

THE ENVIRONMENT, BORDERS, AND POLITICS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CENTRAL
EUROPE'S GABCIKOVO-NAGYMAROS HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT BEFORE AND AFTER
1989

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ABSTRACT The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros hydroelectric project began as a shared industrial project between the socialist governments of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It typified such projects in that little heed was paid to its potential ecological consequences. This led to vigorous protests in Hungary, which eventually helped bring about the collapse of the socialist regime there. Since the revolutions of 1989, the issue of what to do with the half-completed project has brought Hungary into political conflict with the newly independent Slovakia. In this paper, the links between various environmental standpoints and political agendas are explored throughout the history of this project.

INTRODUCTION

On May 19, 1992, the democratically-elected Hungarian government announced its withdrawal from a shared hydroelectric project with Czechoslovakia which had been planned and largely carried out before the collapse of Eastern European communism in 1989. The project involved a new channel that had been excavated in order to divert much of the Danube river, which forms 144 km. of the border between the two countries, to a hydroelectric plant in Gabčíkovo, Slovakia. The Hungarian Government cited "catastrophic environmental consequences" (EIU, Czechoslovakia 1992, p.18) for the agricultural and wetland area alongside the old channel of the Danube, should the plan be fully implemented.

On Oct. 24, 1992, the Slovaks unilaterally diverted almost the entire river into the new channel, precipitating a crisis both political and environmental in nature. According to the Hungarian Parliament, "for 30 km. of the old riverbed, water volume is down four-fifths, preventing navigation, causing environmental damage, and jeopardising subsoil freshwater supplies to several million people." (FBIS 24 Feb 1993, p.21) Despite ongoing negotiations, the situation has not yet been resolved. The resultant level of tension is evidenced by the April 1993 statement of a Hungarian parliamentarian on the "international scandal" of the Danube diversion: "It was entirely due to Hungary's patient attitude that the affair did not escalate into an international conflict." (FBIS 30 Apr 1993, p.10)

The environment is at the heart of this issue. The actual physical geography of the area and, equally important, varied perceptions and constructions of the environment have become the objects of a protracted political struggle. The dimensions of this debate crosscut other contested notions such as national sovereignty, and political legitimacy. In fact, environmental debates have become a proxy for these other issues.

This paper tracks the dominant perceptions of -- and rhetoric concerning -- "environment" through postwar Eastern European history, tying them explicitly to the political agendas they were intended to promote. It is a history characterised by radical changes. First, the largely agrarian societies of central and eastern Europe were subjected to semipermanent Soviet military occupation, massive industrialization and an imposed Stalinist socioeconomic system. In 1989, this system collapsed under its own weight and new economic, social and political pressures have been induced from the West -- most of them completely contrary to those of the previous establishment.

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This paper will examine the two major chronological phases of this story. The first is the communist period, from the end of World War II to 1989. The second comes during and after the collapse of eastern european communism, as the former Soviet Bloc countries attempt to adjust to the change sweeping over them. In both sections, the focus will be on analysis of the changing emphasis and significance assigned to the environment.

The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project is not as clearcut a case of direct environmental degradation as, for instance, the profound industrial pollution in the brown-coal mining areas of northern Bohemia. However, it is a very useful case-study for several reasons. First, it involves the Danube river. This body of water, by its very nature as a free-flowing international river, is a useful tool for analysing the nexus of environment and politics. The Danube is contained by and partially defines the borders of a diverse group of European nation-states including Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Yet, by virtue of its constant movement, it does not belong to any, except in a transitory manner. It throws into question the notion of "the permanent sovereignty of States over their natural resources" (*Policies...*, UNEC 1985) by refusing to stay put, and makes each state vulnerable to pollution or water-supply restriction from the states lying upstream. This dynamic applies not only to former Soviet Bloc states, but also between East and West. In fact, western states, particularly Austria, have played a decisive role in the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project, even previous to 1989.

Second, the system of dams was conceived and partially built during the Communist era. In its near complete state in 1989, it served as a symbol for decisions facing most former East-Bloc states -- whether to continue dependence on a Soviet-style infrastructure, conscious of the high long-term environmental and economic price, or to resign oneself to short-term privation and social dislocation -- so called "shock treatment" -- in the hope of reaping eventual social and economic benefits.

Furthermore, such dilemmas have been posed simultaneously to many individual states, each of which has responded in a manner corresponding to its unique economic, political and social constraints. Differing national priorities, resource bases, and political cultures have logically led to heterogeneous post-communist coping-strategies in Eastern Europe. However, some of the problems facing these countries, particularly environmental ones, transcend national political boundaries. Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros is such a problem, and the irreconcilably different viewpoints adopted by the states involved have resulted in a brand new set of problems since 1989.

