



The Hungarian–Czechoslovak Relations from the Hungarian Perspective

János SÁRINGER

PhD, Head of Department, Associate Professor of Budapest Business School,
Head of the Central European Regional Research Group
e-mail: Saringer.Janos@uni-bge.hu

Abstract. As a result of the first free and democratic elections in Hungary, in May 1990, József Antall formed a government, whose foreign policy goal was the restoration of the sovereignty of Hungary and the support and representation of the Euro-Atlantic integration and of the Hungarians across the border. In the Hungarian–Czechoslovak bilateral relations, the new Hungarian government’s aim was to expand the political relations in both federal and republican levels. It was Hungary’s interest that serious legacies, such as the issue of the Bős–Nagymaros Dam system, should not hold back the general advance, wherefore a solution appropriate for both parties had to be found. Hungary considered Czechoslovakia as an outstanding economic partner. The Antall government took steps so that the fate and future of the Slovakian Hungarians would be ensured in accordance with the European development standards. One of the key issues in this was the consistent Czechoslovak condemnation of the principle of collective guilt, the Beneš decrees. During the dialogues, certain elements of the common historical past returned several times.

Keywords: Antall’s foreign policy, diplomatic relations, Visegrád Three, Hungarian minority, Bős–Nagymaros Dam System

The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF)¹ won the first free and democratic elections in Hungary. In May 1990, József Antall² formed a government, whose foreign policy goal was the restoration of the sovereignty of Hungary (withdrawal of Soviet troops, dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (WAPA), and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)) and the support and representation of the Euro-Atlantic integration and of the Hungarians across the border.

- 1 The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) was established on 27 September 1987 in Lakitelek. Its first president, József Antall, was elected on 21 October 1989. After winning the 1990 elections, MDF formed a government with the Independent Smallholders Party and KDNP. In the first half of the 1990s, several members were expelled from the party. Between 1999 and 2010, the party was chaired by Ibolya Dávid. After the 2010 election failure, the party disbanded on 8 April 2011.
- 2 József Antall (1932–1993): historian, Prime Minister of Hungary from 25 May 1990 until his death on 12 December 1993.

In the Hungarian–Czechoslovak bilateral relations, the new Hungarian government's aim was to expand the political relations on both federal and republican levels. The basis and mutually beneficial order of cooperation between the two countries might have been provided by the pan-European integration. It was Hungary's interest that serious legacies, such as the issue of the Bős–Nagymaros Dam system, should not hold back the general advance, wherefore a solution appropriate for both parties had to be found. Hungary considered Czechoslovakia as an outstanding economic partner, as it was in its interest to bridge the transition to the new settlement system after the collapse of the COMECON. In addition, the Hungarian presence in the federal state was significant as well. The basic shortcoming of the Hungarian–Czechoslovak economic cooperation was that modern forms of production cooperation and integration relations did not play a dominant role. The trade turnover characteristic of the structure of the COMECON became surplus in the spring of 1990 because the current ruble-based accounting system was not in line with economic changes. In addition, cross-border, regional, and sub-regional relations have become more valuable, some of which have already grown into multilateral relations.

When Mátyás Szűrös's³ letter to Václav Havel⁴ was published on 12 March 1990, the interim President of the Hungarian Republic, Árpád Göncz,⁵ expressed his concern about the anti-Hungarian nationalist manifestations in Slovakia and called for the needs of the Hungarian minority to be taken into account in the development of the new Czechoslovak legal and institutional system. In a resolution published on 15 March 1990, the Slovak government described this letter as a step that had whipped up national passions. On the part of Czechoslovakia, preparations for the ceremony scheduled for 20 March 1990, on the occasion of laying the foundation stone for the future building of the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Bratislava, were halted.⁶

The Antall government took steps so that the fate and future of the Slovakian Hungarians would be ensured in accordance with the European development standards. One of the key issues in this regard was the consistent Czechoslovak condemnation of the principle of collective guilt about the Beneš decrees. From the Slovak side, accusations were often made that ethnic differences in southern Slovakia were exacerbated by statements made by some Hungarian politicians.

3 Mátyás Szűrös (1933–) was the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament between 1985 and 1989 and the chairman of the Parliament from 10 March 1989. He proclaimed the Republic of Hungary on 23 October 1989 and was President of the Republic until 2 May 1990.

4 Václav Havel (1936–2011) was a Czech writer and politician, who was President of Czechoslovakia (1989–1992) and of the Czech Republic (1993–2003).

5 Árpád Göncz (1922–2015) was the interim President of the Republic from 2 May 1990 to 3 August 1990 and then President until 3 August 2000.

6 For the above, see the Summary of Current Information on Hungarian–Czechoslovak Relations. ANAH XIX–J–1–j 1990 17. b. 9 May 1990.

During the dialogues, certain elements of the common historical past returned several times. In the case of the Hungarian–Czechoslovak Treaty, the Czechoslovak side did not accept the Hungarian proposal – not even in early 1992 – that said that the Contracting Parties would halt regular consultations on the situation of national minorities and would also establish an institutional framework for co-operation. Prague insisted that the 1938 Munich Convention be condemned when the treaty was signed, that they should make a declaration of invalidity or exchange a letter or notes to that effect. The Czechoslovak side could not accept the Hungarian suggestion that such a statement – a letter or a note – should also condemn the principle and application of collective guilt. The contract was not signed at that time. According to the position of the Slovak government adopted on 7 April 1992, the signing of the basic agreement on friendly co-operation and good neighbourly relations should have been postponed, depending on the steps taken by the Hungarian government in connection with the construction of the Bős–Nagymaros Dam system.⁷ In addition, Hungarian–Czechoslovak relations were affected by the disintegration process of Czechoslovakia.

