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Hungary, Austria, and the Danube

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# Environmental Movements Linked Across the Iron Curtain in the 1980s

Hungary, Austria, and the Danube\*

## Summary

In the 1980s, the environmental movements that gained strength in the countries of the Western Bloc in the second half of the 20th century built connections with the environmentalists of the Eastern Bloc. Such a connection point was the protest against the construction of the planned hydroelectric power plants on the Danube in Hainburg in Austria, Gabčíkovo in Czechoslovakia, and Nagymaros in Hungary. The paper examines mainly the Hungarian–Austrian relations: while the demonstrations on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain contributed to the regime changes in 1989, the Austrian side became financially interested in the construction of hydroelectric power plants in Hungary. The paper examines the environmental movements' pre-history, connection, and survival after the system changes, emphasizing both the development of cross-border relations and of the civil movements, with regard to the governments and the INGOs.

## Keywords

transnational processes, Hungary, Austria, environmentalism, globalization, regime change

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Environmental problems are never limited to national borders. In the second half of the 20th century, the environment became a political issue in Europe:<sup>1</sup> with the two oil crises of the 1970s, a series of events was set in motion, called a “great chain reaction” by Joachim Radkau, and marked by the adoption of environmental legislation and the creation of ministries in both the West and the East.<sup>2</sup> On the international scene, the reports of the Club of Rome and the 1972 UN Conference in Stockholm can also be regarded as elements of this chain reaction.<sup>3</sup> With the rise of environmental movements, it is understandable that initially, national-level groups sought to stretch national boundaries and forge links with each other. An example of this was the first direct European Parliamentary election in 1979 when a Green Party list was put forward.<sup>4</sup> Environmental groups began to emerge also in Eastern Europe at this time: several groups were formed under the auspices of the Evangelical Church in the GDR; the Polish Ecological Club was founded in 1979 in Poland; and in the 1980s, environmental groups were established also in Czechoslovakia and Hungary.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I would like to present an important connection point, the planned hydroelectric power plants of the Danube: Hainburg, Austria; Gabčíkovo, Czechoslovakia; and Nagymaros, Hungary. These projects are not only connected by the river but also by governmental relations and, most importantly, by the protests against them, organized by environmental movements. Since the border between Austria and Hungary also separated the First and

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Wenkel et al., ‘Editors’ Introduction’, in *The Environment and the European Public Sphere: Perceptions, Actors, Policies*, ed. Christian Wenkel et al. (Winwick, UK: White Horse Press, 2020), 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.3197/63811648691470.intro>.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Dupuy, ‘The Western European Public Sphere and the Environment in Eastern Europe During the Cold War: Between Model, Utilisation and Denunciation’, in *The Environment and the European Public Sphere: Perceptions, Actors, Policies*, ed. Christian Wenkel et al. (Winwick, UK: White Horse Press, 2020), 70, <https://doi.org/10.3197/63811648691474.ch04>.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Radkau, ‘The Great Chain Reaction. The “Ecological Revolution” in and around 1970’, in *The Age of Ecology* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), 79–113.

<sup>4</sup> Wenkel et al., ‘Editors’ Introduction’, 7, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Dupuy, ‘The Western European Public Sphere and the Environment in Eastern Europe During the Cold War: Between Model, Utilisation and Denunciation’, 79.



Second Worlds, the development of environmental relations between the inhabitants of the two countries allows us to draw conclusions not only on a transnational but also on a global scale. Local movements are often linked to INGOs, or even become part of INGOs, whose number increased significantly after World War II,<sup>6</sup> which process indicates the expansion of globalization at the time.

The relationship between environmentalists across the Iron Curtain was difficult for political reasons. However, the common language served as a facilitator between the GDR and the FRG.<sup>7</sup> Although most of the environmental movements in Eastern Europe were of domestic origin and they reflected on their own country's problems, links with Westerners helped their organization and advocacy.<sup>8</sup> The flow of information about the Soviet Union's environmental problems to the West became smoother and increased in volume in the second half of the 1980s, during the Gorbachev reforms.<sup>9</sup> In Erich Honecker's hardline GDR, the environment was a central issue in protests at the time; in Poland, on the other hand, the issue was less central, but thanks to its relative political freedom, activists were able to network more easily.<sup>10</sup> In Czechoslovakia, Charter 77, as a group of dissidents, was

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<sup>6</sup> John Boli and George M. Thomas, 'World Culture in the World Polity: A Century of International Non-Governmental Organization', *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 2 (April 1997): 171, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657298>.

