

„Search for Public Opinion under Communism”

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The subject of my research project is an undiscovered goldmine of the Hungarian history, namely the legacy of Research Center for Mass Communication (CMC, later Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research). This unique treasury of historical records provides us an extremely interesting pool for understanding much deeper the Hungarian society before the transition and the later consequences of its peculiarities. The sources I have started to scrutinize possesses two equally precious and interesting parts: the output and results of the work of CMC and the history of the institution. I'm convinced that these two aspects of the functioning of CMC have to be investigated on a parallel way.

The enormous amount of information and survey data produced and accumulated by CMC provides a peculiar insight into the social developments of the last two decades of the communist dictatorship in Hungary and enables a deeper knowledge about the structure and stratification of the Hungarian society before the transition. Yet, this source material was almost completely unutilised until now.

The evaluation and interpretation of the results of the researches conducted in the Institute would not be complete and adequate without telling the history of the institution what have produced them.

CMC was a „schizophrenic institute” because on the one hand it was extremely close to the dictatorial power while at the same time it was similarly close to dissent, the opposition circles. The history of such „schizophrenic institution” enables us to delineate a picture of the schizophrenic existence of intellectuals with critical mind during the Kádár-era.

In my application to the Visegrad Fund I indicated that the complete processing of the records on CMC and the writing its history might take years. A two months grant helped to lay down the fundamentals of my larger research project and take an assessment of the dimensions, interconnections and complexities of these historical records. It also allows me to conduct oral history interviews with those former colleagues who have reliable information and may offer a deeper insight into the history of this unique institution.

What is done:

- I had a rough look over the materials (paper-base and digitalised documents) on CMC accessible in Blinken OSA. I've got a general idea about the dimensions, character, proportions and incompleteness of this collection. It's even larger and richer than I expected.

- I thoroughly went through the documentation of some research projects conducted by CMC, the correspondence of the leadership and the strategic documents of institution (regarding the history of its foundation, longterm plans, basic principles, fundamental problems, evaluations, self-evaluations, reorganisations and liquidation).

- I launched the oral history collection, I made four exhaustive interviews (with Mária Vásárhelyi, Endre Hann, Tamás Terestyéni and András Szekfű) and worked out an interview sketch for the following interviews. /The list of documents I used, see below in Appendix./

Further plans:

The Visegrad grant could cover the preparatory phase of a larger research project for discovering and analysing profoundly the history and achievements of CMC. This project consists of

- systematical scrutiny of the records guarded by Blinken OSA;
- opening up the missing materials namely the documents of party-bodies concerning CMC, state security records on CMC (in Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, ÁBTL), yet unexplored records in private hands of former researchers;
- making oral history interviews with former researchers, leaders and controllers of CMC.

The end-product of the project would be an ample monography on CMC to be published in 2019, for the 50th anniversary of CMC.

A closer look at the history of the Institute

I have listed the main characteristics of CMC in my research proposal. There is no reason to repeat it, but after reading a lot of strategic documents, top management correspondence and corporate records of CMC I could shape a more nuanced picture about the often controversial manifestations of these characteristics.

The history of CMC can be divided to three periods.

Build-up: Sociology in Hungary was tolerated from the beginning of the 1960s and institutionalised at the end of that decade. The Institute of Sociology of Hungarian Academy of Sciences was founded in 1968, the Institute for Social Sciences at the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party and CMC were founded in 1969. The first departments of sociology (at ELTE and MKKE) were set up some years later.

The manifold starting staff of CMC consisted of very ambitious, young intellectuals with a large variety of diplomas. The first years were dedicated for a very intensive self-educational, self-building process. A huge amount of sociological literature, basic readings and methodological manuals were translated, adopted and published in the series of CMC. The quickly growing library of CMC became the number one library of social sciences in Hungary.

Within a few years CMC became an undoubtedly competent, internationally respected institute, operating at the edge of contemporary sociology and holding strong professional relations with leading research centers all over the world.