The Hungarian government led by Prime Minister József Antall had to settle the relations between Budapest and Prague and Budapest and Bratislava taking all this into account, especially because it was in the common interest to resolve the structural issue of the Warsaw Pact, strengthen security in the region east of the Elbe, and strengthen regional co-operation. In addition, the Antall government saw the conclusion of new types of bilateral treaties as the basis for its foreign policy, an important element of which were good neighbourly relations.

The Disintegration Process of Czechoslovakia

In Czechoslovakia, the engine of the ‘velvet revolution’ was the Civil Forum (OF) in the Czech Republic and the Public against Violence (VPN) in Slovakia. The two political movements – and then the party – with significant social support forced the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party to take an important step in the democratic transformation of the June 1990 parliamentary elections. The Civil Forum and the Public against Violence won the elections, and their representatives got significant roles in the Czech, Slovak, and federal governments. After the elections in 1990, the development of the market economy in Slovakia had more serious social consequences than in the Czech Republic. The Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar⁸ announced the slower pace of the market economy, which he linked to the representation of the Slovak interests

7 See Sáringer 2021, chapter: The Bős–Nagymaros Dam System. Cf. Jeszenszky 2016: 242–247.

8 Vladimír Mečiar (1942–) is a Slovak politician, who was Prime Minister of Slovakia from 27 June 1990 to 23 April 1991 and then from 24 June 1992 to 13 March 1994.

and to the need to create an independent Slovakia. He formed the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which was joined by the majority of the VPN.

In 1992, the disintegration process of Czechoslovakia and the parliamentary elections in June were primarily in the focus of the politics of Prague and Bratislava. The intellectual elite that, as a result of the elections held on 5–6 June, came to power in November 1989, was pushed to the margins of the political system. In contrast, Václav Klaus's⁹ centre party adopting Czech national interests and left-wing parties from the Czech Republic had taken strong positions. In the whole of Czechoslovakia, the left wing obtained majority, while in the Czech Republic the right wing was in the majority. This might have encouraged the Czech winners to get rid of the left-winged Slovakia to save their economic reform and power. The Party of the Democratic Left of Slovakia¹⁰ talked about common foreign policy as opposed to Vladimír Mečiar. In Bratislava, the federal reactions to the Hungarian steps taken in the case of the Bős–Nagymaros Dam system were considered belated.

After the parliamentary elections held in 1992, the differences between Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar further increased the fragmentation of the political arena. The root cause of the opposition was the asymmetry between the two republics, which was also reflected in the two opposing concepts. At that time, Klaus still considered a unified state as acceptable and workable in some aspects. Mečiar's solution was to abolish the federal state. However, the Slovak leadership was increasingly aware of the economic and social problems arising from the immediate secession, for which – unlike the Czech Republic – it was unprepared. The danger of isolation due to the lack of an international background was also felt in Bratislava. Slovakia's problems were exacerbated by the tense and unstable domestic political situation in the region.

Czechoslovak (Federal) Foreign Policy

The Czechoslovak (federal) foreign policy continued to strengthen its relations with Western European cooperation structures. This has resulted in the ratification of the Free Trade Agreement signed with EFTA¹¹ and the accession to the Council

9 Václav Klaus (1941–) was the Czechoslovak Federal Minister of Finance from 10 December 1989 to 2 July 1992. In April 1991, he was one of the founders of the Liberal-Conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which won the 1992 elections in the Czech Republic.

10 The Party of the Democratic Left (*Strana demokrickej ľavice* – SD) is a Slovak social democratic political party founded in 1990 and united in 2005 with its official successor, the Smer.

11 The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) is an agreement signed in Stockholm on 4 January 1960 by the 'Seven' (Austria, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden). In contrast to the European Economic Community, the 'Six', EFTA is an integration organization that sought to achieve the free movement of industrial products. Iceland became a full member of EFTA in 1970, Finland in 1986, and Liechtenstein in 1991. In 1973, the EFTA

of Europe's Single Act on Human Rights and Freedoms. At a meeting of the CSCE Ministerial Council in Prague in late January 1992, Czechoslovakia took over the rotating presidency of the organization. With its military unit sent to the UN peacekeeping force in Uganda, Czechoslovakia declared its interest in ending the civil war and resolving the Yugoslav crisis. In accordance with the decisions of the European Communities, Czechoslovakia recognized Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in consultation with the Visegrád Three. The country's new bilateral relations continued with the signing of the Czechoslovak–German Basic Agreement in Prague and the Czechoslovak–Russian Basic Agreement in Moscow, as well as an agreement on financial and property issues related to the Soviet troops' stay in Czechoslovakia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia gradually recognized the new independent republics.

Foreign capital showed less interest in Czechoslovakia than expected. In addition to capital of German origin, French, Italian, and, to a lesser extent, US investments also appeared. The largest foreign investors in Slovakia were Austrians, accounting for almost 50% of the foreign capital invested in Slovakia. The reason for the modest inflow of foreign capital is the domestic political uncertainty in the country on the one hand and the economic and political dispute between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which have had an alarming effect on investors, on the other.

