control in the functioning of the socialist economy, Garvy's /1966/ and Berliner's /1981/ show a more important role of the mechanisms in question.

3. Cf. - ov -: Belénész az ember az újságba (Having a look at the newspaper), Élet és Irodalom, 2 April 1982.


11. For more detail, see Soós /1983/.

12. About the "responsibility for supply" see Schweitzer /1982/.

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