<sup>7</sup> Astrid Mignon Kirchhof and John Robert McNeill, 'Introduction. Environmentalism, Environmental Policy, Capitalism, and Communism', in *Nature and the Iron Curtain. Environmental Policy and Social Movements in Communist and Capitalist Countries 1945–1990*, ed. Astrid Mignon Kirchhof and John Robert McNeill (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrd0c1.4>; Astrid Mignon Kirchhof, 'The Impact of East German Nature Conservationists on the European Environmental Consciousness in the Twentieth Century', in *The Environment and the European Public Sphere: Perceptions, Actors, Policies*, ed. Christian Wenkel et al. (Winwick, UK: White Horse Press, 2020), 106–107, <https://doi.org/10.3197/63811648691475.ch05>.

<sup>8</sup> Kirchhof and McNeill, 'Introduction. Environmentalism, Environmental Policy, Capitalism, and Communism', 9.

<sup>9</sup> Kirchhof and McNeill, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Julia E. Ault, 'Environmental Activism in East Germany and Poland, 1980–1990', in *Nature and the Iron Curtain. Environmental Policy and Social Movements in Communist and Capitalist Countries 1945–1990*, ed. Astrid Mignon Kirchhof and



able to play a mediating role between East and West, through the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and other contacts.<sup>11</sup> Environmental groups in the East have often been allowed to present the environmental damage they have observed (for example, the planned paper mill on Lake Baikal) through Western media, such as BBC and Radio Free Europe, that could also be received in the Soviet bloc countries.<sup>12</sup>

In the following, Hungarian–Austrian relations are primarily discussed. In contrast to the history of INGOs, this can be described much more with the concept of transnationalization instead of globalization. According to the dominant approach in the sociological literature dealing with it,<sup>13</sup> we are talking about processes that do not necessarily extend to the whole world, but – similarly to sports<sup>14</sup> and migration<sup>15</sup> – they reflect global influences.

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John Robert McNeill (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 152, 168, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrd0c1.13>.

<sup>11</sup> Eagle Glassheim, 'Building a Socialist Environment. Czechoslovak Environmental Policy from the 1960s to the 1980s', in *Nature and the Iron Curtain. Environmental Policy and Social Movements in Communist and Capitalist Countries 1945–1990*, ed. Astrid Mignon Kirchhof and John Robert McNeill (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 147–148, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrd0c1.12>.

<sup>12</sup> Dupuy, 'The Western European Public Sphere and the Environment in Eastern Europe During the Cold War: Between Model, Utilisation and Denunciation', 71–74.

<sup>13</sup> Heather Hofmeister and André Pascal Breitenstein, 'Contemporary Processes of Transnationalization and Globalization', *International Sociology* 23, no. 4 (1 July 2008): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580908090724>; Anja Weiß, 'Globalization and Transnationalization', in *Globalization and Transnationalization*, ed. Betina Hollstein et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021), 150–51, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110627275-011>; George Ritzer, *Globalization: The Essentials*, 1. publ (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 2–3.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson, 'Recovering the Social: Globalization, Football and Transnationalism', *Global Networks* 7, no. 2 (2007): 199–201, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2007.00163.x>; William W. Kelly, 'Is Baseball a Global Sport? America's "National Pastime" as Global Field and International Sport', *Global Networks* 7, no. 2 (2007): 190–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2007.00164.x>.

<sup>15</sup> Ewa Morawska, 'Transnationalism', in *Transnationalism*, ed. Mary Z. Waters, Reed Ueda, and Helen B. Marrow (Cambridge, MA; London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2009), 149, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044937-011>.



## The Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Project

The middle basin of river Danube (that almost coincides with the Pannonian Basin) starts at the Devin Gate, which is followed by a tectonic basin called Little Hungarian Plain. It has parts in Western Slovakia (formerly Czechoslovakia), Hungary, and Lower Austria. 10 million years ago, in this area laid the bank of the former Pannonian Sea with the delta of the Paleo-Danube, the river that filled the region with sediments.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays the Danube has an inland delta here embodying large islands from Bratislava to Komárom, such as Csallóköz (Žitný ostrov) in Slovakia and Szigetköz in Hungary. The main riverbed lies on the crest of the sediments, resulting in high risks of floods, like those, for example, in Hungary in 1954 or in Slovakia in 1965 that caused several casualties.<sup>17</sup>

Before the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 that split the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, water regulation works had begun to facilitate domestic and international ship transit and protection against floods. There were plans before and after 1919 to exploit hydropower and regulate this section of the Danube, but these plans never came to fruition.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, a treaty concerning the construction of waterworks was signed in 1977, in Budapest by the Czechoslovak and the Hungarian government.<sup>19</sup>

From 1981, it was not only the opposing articles, debates, and protests (mainly on the Hungarian side) but also the lack of funds that

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<sup>16</sup> Orsolya Sztanó et al., 'Late Miocene Sedimentary Record of the Danube / Kisalföld Basin: Interregional Correlation of Depositional Systems, Stratigraphy and Structural Evolution', *Geologica Carpathica* 67, no. 6 (2016): 536–538, <https://doi.org/10.1515/geoca-2016-0033>.