In parallel with the process of the division of Czechoslovakia, the separation of the Czech and Slovak foreign services and the establishment of a network of independent foreign representations began. The aim of the Czech foreign policy was to establish the best possible relations with neighbouring states and with the powers that played a key role in international politics and the countries of the Central European region. The Visegrád Three was considered useful for the co-operation of the Central European countries, and their practical and non-institutional role was emphasized.

Slovakia took active foreign policy steps and showed several signs of working towards a Bratislava–Kiev–Bucharest axis.¹² In addition to the establishment of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovak Foreign Minister Milan Kňažko¹³ met with his Hungarian, Austrian, Italian, and Romanian counterparts.

It was in Budapest's interest that its northern neighbour be a stable, democratic country, and it did not intend to isolate Bratislava because in that case there could be a danger that the Bratislava–Kiev–Bucharest axis had Belgrade included.

Member States concluded a free trade agreement with the European Community. On 13 June 1990, Hungary and the EFTA countries signed a declaration of cooperation in Gothenburg.

12 See Cryptographic Telegram from Warsaw. Activities of Romanian diplomacy in Poland. ANAH XIX–J–1–j 1992. 49. b. 11 August 1992.

13 Milan Kňažko (1945–) is a Slovak actor and politician. From 24 June 1992 to 19 March 1993, he was the first Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister of Slovakia.

On 1 January 1993, the split took place, with the creation of the Czech and Slovak Republics, which were automatically recognized by the embassies in Prague.¹⁴

Top-Level Visits to Hungary and Czechoslovakia

On the occasion of the invitation of Václav Havel, Árpád Göncz paid an official working visit to Czechoslovakia¹⁵ on 12 July 1990, followed two days later by a one-day working visit to Bratislava by Tamás Katona,¹⁶ Political Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The purpose of his visit, ‘right after the meeting with the President of the Republic, was to assess the concrete possibilities and intentions of Slovakia, to get acquainted with future Slovak ideas on the structure of relations, and to exchange views on some practical issues of our co-operation’.¹⁷ Tamás Katona also made concrete proposals to strengthen the relations between Budapest and Bratislava – thus, for the exchange of Hungarian and Slovak scholars, the establishment of a Slovak-language department at the University of Szeged, the establishment of a Slovak cultural centre in Békéscsaba, the cooperation of cities, counties, and other territorial units, and the establishment of relations between parliamentary committees. He suggested that *Matica slovenská*¹⁸ send an unlimited number of books to Slovak nationals in Hungary and to the teachers there to improve the quality of education.

At the end of August 1990, Hungarian Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky¹⁹ held a formal meeting in Prague with Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier,²⁰ who made it clear that the federal government wanted to retain its own competence on a number of issues that the Slovak leadership wanted to bring to its exclusive competence: the issue of nationality in Slovakia or the Bős power plant. Jiří Dienstbier also made it clear that there were also competence issues between Bratislava and Prague in foreign affairs. The leaders of Hungarian diplomacy had

14 See Sáringer 2021. 196. Summary report of Ferenc Bősenbacher, member of the Diplomatic Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to Géza Jeszenszky. On 1 January 1993, the embassies in Prague automatically recognized the Czech Republic and Slovakia. 17 November 1992.

15 See Document No. 86 of Sáringer 2015. Report on the official visit of Árpád Göncz, President of the Republic of Hungary, to Czechoslovakia. Date: 17 July 1990.

16 At that time, Tamás Katona (1932–2013) was the Political State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (he held his position between 24 May 1990 and 20 June 1992).

17 See document No. 87 of Sáringer 2015 entitled Report of Tamás Katona, Political State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on his visit to Bratislava. Date: 30 July 1990.

18 *Matica slovenská* was founded in 1863 by leading Slovak politicians living in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, with the aim of bringing together Slovak cultural and scientific life.

19 Géza Jeszenszky (1941–) is a Hungarian historian and politician. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary from 25 May 1990 to 12 June 1994.

20 Jiří Dienstbier (1937–2011) was the Czechoslovak Federal Foreign Minister from December 1989 to June 1992.

to take all these into account to a large extent and strive to establish fair co-operation with Hungarian interests in mind. The issue of the Bős power plant was also discussed at the Foreign Minister's meeting. The Czechoslovak partner emphasized that they wanted to use this investment 'in some way'. Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky explained to his guests that the Hungarian government did not consider it expedient to continue the work on the Bős section of the power plant until sufficient expert opinions were available.²¹

In early February 1991, František Mikloško,²² President of the Slovak National Council, and Vladimír Mečiar, President of the Slovak Republic, visited Hungary. The aim of the meeting was to develop Hungarian–Slovak relations and to clarify existing problems and confounding factors. 'On the Hungarian side, the negotiations emphasized that the efforts to develop Hungarian–Slovak relations are not directed against the Czechoslovak federal system but form part of the relations between the two countries as a whole and serve the Central European rapprochement and the construction of the Europe House.'²³ The Slovak leaders were received by Árpád Göncz, József Antall, and György Szabad. József Antall 'expressed his opinion that our intentions should be clearly stated, which is an important guarantee of understanding. There will obviously be debates in the future.' František Mikloško was the first to touch on the issue of the Bős–Nagymaros dam system and called it an 'inherited sin'. Nonetheless, the question of how to proceed had to be answered, and a compromise acceptable to both parties had to be found. Mečiar called the meeting a 'mission of good hope' and referred to the geographical significance of Slovakia as far as his country was supposed to be between Hungary and Poland. Prime Minister József Antall informed Vladimír Mečiar that the issue of the dam was a legacy that had to be dealt with, but it had to be taken into account that it was a serious political issue in Hungary. 'The opposition, which has been united in protests against the BNV, now forms a majority in the parliament. Resolving the issue is not a matter for government decision, as it requires a parliamentary resolution. It is up to further bilateral negotiations to determine whether the arguments are properly prepared professionally.' Prime Minister József Antall spoke about the planned Visegrád summit, where negotiations must be held in order for the trilateral co-operation to be effective.