Finally, the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros issue has always been very explicitly politicised and, as such, provides a clear cut example of the difficulty of resolving environmental issues which crosscut political, ethnic, and ideological lines. As is the case here, the environment becomes a contested concept, invoked by all sides in order to justify their particular agenda. While dependent on many local and particular factors, the phases of this controversy have generally reflected the pattern of events and attitudes regarding the environment in postwar Eastern Europe.

THE SOCIALIST YEARS; STATE UTILITARIANISM (1945-81)

In 1963, Hungary and Czechoslovakia began planning a set of dams and locks along a 144 km. stretch of the Danube River which formed their mutual border. Within a decade, the plan had become an ambitious "final scheme" in which the river was to be dammed twice and diverted away from 10 miles of its original bed.

According to the treaty signed between the two countries in 1977, the first dam would be built at Dunakiliti, at the western end of the shared riparian border. (see Fig. 1) Its role was twofold. First, it would cause a large backup of water, the Hrusov reservoir. Second, it would periodically release a flow of water, comprising 97% of the river's natural volume, from the reservoir into a raised concrete-

lined canal built in Slovak territory. This "bypass canal" would run parallel to, but north of, the old riverbed and feed an eight turbine hydroelectric plant at Gabčíkovo, Slovakia, before flowing back into the old channel. An additional dam and power plant were to be built further downstream at Nagymaros, Hungary.

Fig.1:



The electrical generation would come from water surges between the power plants, to be released twice daily. First, a volume of water, twelve feet above the normal level, would be propelled from the Hrusov reservoir to the Gabčíkovo plant, where it would be forced through eight turbines to provide peak-time energy. Afterwards, it would, in turn, be dispatched downstream to Nagymaros, where containment and peak-time electricity generation would be repeated. (Schapiro, 72) The bypass system was geared to the geography of the area. It was the only way to generate the surges of water necessary for electrical generation in the flat Danubian flood-plain.

The planners of the dam had two main objectives in mind. The first was the cooperation and interdependence between the socialist states of eastern Europe.

The dam was seen as a project between "fraternal socialist states," under the aegis of Comecon. In 1971, Brezhnev introduced the "Comprehensive Program for the Further Extension and Improvement of Cooperation and the Development of Socialist Integration by the Comecon Member Countries." (Brown, 146-8) The new program emphasized "joint investments, joint enterprises and international associations" (Mellor, 229) as a basis for voluntary interstate cooperation. The cooperation between Hungary and Czechoslovakia on the Danube project embodies this strategy. This is reflected in the

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preamble of the 1977 treaty, which aims to: "further strengthen the fraternal relations of the two States and significantly contribute to bringing about the socialist integration of the States members of the Council for Mutual Economic Co-operation." (32 I.L.M. 1249)

The second objective of the project was to subdue and harness the natural environment of the area. This goal was facilitated by a utilitarian attitude toward the environment by the socialist regimes -- it was generally regarded as either a resource or a threat. The imperative of harnessing natural resources is reflected in the 1977 treaty preamble, which stresses "...the development of water resources, energy, transport, agriculture and other sectors of the national economy of the Contracting Parties" (32 I.L.M. 1249). The project foresaw irrigation and improved navigation in this notoriously shallow section of the river. The latter was a key factor for the Russians, who favored the project "not only as an example of fraternal cooperation between Comecon countries but also...because the deeper water-course thus created would allow heavy military materiel to be moved by water as far as Bratislava." (Rich 1992, 217) The generation of electricity was also a key objective -- it was a precondition to industrial development and had taken on an "ideological undertone" since the 1962 completion of a Comecon eastern european electricity grid. (Mellor, 239)

On the other hand, the river's tendency to flood represented a threat which could be mitigated by the construction of dams and channels. A catastrophic 1965 flood on the Slovak side was a major impetus for the project. (Okolicsany 1992a, p.53)

The dam treaty included measures to control floodwaters as well as navigational hazards such as spring ice-floes and shallow sandbanks. (32 I.L.M. 1255)

The corollary to this utilitarian attitude can be a disregard for environmental consequences. An example of this is the use of the Danube river as a depository for the unfiltered sewage of both Budapest and Bratislava as late as 1990. (Simons) In the 1977 dam treaty itself, environmental protection is treated briefly and vaguely. This is hardly surprising in a system in which state control both of industries and regulatory agencies caused "a conflict of interests in which the environment was the loser." (Okolicsanyi 1992b, 65)

Environmental Protest and the Fall of Communism

By the late 1970's, the accumulating economic, environmental and cultural costs resulting from the practical application of state-utilitarianism had spawned dissent across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Its expression under the rubric of environmental activism was based on notions of the environment radically different from those of communist national and international government structures. Despite their focus on environmental issues, these groups were also able to indirectly campaign for individual rights, accountable government and nation-state sovereignty.