<sup>17</sup> Mihály Erdélyi, 'Hydrogeology of the Little Hungarian Plain Now and after the Construction of the Danube Barrages', *Földrajzi Értesítő* 39, no. 1–4 (1990): 15, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Zoltán Hajdú, 'A Magyarországi Vízi Energia Hasznosításának Száz Éve', *Magyar Tudomány* 44, no. 8 (1999): 948.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Manning, 'Patterns of Environmental Movements in Eastern Europe', *Environmental Politics* 7, no. 2 (1998): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644019808414395>; Celia Donert et al., 'Unlocking New Histories of Human Rights in State Socialist Europe: The Role of the COURAGE Collections', in *The Handbook of COURAGE: Cultural Opposition and Its Heritage in Eastern Europe*, ed. Balázs Apor, Péter Apor, and Sándor Horváth (Budapest: Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2018), 506.



hindered the implementation.<sup>20</sup> Finally, after the change of regime in 1989, the project, which was executed only on the Czechoslovakian side (together with the Mohovce nuclear power plant), became the main option for energy independence for the independent Slovakia that was created in 1992.<sup>21</sup> In this year, Hungary terminated the 1977 contract, never having built the Nagymaros barrage, and Slovakia unilaterally carried out the river diversion, starting electricity production at the Gabčíkovo hydropower plant.<sup>22</sup>

### **Governmental relations between Austria and Hungary**

According to archival sources, the Hungarian prime minister (named this time the Chairman of the Council of Ministers) and the Austrian chancellor met annually in the 1980s. Based on the documents of the leading organs of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party – the Central Committee, the Political Committee, and the Secretariat –, I have collected the occasions when the Hungarian Prime Minister, the President (named Chairman of the Presidential Council) or the holder of real power, the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party attended a ministerial or higher-level meeting.<sup>23</sup> Comparing the 50 mentions of Austria in the 1980s with the earlier ones, I have found that there are only 7 mentions of Austria in the 1970s (roughly once per year) and 1 in the 1960s. As this collection is based on party documents, meetings of Hungarian government members who were not in the party leadership are not included (however, the top leaders were always party members).

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<sup>20</sup> Judit Galambos, 'An International Environmental Conflict on the Danube: The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dams', in *Environment and Democratic Transition: Policy and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Pál Tamás and Anna Vári (Springer, 1993), 179–180, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8120-2\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8120-2_9).

<sup>21</sup> Galambos, 192.

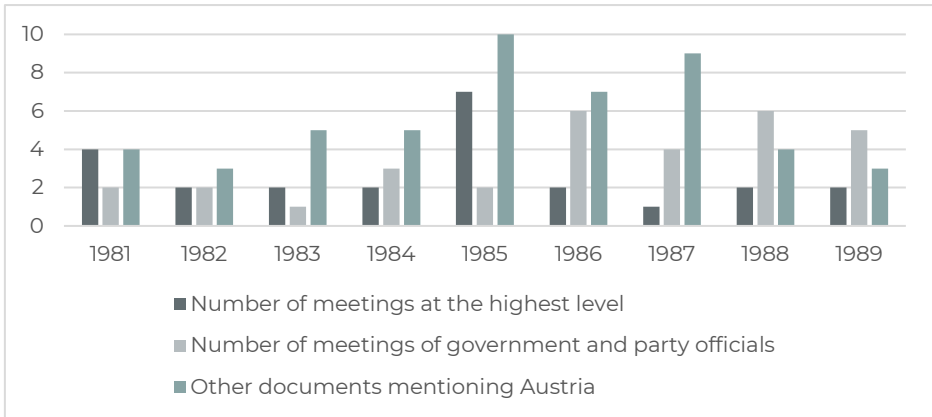
<sup>22</sup> Galambos, 192–193.

<sup>23</sup> National Archives of Hungary, Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, Central Organs: MNL OL M-KS 288





Figure 1 Representation of Austria in the minutes of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party's central organs (1981–1989)



Source: own calculations from the data of MNL OL M-KS 288

In the field of party relations, contact with the extra-parliamentary Communist Party of Austria was of utmost importance for the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party: a meeting was held at the annual party congress in Vienna or in Budapest almost every year. From the Hungarian side, it was mostly attended by a member of the leading body, the Political Committee. Party-level relations with the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the leading force in the Austrian government in the 1980s, were only established in 1986, and with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) even later, in 1989, the year of the regime change.

As the graph shows, 1985 was an outstanding year: in February, Prime Minister György Lázár visited Vienna, and after Defence Minister Friedhelm Frischenschlager visited Budapest in July, events accelerated. In September, Chancellor Fred Sinowatz was awarded an honorary doctorate by Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in the presence of György Lázár,<sup>24</sup> and the following month both Vice-Chancellor Norbert Steger and Foreign Minister Leopold Gratz met with Lázár. Steger, and – later in the year – President Rudolf

<sup>24</sup> It was not just a diplomatic gesture, but a reward for the decades of scientific cooperation, mainly in literary studies. 'Fred Sinowatz Budapesten', *Délmagyarország*, 26 September 1985.