Decade of stability: From the middle of the 1970s to the middle of 1980s CMC experienced a quiet period of steady operation. The turmoils of the first years ended, the researchers enjoyed an unparalleled level of independence in the socialist world, a relative abundance of financial resources and an agreeable, relatively loose work schedule. The charismatic leader of CMC, Tamás Szeckő (elected for general secretary of International Association for Mass communication Research) asserted with good reason at the end of this period that CMC was considered one of the best public opinion research centers in Europe.¹

Crisis of credibility: Just at the moment when CMC reached a higher level of institutional independence in the middle of the '1980s, it had to face its controversial, even schizophrenic position. CMC had a Janus-faced character from the beginning. It was especially close to the Party,

1 Új Tükör, 1984/38.

its confidential advisor. It received and fulfilled confidential tasks in service of a dictatorial power. At the same time it was a shelter of dissidents, a scene of barely hidden oppositional activities. The critically loyal leaders who had direct, everyday contact with the politicians and cadres of the Party formed one side of the „Janus-faces”, the less (or absolutely non) loyal researchers represented the other side of it. This duality became more and more awkward and unsustainable.

The general feeling in the institution continuously worsened, the inner conflicts sharpened and this process culminated in a rebell against the leadership, led by the new, independent trade union (TDDSZ) in 1988.

The end of the consolidation period of the Kádár-era ended the consolidated period of CMC. The hidden impossibility of the mission undertaken by CMC became revealed and formulated by the general director, Tamás Szecskő himself: „There is no public opinion without a public, therefore it cannot be researched.” „If the information about social problems - their existence and the various alternatives of their solutions – are not circulated freely in the society, the results of the polls are pseudo facts and their use is almost as dangerous as the neglect of public opinion.” „Public opinion research evolved in bourgeois societies that were based on parliamentary democracy and market economy and meet the requirements of modelling the public in such societies. In order to achieve the appropriate level of self-knowledge and self-understanding of the society the results of public opinion researches should be as widely distributed and known as the weather forecasts.”²

The Department of Public Opinion Research discussed the proposal of Tamás Szecskő about the future of CMC on 6 November, 1988. The fellows of the department consented that „we are facing a double lack of credibility. The representatives of the political power think that we want to cheat them with too bad findings because we are rebellious intellectuals. The people who are reading our publications think that we want to cheat them with too good findings because we are payed by the political power.”³

Still, this dramatic period was the most productive time in the history of CMC. The researches presented below were conducted in the 1980s.

Researches of the Past - messages to the Present

Hereby, I give some details of one-time researches in order to make it conceivable how the Past can send a message to the Present via these inquiries.

Evaluation of economic situation - desperation and empty horizon:

From the mid-1970s CMC regularly made polls on how the people evaluated the economic situation of the country and the perspectives of their own household. From the end of the 1970s the people seemed to be more and more pessimistic. The contrast of the trends in evaluating socialist and western countries was spectacular. From 1982 till 1986 the evaluation index (showing the proportion of problems and achievements) of socialist countries worsened from -5 to -55, while that of the western countries improved from -75 to -30.

In Fall, 1986 the pessimism and disappointment reached a dramatically high level. But the views about the causes of the economical problems were generally inadequate. Subjective and external problems were mentioned most often (the laziness and bad discipline of workers, the worldwide economic crises), and the inner structural characteristics the socialist order and „planned” economy were mentioned most rarely. While the economic situation in capitalist market economies with much larger income differences was evaluated better, 70-75% of the questioned people thought that the income differences in Hungary are too big and they should be smaller.

The society was absolutely unprepared for the necessary changes due to the misleading discussion

2 HU OSA 420 – 3 – 2 / 2

3 MNL 017– 2 – 8

of the problems in the public, in the press. That was revealed by the complexity of public opinion researches and content analyses.⁴

Change of system – unthinkable and undesirable

How likely is the occurrence of the listed events till 2000? The questioned persons had to sort out 42 events in the middle of the 1980s by the likelihood of their occurrence. The very last - the least likely - item in the list was the change of the system. Only 7% believed that its occurrence was very or quite likely in the following 15 years. 56% responded that it would be very wrong, 21% responded that it would be wrong enough. So, 77 citizens from 100 did not want the change of the system despite of the general desperation and pessimism over the future of the socialist Hungary and the socialist world in general.⁵

We can say that the horizon before the society was empty.