As Eastern European communism evolved, the relationship between citizens and central government developed in the form of a singular social contract. (Dennis 1993, Jancar 1992, Schapiro 1990, Brown 1988) Crackdowns in East Berlin (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Poland (1970, 1981) proved the determination of the communist regimes and their Soviet guarantors to suppress dissent. However, such overt unrest in the "worker's paradise" was politically embarrassing. (Brown, 209) As a result, the eastern european regimes launched a pro-active campaign against dissent in the form of a "socio-economic mode of legitimation." This stipulated that "in return for an acceptable standard of living the citizens tacitly, if unenthusiastically, were supposed to accept the party's claim to be the leading force in society." (Dennis, 15)

This general principle varied in its application from state to state. The history of communist Eastern Europe is characterized by a tension between conformity to a Stalinist command-and-control socio-economic norm and its adaptation to fit the national traits of individual countries. (Jancar, 160) Crackdowns have generally occurred when the political order in one of the countries diverged too far

from that dictated by the center, but this did not prevent the proliferation of country-specific forms of socialism. These differing levels and types of government control formed fundamentally different national political cultures, which, in turn, shaped events the up to and since the revolutions of 1989:

Countries with a determined and homogeneous population, like Poland and Hungary, were able to soften the features of Communist rule to where they were scarcely visible to the outside observer. Regimes in other countries did not feel so secure. The Czechoslovak authorities believed they had to crack down on freedom of speech and association up until the very end. (Jancar, 161)

The differences between the Hungarian and Czechoslovak regimes, in particular, have brought them to an impasse over the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project which, as we will see, still persists. However, in both Czechoslovakia and Hungary, it was common public concern for the environment which originally revealed the chinks in socialism's armor. Across Eastern Europe, in the late 1980's, the environment became a "rallying point" of social protest, which, despite seemingly benign intentions, soon acquired "unstoppable momentum." (French, 6)

The reason that environmental activism played such a crucial role in the revolutions of 1989 is simple. By polluting the environment to the extent that they did, the central governments had reneged on their end of the social contract. The state monopoly of power was "premised upon its ability to promote economic and social well-being." (Jancar, 164) By the early 1980's, and particularly after the Chernobyl accident in 1986, the state of the environment was not only a source of "public disgust" (French, 6), but an active threat to human health and welfare. (Wolfson and Butenko 1992, French 1990, *From Below* 1987) This "failure of the socialist system to provide environmental well-being" (Jancar, 164) was a breach of the social contract of such magnitude that it warranted the east european public's refusal to acquiesce further.

In 1988, J.F. Brown stated that "the quest for a genuine legitimacy will be frustrated so long as the east european societies are offered no possibilities of influence or participation in a genuine political interaction," but predicted that such pluralism would require "a fundamental break with Leninist tradition, practice and ideology, of which the monopoly on authority is the main buttress," and therefore that "any alternation of this in Eastern Europe..would be the result of a more basic transformation not to be expected." (16) Only a year later, events would affirm his theory while turning his prediction on its head. As it turns out, the environmental challenge to the socialist state, while originally intending only to effect targeted change within the parameters of the system, had struck at the very roots of its legitimacy. As Barbara Jancar points out, the new public claim to make policy initiatives "was premised upon state system failure," but because the state was not going to roll over and surrender its authority, the environmental activists would have to "argue both for their policy (of environmental rehabilitation) and for their right to promote it." (165)

In this context of a crisis not only of "environment" but also of political legitimacy, it is instructive to look at the case study of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros hydroelectric project in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The "Danube Circle" in Hungary

The most dramatic example of this evolution is in Hungary, whose political atmosphere was unique in East Europe. Direct Hungarian opposition to the Soviet-imposed order had been crushed in the 1956 uprising. However, the government subsequently ushered in a policy of low-level toleration and reform, known as "Kadarism" for its association with long-time Hungarian leader Janos Kadar. It was embodied by his famous 1961 statement that "Whoever is not against us is with us." (Brown, 201) Hallmarks of this new course were gradual introduction of market elements to the economic system along with toleration of private enterprise and quiet dissent. In other words, the social contract in Hungary included latitude for criticism, if not for direct challenges to state authority.