21 See Sáringer 2015 No. 90 entitled Géza Jeszenszky's report to the government on his official visit to Prague. Date: 14 September 1990.

22 František Mikloško (1947–) was a Slovak politician and President of the Slovak National Council between 1990 and 1992.

23 Document No. 132 of Sáringer 2018. Summary of the visit of František Mikloško, President of the Slovak National Council and Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, to the competent regional department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 22 February 1991.

Former Federal President Vaclav Havel told József Antall in Helsinki²⁴ that the disintegration of Czechoslovakia was unstoppable. For this reason, the Hungarian Prime Minister invited Václav Klaus Czech Prime Minister and Vladimír Mečiar Slovak Prime Minister to Hungary. After the Czechoslovak elections (June 1992), Václav Klaus's first foreign trip led to Hungary. During the working visit, he had a brief discussion with József Antall, during which he put economic cooperation first in the relationship between the two countries. He called it unfortunate, but not surprising, that trade turnover had fallen. He called this fact an intermediate state and suggested that the ministers meet in September to shorten the transition period.²⁵

Vladimír Mečiar paid a working visit to Hungary in early September 1992, during which he made the following statements: 'It was a stabilizing element that the Hungarian card could not be played. [...] The "necessary rights" are guaranteed, the situation of the Hungarian minority is the best there, they do everything they can to "avoid ethnic conflict" [...] The minority issue is a "by-product", but public opinion must be taken into account. [...] In Slovakia, "we got rid of the nationalist movements".' In the light of the real situation, Mečiar's sentences testified to strong hypocrisy. Consul-General Jenő Boros in Bratislava reported on anti-Hungarian writings in the Slovak press. On the Slovak side, there was an awareness that Hungarian politics were seeking the later feedback of the southern territories, which were also featured in newspapers and commentaries close to the government.²⁶

The Bős–Nagymaros Dam System

The construction of the Bős–Nagymaros Dam System, signed in 1977 by the leaders of two state-socialist countries, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, became the neuralgic point of Hungarian–Czechoslovak and Hungarian–Slovak relations. In Hungary, the Danube Circle, which was established in September 1984, played an important role in the process of regime change and structural change. The central theme of the movement was the protection of the environment and the Danube, and the Danube Circle won the alternative Nobel Prize in 1985. 'After that, the Danube movement became one of the "schools" of Hungarian democracy' (Bába 2015: 51). The protest against the construction of the Bős–Nagymaros Dam system played an important role in the change of regime in Hungary. There was

24 The follow-up meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Helsinki, took place from 24 March to 10 June 1992.

25 See Sáringer 2021. 189. Report to the Government on the visit of the Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus to Budapest. 17 August 1992.

26 Sáringer 2021. Document No. 171. Letter from the Chief Consul-General of Bratislava Jenő Boros on anti-Hungarian manifestations in the Slovak press. 14 April 1992.

a social consensus against the dam system, which became a political force by the end of the 1980s, and the case of Bős–Nagymaros became one of the identification factors in the change of regime in Hungary.

In May 1989, the government led by Miklós Németh halted construction at Nagymaros. At the end of August 1989, the Czechoslovak government stated in a letter that if the Hungarian side did not continue construction, the Czechoslovak side would unilaterally divert the Danube and put the power plant into operation. Prague withdrew from the case in May 1990 and left the dispute to the Slovak government. In the event of a complete halt in construction, Hungary was willing to pay compensation to the Austrian contractor, which affected Austria sensitively because they were one of the beneficiaries of the electricity generated by the dam system.²⁷

On the Slovak side, Vladimír Mečiar developed the issues related to the Bős–Nagymaros Dam system into a national affair, which strengthened anti-Hungarian sentiments, and at the same time treated several elements of Hungarian–Slovak relations as ‘hostages’. The Slovak leadership used the construction of the dam to incite nationalism, this way creating a hostile image in the midst of Slovakia’s independence. Mečiar and his people combined their search for identity against someone with their extreme nationalism, one of the characteristics of which was anti-Hungarianism.

In January 1991, the essence of the Hungarian concept was to terminate the 1977 interstate agreement by mutual agreement in the negotiations with the Czechoslovak side and to create a new one to settle it. Accordingly, the Hungarian position reflected the recognition of the primacy of ecological values. The Hungarian side did not accept the filling of the Dunakiliti reservoir, the diversion of the Danube, and the commissioning of the upstream canal.

