

OSA Visegrad Fund – Research Report
The Environmental History of a Damming Project. The Debates around the
Construction of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dams

by
András Vadas, PhD

The Open Society Archives hosts one of the most extensive collections of documents related to the change of regime in Hungary. In the process of regime change in Hungary the anti-Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dam construction protests were of primary importance as it has been argued by historians. A number of archive holds smaller or bigger collections on the problem of the construction works. At first the Környezetvédelmi és Vízügyi Levéltár (Environmental Protection and Water Management Archives) has a major collection of maps, and plans connected to the project. The Hungarian National Archives also has similar holdings while at least three archives to my knowledge hold documents related to the political conflicts around the joint Czechoslovak-Hungarian megaproject. First a number of documents are preserved in the Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történelmi Levéltára (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security) which directly concerns the protestations, the persons who were considered a threat. Two archives however collected a number of documents which concerned the opposition. The Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives) got in possession of a major collection, the private archive of the Duna-kör (“Danube Circle”), the most important organization that systematically argued against the completion of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dams by organizing conferences, publishing articles and press releases. This archive however covers only the period after 1992. The documents of the Danube Circle for the period before cannot be accessed at the moment or at least not to my knowledge. However for this period the collection of the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives’ collection to some extent can be a compliment. Three parts of the extensive collection on the matter were studied during my two months scholarship period:

1. Records of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Research Institute – Hungarian unit (HU OSA 300-40-1). This collection was the most comprehensive in covering the printed press on the issue.
2. Records of the Open Media Research Institute: Information Services Department – Hungarian subject files (HU OSA 205-4-140) also contained a number of documents related to the perception of the project in Hungary in the 1980s.

3. The video collection of the Fekete Doboz Foundation (HU OSA 305-0-3) has been made available recently. Their footages preserve a substantial amount of material on the demonstrations and political debates around the construction of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dams as well as interviews with important figures of the demonstrations, such as János Vargha (informal head of the Danube Circle) or Béla Lipták, an environmental engineer, who organized the international protests against the project.

Although some of the political processes also need clarification especially as no study has been written on the topic in years but even more importantly almost none of the studies concerned the events from an environmental history aspect. With the exception of the works of Viktor Pál the study of twentieth-century environmental processes in historical perspective is a blank field in Hungarian historical scholarship. Environmental history as a distinct research field developed in the last roughly fifty years. Starting with the environmental movements from the 1960s more and more attention has paid by historians, geographers, biologists to the changes of the landscape in historical times and the influence of humankind on the different spheres of the Earth. Much attention was dedicated to one of the most vulnerable sphere, the hydrosphere. The significant changes in water quality, in hydrograph and the biome of rivers in the last two centuries demonstrated scholars and political decision makers the extent of human influence on nature more clearly than changes in the lithosphere (or even the atmosphere). Ever since in the 1890s, when there were plans to create a major hydropower plant to utilize the energy of the Niagara Falls, damming projects are frequent areas of conflict because of the different political, financial and environmental concerns of the actors involved. Environmental historians for decades now have been very active in analyzing how the different agendas and interests of different actors in such projects influenced the construction and the perception of such projects. One of the frequently argued problems is how the idea of “development” and “modernization” overwrote the interests of traditional economy, farming, tourism, etc. A key area in this respect is the analysis of the dam building projects of dictatorships in the twentieth century. Case studies were carried out to understand the politics of such projects in India, Egypt, China, USA as well as in Mozambique and Ghana, etc. However apart from a number of studies that touched upon the political and legal relevance of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dam project especially its role in the rise of environmental movements and the formation of the democratic opposition in Hungary no detailed analysis was carried out on the problem from and environmental history point of

view. The sources consulted in the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives allow a sufficient basis to treat the problem.

The three archival fonds consulted when working at OSA enabled to have a good insight on the one hand on the political propaganda and the motivations behind the construction of the dam building as well as the ways opposition found its way to challenge the political decisions made by János Kádár and his circle regarding the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dams. I focused on three problems when working all of which were crystallized while working on the material itself:

1. What international connections Danube Circle had, how they organized their presence in Western media? Did they have constant connections with the Radio Free Europe and other organizations in Western Europe?