Kirchschlager met General Secretary János Kádár twice. This may be related to the agreement reached in December 1985 on Austrian involvement in the construction of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Project.<sup>25</sup> This meant, in short, the involvement of Austrian companies and technology (instead of Soviet ones, which were found unsuitable for the task), using Hungarian money. Hungarian–Austrian political-economic relations had already taken off two years earlier: in November 1983, the construction of Terminal 2 of Budapest Ferihegy International Airport was started with an Austrian loan.<sup>26</sup>

### **Non-governmental relations between Austria and Hungary**

It is more difficult to find sources for exploring non-governmental links than for the governmental level, especially because of Hungary's party-state nature. Due to the diversity of relationships, only those that are closely related to our topic are discussed in the following. The transcripts of Radio Free Europe's broadcasts in the Blinken Open Society Archive were of great help to me, because they not only included news from Hungarian and international (e.g. Associated Press) news agencies and newspapers, but also material from Hungarian NGOs, including the Danube Circle Movement,<sup>27</sup> which was formed to oppose the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Project.<sup>28</sup>

Radio Free Europe reported on 19 September 1984, that after it came to light that Austria was considering giving financial aid to Hungary for the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros project through the state-owned Credit Anstalt and Länderbank,<sup>29</sup> the Danube Circle Movement called to the Austrian public for help in an appeal to the

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<sup>25</sup> Political Executive Committee Report, 3 December 1985. MNL OL M-KS 288, surveillance unit 5/957. (ő. e.)

<sup>26</sup> Secretary Report, 14 November 1983. MNL OL M-KS 288, surveillance unit 7/684. (ő. e.)

<sup>27</sup> Records of the Danube Circle Movement. Budapest City Archives X. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Special thanks to my former colleague András Vadas (Eötvös Loránd University), who has found and scanned these records.

<sup>29</sup> John Fitzmaurice, *Damming the Danube: Gabčíkovo/Nagymaros and Post-Communist Politics in Europe* (Oxford, UK: Westview Press, 1998), 135, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429501128>.



Associated Press, signed by thousands of Hungarians.<sup>30</sup> The United Greens of Austria (Vereinigte Grünen Österreichs) led by Joseph Bűchner supported this appeal on September 20.<sup>31</sup>

A similar report was made on 18 November, based on information from Vienna, regarding the possibility of an Austrian loan and the invitation for the Austrian company Donaukraftwerke (DKW) to take part in the project. It was reported that Die Presse newspaper assumed that a loan of 8 million schillings by the Austrian government – covering more than half of the Hungarian side's construction costs – would offer a solution to the huge social resistance to the Austrian hydroelectric power plant planned for Hainburg, on the outskirts of Vienna, because the Hungarians would pay back the loan with electricity in over 24 years. This “cynical” solution is certainly not good for Hungary, the radio said.<sup>32</sup> The Austrian newspaper Kurier published an article with the expressive title “Hainburg in Hungary”.<sup>33</sup>

In a radical turn in Austrian public life, on 19 December 1984, a peaceful protest in Hainburg was violently dispersed by police after a crowd of three thousand people had occupied the area for nearly two weeks, and later public pressure forced Chancellor Sinowatz and the Austrian government to abandon the project.<sup>34</sup> The Hainburg–Nagymaros negative parallel appeared later in the media, for example in the Mlada Fronta, Prague (9 January 1985),<sup>35</sup> in the Trend, Wien (May 1986, but supporting the Gabčikovo–Nagymaros Project),<sup>36</sup> or in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, München (May 1986).<sup>37</sup> In

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<sup>30</sup> Radio Free Europe, 19 September 1984. Hungarian Open Society Archive (HU OSA) 300-40-1; Energetika, Erőművek, Vízierőmű, Bős–Gabcikovo–Nagymaros

<sup>31</sup> APA, Eisenstadt, ‘VGÖ: El a kezekkel a magyar Dunai Vízlépcsőtől’, *A Duna Kör hírei*, 10 1984.

<sup>32</sup> Radio Free Europe, 18 November 1984. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>33</sup> Otmar Lahodynsky, ‘Hainburg in Ungarn’, *Kurier*, 19 November 1984.

<sup>34</sup> Bernd Lötsch, ‘Das Wunder von Hainburg’, in *Der Kampf Um Die Donauauen. Erfolge Und Niederlagen Der Naturschutzbewegung*, ed. Bund Naturschutz in Bayern e. V., Gregor Louisoder Umweltstiftung, and Claus Obermeier (München: oekom, 2015), 67–80.