In a letter dated 23 January 1992, the Czechoslovak Federal Prime Minister Marián Čalfa announced that on 12 December the Government of the CSSR had adopted a resolution authorizing the commissioning and completion of the Bős hydroelectric power plant on the territory of the CSSR. With this, the Prime Minister declared the unilateral diversion of the Danube and ran aground on bilateral intergovernmental talks on the hydropower issue.²⁸ On 5 August 1992, the Czechoslovak Government notified the Danube Commission²⁹ in writing

27 On what has been said, see Bába 2015: 50–57 and Jeszenszky 2016: 242–247.

28 Sáringer 2021. Document No. 206. The Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, Marián Čalfa, wrote to the Hungarian Government, informing them of the unilateral diversion of the Danube. 12 February 1992.

29 The Danube Commission was established in 1948 after its predecessor organization established in 1856. Its aim is to promote cooperation on shipping on the Danube. In 1948, a convention signed by the coastal states declared the application of the principle of free navigation on the Danube. Cabotage traffic could be maintained by each country, and each country was obliged to maintain the waterways of the river section belonging to its territory and to carry out customs and health control and river policing tasks. The revision of the Convention began in 1993.

that the crossing of the Danube would be realized between 15 October and 30 November 1992. On April 4 1992, the Hungarian Parliament authorized the government to unilaterally terminate the 1977 interstate treaty, which took place on 19 May. In his submission to the government in early September 1992, Géza Jeszenszky proposed a response: Submitting a joint application and action with the Czechoslovak government to the International Court of Justice in The Hague.³⁰ It was in our fundamental interest that the procedure reached a stage as soon as possible in which we could ask the court to suspend the work on a temporary basis. The advantage of the procedure was that the court's decision was binding in the event of subjection. The downside, however, was that the Czechoslovak government might delay the process and complete the construction in Bős.³¹

On 25 September 1992, at the ceremonial handover of the Danube–Main–Rhine Canal in Nuremberg, József Antall spoke about the unilateral diversion of the Danube:

It would not be fair for me to hide the fact that there is a serious tension between Hungary and Czechoslovakia and Slovakia, which is becoming sovereign, in the context of the common Danube section. Although we are clearly striving for good neighbourly relations, I still have to talk about the international legal, ecological, and shipping problems related to the construction of the Danube hydropower plant. We can only regret that the Federal Government of Czechoslovakia and the Slovak Government have not yet found a way to a common position.³²

Three weeks later, on behalf of the Czechoslovak government, the Austrian construction company completed the work on the unilateral diversion of the Danube and ordered a three-day shipping lock. One day before the Hungarian national holiday, on 22 October 1992, officially the Czechoslovak government, but in fact the Slovak government, diverted the Danube from its natural channel. On 27 October 1992, with the involvement of the EC Commission, the two parties signed the London Agreement, which provided for the settlement of disputes between the countries before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Temporary water sharing had been applied for the period until the court ruling.

Despite bilateral and multilateral consultations, the Slovak side did not honour its commitments, and the Danube was blocked and unilaterally diverted, disregarding the principle of good faith – the basic *bona fide* principle of

30 The International Court of Justice (Hague) is the primary judicial body of the United Nations.

31 Sáringer 2021. Document No. 210. Submission to the Government on the planned Hungarian response to the construction of the Bős–Nagyymaros Dam system in Czechoslovakia. 1 September 1992.

32 Communicated by Marinovich 2018. 79–80.

international treaties; nor did they intend to change that, which might have been due to the fact that the construction company was based in Austria.

Hungarian National Policy

One of the factors determining the foreign policy of the Hungarian government led by József Antall was that Hungary, as a subject of international law, did not coincide with the Hungarian nation as a historical formation. An important element of the new Hungarian foreign policy strategy was the support of Hungarians living outside the borders. At the end of May, the Hungarian Parliament passed a resolution on Hungarian minorities living in the neighbouring countries, according to which:

The responsibility and concern of the mother nation for the fate of their national minorities should be given a contractual international legal framework. The protection and development of the identity of national minorities, the legal guarantee of the individual and collective rights of national minorities living in the region, their participation in public life and the decision-making of their own affairs, the legal guarantee of their self-organization and self-government, and the use of nationality, education, cultural life, religion, and information.³³

In bilateral agreements, the Hungarian government guaranteed unhindered contact between national minorities and provided assistance to Hungarian national minorities living in neighbouring countries.

The cornerstone of the nation's concept of the government led by József Antall was that all members of the Hungarian nation who professed to be Hungarian should be able to live anywhere in the world.³⁴ No one can be excluded from the nation on ideological, political, or religious grounds. Dealing with Hungarians living abroad, monitoring their destiny, and protecting and representing their interests in accordance with the norms of international law was one of the key elements of the new Hungarian foreign policy in bilateral interstate relations and international forums. This idea also permeated the foreign policy concept and diplomatic practice.

33 See Sáringer 2015 No. 114. Resolution of the Parliament of the Republic of Hungary on the situation of Hungarian national minorities living in neighbouring countries – 24 May 1990.

34 In the United States, on the occasion of the 1988 census, 727,000 people declared themselves Hungarian in both literal equality branches and 1,777,000 in one branch. There were 200–300 thousand Jews in Europe, 120,000 in Canada, 110,000 in Latin America, 70,000 in Australia, 20,000 in Africa, and 200,000 in Israel.

