

The degrees of openness in Hungary during socialism in the activities of the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research

About my research

My doctoral project is the activity of the Mass Communication Research Centre. The documents of the institution's history are kept in the National Archives of Hungary, and I started to research in a collection, which was donated to the Open Society Archives. In terms of topics, this is a very varied material. First I started to narrow down the scope of my research and at the end of the process I chose the young people. The main question of my research was, which reports were closed or open until the regime change?

About the activity of the Centre

The Mass Communication Research Centre, the predecessor of the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research was founded by the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party in 1969. It may seem that public opinion researches in socialist systems were biased, unreliable and sometimes largely manipulated, but this was not true in the case of the Centre. It became the scientific basis of public opinion researches which was a curiosity in Hungary. It was under the control of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party Central Committee Agitprop Department but had a professional independence. Thanks to the head of the Centre, Tamás Szecskő, the researchers used Western European methods, travelled abroad to attend professional conferences, and wrote publications in international journals. But there were some topics which were taboos at that time, such as the Soviet troops in Hungary, the one-party system, person of János Kádár and antisemitism. The name of the Centre changed to Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research in 1988. After the regime change, mainly for political reasons, Prime Minister, József Antall closed it down in 1991, but Domokos Kosáry, the Head of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences established a research group to save the Centre's work. Eventually this group ceased to exist in 2010.

About the research documents

The Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party Central Committee Agitprop Department ordered the public opinion surveys, nevertheless the researchers sometimes initiated their own research. Their findings were published in the Centre's series. They put great emphasis on translating and publishing the most important international literature.

The Institute's collection at OSA consists of three parts: The Research, Publications and Research reports and Executive Files and Administration. The researchers never had to falsify their findings and they had to work within the frames of restricted publicity. These publications were never publicly or commercially available and could only be accessed in the Centre's library.

In the Publications and Research Reports subfounds there are three types of publications: confidential reports, and publications for internal (between confidential and open) and professional use. The confidential reports were printed in a limited number of copies – usually 13 and in exceptional case 20-30 copies - and the Agitprop Department decided upon the list of recipients. In the 1970s, not even the Institute's employees could know the contents of confidential reports. The researchers were allowed to conduct surveys not only about the most important questions but also about the most sensitive ones. The reports were color-coded documents, blue, pink and green. (Green documents are not kept in the OSA.) The blue reports were printed in the fewest copies because these were the most confidential reports. Blue studies and pink reports were treated a little bit loosely. In addition to confidential and open documents, documents for internal use can be found in the collection, and access to these were restricted to the staff of the Centre. In the early 1980s, they started to produce rapid reports which usually contain a brief, few page description of the findings, without explanation. The open publications were published in the Centre's quarterly journal *Rádió és Televízió Szemle* (Radio and Television Review) from 1969 to 1979, changed to *Jel-Kép* (Symbol) in 1980. But these publications were not available to all, only for the professional use, were not sold at newsstand until 1988/89.

Changes in research topics can be well observed in the confidential reports. In the first years, a lot of mass media researches were carried out but later the public opinion research dominated, people were asked about current issues, such as living standards, education, economic issues, Party congresses, and foreign policy events. The topics changed a little after the mid-1980s and current political questions came to the forefront for example the Chernobyl catastrophe, Hungarian community beyond the Hungarian borders, poverty and unemployment and the Soviet Union. A major turning point was in 1988, when research topics changed due to political and economic changes, and the role of the public opinion became more and more important for the Party. From that year the Institute carried out rapid public opinion surveys and processed the samples more quickly. The most sensitive topics were analyzed, such as political pluralism, press law, freedom of assembly, the tax system, the Communist Youth Organization and alternative youth organization.

From 1989 research was conducted on the president, the constitution, the parties, the 1956 revolution and reburial of Imre Nagy, popularity of the politicians, publicity, the democratic process, withdrawal of the Soviet troops, the Gypsies and the Jews, energy policy, agricultural demonstration, strike, emigration, trade-unions, Bős-Nagymaros Dam.

Research about the youth

I chose this group because the opinion of the youth was always in the focus of the Party's attention since it wanted to know what they really thought. It was a unique social group because it was only a temporary condition, to belong to the group aged between 14 and 29 years. In general, young people did not have solid knowledge or strong opinions on various topics, and these kept changing over the years. In the OSA's collection there are many survey documents, background materials and confidential reports about the youth. The situation of the young was examined at the end of the 80s, when an independent survey¹ was conducted. Here are some of the topics that were studied over the years: the impact of the Youth Act in 1971, youth clubs, general feeling, population policy, what it meant for them to be Hungarian, the 1956 revolution. It is also interesting to analyze open publications because there are many publications on mass communication research about popularity of youth programs or youth information habits. But until the regime change there were only a few articles about the relationship between politics and youth.

