

Envirioning the Dam debate in the ECE from the perspective of the RFE/RL Research Institute
Final Project Report (May-June 2022)



I have submitted my application for the Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives back in 2020, when I was in the midst of the development of the research project called “Hydrosocialism,” in which I have developed the thesis that there was a specific state-socialist response to challenges associated with the transition to post-industrial / risk society in the sphere of water-management. I have based my argumentation on the extensive analysis of discursive changes in the perception of water and water management in Eastern European societies under the communist rule between 1960s and 1990s. Nonetheless, dominant part of my research in this direction was based on materials coming from Czechoslovak sources (discussions in official journals and publications by experts on the subject) and Intern/Transnational expert organization. Therefore, I have identified OSA collections as a promising resource providing me with an opportunity to expand my research especially in two mutually complementing directions. First, OSA collections held the promise of enabling me to delve into discussions beyond the national framework and include wider state-socialist Eastern European context. RFE/RL Research Institute developed background materials for analytical purposes on the basis of monitoring newspapers and broadcasting in the socialist countries and its collections consist mainly of clippings and analyses based on them covering to a certain extent also the development of

¹ Picture taken during the field trip to Nagymaros - the site of the Nagymaros section of the Gabčíkovo Nagymaros damming scheme on the Danube.

the debate on water resources. In a form of situation and background reports on individual nations and entire region. Second, RFE research institute materials, I believed, would provide me with an insight into the negotiating of the meaning of waters between various types of expertise and official and unofficial knowledge in Eastern Europe, since its focus was further limited by the political agenda of its donors, collaborators, and complex cold war dynamics.²

In order to organize my research at OSA, I have translated these two directions into two parallel research axis – because of the considerable range of materials related to water stored in OSA Archives I decided to narrow my research on situation in different ECE countries to the issue of large Dams and the gradual enviroing (i.e. their discursive reinterpretation from an environmental point of view) of their image in RFE collections between 1950s and 1990s across the monitored area – here, the collections related to the Danube cascade debate and especially the case of Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros, the undisputed pinnacle of the negotiations of the dam building in the ECE region in the late 20th century, were the main focus of my interest. Concerning the second topic, I have decided to focus on the Czechoslovak case, since I had already a considerable knowledge of the national debate. Negotiation of meaning and knowledge production on water between various types of expertise, authorities and perspectives as captured by RFE (acting as both an observer and actor in the process) became the basis for productive comparisons with its own reflection/re-interpretation in/by the RFE/RL analysts.

Enviroing the Dams

During my stay I have predominantly focused on collections of the RFE/RL RI related to “dams” in general - but most specifically in relation to discussions of environment and environmental costs related to dam building. My research focused mainly on the role on RFE in “enviroing” of the dam debate – and the role of RFE as “ecosonic”³ amplifier of domestic and international discussions and environmental critique of large dams.

Dams from the very beginning represented an important point of interest for the RFE. Following the contemporary image of large dams as industrial structures designed to boost mechanization and soviet style industrialisation of Eastern European economies, dams in RFE RI collections were often linked to the interrelated processes of „Sovietization and Exploatation“ (as heading of reports and code names suggest) and approached predominantly as “industrial constructions” all across the region. The RFE interest in dams and their interpretation undoubtedly reflected their position as „symbolic structures“ of state-socialism, as they were often labelled as „structures of communism.“ Crucially, as the interest in dams faded in socialist countries, it faded also in RFE reports which gave space to other, more pressing issues. This changed in early 1970s, when dams started to be discussed in terms of energy crisis stemming from the disproportion between industrial development and energy resources. Gradually, image of large dams in RFE materials underwent a major shift. Instead of vehicles of modernity (despite various issues related to their planning, construction and maintenance), RFE analysts started to see them as desperate attempts to solve energy crisis, to pool resources (especially in case of Danube dams – not only Hungarian-Czechoslovak project, but also Bulgarian-Romanian, Romanian – Yugoslavian etc.) and as examples of unwavering forces of soviet imperialism. Rather surprisingly, the narrative of criticizing dams from environmental point of view appeared in RFE materials significantly later than in the individual national discourses within ECE

² Olšáková, Doubravka. “Environmental Journalism? Radio Free Europe, Charter 77 and the Making of an Environmental Agenda.” *Environment & History* (09673407), vol. 28, no. 2, May 2022, pp. 203–27.

³ Yuliya Komska; RFE/RL Broadcasting and West German Society: Caught between Nature Protection Activism and Anti-Americanism. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2018; 20 (3): 180–206

countries and only in relation to the dry period of early 1980s, when rising levels of pollution of eastern European rivers became more clearly visible and international environmental debate began to penetrate more strongly into discussions about the relationship between East and West and began to be used to point out the backwardness of the East (in terms of the later notion of Ecocide). Similarly, environmental movements, unlike official environmental policies of communist countries and international organizations active in the region, had been escaping the attention of RFE's editors and analysts till late 1980s.