To the study of the problem the Radio Free Europe's Records were of course essential. The fonds were made up of three major types of sources. First it contains a highly comprehensive collection of the different journal and newspaper articles and columns on the construction including the local press. Second, it contains dozens of A-wire and B-wire news of the Associated Press related to the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dams. Third, it included the text of the Hungarian airings of the Radio Free Europe on the construction works. It is evident based on the radio-broadcastings that László (Levente) Kasza the Zoltán Zsille directly received all the newsletters of the Danube Circle as well as from other organizations.

2. Was there any connection between the Hainburg hydropower plant protests in Austria and the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dam protestations?

An issue almost never addressed in scholarship to my knowledge is the impact of the suspension of an Austrian hydropower plant project on the Danube at Hainburg in 1984 on the Hungarian events. At least two aspects are worth consideration. First, the involvement of the Austrian greens in the Hungarian environmental protests. The documents studied revealed the connection of a number of Austrian politicians with the Hungarian environmental movements. A prominent Austrian “green” of the time, Freda Meissner-Blau on a number of occasions referred to the Hungarian–Czechoslovak plan as “Stalinist project”. The example of the successful protest against the hydropower plant over the Danube in Austria became a frequent point of reference at the events organized by the Danube Circle.

Second, and no less importantly there was a very important political consequence of the suspension of the Hainburg dam, which is highly interesting from an environmental

history point of view, the financial involvement of Austria in the Hungarian part of the dam construction. Right around the time that the ground works of the Hainburg dam were suspended, the Austrian government decided to substitute the energy loss by investing in the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dam constructions. The Hungarian government faced financial difficulties which delayed the beginning of the works. The Austrian government through some of the Austrian companies started negotiations on giving financial aid in completing the Hungarian part of the project. The Austrian-Hungarian treaty was finally signed in May 1986. In the agreement, in return for the Austrian financial aid starting, with the completion of the works of the Hungarian dams Austria would have received the power produced by the two hydropower plants for 25 years. In 1986 the plans were expected to have been completed by 1990 thus until 2015 the energy produced at Gabčíkovo and Nagymaros would have served the power supply of Austria not Hungary. The Hainburg and the Hungarian-Czechoslovak dam constructions were seldom compared or even considered as being interrelated but the few points I hope well demonstrates it.

3. In light of the reasoning of the Danube Circle and the political decision makers of the time how much the environmental concerns were rather means to achieve political goals than to suspend this very project?

The Records of the Radio Free Europe is a very valuable collection to the study of the environmental movements of the 1980s and the role they played in the change of regime as well as in studying the environmental policies of the period. The different interviews collected by the Radio Free Europe can contribute to the frequently recurring problem, how much the environmental concern was an excuse to criticize the state-socialism. This issue was very much in the focus of state press as well when criticism around the dams occurred. To argue for one or another aspect the study of the members and the activities of the Danube Circle is essential. Despite the lack of the own documents of the Danube Circle for the pre-1990 period the members of the association was easy to reconstruct. Despite that many of the members were indeed coming from biologist, environmentalists, engineers, non-specialists as well as people at the time actively involved in the new political movements were also amongst the founders of the Circle.

The studied material demonstrated that the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dam construction is well worth to be studied from an environmental history point of view. In the case the interests of the different actors is well defined even in the press of the period. The above mentioned

Hainburg case and its impact on the finances of the Hungarian dams makes the case even more interesting with representing a classic “not in my background” case.

Apart from research I aim to use the results of my research at the Open Society Archives in teaching. Since my appointment at the Eötvös Loránd University as assistant professor I have started to gather teaching material for a course on the environmental history of the 19th-20th centuries. The sources I photographed in the archives, partly those I made available at the Parallel Archive initiative will provide a basis for the discussion of the problem of dams in historical perspective at this course.

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