<sup>35</sup> Radio Free Europe, 19 January 1985. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>36</sup> Radio Free Europe, 25 April (!) 1986. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>37</sup> Radio Free Europe, 28 May 1986. HU OSA 300-40-1



the meantime, there were also differences between Austrian and Hungarian environmentalists: many of the former opposed nuclear power, while the latter saw it as an alternative to Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros.<sup>38</sup>

According to Daniela Apaydin (formerly Neubacher), the organizers of the Danube Circle wanted to attract (and later succeeded in their endeavor) the attention of Austrian environmentalists such as Peter Welsh, who played a key role in the Hainburg protests; Günter Schobesberger, who had protested with the Danube Circle in Hungary; leading activists Günther Nenning, who was expelled from the SPÖ in 1985; and Freda Meissner-Blau, who became a Green-Party MP in 1986.<sup>39</sup>

On January 18, 1986, Austrian, West German, and Hungarian environmentalists agreed on a joint demonstration, which was called an international “non-violent resistance”.<sup>40</sup> On 8 February, 800 demonstrators, including 60 Austrians, gathered in Budapest, even though the Danube Circle Movement called off the action to avoid provocations. On the banks of the Danube in Buda, police used batons to disperse the group, and an Austrian journalist, Franz Goess, who filmed the movement, was temporarily arrested.<sup>41</sup>

On April 16, 1986, 30 Hungarian individuals published a paid advertisement in *Die Presse* asking the Austrian public to block the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros project, citing the Hungarian people's request and the European Parliament's decree and also enlisting environmental, financial, and drinking water safety concerns.<sup>42</sup> They referred to the fact that the “silent walk” in February and any other form of protest in Hungary were prohibited.<sup>43</sup> The advertisement

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<sup>38</sup> Daniela Apaydin, *Stop Nagymaros! Die Geschichte einer Grenzüberschreitung*, 1. Auflage, Zeitgeschichte im Kontext, Band 19 (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2023), 184.

<sup>39</sup> Daniela Neubacher, ‘Wetlands of Protest. Seeking Transnational Trajectories in Hungary’s Environmental Movement’, in *The Environment and the European Public Sphere: Perceptions, Actors, Policies*, ed. Christian Wenkel et al. (Winwick, UK: White Horse Press, 2020), 117–118, <https://doi.org/10.3197/63811648691476.ch06>.

<sup>40</sup> N N, ‘Donaukraftwerk: Umweltschützer Protestieren’, *Kurier*, 20 January 1985.

<sup>41</sup> Radio Free Europe, 7 and 8 February 1986. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>42</sup> For example in *Die Presse* or in *Die Welt*: Radio Free Europe, April 17 1986. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>43</sup> Radio Free Europe, 16 April 1986. HU OSA 300-40-1



received positive feedback and it was particularly important for the Hungarian party-state because it was included in the reports of the Politburo with a Hungarian translation, and was the subject of a special investigation.<sup>44</sup> In response, Radio Free Europe translated an article published in *Népszabadság*, which implicitly accused the signatories of the ad, who were otherwise respected members of the society, of exhibitionism and anti-government activities.<sup>45</sup> Another response was that in May, József Marjai, a member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, visited the waterworks of Melk, Austria, and met with Norbert Steger Vice-Chancellor.<sup>46</sup>

In September 1986, a press trip to Hungary was organized for the Austrian Society for Nature Conservation, Vienna regional group, where they secretly met with cca 60 people, including the leaders of the Danube Circle Movement.<sup>47</sup>

The relations between the Austrian and Hungarian protesters continued: in April 1987, Austrian protesters, including members of parliament, whose Green Party had been elected for the first time in the previous year, were arrested in Budapest.<sup>48</sup> The Danube Circle Movement made a brochure in English titled “Nagymaros News” that was also distributed at the Ecological Institute, Vienna, and after that, WWF Austria made their own Nagymaros-brochure.<sup>49</sup> Also during this month, as another act of protest, the ecological group Global 2000 put up a banner with the word name Nagymaros on it on the top of the Credit Anstalt bank, but they did not achieve the desired effect since bywalkers did not understand what it was about.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Political Executive Committee Report, 22 April 1986. MNL OL M-KS 288, surveillance unit 5/967. (ő. e.)

<sup>45</sup> Radio Free Europe, 21 May 1986. HU OSA 300-40-1. The original article: László Szabó, ‘Hirdetés’, *Népszabadság*, 19 April 1986.

<sup>46</sup> Apaydin, *Stop Nagymaros! Die Geschichte einer Grenzüberschreitung*, 188.

<sup>47</sup> Apaydin, 188.

<sup>48</sup> Radio Free Europe, 1987. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>49</sup> Neubacher, ‘Wetlands of Protest. Seeking Transnational Trajectories in Hungary’s Environmental Movement’, 119.

<sup>50</sup> Apaydin, *Stop Nagymaros! Die Geschichte einer Grenzüberschreitung*, 192–193.