In the course of the historical transformation taking place in Eastern, Central, and South-Eastern Europe, the issue of nationals and nationality had resurfaced and often became the subject of serious conflicts. The Ural Mountains and the Oder–Leitha–Adriatic region as a whole affect several tens of millions of people. Western Europe was not free of national minority problems either. In shaping the international (and domestic) minority policy of the new Hungarian government, it was based on the general recognition that – in addition to its political, economic, ecological, and military components – the human and humanitarian factors are indispensable elements of international security. Unconditional respect for human rights is a universally accepted requirement in international relations and cannot be considered the exclusive internal affair of states. The full guarantee and continuous development of national and ethnic minority rights, which are an integral part of human rights, contribute decisively to the strengthening of international trust, the development of bilateral and regional relations, the deepening of the Helsinki process, and the consolidation of universal peace. Satisfactory treatment and reassuring the institutional settlement of the situation of national and ethnic minorities is a precondition and a measure of justice, democracy, and the rule of law. Nationalities that fully enforce their rights, freely preserve and develop their identity, language, and culture, and act autonomously in their own affairs are links between states and key factors in the internal strength and prosperity of their state. The rights of national minorities can only be fully exercised if persons belonging to these communities can exercise their individual minority rights in their natural communities, collectively. The real equality of rights of national minorities, the offsetting of the inherent disadvantages of being a minority requires that, in addition to the rights granted to the majority, they also enjoy the special rights deriving from their minority status; literal equality before the law means the legal disadvantage of the minority – e.g. in case of the language use of a majority minority.

The Hungarian government considered it particularly important that national and ethnic minorities truly live on an equal footing with the majority nation. In the spirit of these principles, the Hungarian government sought to enshrine and guarantee the rights of national minorities on four levels. The first level was the area of bilateral relations: Budapest proposed a joint declaration to all its neighbours except Austria. A draft bilateral declaration was drawn up with Ukraine and signed by Géza Jeszenszky in April 1991. Croatia and Slovenia reacted positively to the Hungarian initiative, and Belgrade did not oppose either. According to Prague and Bratislava, the issue should have been resolved at a European level, but they did not shy away from consultations. Romania considered the matter exclusively an internal matter. Romania reacted angrily and dismissively to the Hungarian initiatives, while gradually trying to restore the practice of Ceaușescu's

previous ethnic policy.³⁵ At the second regional level, the Hungarian government encouraged and participated in the elaboration of the Pentagon proposal, which was presented at the Copenhagen human rights conference and which formed one of the foundations of the Copenhagen document. At the third level, Hungarian diplomacy played an active role in the work of the Commission for Democracy through Law preparing the convention of the Council of Europe Convention. The draft also reflected the Hungarian intention. Budapest called for the development and adoption of a universal minority charter within the UN framework. To promote this, Géza Jeszenszky officially announced at the Geneva session of the Human Rights Committee in February 1991 (fourth level) the readiness of the Hungarian Government to host the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights.

It is necessary to mention the events of 16 September 1992 in connection with the qualifying football match between Slovan Bratislava and FTC Champions League (4–1). In the fifty-fifth minute, in the Hungarian sector and in the Sector C behind the gate, where a mix of Slovak and Hungarian fans were present, the Slovak police and commandos launched an attack and brutally beat the supporters. The Slovak government did not distance itself from the nature and methods of police action. In the media, the responsibility was shifted to the Hungarian sensitivity and to Hungary. The Slovak government complained that the Hungarian government had raised the matter to a diplomatic level. Slovakia saw this as fuelling anti-Slovak sentiments.³⁶ Today, the brutality of the police seems to have been a planned action, backed by intimidation, exaggeration, and preliminary force assessment, probing into: How does the majority of Slovaks react to such an event with international and ethnic dimensions? The Slovak government's policy miscalculated the gravity and danger of the events in the stadium in respect of the Hungarian–Slovak relations or Slovakia's international image.

New Forms of Cooperation in Central Europe and the Visegrád Cooperation

The Alps–Adriatic Cooperation was established in 1978 and was the basis for a community of countries along the Danube–Adriatic geographical line. At the initiative of Italy – Hungary, Austria, Yugoslavia, and Italy and their Foreign Ministers agreed in Budapest on 11 and 12 November 1989 to deepen good neighbourly relations and co-operation between the states (Quadrangone) along

35 Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989) was the leader of the Romanian Communist Party and the dictator of Romania from 1965 to 1989.

36 Sáringer 2021. Document No. 194. Letter from the Chief Consul-General of Bratislava, Jenő Boros, on Slovak foreign affairs and current issues in Hungarian–Slovak relations. 21 September 1992.

cultural and historical traditions and based on the role of national minorities as bridges, an agreement joined by Czechoslovakia on 28 May 1990.

The first summit of the emerging organization was held in Venice from 31 July to 1 August 1990, during which the Italian name of Greek-Latin origin, the *Pentagonale*, became established. At that time, membership was conditional on the freely elected parliament in the candidate country exercising legislative power, guaranteeing human rights and recognizing the rights of national minorities. The agglomeration has proved to be geographically closed but also flexible enough to work with other countries.

At the second summit in Dubrovnik, on 26–27 July 1991, at the strong request of József Antall, Poland became the sixth member of the organization, creating the *Hexagonale*. This cooperation became the Central European Initiative in 1992,³⁷ when Yugoslavia's membership was suspended and Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the successor states to Yugoslavia, were accepted instead. In 1993, the organization expanded again due to the separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia and the accession of Macedonia. The objectives of the CEEC included strengthening regional co-operation, promoting European integration, and supporting the EU accession process of non-EU Member States (See Bába–Gyurcsík–Kiss 2020).