Public opinion about the Communist Youth Organization

A number of public opinion surveys were made about young people by the Youth Research Group of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth Organization (KISZ). Like the Centre, this Organization had its own publishing company, which published the research papers such as informing about travel, the style and interest of young people and a repertory of their publications. The Centre often researched young people, especially the relationship between youth and the KISZ. The reason was that not only the Party but also the KISZ needed information about the opinion of young people. And the government wanted to know what they thought about the KISZ?

There are two different ways to present the research of the youth and the KISZ. The first is looking at the views of adults about the KISZ. There are three different documents. The survey was made in 1975, we find the questionnaire, a confidential report and a publication in the collection². If we compare the two documents we find some differences between them.

¹ The research is Youth 1988, the related documents: HU OSA 420/1/1/38, 420/2/2/4, 420/2/2/5, 420/2/1/41.

² HU OSA 420/1/1/4, 420/2/2/10, HU OSA 420/2/1/8.

In the introduction of the publication, the authors wrote that the research was not large-scale so we can not draw general conclusions. The main goal of the KISZ was to improve its own internal activity. They were confident that they had a valuable program which was interesting for young people. Most of the minor details in the report are missing, or words with negative meaning (closure, incompetence) were generally omitted. However, there is no factual change compared to the confidential report.

The other way of presenting the topic is the change of young people's opinion about the KISZ between 1972 and 1988. From 1972, we find a confidential report and there are a questionnaire with coding instructions, two confidential reports and a study³ from 1988. In 1972, there was no specific youth research, but two other studies⁷ - Education of Marxist subjects and Knowledge of the Youth Act -, data were used. The respondents were university or college students, 14,18 and 22 years old students, with a total of over 1,200 people. The researchers were interested in the opinions, attitudes and activities of the KISZ. But there was no broad and general satisfaction with the organization's activities. More than 50% of the respondents were proud of being a member of this Organization. The Institute organized a questionnaire survey among 300 young people (aged between 16-30) in Budapest in 1988. They asked questions about the KISZ and other alternative youth organizations and about the military service and the religiousness too. But the last two were very sensitive topics the findings were published only in confidential reports. At that time only 26% of the interviewed people were members of the KISZ and of them only 25% thought it important to be member KISZ. Those who never joined the Organization said that it was boring and unnecessary. In the last months of 1988 several alternative groups were formed and started to be active in the country. The majority of the young wanted to have a pluralistic youth movement, but the alternatives were not well known at that time.

Conclusion

In terms of accessibility, it can be clearly seen that the research materials were meant for different levels. Some researches were so confidential that only a closed group could know the content, but some parts reached a narrower public. At the end of the 1980s short summaries of research findings were published in newspapers⁴. The staff of the institute worked within the frames of restricted openness, but this framework became looser in 1988 and altogether disappeared in 1989.

³ HU OSA 420/1/1/38, 420/2/2/4, 420/2/2/12, 420/2/1/41.

⁴ HU OSA 420/2/2/5 – Public opinion about the 1956 revolution was published in a newspaper, *168 óra* in 1989.

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Opportunities in the topic

There are still many opportunities, as a similar analyses can be prepared from other material of the institute. Furthermore, the role of school television - an educational tool - in youth life could be research topic. In order to get a full picture of the Center's activity, it would be important to study the documents of the institution's history. These will reveal what research the party ordered and what additional instructions the researchers were given. These materials are in digital form at OSA, but have not been processed yet. If you look into the archives, there are other documents related to youth. Among others, Maria Heller Research Documentation contains the material of many intellectual debates about youth. It can also be complemented by research on Radio Free Europe's Hungarian unit, which collected information on youth.

Finally I would like to say thank you to the staff of the OSA for helping me, especially Iván Székely, Judit Hegedűs and Katalin Gáboros. Thank to the Visegrad Scholarship this research period has contributed to my doctoral project.

Appendix (consulted files)

HU OSA 420 – Collection on the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research

HU OSA 420–1 - Research

HU OSA 420–1–1 - Public Opinion and Media Research

HU OSA 420–1–1 – Archival boxes # 4

HU OSA 420–1–1 – Archival boxes # 33

HU OSA 420–1–1 – Archival boxes # 38

HU OSA 420–2 – Publication and Research Reports

HU OSA 420 –2–1 – Manuscripts, Background Materials

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 1

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 4

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 8

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 10

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 17

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 18

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 20

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 26

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 32

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 34

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 39

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 41

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 42

HU OSA 420–2–1 – Archival boxes # 48

HU OSA 420 –2–2 – Confidential Reports and Publications

HU OSA 420–2–2 – Archival boxes # 3

HU OSA 420–2–2 – Archival boxes # 4

HU OSA 420–2–2 – Archival boxes # 5

HU OSA 420–2–2 – Archival boxes # 10

HU OSA 420–2–2 – Archival boxes # 12

HU OSA 420–2–2 – Archival boxes # 17