Since I was interested in the representation and image of “large dams” in RFE discourse, I have identified a number of “phrases” (subject words) used in the RFE indexing system over time, under which relevant materials could theoretically be classified: water, river, large constructions, environment, ecology, pollution, protest movements, Danube, waterways. Since the search of such keywords returned a wide collection of boxes from various national units, I decided to consult at first selected boxes from all national collections. There was a relatively clearly apparent pattern – as expected, up until 1970, dams related content have been generally discussed in relation to industrial development – initially in the 1950s in relation to Stalinist industrialization and labour issues (often using explicitly “dams” as a keyword) and later (late 1950s) the focus shifted towards water supply, waterways, floods and water pollution. Early 1970s witnessed arrival of “environmental” discourse, which, however, most RFE RI units soon abandoned, only to reinvent it by late 1980s. The primacy and universality of political framing in subject indexing has been challenged from the start by specific environmental conditions and political and economic developments in individual eastern bloc countries. Particular geography of Eastern Europe significantly influenced classification of materials by different national units. While Czechoslovak unit focused since 1970s on water related issues under the heading “Water”, “Water pollution” or “Waterways”, in other countries “Danube”.

Concerning the Gabčíkovo Nagymaros dam project and protest movement against the construction of the dam, initiated by natural scientists in early 1980s, OSA Archive stores a variety of invaluable and often hitherto unprocessed materials and documents including visual materials – especially documentaries produced by the Black Box Foundation, which provide interesting material for a comparative analysis of the visual and pictorial language of environmental criticism at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. However, especially the Collection of Vargha János, personal archive of the leading figure behind the popular movement in Hungary, promised to be a very rich source in this respect. However, due to the regrettable lack of knowledge of Hungarian on my part severely limited my ability to fully explore and utilize the rich content of the fund. Since the fund has only now been only now started to be ordered and properly catalogued. I limited my inquiry basically to a sort of probe – with some interesting results (while most files are in Hungarian, there is some print documentation in German or English and, similarly to RFE/RL, this fund includes results of monitoring of dam and environment discussions in neighbouring countries).

Consulted materials on Dams

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

- HU OSA 300-10 Balkan Section: Albanian and Yugoslav Files; 300-10-2:106 + 117 + 482
- HU OSA 300-60 Romanian Unit; 300-60-1:60 + 379 + 570
- HU OSA 300-50 Polish Unit; 300-50-1:1960 + 1969
- HU OSA 300-20 Bulgarian Unit; 300-20-1:155 + 210 + 213

Janos Vargha Collection

Documentary movies on anti-dam movement in Hungary:

HU OSA 305-0-2 Documentary Films of the Black Box Foundation (A Fekete Doboz dokumentumfilmjei)

- 305-0-2:2/1 : The Facility (mass protests against Gabčíkov-Nagymaros in 1988)
- 305-0-2:280/1 The People Live Here (environmental protests in Hungary in 1988)
- 305-0-2:68/1 : Blue Danube (covering the Gabčíkov Nagymaros dispute 1988-1992 from Hungarian and environmental point of view)
- 305-0-2:60/2 : Documentation of Year 1992. Chronicle of October # 2: Logbook (covering the Gabčíkovo-Nagymros dispute developments in 1992)

Constructing the meaning of waters

Significant part of my research at OSA focused on materials and records of the Czechoslovak Unit of the RFE research institute. I have browsed through the background materials collected by the unit (mostly clippings from Czechoslovak newspapers and magazines) and reports (both situation and background) prepared by the unit. Building on the previously acquired knowledge of the extent and content of the water-debate in the socialist Czechoslovakia, I sought to answer the question how such “national” environmental debate on water was re-produced and interpreted by the RFE staff: how much space various types of expertise (environmental sciences, economy, hydraulic engineering; official vs dissent) get in RFE reports? how did that change over time? How were these often-conflicting perspectives juxtaposed, silenced or harmonized and negotiated in the context of the continuing ideological Cold war conflict/ transformation period? During my research, I found that collections of the Czechoslovak Unit included surprisingly rich material, covering various perspectives appearing in the official public discourse – reports of People's Control Committee; agricultural daily newspapers; specialised journals on issues such as environment, political economy etc..) – while simultaneously silencing other. There was clearly a strong preference for Slovak issues (not only Gabčíkovo Dam), especially after 1970, and the agenda of water supply and water shortage, while relatively lively debates on pollution in Czech rivers remained largely side-lined.

Consulted materials on Czechoslovak Water Management

HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit

- 300-30-2:102
- 300-30-2:28/3
- 300-30-2:29/1
- 300-30-2:63/2
- 300-30-3:9/2
- 300-30-3:27/6-7
- 300-30-3:39/2
- 300-30-4:17/3
- 300-30-4:59/6+8
- 300-30-4:89/7
- 300-30-6:19/3
- 300-30-6:140
- 300-30-7:379/2
- 300-30-7:380-382
- 300-30-7:621-633
- 300-30-9:2/5
- 300-30-9:5/2

- 300-30-9:26+27
- 300-30-29 Telephone Calls to the Czechoslovak Desk (boxes 1-3)
- 300-30-15 Collection of Documents Relating to the Czechoslovak Opposition and Protest Movement (boxes 13 +26)

Additional research activities outside of OSA:

Field trip to the construction site of the never built Nagymaros dam

Visit to the archives of the Danube Commission (located close to OSA in Budapest)

Collection of contacts for future interviews with contemporaries – extracted from archival funds and other sources

Movie Dunaszaursz I-II (1984-1988) – with english subtitles, available online on the website of its creator <https://www.filmcsillag.net/filmek>

Materials available at CEU library (2 MA theses related to Dam building in ECE after 1950)