

## Report on work at OSA

Suzanne Körösi

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### 1.

The topic of my research concerns human rights movement at the beginning of the 1970's in Hungary, in particular the 1973 petition to defend the right to abortion signed by more than 1550 people.

The purpose of this petition was to prevent the government from changing the decree of 1956 that ensured the right to abortion. As for the historical context, this decree was issued in June 1956, a few months before the revolution broke out in October. It represented the end of the 1953 decree that had introduced a total ban on abortion. This latter became an emblematic regulation and one of the most hated measures of the Stalinist government of Hungary. Therefore the 1956 liberalization of abortion became a symbol of a new era; it was part of the revolutionary movement that preceded the revolution itself.

The idea came to a group of people inspired partly by feminism partly by a general opposition to the Kàdàr-regime in the spring of 1973, when information leaked out that the government prepared a new regulation on abortion. Two generations were particularly concerned: the one of those who was 20-30 years old in the 50s and also the one of their children. They both feared a dramatic change to come.

We can observe a mix of contradictory references of the 50s and the 70s that co-existed in the mind of the signatories of the petition. In the summer of 1973 on the one hand we could, they could imagine a remake of the 1953 total ban, on the other hand we, they became engaged in a political action that was totally inconceivable during the first half of the 50s.

This contradiction can explain the unexpected success of this petition action.

In 1973, one should recall, personal computers and Internet did not exist, but when you study the signature sheets in file n° 288.f. 36/1973/34. ö.e. at MNL (National Archives), you understand that during the 3-month period of collection of signatures, a real network and forum came to life and this can be considered another possible key of the succes.

In fact you can see a great number of sheets copied at home or at the workplace on a typewriter or by hand by the signers who, by their own decision, became signature collectors. Also, several signatories seized the occasion to give their own point of view on the issue of abortion or give their own suggestions to solve the demographic problem i.e. the low birth rate of Hungary. So, some 20 years before the invention of compjuters and Internet for massive use, a real forum

and a real decentralized collective action came to life similar to what seems to be quite easy to achieve on Avaaz, Facebook, Twitter etc.

In the beginning of my work my intention was to fully understand the following things.

First, how this success became possible, what we - all those, who were the authors of the text of the petition, the signatories and the collectors of signatures - projected in the text and this unprecedented type of action; what were our motivations and vision of the society.

Secondly, what was the place of this early episode in the history of democratic opposition to the Kàdàr-regime and in the post-1989 period when several signatories of this petition and collectors of signatures accessed to political positions by becoming party leaders, MPs or ministers.

Thirdly, what were the premises of the new, 1973 population policy that in fact included the restriction of the right to abortion and the way it was put in place through the interaction between the regulators (the MSZMP) and the media?

Finally, comparing the text of the petition with the debate within the Central Committee of MSZMP and in the media, how radical was this petition?

## 2.

Regarding questions n° 1 and 2, I had planned to carry out interviews with the actors of the petition what I actually did. I could make long interviews with 16 persons, women and men involved in the conception of the text, the collection of signatures and those who just signed the petition.

As for questions n° 3 the archives of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Research Institute OSA holdings proved to be very useful.

Concerning question n° 4, I studied the files of MSZMP KB at the National Archives (MNL).

Therefore I shared my research time among OSA, the MNL and the interviewees' home. The interviews were recorded on video so making a documentary film later using these interviews is a possibility.

As for my work at OSA, on the day of my arrival I met my advisor, Andràs Mink and we discussed about my topic. He helped me discover the architecture of OSAarchivum.org. My way to find the relevant documents was

[Archival Catalog](#) → [Communism & Cold war](#) → [Records of Radio Free Europe](#) →

[Hungarian Unit](#) → [Subject files, Press Survey](#) → [1606 containers](#) →

Abortusz/Abortion (from 1956 to 1990 in 6 containers)

In these Abortion containers I could discover a collection of Hungarian daily, weekly and monthly newspaper articles stocked and classified under this title. I was interested in other containers too such as Family and Opposition.

I am really impressed by the richness of this collection done by the RFE/RL press survey and I must admit, that I could explore the only Abortion collection of the holding during this Visegrad research period leaving the study of Family and Opposition containers for a later period of research.

To write the story, the history of the 1973 petition, I had also planned to go through other sections of OSA, which I hope will be possible later too. These were:

- a. The personal papers of a range of political, cultural, and counter-cultural figures who were involved in the petition action either as organizers or as signatories or of those concerned by the petition in any other way;
- b. The special collections on the Kádár era, and documentation of former state security agencies' surveillance practices and
- c. The collection of the Hungarian Propaganda Filmstrips produced by Magyar Diafilmgyártó Vállalat, as it covers the periods of time we are interested in and so would shed light on how population policy in the 1950s and 1970s was framed in propaganda.