In September 1988, WWF, International Rivers Network, and Danube Circle made a joint conference in Budapest, entitled 'The Danube Dams',<sup>51</sup> the texts were published a year later.<sup>52</sup> Seven MPs of the Austrian Green Party wanted to place an advertisement in the Hungarian HVG newspaper demanding the halt of the construction works in Nagymaros, but they were refused and their article was published as a leaflet. They said. Let's unite for the Danube and democracy!<sup>53</sup>

Also this month, Representatives of Hungarian and Austrian opposition parties, including Freda Meissner-Blau (Greens, also signed the mentioned leaflet), Erhard Busek (ÖVP), the expert Franz Meister (Ecological Institute), and foreign journalists attended the congress of the newly founded opposition party Hungarian Democratic Forum in Esztergom.<sup>54</sup> By 1989, it had become natural for the Austrian and Hungarian environmentalists to be mentioned together in the media in connection with the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project.<sup>55</sup>

## Opinions from Austria

In 1988, a book of interviews was published in Hungary, which attempted to gather opposing views. In this, the Austrian governing party, the SPÖ has tried to keep its distance from the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project, and they emphasized the need to increase the security of supply in Austria and to help Hungary. They did not express an opinion on the environmental impact but stressed Hungary's sovereignty and decision-making power on the issue.<sup>56</sup> The right-wing opposition, Erhard Busek, vice president of

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<sup>51</sup> 'Állásfoglalás', *Beszélő* 3, no. 25 (n.d.): 86–88; Fitzmaurice, *Damming the Danube: Gabčíkovo/Nagymaros and Post-Communist Politics in Europe*, 153.

<sup>52</sup> Lídia Dobos, Judit Rác, and László Vít, eds., *Utánunk Az Özönvíz* (Budapest: Duna Kör – ELTE ÁJK Politikatudományi Tanszékcsoport, 1989).

<sup>53</sup> Leaflet of the Austrian Greens. ÁBTL III. 1. 22., Collection of Péter Kriston

<sup>54</sup> Apaydin, *Stop Nagymaros! Die Geschichte einer Grenzüberschreitung*, 195.

<sup>55</sup> By the newspaper Rude Pravo, Prague: Radio Free Europe, 9 May 1989. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>56</sup> Helmut Dité: Radio Free Europe, 25 April 1986. HU OSA 300-40-1; Heinz Fisher, SPÖ parliamentary group leader: Henrik Havas, *A Bős-Nagymaros Dosszié Avagy Egy Beruházás Hordalékai* (Codex Rt, 1988), 104–5.



the ÖVP, suggested that if Hungary canceled power plant construction contracts, Austria could waive financial compensation. However, he rejected the suggestion that Austria was exporting its ecological problems.<sup>57</sup> The Greens demanded that the project be stopped; President Freda Meissner-Blau called it a Stalinist project.<sup>58</sup>

The CEO of the Donaukraftwerke company naturally supported the investment,<sup>59</sup> and one expert emphasized the Austrian practice and benefits of hydropower over the ecological costs, referring to the Greifenstein hydropower plant above Vienna<sup>60</sup> as the leader of the industry lobby.<sup>61</sup> Another expert from the other side underlined the difference between the existing 8 power plants on the Danube in Austria and the planned ones, the unknown technological solution, and other consequences.<sup>62</sup> A member of the Global 2000 environmental movement, which played an important role in the protests against the power plants in Hainburg and then in Gabčíkovo–Nagyymaros, spoke of the 'ecological imperialism' of Austria and the lack of democratic debate in Hungary.<sup>63</sup> The Nagyymaros-booklet used almost the same wording: 'economic colonial endeavors.'<sup>64</sup>

In comparison, the Czechoslovak government and its officials had an easier job: flood protection and the development of the Csallóköz were their main arguments for the project. The project was attacked mainly from an ecological point of view by a small number of opposers, some of whom disapproved of it because they thought that it could pose an existential threat to the Hungarian minorities living there.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Havas, 100–101.

<sup>58</sup> Radio Free Europe, 13 September 1988. HU OSA 300-40-1

<sup>59</sup> Eric Schmidt: Havas, *A Bős-Nagyymaros Dosszié Avagy Egy Beruházás Hordalékai*, 95–97.

<sup>60</sup> Professor Otto König, Director, Austrian Eco-Etological Institute: Havas, 91–94.

<sup>61</sup> Herbert Krejci, President, National Federation of Austrian Industrialists Havas, 102–4.

<sup>62</sup> Franz Meister, member of the Austrian Ecological Institute: Havas, 94–95.

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Edit: Havas, 98–99.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Köcher, 'Vorwort', in *Nagyymaros*, ed. Michael Köcher (Vienna / Budapest, 1987), 1–2.

