

## **Final Report by Maren Francke – Visegrad Scholar at Open Society Archives Budapest, from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> January 2023**

### **Title**

“Historical Legacies of the Transition from Socialism to Democracy in Hungary”

### **Abstract of the Project**

When around 1989 the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed and the West proclaimed the victory of democracy, Hungary was considered one of the most hopeful countries: both Hungarian opposition activists and Western observers expected a swift “return to Europe”. This essentially implied the adoption of Western democratic norms and the rule of law. The dynamic youth party Fidesz fuelled this hope. However, today, the situation is fundamentally different: Previously fighting for reforms to overcome socialism and its legacies, Fidesz has been conducting anti-European and nationalist campaigns for more than a decade; Prime Minister Viktor Orbán advocates “illiberal democracy” and has consolidated his position of power in recent years. To shed light on this U-turn, late socialism and post-socialism should be studied from an integrated point of view, in order to understand not only socialist legacies, but also how the course of transition from socialism to democracy leaves its very own marks. This is the general undertaking of my PhD, in which I am focusing on the origin of the Fidesz party at a self-governing university college. I am particularly interested in the contrast between the liberal, grassroots democratic institution and the shift of some of its graduates to the political right.

Taking Fidesz as a case study for my research at OSA, I decided to deal with the party’s narrative according to which it was one of the driving forces and most decisive agents of regime change. Surely, it is to be acknowledged that in the late 1980s Fidesz played a significant role among liberal forces. However, given that its character as a driver of systemic change became an essential component of Fidesz’s self-representation, this narrative should be critically examined: What sort of changes and actions were really within its scope? And how did Fidesz organize its understanding of liberalism, which was in constant tension with the rather non-ideological pragmatism that Fidesz also displayed?

### **Results based on the OSA Fonds**

## ***Public sphere as a Fidesz strategy***

During its formation and expansion, Fidesz applied the things they learned in the college: precise knowledge of the Hungarian legal situation, grassroots democracy, a (niche) public sphere. In the process, they realised early on that the triad of legality, growing membership and publicness could offer security when facing the all-powerful (crumbling, but nevertheless potentially dangerous) state. The relationship with the public was particularly interesting to me: many Fidesz members had already experienced the niche public sphere within the college, where they engaged in free debate. I was interested in how Fidesz tried to contribute to creating this kind of public sphere with critical debates and free speech in the late 1980s amid political change, as well as how their tactics and strategies might have changed after 1990. Based on the OSA materials in collections 205 Records of the Open Media Research Institute and 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute, I was able to determine how Fidesz tried to influence what was published about them, and how this was in line with their strategy of outreach to the public, membership and pursuit of being legalised or rather accepted as such by the state: They directly appealed to the Hungarian Press Agency, sued for misrepresentation, organised their own press conferences, journals and press services, and kept in touch with foreign media. Therefore, the newspaper articles collected in collections 205 and 300 show how the rise of Fidesz is linked to the widening public sphere and growing freedom of the press during the regime change. The collections allow a detailed and precise reconstruction of how Fidesz acted in the public sphere. The background and situation reports have also proved helpful. They assess the events from a contemporary perspective, which made my analysis much easier, as they offered a certain amount of guidance considering my external perspective.<sup>1</sup>

While during my work at the OSA I focused mainly on developments within Fidesz, I was also able to gather information on two other aspects that I would like to cover in my dissertation: continuity of networks and their construction over the 1990 divide, and the change in ownership structures and its negotiation in the public sphere.

## ***Networks***

I have not yet progressed to evaluation of the sources collected, but the following are my reflections that I would like to test and develop with the OSA materials. As networks are one of the core interests of my PhD, I was naturally interested in how well-connected the college

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<sup>1</sup> Materials looked at: all files on the Fidesz party between 1990 and 1994 from the subfonds HU OSA 205-4-140 Hungarian Subject files; all files on the Fidesz party between 1988 and 1989 from the subfonds HU OSA 300-40-1 RFE/RL Research Institute.

students were not only to the opposition movements and but also to reform movements form within the state party in the 1980s. In this regard, the reform circles in the MSZMP proved most interesting for me, even though they themselves might not have been the most significant and successful undertaking of the regime change. To address this aspect concerning networks, I started out by working with András Bozóki's interview collection (HU OSA 445 András Bozóki Collection). As part of his research into the regime change and its key figures, he also interviewed some very important members of the college movement.<sup>2</sup>

In order to also look at the other side of the regime change, i.e. the reformist currents and their networks within the party, I also looked at the materials on the reform circles in the MSZMP. Unfortunately, I have not got very far with the evaluation yet, but what I find particularly significant about this movement is that there were indeed platforms in the state party who wanted reforms and changes, but Fidesz strictly rejected any cooperation. Fidesz had just emerged from the College around that time and thus I consider party and college still being closely interconnected, probably also in their views and attitudes towards the MSZMP. While browsing, I came across some documents that suggest that the reform circles have also tried to establish relations to Fidesz. Although this aspect will only be a small part of my dissertation, I decided to delve a little deeper into the subject of the reform circles to examine whether there might have been an exchange of ideas of any kind between the college and the reform circles.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Ownership relations***

After 1990, the consensus on the rights of use of some public buildings was shaken by the change in the ownership system. Bibó College was also affected by such a conflict when a religious order of the Catholic Church claimed restitution of the building in which the college had been based since 1983. In this regard, I have already conducted research into OSA materials on previous occasions. However, I used my time as a scholarship holder to take a closer look at the following materials to better situate this conflict in the early post-socialist period and the public negotiations of the changed property order and its actors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews I have started to look into and currently still evaluate: János Áder, András Bozóki, Iván Csaba, Gábor Demszky, Tamás Deutsch, Bertalan Diczházi, Zsuzsanna Farkas, Attila Fölsz, István Hegedűs, György Kakuk, András Körösenyi, Lajos Kósa, Ferenc Kószeg, László Kövér, István Kukorelli, Péter Molnár, Andrea Pelle, Béla Rabi, Zoltán Rockenbauer, Tamás Tirts, István Tömpe, István György Tóth, Klára Ungár, László Urbán, András Vágvölgyi.

<sup>3</sup> Materials looked at: HU OSA 400-1-1 The Hungarian Reform Movement; HU OSA 400-1-3 Records of the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party; HU OSA 400-2-1 The Budapest Reform Circles in General; HU OSA 400-2-2 Documents of the Organizational Committee of the Budapest Reform Circles; HU OSA 400-3-2 Personal Papers, Manuscripts by Zoltán Novák. In addition: all files on Hazafias Népfront in 1989 and 1990 in the subfonds HU OSA-300-40-1.

<sup>4</sup> Materials looked at: all files on "pártvagyon" in the subfonds HU OSA 205-4-140; files on church property that was missing from previous research at OSA, i.e. situation reports on the relationship between church and state from the subfonds HU OSA 300-40-1; files on corruption between 1987 and 1994 in the subfonds HU OSA 300-40-1.