An important element of the establishment and operation of the Visegrád Cooperation is the geographical-historical-cultural cohesion, in which the traditions of the common historical past and the idea of Central Europeanness – which also relies on the roots of the 19th century – played a significant role. It is also a significant cohesive force that all three countries had moderately developed economies but were relatively more developed within the COMECON. In parallel with the change of regime, they were at the forefront of building a market economy compared to the former state-socialist countries of Central Europe.

In terms of political cohesion, all three countries are characterized by a system of goals and means of negotiated regime change and democratic transition. The institutions of democracy and their mechanisms have essentially developed in the three countries. The dynamism that changed the previous system and the regional community of interests necessitated further and continuous co-operation between the three countries.

The security and foreign policy priorities of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland were the restoration of Euro-Atlantic integration and national sovereignty, primarily through the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops and the abolition of the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON. The Warsaw Pact and the CMO were disbanded during 1991, but the administrative, personal and inter-institutional relations acquired over several decades have survived. All this contributed to

37 Cf. Sáringer 2021 with document No. 282. Cryptography from Rome. The Italian government attaches importance to the Central European Initiative. 28 December 1992.

organizational and functional cohesion, which was further strengthened by their membership of international institutions in pan-European organizations such as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), the Organization (OSCE), and the Council of Europe.

Among the external cohesion factors, the unstable domestic political situation in the Soviet Union was significant, especially those Soviet internal forces (conservatives) who wanted to keep their empire and reorganize their military and power. Another important factor is that a significant portion of U.S. decision makers treated the three countries together. In the meantime, Washington shared Central European security responsibilities with the united Germany, which also supported regional cooperation in the region.³⁸

The antecedents of the Hungarian–Czechoslovak–Polish triad include the fact that in August 1990 Polish Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski³⁹ sent a letter to his Hungarian colleague, Géza Jeszenszky, proposing a conciliation forum for the Deputy Foreign Ministers of the three countries. In December 1990, a tripartite foreign consultation took place in Prague, where the parties agreed on the issue of the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact and the date of the Visegrád Summit. On 21 January 1991, the three foreign ministers met in Budapest and were greeted by József Antall, who told them: ‘we consider important not only the tripartite co-operation and the development of a common position on all important issues today, including the future of the Warsaw Pact, but also the Lithuanian issue. We support coordinating our cooperation with Western European integrations.’⁴⁰

The leaders of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland, and the Republic of Hungary signed a declaration in Visegrád on 15 February 1991, and with this act the co-operation of the Visegrád Three was established. At the meeting, József Antall said about the tripartite co-operation that ‘we do not want to create an organization that would give the impression that a new international organization is being created, which could be an alternative to other European organizations. It is important that our negotiations with European organizations take place in parallel and independently. However, the three countries should coordinate on these issues. This also applies to military policy issues.’⁴¹

The last sentence of the Hungarian Prime Minister is related to the fact that the Union of European Centre-Right Parties held its meeting in Helsinki in September

38 Adding that in the transforming Central Europe, united Germany was interested in the system of small states (Mitteleuropa).

39 Krzysztof Jan Skubiszewski (1926–2010) was Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland from 12 September 1989 to 26 October 1993.

40 Sáringer 2018a. Document 184. Report of the competent regional department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Hungarian government on the Hungarian–Czechoslovak–Polish meeting at the level of foreign ministers in Budapest. 30 January 1991.

41 Sáringer 2018a. Document No. 188. Foreign Ministry Summary of the Visegrád Summit. 16 February 1991.

1990. At this meeting, József Antall outlined his plan for the Central and Eastern European Union, whose member states would be Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. They would secede from the Warsaw Pact and form an independent military alliance, and its structure would be similar to that of the Western European Union. An essential element of the concept was for the Union to negotiate as an equal partner with the Western European Union (WEU), the defence organization of Western European states, and thus serve as an intermediate institution until the three states join the NATO. In 1992, the Visegrád countries already designed a unified air defence system.⁴²

In the first phase of the Visegrád Cooperation (1991–1993), cooperation between member states worked well. One of the foreign policy goals of the Visegrád Group of three member states was integration into the European Communities / the European Union. In the 1990s, support for the democratic states of the Central and Eastern European region became an important element of the Council of Europe's policy. Respect for human rights, the establishment of democratic institutions and a market economy were conditions for membership of the Council of Europe and a threshold for accession to the European Communities / the European Union.

In October 1991, the foreign leaders of the Visegrád Three decided in Kraków to establish the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA),⁴³ which aims to accelerate and deepen integration with Western European institutions, strengthening the democratic system and free market economy of their states. Three months later, there was another meeting in Warsaw, where they agreed on the need to strengthen the international importance of trilateral co-operation and the co-ordination element of their activities at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe. The members of the Triadic Group of Visegrád also sought to develop relations with the Western European Union, the European Communities, and the NATO.

Another summit of the Visegrád Three member states was held in Prague on 6 May 1992, where József Antall stated the following:

The question always arises: what unites us? First, it connects us with memories of historical tradition, good and bad. Secondly, we are connected by a geographical link, which also provides an opportunity for economic co-operation. The third thing that unites us is the Euro-Atlantic security system, which we absolutely need. And, finally, the fourth is a practical question: we are sitting together in the 'dentist's waiting room' of the European Community. The Association Agreement, which we have agreed

42 Sáringer 2015. Document No. 132. György O'sváth's note on the reception of József Antall's plan for the Hungarian, Czechoslovak, and Polish unions in Brussels. 21 September, 1990.