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In 1981, a scientist named Janos Vargha became concerned about evidence that the Nagymaros project posed a significant threat to the environment. The same year, he broke the official code of silence by publishing a critical article on the dam in a popular social-science journal. By 1984, his persistent activism had put him out of work, but he had founded the "Danube Circle," Hungary's first postwar independent citizen's group. Although it was ostensibly an organisation of scientists opposed to the dam on environmental grounds, an alliance was quickly formed with anti-communist intellectuals. (Schapiro 72-4) This posed an obvious threat to the regime, which outlawed the Circle. (Pearce, 52)

Thus, although the Danube Circle may have originally "naively thought its focus on environmental issues was apolitical," (Jancar, 167), the struggle quickly took on a political dimension, in that "if you don't have civil liberties, you can't act." (Varghas in Schapiro, 74) Furthermore, the group provided "a relatively safe forum for criticizing the regime...by establishing a public arena that may not have consistently been *anti*-governmental but remained nonetheless strictly *non*-governmental." (Feffer, 154) This movement can be compared with the Polish Solidarity Party and the East German Lutheran Church as a forum for oblique criticism which eventually became instrumental in bringing down the communist regimes and nurturing a civic society. (Ibid, 154) By August 1990, 10,000 people were willing to take the risk of joining a public march against the project in Budapest, attesting to a strategy which allowed people to "... express themselves on a technical question, not at first as a political confrontation." (Ferenc Koszeg in Schapiro, 74)

The political vitality of the movement also derived from its perception of the environment and its importance. Unlike the bureaucrats who had planned the project, the Danube Circle viewed the landscapes and ecosystems it was protecting as having intrinsic worth as an integral part of Hungary's cultural landscape. The best examples of the "link between environmentalism and nationalism" (Jancar, 175) were the environmental movements in the non-Russian republics of the USSR. Many of these saw their movement as "an integral part of the drive to reinstate separate government and win complete independence" from a Russian overlord whose "annihilation of their environments" was seen as part of a "master plan to undermine their national might and independence." (Wolfson and Butenko, 44) However, the Hungarians were also motivated by the association of "national tradition to specific landscapes" (Jancar, 175) and the notion that the destruction of these landscapes in the name of the international socialist cause was also the destruction of what constituted Hungary. In the words of Janos Vargha:

The Danube and I understand each other. It's something that is more than just another piece of water. It has created a whole landscape in Hungary, it is at the center of an entire ecological system. The Danube is more than just another part of the nonliving environment. (Janos Vargha in Schapiro, 72)

This conflation of environmentalism and nationalism was anathema to socialist regimes because it used the environment to attack the notion of international socialism. The Hungarian regime reacted explicitly to this threat, as in this excerpt from a contemporary official publication:

Could an action...of a narrow group, accompanied by noisy foreign publicity, take root or lead to any "result" in our political structure, when this group -- holding itself aloof from dialogue -- opposes the governmental decision handed down in an interstate agreement...by stretching the truth and fanning national sentiments? (Magyar Hirlap, 24-4-87 in From Below, 65)

With this further politicisation of the struggle, it became clear that the struggle to stop dam construction had taken on a much larger significance. The demands implicit in the Danube Circle's agenda -- increased personal and national self-determination -- were not in accord with the political boundaries set by the regime.

"The Danube issue has become a very important political question because it was one of the last projects of the fundamentalist wing of the Communist Party. People thought that if it is possible to stop this dam, we can change the total system. And if we're not able to do that, everything will remain the same." (Vargha in Schapiro, 74)

In other words, the collapse of the socialist form of legitimation had become explicit. In Hungary, as elsewhere throughout Eastern Europe, "outrage at ecological destruction helped erode the private deals that millions of people...had made to survive within the system." (Schapiro, 74)

For five years, the Danube Circle constantly tested the limits of the "tacit agreement...on the way the grassroots game could be played." (Jancar, 165) Their strategies included circulating underground newspapers and petitions, organizing peaceful protests and even taking out ads in western newspapers. (*From Below*, 66-7) The regime responded by ignoring or harassing the protesters and denying their applications to register as official organizations. (*Ibid*, 62) On at least one occasion, the authorities resorted to violent means, when truncheon-wielding Budapest police officers attacked peaceful demonstrators in February, 1986. (*Ibid*, 66) Despite such tactics, the Danube Circle was able to internationalize the issue, not only adopting the tactics of western environmental groups, but attracting active western interest in the dispute. This was a further embarrassment for the regime, which reacted typically:

... when they call themselves representatives of Hungarian society, with the participation of protestors mainly imported from abroad, from Austria, and they organize a street demonstration...then there is hardly any more place for tolerance... (*Magyar Hirlap*, 24-4-87 in *Ibid*, 65)

Despite such rhetoric, the Danube Circle's activities played a large role in holding up the construction of the dam system and eventually in bringing down Hungary's socialist regime. Work on the Hungarian half of the project ceased in 1983, due not only of lacking funds and technological problems, but also due to the increasing pressure from activists. The regime might have sat on the project indefinitely, but Austria offered to underwrite the project in 1985, "depriving (Hungary) of their best excuse to do nothing." (*Blue is Green*, 48) Ironically, the Austrian government was reacting to protests by its own greens which had prevented the construction of a similar dam project in Austria -- the return on Austria's loan was to be 66% of the Hungarian dam's electrical output for 20 years. (Fisher 1993, 8)

The Slovak case

The repressive nature of the Czechoslovakian regime is key to understanding the failure of the environmental movement to rise in Slovakia in the same spectacular fashion as it had in Hungary. The spectacular crackdown of 1968 and subsequent unimaginative leadership led to a venomous political atmosphere very different from (and often quite critical of) that of reform-minded Hungary:

In the collapse of public morale after the invasion some sectors of society chose to vent their spleen on the reformers of 1968. They, it appeared, were being held responsible for the present predicament. And the few who still persisted with active dissent were often the target of particular abuse. It was an emotional and all too understandable response. But it resulted in the Czech nation, especially, lapsing again into one of its historical sloughs of despond that, together with a do-nothing regime, made Czechoslovakia a backwater for almost twenty years. (Brown, 295)

In the Czechoslovak context, the restrictions on environmental (or any nongovernmental) activism were severe, and government repression more heavy-handed. All nongovernmental organisations were illegal and "their publications were banned immediately." (Wolfson and Butenko, 72) The tone was set in the 1970's, when a report by the Slovak Academy of Sciences

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on the ecological danger posed by the proposed hydroelectric project was suppressed. (Rich 1993, 151) Cases of subsequent repression included a three-year jail sentence for a 25 year old Czech "for writing a letter about the poor environmental conditions to a friend in West Germany and for writing an ecological-political parody of a traditional Czech Christmas mass." (French, 32) Such harsh measures were part of a political culture in which "independent views and public debate (were) not permitted." (From Below, 18)

This is not to say that there was no protest activity at all. In 1985, on the urging of the Danube Circle, the Czech dissident group Charter 77 issued an appeal to the government to reconsider the dam. The text cited "irreversible consequences" of the project, which was described as a product of the "hysterical industrialization of the 1950's." (From Below, 19-20) However, because such publications were so rare, "the Slovak population was denied access to information about the possible environmental dangers of the project," (Okolicsanyi 1992c, 47) and thus, there was never a popular groundswell against the dams.

This situation is particularly ironic in light of Czechoslovakia's massive environmental degradation. (Dickman; Wolfson and Butenko, 72) However, since most of this was due to dependence on brown coal for fuel, it diverted attention from "secondary" issues like the Gabčíkovo project. In fact, Slovakia's heavy dependence on energy imported from the Czech Republic and elsewhere -- it generates only 14% of its domestic needs -- was an overriding Slovak argument for the construction of the dam. (Fisher, 11) Thus, environmental resistance was suppressed and the project was rationalised by holding it up against the brown coal industry. In the words of Wolfson and Butenko,

Their (Czechoslovak) preoccupation with Czechoslovakia's energy problems can be understood, but at the same time the project represents an excellent example of how national short-term interests can overshadow all others. It is obvious that the entire (Gabčíkovo) project, including its Hungarian part, could inflict grave damage on the Danube, and even while today the Czech bank is not affected too badly, in the future it will be impacted more seriously. The fact remains, however, that the protests only came from Hungary. (74)

Suppression of information and dissent, combined with the unambiguous dedication of the Czechoslovak government to the timely completion of the project, laid the groundwork for a serious dissonance between the Slovaks and Hungarians after the revolutions of 1989. Physically, the dam was about 90% complete on the Slovak side and 10% complete on the Hungarian side in 1989. (Fisher, 7) In terms of how they viewed the project, the two fledgling states were worlds apart.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION (1989 -)

By 1989, the regimes of eastern Europe had lost all semblance of political legitimacy or economic viability. Gorbachev's recognition of the economic and social shortcomings of the prescribed socialist systems was the final straw for the Soviet Bloc. (Dennis, 20-5) The 1986 accident at Chernobyl -- an example par excellence of socialist environmental mismanagement -- caused widespread concern which quickly evolved into direct criticism of the regimes. Only under the new era of 'glasnost' was such dissent thinkable in eastern Europe. (From Below, 3)