Who is Hungarian?

Guy Lázár conducted a longitudinal research focusing on the question: Who is Hungarian? The results:

	1973	1983	1985	1987
Nativ Hungarians living in western countries	24	24	34	50%
Hungarian speaking people in the neighbouring countries	45	46	50	63%
Minorities living in Hungary	73	73	76	77%

This table demonstrates that the dominant view was conform to the notion of state nationality in the Kádár-era. By this view everybody is Hungarian who belongs to the society of Hungary. Even the non-Hungarians. But nobody is Hungarian who does not live in Hungary. Not even the Hungarians. The prevailing understanding of the Hungarian nation excluded the Hungarian minorities and emigrants with all their values and problems, and this understanding became replaced by a mixed and vague one near and after the transition.⁶

What about '56? - to be neither conformist nor non-conformist

What was „'56”? One thousand five hundred 25-30 year old youngsters were questioned in 1981, 25 years after the „regrettable events”. Nobody elected the response that it was simply revolution. But 50% elected the response that it started as revolution. (This statement implies that the „regrettable events” later changed their character.) This response was conform to the official standpoint in the first weeks after crushing the revolution. But at the beginning of December 1956 the Party adopted the resolution of on the „four causes of the counterrevolution” that disqualified the initial view and replaced it with another one which prescribed that the counterrevolution was counterrevolution from the very first day.

This example shows that the problem of conformism is not simple. '56 was counterrevolution in the „first public”. It was revolution in the second public (in samizdat and privat discourse). We may presume that the relative majority of the youngsters liked this version at the first sight, because it gave them the opportunity for being neither conformist, nor non-conformist.⁷

4 HU OSA 420 – 2 – 1 / 33

5 Dobossy Imre – Nagy Lajos Géza: Társadalmi problémák a közvéleményben, 1986. HU OSA 420 – 2 – 1 / 33.

6 HU OSA 420 – 2 – 2 / 4.

7 HU OSA 420 – 2 – 2 / 1

.Dissidents– they are right, they are dangerous

It's worth mentioning another example for the controversial attitude to the official standpoint. There was a longitudinal research on dissident and oppositional activities conducted from 1984 to the fall of the party-state. In May 1988 56% of the representative sample consented that „the activities of oppositional groups endanger the order and tranquility of Hungary”. Practically the same majority (58%) also consented that „the dissents only express what everybody thinks for themselves.” So, the majority liked what the dissidents said and did not like what the dissidents did. What activities could be right if the activities conform to the right known by everybody would have not been right? There is only one possible answer: no proper activities can be conceived.⁸

The empty horizon before the society....

Appendix:

Source material:

1. HU OSA 420 Collection on the Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research (1969-1991, formerly Research Center for Mass Communication, 1969-1988)

It has been donated to OSA by Mária Vásárhelyi in 2011.

It contains 120 linear meters of hard copy materials, 24 Gbyte of electronic records, 149 Archival boxes, 18.63 linear meters.

HU OSA 420 – 1 Documents of researches. 67 Archival boxes, 8.38 linear meters

HU OSA 420 – 2 Publications and research reports. 77 Archival boxes, 9.63 linear meters.

Analyses, concise rapid reports, background materials, confidential papers, theoretical studies connected with researches and publications of publishing department of CMC: inner and open publications, series, reviews.

HU OSA 420 – 3 Executive Files and Administration, 5 Archival boxes, 0.63 linear meters.

Strategic and administrative documents: history, plans, meetings, directives, relations, organisation, structure, budget, HR-affairs etc., correspondence of the leadership.

2. Documents digitalised by fellows of OSA from the fond of Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research in National Archives of Hungary (original reference code: XXVI-A-37).