

Inside contemporary Hungary: A traveller's first-hand account

Istvan Gyongyosy is a Hungarian student who recently spent several months travelling in East Europe. This is his personal account of life and dissent in Hungary.

One of the more surprising phenomena of Eastern Europe is that despite the pervasive Soviet presence in the region since the Second World War, these countries have managed to retain, to a striking degree, their individual characters. What this reveals is that in spite of stringent external political pressures, in the long run it is the national traditions and histories—and their continued development—which tend to predominate over the outside factor.

Travelling through Eastern Europe one cannot fail to notice sharp differences in everything from living conditions and the nature of social and cultural activity, to the basic moral attitudes and general outlook of people residing within the greater 'socialist camp'. Equally striking is the fact that when compared to the well-known dissident movements in the U.S.S.R., Poland, Czechoslovakia and even Romania and the German Democratic Republic, the situation of the dissident movement in present-day Hungary—once, the most explosive, destructive and far-reaching 'dissident' movement in postwar Europe, barely twenty-five years ago—is both less visible and less widely known than that of neighbouring countries.

I should note that although I recently had the opportunity to spend several months in Hungary, by no means did I obtain a complete overview of the situation of oppositionists there. Indeed, my experiences were more or less of a fragmentary nature, gained through an active social life among students and intellectuals in Budapest. Therefore, I can ultimately only speak from a personal point of view, but I do think that in many ways my experiences have general validity. When I first arrived in Budapest I asked one of my aunts about the 'dissident' movement in Hungary, to which she replied: "Dissidents in Hungary? Away from Hungary, perhaps,

but not in it. After all, a 'dissident' is a person who emigrates to the West illegally." Thus, one of the first things I learned about the oppositionist current in my ancestral homeland was that the term 'dissident' was used there to describe people who had left the country for voluntary exile in the West. Furthermore, although this action indicated a certain opposition to the system, it did not immediately point to involvement in the larger 'dissident' movement within Hungary. This, of course, is very different from the way the term 'dissident' is applied in other Soviet bloc countries, where it is used to identify individuals who stay and actively oppose the regime. It should be noted that the rate of emigration from Hungary is much higher than it is in other sister states for the simple reason that it is relatively easier to leave the country. One merely requests the Western money allowance everyone is entitled to every three years, and more often than not, it is issued to applicants, at times even entire families.

The Hungarian term for 'dissident', in the usual sense of the word is "ellenzéki" or "opposition". It has very broad connotations and many applications. In one sense or another, some 95 per cent of the Hungarian population could be called "ellenzéki" because of the widespread fundamental opposition to the regime, which on occasion becomes focused (vehemently, at times) on specific issues. Membership in the Warsaw Pact is one issue exemplifying the latter brand of "ellenzéki", since most Hungarians would prefer to retain a neutral status in the political arena as do such governments as Austria and Finland. In general it is safe to say, however, that very few Hungarians are "ellenzéki" beyond the occasional voicing of criticisms, and that those who are, by no means form a cohesive group.

The active Hungarian dissident movement (i.e., those who write *ellenzéki* material and participate in *ellenzéki* activities) is characterized by several qualities. It is small, fragmented, relatively unorganized and unknown, and receives very little public support. Moreover it is relatively unpersecuted. On the whole,

the movement remains without a structure, although when the need arises it can get organized with amazing speed. An example of this quick response to events was the action in protest of the sentencing of five Czechs a year ago. Within days of the sentencing, three petitions were drawn up and signed by many of the leading intellectuals; one was sent to Janos Kadar, and one to the Hungarian Prime Minister, asking them to intercede on behalf of the five. A copy was also sent

are probably the most unpersecuted dissidents in Eastern Europe. Most of them (the *ellenzéki*) are employed. Many of them, like Gyorgy Szabo and Laszlo Rajk Jr., are even well-employed. If they should lose their jobs, as did the organizers of the three petitions on behalf of the Czechs, they can engage in "free occupations", i.e., translating, writing freelance articles, and doing other odd jobs—all within the boundaries of the law. Few people get totally blacklisted. If



to Czech Premier Gustav Husak in protest of the judgement. The petitions were drawn up and collected so quickly that I know of one filmmaker who felt personally affronted that the petitions had been sent off by the time he learned of their existence.

In addition to such ad hoc actions, there are some regularly-organized activities as well. Starting in early 1979, a series of "Monday night lectures" were held at various private apartments in Budapest. The topics of discussion—as well as the point of view from which they were approached—were such that could not be held in the usual public places—the young Artists' Club or the University Clubs. The series consisted of lectures by historians, writers and others on subjects ranging from Soviet political life in the 1930's, to Transylvanian-Magyar culture since 1920 and the situation of the Gypsy and Jewish minorities in Hungary. The lectures were well-attended by students, university professors and the ever present secret police informers. But nobody seemed to mind the fact that attendance was being monitored. Proceedings were relaxed and more or less unharassed, although job-related threats were levelled against at least one of the speakers in April of 1980. He subsequently cancelled out, only to be replaced by another qualified speaker. There is also a sporadic *samizdat* newsletter whose title translates roughly as "Reject File". Its self-professed aim is to publish material, mainly essays, that is not officially acceptable for publication. Most of this material also appears in the *Magyar Fuzetek*, (Hungarian Booklets) published in Paris and distributed quite widely through Hungary's intellectual circles. Despite all these activities there are no focal organizations similar to the human rights groups or free trade unions that can be found in other countries. Rather, the "movement" is made up of a wide range of intellectuals and students who group and regroup as the occasion and circumstances dictate.

The Kadar regime, for its part, is not about to popularize the *ellenzéki* by making martyrs of them, and thus they

someone gets to be too troublesome, at worst, he might be asked to leave the country. George Konrad is one *ellenzéki* who refused to do so, and as of last year he was still living peacefully in his home near Budapest.

Essentially, the police handle the *ellenzéki* with velvet gloves. One friend who happened to acquire an apartment in a building situated next door to a government minister's villa, claimed he was not sure whether his apartment had been searched or not, although he seemed to feel that *samizdat* papers left on his desk were occasionally slightly rearranged upon his return from an outing. Cases of mental abuse of oppositionists in psychiatric institutions are practically unheard of in Hungary, as is the use of torture or physical violence.

The *ellenzéki* have failed on their part, to take advantage of the genuine popular revolts that have on occasion arisen within Hungary. Although the public response to the enormous price rises in August of 1979 was generally muted, it did include a little-known act of sabotage—a major explosion in a typewriter factory—as well as bomb scares in downtown Budapest offices. The latter caused the evacuation of hundreds of workers. Of course, all of these events remained unreported in the official press, as did another incident involving a piece of bread spread with lard being placed in the hand of a monument to Lenin (at the giant industrial complex at Chepel) with the note "this is what you have given us" hung around it.

The resulting neglect and cynicism on the part of the general population and of the government, leads to a strange cynicism among the *ellenzéki* themselves. They see little hope for change in their own country other than the population sinking even deeper into the materialistic mire of consumerism. The *ellenzéki* seem to continue more out of a sense of necessity than anything else, believing that even if there is little hope for concrete change, someone has to represent loftier ideals and rally for their maintenance.

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