<sup>65</sup> Vladislav Lokvencz, Government Commissioner; Juraj Mesík, Representative, Slovak Union of Nature Conservationists, Bratislava Group; Miklós Duray, President,



## NGOs and funding

The international affiliations of these Austrian NGOs show two patterns: 1) the international organization establishes a national affiliate, and 2) the locally based organizations become part of a larger one. A good example of the first is WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), founded in Geneva in 1961,<sup>66</sup> whose Austrian affiliate was established two years later in 1963.<sup>67</sup> Beyond the Danube Circle, WWF Austria was also in contact with some local Hungarian environmental organizations connected with the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros project, such as REFLEX,<sup>68</sup> founded in Győr, in 1987.<sup>69</sup> The same was the case with 1970-founded Greenpeace, while Greenpeace Austria, which was also involved in the protests, was established after a longer delay, in 1983<sup>70</sup> – only one year before Hainburg. With Global 2000, it was the other way around, and therefore, belongs to the second one of the aforementioned patterns: in 1982 it became a member of the INGO Friends of the Earth, which was founded in 1971.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, Hungarian environmental movements were formed later – the Danube Circle was founded only in 1984 – and were not part of international organizations.

I should also mention the support of the Soros Foundation for Hungarian environmentalists: the restitution of foundations in the

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Committee for the Protection of the Rights of the Hungarian Minority in Czechoslovakia; István Csibrey, Vice-President of the Dunaszerdahely District National Committee; Havas, *A Bős-Nagymaros Dosszié Avagy Egy Beruházás Hordalékai*, 106–18.

<sup>66</sup> Ritzer, *Globalization*, 127.

<sup>67</sup> 'Die Geschichte des WWF Österreich', *WWF Österreich* (blog), accessed 24 May 2023, <https://www.wwf.at/wwf-oesterreich/geschichte-wwf/>; Daniela Neubacher mistakenly writes 1967: Neubacher, 'Wetlands of Protest. Seeking Transnational Trajectories in Hungary's Environmental Movement', 119.

<sup>68</sup> Fitzmaurice, *Damming the Danube: Gabčíkovo/Nagymaros and Post-Communist Politics in Europe*, 165.

<sup>69</sup> '7602-2/1987. "REFLEX" Győr-Sopron m. Környezetvédők Egyesülete Nyilvántartásba Vétel' (Győr Városi Hivatal, 11 March 1987), <http://reflexegyesulet.hu/index.php/rolunk/multunk>.

<sup>70</sup> Neubacher, 'Wetlands of Protest. Seeking Transnational Trajectories in Hungary's Environmental Movement', 120.

<sup>71</sup> Neubacher, 120.





People's Republic of Hungary made it possible to open an office in Budapest in 1984.<sup>72</sup> An example: the founder of the Danube Circle, biologist-journalist<sup>73</sup> János Vargha received from the Commission of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Soros Foundation a two-year grant of HUF 8,000 a month, equivalent to the average Hungarian salary at the time,<sup>74</sup> in 1987, for his research project entitled Social Problems of the Ecological Crisis.<sup>75</sup> However, this was only ad hoc support, and it was only in 1989 when George Soros, who had "cautious reservations" about the effectiveness of environmental movements, committed himself to the costly and time-consuming establishment of an institution.<sup>76</sup> The Rockefeller Brothers Fund was also engaged in similar support activities at the time.<sup>77</sup>

## Narratives and global context

Looking at the issue from a wider perspective, we can observe several patterns in the evolution of events and opinions in the 1980s, and thus we can examine them in different narratives. Firstly, the political narrative: while people in Hungary were talking about the environment and protesting for it, they were also talking about other political matters that otherwise they were not allowed to discuss;<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Szabina Kerényi and Máté Szabó, 'Transnational Influences on Patterns of Mobilisation within Environmental Movements in Hungary', *Environmental Politics* 15, no. 5 (2006): 805, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010600937249>.

<sup>73</sup> Neubacher, 'Wetlands of Protest. Seeking Transnational Trajectories in Hungary's Environmental Movement', 116.

<sup>74</sup> Average salary, 1987: 6987 Ft; 1988: 8968 Ft 'KSH STADATAT: Economically Active Persons, Average Gross Salary, 1960–2020', 2021, [https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_hosszu/h\\_qli001.html](https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_hosszu/h_qli001.html).

<sup>75</sup> *Soros Évkönyv 1987*, Soros Évkönyvek (Budapest: Soros Alapítvány, 1988)2nd supplement.

<sup>76</sup> Béla Nóvé, *Tény/Soros. A Magyar Soros Alapítvány Első Tíz Éve 1984–1994* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1994), 274–276.

<sup>77</sup> Nóvé, 275.

