

REPERTOIRES OF RESISTANCE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE. ORIGINS OF GRASSROOTS IN THE LATE STATE SOCIALISM

final report by **Szabina Kerényi**

Ph.D. candidate in Sociology

1. Aims of Research

The aim of the research at the OSA was to conduct a historical background investigation to my dissertation project *Grassroots Mobilizations in Central European Cities*, using original materials from the period of late state socialism. The dissertation project discusses the emergence of urban grassroots movements in Central European cities, predominantly the new types of mobilizations that connect urban spaces to more general systematic problems through autonomous, bottom-up action.

The goal was to work out a historical chapter to the dissertation and look for the background of grassroots mobilization in the region, the context in which they emerged, the dominant discourses of the movements of a period of late state socialism, which also signify the dawning of new democracies. Along the concept of “repertoires of contention” by Charles Tilly, widely used in Social Movements Theory to outline sets of actions available for movement actors, the research aimed to trace back grassroots mobilization to a different political context and look for interconnectedness, the application of symbolic and cultural tools across the changes.

My attention focused on the mostly illegal, underground gatherings that were directed against the socialist authoritarian regime as such, in the region of Central Europe, most of all Hungary, but also other Visegrad countries. International co-operation was in focus, and since the international dimension and transnational networks play an important role for movements in the new millennium, too (although in different forms, through the diffusion of grassroots movements into the international movement arena), the role of such international co-operation was also a question – what was the emphases of such exchanges, what were the most important dimensions? What determined those discourses, and to what extent did later civil movement discourses relate back to them?

Apart from international co-operation, the aim of the research was to look at the central topics of the dissident movement. Since peace and environmental issues had a particular importance and a special role in the late period of state socialism, and in some cases, after the regime change, too (particularly the issue of the Danube in Hungary, where the Danube Circle and the problem of building a hydro plant on the Danube between Gabčíkovo and Nagymaros grew to be a symbolic issue of the united opposition, and was brought back as a re-used and reinterpreted symbol within the context of the elections in Hungary in 1998.) Therefore, the aim was to investigate the continuity between the peace and environmental movements of the '80 and those after the regime change, in the early '90s, and furthermore, so seek for linkages of those movements and the newly emerged urban grassroots movements of the new millennium. The hypothesis was that while the '90s movements were organically rooted in the former, anti-authoritarian resistance structures, the urban grassroots movements that emerged in the early 2000s embodied new mobilization structures, which were rather influenced by transnational trends and discourses, and much less related to historical patterns of resistance.

2. Materials

For the research purposes, I was searching at collections that include materials on the dissident movement in Central and Eastern Europe. That entails mostly the Demszky-collections – personal records and samizdat publications, collections of the Radio Free Europe, early publications of the periodical *Beszélő* (or *Máshonnan Beszélő*), reports on early meetings and discussions of the Democratic Opposition. The documents in focus were diplomacy correspondence and telegraphs, some original letters, leaflets (especially those that were related to the Danube Circle – invitation for demonstrations), transcripts of radio programs, foreign and domestic newspaper articles. The documents researched fell under the following categories:

- 1) any news related to dissident groups in Hungary, Poland or Czechoslovakia – these were mostly records on police investigations, arrests, police or court files, reports of the Radio Free Europe, the Information Centre publications of György Krassó; the aim here was to see the language related to the dissident movements, used by the different sides – the actors from within, and among each other, allying parties, mostly from the “Western world,” local newspapers and the authorities – the court, the police
- 2) materials on the Charta '77 – from various resources, whether in diplomacy correspondence, official letters, foreign (that is, mostly English or German) language newspaper articles, or open letters as political petitions; even though the Charta '77 was a Czechoslovak initiative, originated by only 243 hundred individuals, its presence among the dissident movement is much more accentual and widespread, and as the documents show, it served as a reference point in many issues (human rights, problems of individual freedom) among Hungarian intellectuals, too; another aim was to investigate the international dimensions of the dissident movement, the regional co-operation between the different groups across the countries
- 3) newspaper articles, reports on peace or environmental issues, or any mobilizations related to them – rather in the late '80s, '87-'88, reports on demonstrations, illegal gatherings, mostly in samizdat literature (*Túlélés* magazine), the importance of the Danube-issue in the democratic opposition movement, and how much the issue of environment was an integrative part of the dissident movement; similarly, for peace issues – mostly in the context of Chernobyl, discussions on the accident, and the issue of compulsory military service; original leaflets – invitations to demonstrations for the Danube, against the hydro plant
- 4) some, although very few materials, mostly newspaper clips from the early '90s, from some early democratic magazines and periodicals, mostly Hungarian, such as *HVG*, the *Reform* or the *Magyar Narancs*; here the focus of interest was the visions towards the new democracy, seeking for bottom-up elements in politics, early views on the democratic opposition and the role of the opposition movement in the new democratic system, and on new roles and meaning of “opposition”; potentially, was looking for documents of the formation of the early civil societies, establishment of the first NGOs, institutionalization process of the opposition movement.

3. Findings and further research

As a Cultural Anthropologist/ Sociologist, working with archive materials was a new approach for me, however, it was essential for this part of the research to work with original documents from that period, and even though it is not aimed to be a comparison, the diachronic perspective gave the research a new, important dimension. Not surprisingly, and in accordance with the hypothesis, the dissident discourse was dominated by rather small, closed circles of intellectuals, and even though the documents stem from a few resources, the determinant role of the few dozens of intellectuals was obvious.

The issues mostly discussed among these circles were predominantly problems of freedom and human rights, which also came up at the international co-operation of the dissident groups. The same discourse can be traced further on among civil groups and initiative during the '90s, where the dominant issues and the language can be seen as a heritage from the dissident groups of the late state socialism. These elements are present not merely on a symbolic but also on a structural level. Active discussions on problems of institutionalization embraced almost exclusively the formation of new political parties, which turned out to form the new opposition in the democratic systems.

The transformation brought about burning issues came to surface with the changes themselves, such as housing or privatization, therefore, it was expected among movement researchers (e.g. Chris and Katy Pickvance) that the very same issues would appear on the bottom-up level, and the grassroots and the NGOs would be formed and mobilized along these problems. Those issues, however, were significantly articulated and problematized by the new movements of the early 2000s, while the early 1990 saw a rise and dominance of the environmental movement, which formed as the largest and strongest civil network in Hungary, with hundreds of NGOs and local organization at different levels, local and national. The findings at the OSA supported the presumption that there is an organic continuity on structural and symbolic levels between the movement groups of the democratic opposition of the '80s, and the groups of the newly built civil society after the democratic changes, and thus form a first generation of social movements. The international dimensions, just like the individual issues (human rights, environment or individual freedom) were strongly present, and they all came up within the given frame of a particular discourse of the democratic opposition (international, regional solidarity among dissidents, against state authoritarian oppression, values of basic human rights), many features of which can be found in the discourse of new civil societies of the '90s, dominated by a liberal discourse.