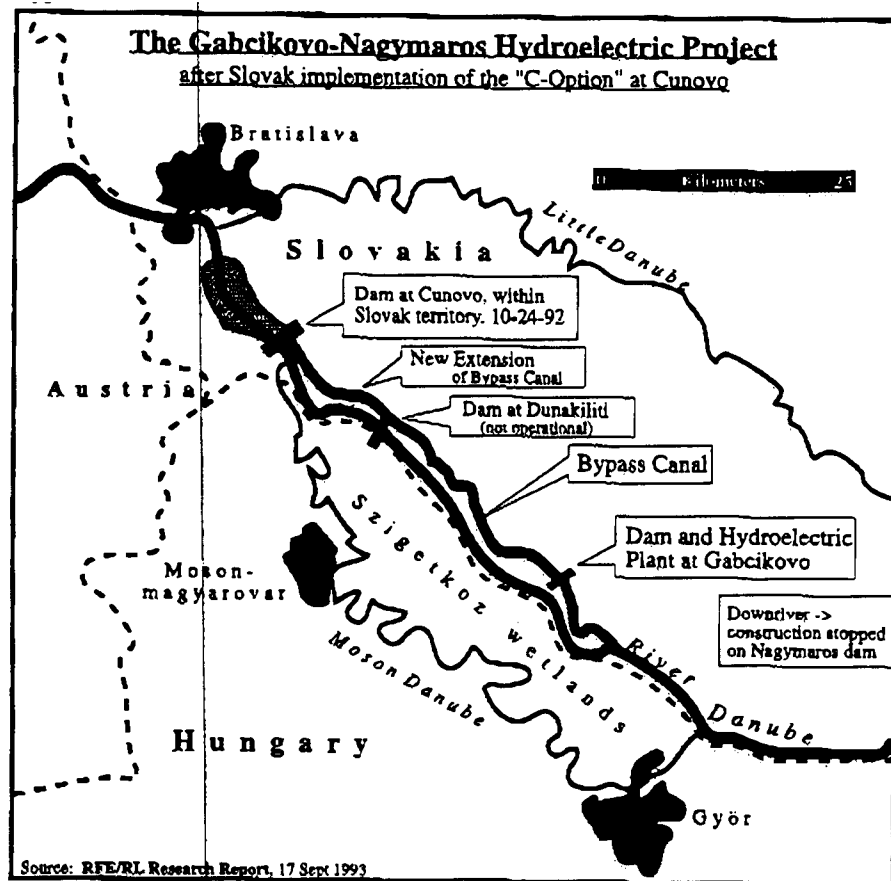
In Hungary, the Communist Party dissolved itself on May 11, 1989. Two days later, the Prime Minister of Hungary canceled the Hungarian part of the project. (Okolicsanyi 1992c, 46) Seemingly in one fell swoop, the fight against the dam, and the surrogate fight against one-party rule had been won. (Ibid, 47) Hungarian attention quickly turned to the Czechoslovak side of the

project, but the hope was that "the emergence of a free press in Slovakia and the ensuing greater availability of information about the environmental threat posed by Gabčíkovo would turn public opinion against it." (Ibid, 46) Ominously, the "Velvet Revolution" came and went in Czechoslovakia came and went on November 17, 1989, and construction continued on the Nagymaros plant. The lines had been drawn for a struggle which no longer pitted citizen against state but state against state.

Chronology of the Hungarian-Slovak Dispute

Since the revolutions of 1989, the Hungarian and Slovak positions on the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros hydroelectric project have been fundamentally opposed. Hungary, whose independence movement was heavily identified with opposition to the project, sees no alternative but to scrap it. Slovakia, on the other hand, lacking a tradition of environmental protest, and viewing energy problems as more pressing, has decided to complete the project. As time has gone by, both countries have implemented policies which have concretized their respective positions and thus aggravated the conflict.

Fig.2:



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On October 31, 1989, Hungary officially stopped work on the Nagymaros dam, symbolizing its commitment to end the project. Spurred by continued activism, it moved quickly to end its involvement in the project. The difficulty was persuading the Slovaks. Suggestions that "further investigations were necessary on the conditions and consequences of the construction" (Ibid 1266) had been met at first with icy silence, and then with the August 31 notification from the Czechoslovak Prime Minister that a "provisional solution," the so-called "C-option," was being considered. (Ibid 1267) This involved the construction of a new dam and headwater reservoir fully within Slovak territory at Cunovo. The bypass canal would simply be extended five miles (see Fig.2), sidestepping the defunct Dunakiliti dam, and the diversion of the Danube River would proceed over Hungary's head. (Okolicsany 1992a, 50) The Hungarian government protested this proposed solution strenuously, but failed to offer any alternative solutions.