<sup>78</sup> Havas, *A Bős-Nagymaros Dosszié Avagy Egy Beruházás Hordalékai*, 174–75.



similar was the case, for example, in Bulgaria in the Soviet bloc.<sup>79</sup> According to Antonio Gramsci, opposition to the state was formed in the civil society.<sup>80</sup> By comparison, in Austria (a First-World state), opinions were surprisingly subdued: environmentalists commented mainly on the immediate question, while politicians respected the political sensitivity of Hungary, their neighboring state belonging to the Second World. After 1984 the Greens, who opposed the project, gained strength in Austria and even entered the parliament in 1986.

Secondly, the system-level narrative: scientific and technological progress was one of the guiding principles of an inflexible command economy such as Hungary. According to the main communist ideology, the state could not cause an environmental problem – environmental damage could only be caused by profit-oriented companies. The lack of freedom of opinion made it even more difficult to avert the danger.<sup>81</sup> This is why the protest was so painful for the government: it contested the scientific part of the ideology itself. In contrast, in capitalist Austria, public pressure in 1984 led to a relatively quick change of attitude towards the Hainburg hydroelectric power plant. The maximization of profit for the technologically advanced capitalist corporation versus the ecological concerns of the community raised (and still raises) serious moral questions. The dilemma for Austrian politicians was that they considered that they could not criticize the political establishment in Hungary in the interests of their own country, and thus from the outside they might have appeared to have given up principles for money and used a NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) attitude instead of looking at the greater picture. There is also a natural necessity: when a river is partially regulated, water level problems are amplified in the unregulated area, especially downstream. Just as the Austrian regulation of the Danube in the 1890s forced the Hungarian

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<sup>79</sup> Susan Baker and Petr Jehlička, 'Dilemmas of Transition: The Environment, Democracy and Economic Reform in East Central Europe – An Introduction', *Environmental Politics* 7, no. 1 (1998): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644019808414370>.

<sup>80</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. Joseph A. Buttigieg, vol. 1, *European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 214–215.

<sup>81</sup> Baker and Jehlička, 'Dilemmas of Transition: The Environment, Democracy and Economic Reform in East Central Europe – An Introduction', 7.



government to dredge and regulate the Danube, the Austrian water barriers of the 20th century also transferred flood problems to Hungary.

Thirdly, the environmental narrative: through Austrian environmentalists, Hungarians were linked to global environmental movements. Although the problem with the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros project – similar to the Hainburg hydroplant – was not a global but a regional one, the WWF, which already existed in Austria at the time, played a major role in the protests. At the same time, the international recognition of the Hungarian Danube Circle was demonstrated by the fact that it was granted the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize, in 1985.<sup>82</sup> According to Daniela Apaydin, cross-border environmental contacts were established between 1984 and 1986, and from 1987 onwards it was the Hungarian mass protests that took center stage.<sup>83</sup> Although more recent research has shown that the issue of human rights was a hot topic in the Eastern Bloc, particularly in the field of relations with the Global South<sup>84</sup> this is not confirmed by the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros case. Activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain interpreted civil society and human rights according to the Western perspective, which correlated with the fact that knowledge, money, and other support flowed mainly from West to East. As Mary Kaldor states, the parallel reinvention of civil society in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s through protests against dictatorships was a direct precursor to the emergence of global civil society in the 1990s.<sup>85</sup> It is interesting to note that Austrian relations also served as step to the international for Hungarian

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<sup>82</sup> Apaydin, *Stop Nagymaros! Die Geschichte einer Grenzüberschreitung*, 222.

<sup>83</sup> Apaydin, 247–52.

<sup>84</sup> Kim Christiaens and Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Competing Solidarities? Solidarność and the Global South during the 1980s', in *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, ed. James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020), 289, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvx8b7ph>; Paul Betts, 'Rights', in *Socialism Goes Global*, ed. Paul Betts and James Mark (Oxford University Press, 2022), 180–181, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192848857.003.0006>.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA: Polity Press; Distributed in the USA by Blackwell Pub, 2003), 1–2.



environmentalists such as the Danube Circle. It cannot be decided whether the individual or the organizational level was more important: as in many other transnationalization processes,<sup>86</sup> there is a bidirectional causal relationship between the micro level and the macro level.

While the Austrian NGOs are still significant today (especially thanks to the INGOs), the Danube Circle, organized (also) for political purposes, quickly became irrelevant after the initial enthusiasm for the regime change, because its key members have scattered into different political parties.<sup>87</sup> Another pattern of globalization: similarly to Austria, INGO branch organizations in Hungary, such as National Society of Conservationists, which is linked to Friends of Earth, and WWF Hungary are still stable and relevant in the long term.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hofmeister and Breitenstein, 'Contemporary Processes of Transnationalization and Globalization', 481.

<sup>87</sup> András Lányi, 'Harminc Év Múlva', *Ellensúly*, no. 3 (2019): 50.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Rose-Ackerman, 'The Voluntary Sector and Public Participation: The Case of Hungary', *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 79, no. 3–4 (September 2008): 613, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8292.2008.00372.x>.