Concerning the organization of the Archives, I was also impressed how quickly and simply I could obtain the material I needed compared to MNL.

This is of course due to the difference in quantity of the stock at National Archives but also both to their very complicated cataloging and the administrative procedure. (Actually it took me about three days to manage to identify the files and boxes that could be relevant for my research and then three other working days to receive the requested files and boxes.)

### 3.

As I mentioned above, my initial research question concerned primarily the actors' motivations. However while reading the RFE/RL Abortion newspaper article collection ranging from the late 50s through the early 70s I realized that what we thought in 1973 on the relationship between the MSZMP and the press was in fact considerably more complicated.

We thought that the debate in the newspapers on the necessity of a population policy that started in 1972, induced by the MSZMP, let's say, came out of the blue

and it served just to prepare public opinion for the policy that has already been decided.

While reading the RFE/RL article collection ranging from the late 50s through the early 70s I understood that this debate was nothing new or recent. Actually from 1957, just a year after the liberalization of the right to abortion through 1973, the debate was continuous and the vocabulary of the opponents was more or less the same. From my university studies at ELTE, the debate of the 20's and 30's on the "*egyke*", the tradition of having one only child in peasant families was familiar to me but I became conscious of this uninterrupted debate during socialism only by reading the RFE/RL article collection in the Abortion containers. Therefore a new question occurred fairly quickly in my research, which could be formulated like this:

What was the *actual* relationship between the MSZMP and the press in the periods that concern my research?

I am very grateful to my OSA advisor, Andràs Mink for his suggestion to read his master's thesis written in 1989 on population policy between 1950 and 1956. It made me understand that this relationship in the 50s was definitely very different from the period 1962-63 and later from that of 1972-73. The demographic situation of Hungary, the fairly low birth rate in the 50s was more or less the same as in the 70s. But, as Andràs Mink showed in his master's thesis, in the 50s the Ràkosi government clearly considered the low birth rate a problem of legitimacy of socialism. Therefore, to prove the legitimacy of socialism it decided to increase the birth rate by any means involving a total ban of abortion and the disapproval of contraception as well as a very aggressive national press campaign and widely publicized trials against women who asked for and doctors who carried out illegal abortions.

What we can learn from RFE/RL collection is that some 20 years later, Kàdàr's population policy proved to be much softer, I would say much shyer, and definitely much less aggressive. The legitimization problem vanished in its form of the 1950's although it occurred through a major preoccupation of the Kàdàr-regime, which was to avoid by any means the return of another 1956. It resulted in an effort to make a.) the preparation documents "top secret", "top confidential" or "confidential" and b.) even in these top secret documents it was imposed (or self-imposed ?) not to mention the restriction of the right to abortion and instead the usage of expressions such as the "the improvement of mothers' and children's health".<sup>1</sup> In 1972 MSZMP proposed some incentive social and economic measures as it had done already in the 60s recognizing that they had been inefficient as they had resulted in only a one or two-year increase of the birth rate before dropping back and that they had to be reinforced.

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<sup>1</sup> 288.f. 36/1973/34. ö.e. 235./ Népesedési helyzet alakulàsa A PB. 1973 II. 13. hat.vh.jelentés (190 lap)ad 0065/1973 Eü M

From the MNL MSZMP material we learn that however MSZMP had to face a double enemy that brings us back to the issue of the Kàdàr regime's legitimization. One was the *population*, who refused to grow, which led to the failure of the 1967 population policy. Therefore this population policy, which didn't include a modification of the 1956 liberalization of abortion, didn't change anything on the long term. The other enemy was the *discourse* of the anti-abortion lobby that came up openly with pre-war nationalist arguments warning the nation with extinction and asking explicitly for a restriction of the right to abortion and a professionalization of motherhood (cf Fekete Gyula and others in *Élet és irodalom*).

Probably under the pressure of this latter the Central Committee decided at the end of 1972 to reinforce the incentive measures in housing, in maternal and child raising aid but also to break a taboo, restrict the right of abortion. In May 1973 the Agit. Prop. Committee, monitored directly by the Central Committee, made this double fight explicit in a document that defined the campaign related to the new population policy to be implemented in October the same year.<sup>2</sup>

As one can see, the study of the Abortion containers at OSA and the MNL MSZMP KB documents proved to be complementary; confronting them in a systematic way is going to be a very exciting work I would like to accomplish.

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<sup>2</sup> MNL 288.7.41/203