43 Sáringer 2021. Document No. 276. Cryptographic telegram from Warsaw. Free Trade Agreement of the Visegrád Three. 17 September 1992.

on together, forces us to work together in the common interest. [...] We must continue to be aware, even after the Maastricht meeting, as we are all aware at this table that there is no complete consensus within the European Community on all aspects. Formally everyone agrees, but there are differences in emphasis (currency, certain economic issues, issues arising from the development of regions, the degree of sovereignty). So, we need to know that we will not be joining the European Communities in 1992 but presumably the European Communities at the end of the century.⁴⁴

Following the Prague Summit, the Czechoslovak government's foreign policy activity in the run-up to the parliamentary elections became more subdued. Moreover, some specific steps were taken on the part of Czechoslovakia, which were described in the report of the Hungarian mission in Strasbourg. At the behest of Prague, the Czechoslovak side regularly and deliberately avoided negotiations. In Strasbourg, the Czechoslovak ambassador spoke at non-public events on behalf of the Three but represented only Czechoslovak interests. On several occasions, the Czechoslovak delegation voted differently despite explicit attempts at conciliation between Hungary and Poland.⁴⁵

In August 1992, Václav Klaus from the Czech Republic and Vladimír Mečiar from the Slovak Republic agreed to become the two independent states of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, which took effect on 1 January 1993. From then on, the Visegrád co-operation transformed into the Visegrád Four (V4) (Bába–Gyurcsík–Kiss Gy. 2020, Sáringer 2018b).

Summary

The goal of the Hungarian government led by József Antall was the widening of political relations with Czechoslovakia at both the federal and republican levels. The basis of the cooperation of the two countries was the European integration. The purpose of the Visegrád Cooperation, established at the beginning of 1991, was to take joint and coordinated steps towards the Euro-Atlantic integration. In addition, both Budapest and Prague were interested in the strengthening of the economic cooperation, which was partly helped by the economic relations made during the operation of the KGST, and which was partly made difficult with the dissolution of the KGST by the transition from the rubel accounting system to the dollar accounting system. The political relations were characterized by regular bilateral, high-level visits and dialogues, which fundamentally

44 Hungarian Foreign Policy Yearbook 1992. 190–192.

45 The unsigned document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Visegrád Three in the Council of Europe. ANAH XIX–A–150–j 91. b. 27 April 1992.

influenced positively the Hungarian–Czechoslovakian relations. But neuralgic points, such as the Bős–Nagymaros Water Barrage System and the Beneš decrees, made the cooperation difficult. During the examined period, both parties were open to resolve the problem of the Water Barrage System, trying to settle the controversial issues through negotiations. But the starting point of Budapest and Prague (later on Bratislava) were not the same. The process of disintegration of Czechoslovakia, which by 1992 had become evident, caused difficulties during the collaboration, and in addition Prague transferred the matter of the Water Barrage System to the jurisdiction of the newly formed Slovak government. The Vladimír Mečiar type of search for identity defined itself against the Czechs and primarily the Hungarians, which Mečiar connected – and developed into a Slovak national cause – with the construction of the Bős–Nagymaros Water Barrage System supported by the Austrian capital, a symbol of the creation of an independent Slovakia. The Czechoslovak federal government, and later the Czech government, distanced themselves from the repeal of the Beneš decrees – the principle of collective guilt. All of these have put a strain on bilateral and tripartite relations.

References

Archives of the National Archives of Hungary

ANAH XIX–J–1–j 1990. Box 17.

ANAH XIX–J–1–j 1992. Box 49.

ANAH XIX–A–150–j. Box 91.

BÁBA, Iván. 2015. Rendszerváltoztatás Magyarországon. Egy történelmi pillanat leírása. Budapest: VERITAS–Magyar Napló.

BÁBA, Iván–GYURCSÍK, Iván–KISS GY., Csaba. 2020. *Közép-Európa magyar szemmel*. Kőszeg: Felsőbbfokú Tanulmányok Intézete (iASK).

JESZENSZKY, Géza. 2016. *Kísérlet a trianoni trauma orvoslására. Magyarország szomszédsági politikája a rendszerváltozás éveiben*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó.

MARINOVICH, Endre. 2018. *1315 nap. Antall József miniszterelnöksége*. Budapest: Magyar Napló–VERITAS.

SÁRINGER, János. 2015. *Iratok az Antall-kormány külpolitikájához és diplomáciájához 1990. május – 1990. december*. Budapest: VERITAS–Magyar Napló.

2018a. *Iratok az Antall-kormány külpolitikájához és diplomáciájához 1991. január – 1991. december*. Budapest: VERITAS–Magyar Napló.

2018b. Visegrád újjászületése az államszocializmus bukása után (1991–2004). In: Balaskó, Angéla (ed.), *A Visegrádi Négyek jelentősége, struktúrája és értékei*. Budapest: Külügyi és Külgazdasági Intézet.

2021. *Iratok az Antall-kormány külpolitikájához és diplomáciájához 1992. január – 1992. december*. Budapest: VERITAS–Magyar Napló.

TORDA Endréné (ed.). 1992. *Magyar Külpolitikai Évkönyv 1992*. Budapest: Külügyminisztérium.