The crisis continued to deepen and culminated, on May 16, 1992, with Hungary's unilateral termination of the original 1977 treaty. Hungary gave the following reasons for its move:

Hungary cannot accept that the population of the region suffers from the consequences of the functioning of a barrage system planned without professional and public control; that irreversible damage afflicts the ecological and environmental resources of the region...; that degradation and...extinction threaten the vegetation and fauna of the region; that serious damage afflicts unique landscapes; and that imminent catastrophe threatens the population due to barrages and dykes of insufficient stability as a consequence of shortcomings of research and planning. (Ibid,1261)

Slovakia -- reacting to the treaty abrogation and its imminent split with the Czech Republic -- began working frenetically to complete the dam at Cunovo, and did just that on October 24, 1992, transforming "the mighty Danube into a small creek along the twenty-five kilometer stretch of the border..." (Okolicsany 1992a, 49) A full 97% of the river's flow was diverted into the bypass channel. During subsequent negotiations, both sides have maintained their inflexible stance. The one major breakthrough was that both sides submitted to arbitration by the International Court of Justice on April 7, 1993. Unfortunately, no decision is expected until 1996 and all attempts at interim water-management regimes in the meantime have broken down. (EIU, Slovakia 1994, p.35)

Environmental Issues

Hungary's abrogation of the 1977 treaty has been based primarily, on environmental reasoning, much of it inherited from the research used by the Danube Circle to oppose the project before 1989. In their 1992 declaration of termination, the Hungarian government cited four main ecological objections:

Geological and geophysical risks: the Hungarians claim that "the stability of certain parts of the embankment cannot be considered safe against earthquakes that are likely" make the risk of catastrophic flooding unacceptably high. (Ibid 1275-6)

Effects influencing ground water: 45% of Hungary's drinking water supply comes from the affected area, where it is "naturally filtered" in the uppermost layer of the riverbed. Hungary contends that the decreased water flow will allow viral contaminants into this groundwater and will also alter the water table severely enough to devastate important habitats and cropland.

Effects on the surface water: The Hungarians maintain that in the old bed of the Danube, the flow speed will cause stagnation, sedimentation and "unambiguous water quality deterioration." This is seen as a threat to riparian vegetation, fishing and the river's potential to

supply drinking and industrially-used water. (32 ILM 1279-80)

Ecological and genetic problems: The Szigetkoz in Hungary is an area of forested wetland on the south bank of the Danube's old channel. According to one report, its diverse ecosystem is threatened with "80-90% decrease in species" due to synergistic effects of the diversion.

The extent to which these predictions are borne out by fact since the diversion is difficult to ascertain. The consensus seems to be that there has been significant ecological damage, particularly to the Hungarian side. (Fisher, 10; Dispute...) In particular, the changes to the water table have begun to dry out Szigetkoz area and threaten the groundwater supply.

The Slovaks, on the other hand, have a simpler environmental argument; in their opinion, the danger caused by the diversion is "less urgent than the threat to health posed by the country's lignite-burning power stations." (Rich 1993, 151) They insist that now that most of the project has been completed, the damage is done and "stopping construction of the dam will not bring back land already lost." (Binder, 77) This being the case, reducing reliance on coal and nuclear power makes the operation of the dam system imperative. (Fisher, 10) This argument certainly has a strong environmental aspect. After all, brown coal pollution is the bane of eastern Europe, and after Chernobyl, nobody is particularly interested in keeping eastern European nuclear reactors on-line any longer than necessary. However, this is really not so much an environmental argument as an economic one, with the environment acting as a constraint on economic choices. Wolfson and Butenko describe the "perennial problem that hampers any effort to improve the quality of the environment" in Czechoslovakia since 1989:

Coal-based energy generation and heavy industries represent the heart of the country's economy. Any abrupt decline in noxious emissions will immediately result in slowed down production and an explosion of unemployment. Coal can be replaced by nuclear power plants, hardly palatable ecologically, either. (73)

In the specific case of Slovakia, this argument has a particular resonance when one considers the following statistics: As of the fall of 1991, the Slovak Republic supplied only 14% of its own energy needs, while 18% came from the Czech Republic and nearly 70% was imported from abroad. After the Czech-Slovak split in 1993, the Slovaks would no longer be able to count on cheap energy from the Czechs anymore. They were also under pressure from Austria to close their largest power source, a Soviet-style nuclear reactor. (Fisher, 11)

Furthermore, given the potential economic significance of the project, and the insistence from the rest of the world that it be closed down, the dam has become a symbol of stubborn national pride in the face of adversity. (Ibid, 12) The pressure on Slovakia to knuckle under to ecological reason has produced a defensiveness typified in the following statement by Julius Binder, manager of the Slovak state construction firm which built Gabčíkovo:

(Danube Circle's) aim was not (and is not) to search for the best environmental and economic solution, but rather to stop the completion of the dam, to damage the Czechoslovak -- and especially the Slovak -- economy, and to exacerbate the controversy between both Slovaks and Hungarians and Slovaks and Czechs. In this unstable political and economic situation they could better pursue the policy of autonomy for Hungarian minorities and, later, the restoration of the Hungarian Empire. (Binder, 77)

In some ways, the frenzied rush to complete the Cunovo dam and implement the "C-option" was a formative national experience for the Slovaks. On the eve of independence, it was easy to portray the dam as a national effort for self sufficiency. In the words of one local resident, "With Czechoslovakia splitting, we need to be able to live off something too." (Ingram)

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In the June 1992 elections in Slovakia, every political party (except the Hungarian minority parties) was on the record as supporting the Gabčíkovo project. The political overtones of this ostensibly ecological stalemate are explicit in the following statement by a state secretary at the Hungarian Foreign Ministry:

"For us [Hungary], this power station is a manifestation of voluntarist gigantomania and disdain for public opinion and science. In Slovakia, however, this power station stands for new national independence, national pride and Slovak strength, will, decisiveness and creativity." (Ingram)

In any case, Hungary's own protestations of environmental virtue have not always been borne out by fact. For instance, although it is true that pollution has been significantly reduced in Hungary, that has more to do with "the fledgling market economy, which forced companies to make better use of resources and to give up unprofitable markets" than with effective regulation or enforcement on the part of the public sector. (Okolicsany1992b, 68) Indeed, where the Slovakian environmentalists have joined the nationalist consensus that the new country does not have "the luxury of allowing environmental concerns to take precedence over their need for increased energy self-sufficiency," (Ingram) Hungarian environmentalists have largely disappeared. Public apathy about the environment (apart from the Gabčíkovo project) was revealed by a poll in which, of the twenty-two countries surveyed, "Hungary was the only one in which almost nobody thought the environment should be the country's top priority." The other surveyed countries averaged 10% to 30%. (Okolicsany1992b, 67) Barbara Jancar argues that environmental movements motivated by opposition to one issue, such as the Danube Circle, tended to fade fast once that issue had been dealt with, or was at least in the realm of public debate. After all, the Eastern European environmentalists were fighting as much for a sphere in which to act, as for a particular action:

The role that these projects (such as Gabčíkovo) played in reifying the shortcomings of the Communist system cannot be overestimated. However, once disposition had been made of the problem, the cascade seemed to dry up overnight...All over the area, the environmental movement was in disarray as the public returned to its private concerns. The movements founded on system inefficiency seemed to have faded away, their marginal utility gone. (181)

To continue Jancar's economic metaphor, it is as if the "invisible hand" of civil society has come to be relied upon to prevent the recurrence of the problems of a socialist status-quo which, in the trenchant words of Hungarian environmentalist Judit Vasarhelyi, consisted of "the solution of problems which would otherwise not have arisen." (Vasarhelyi, 79) Even the hero of the movement, Janos Vargha, echoes these sentiments:

In our country, the decision makers have been isolated from the effects of their decisions. I can only hope that with the growth of a new civil society, with economic power operating on a more human scale, that independent citizens will understand much better how their activities affect the environment." (Vargha in Schapiro, 76)

CONCLUSION

Throughout the debates centering on the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project, the ideas of "environment" have regularly been reduced to political footballs in struggles for autonomy, civil rights and national self-determination. It is sometimes hard to distinguish its role as a genuine issue from its role as a slogan. Still, the central importance of its definition and representation is at the heart of this case study. The ongoing negotiation of this case (particularly the upcoming

Hague decision, and Hungary and Slovakia's adherence to it) will provide a vital glimpse into the ongoing dynamic of European integration and the implications this process has for the interrelationship of political culture and environment.

From Gabčíkovo we can draw two lessons. The first is that the environment is a fundamentally political concept. It means different things to different groups and individuals, but has a common connotation of elemental security. The second lesson is that this connotation is wide open to manipulation and makes societal constructs of "environment" just as important, in a political sense, as the empirical reality.

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