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Kádár Must Go, or a Close-up View of the May 1988 Party Conference

Kádár musi odejść, czyli spojrzanie z bliska na konferencję partyjną z maja 1988 r.

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the final phase of Hungarian state socialism through the political transition of 1988, focusing on the removal of János Kádár during the May party conference. The study argues that Károly Grósz's rise to power would not have been possible without the explicit support of the Soviet leadership, which sought to implement Gorbachev's reformist agenda across the Eastern Bloc. Drawing on archival sources and contemporary accounts, the paper examines the decisive role of the Soviet Union in influencing Hungarian domestic politics, both directly and indirectly. Special attention is given to the interplay between Hungary's deepening economic crisis, the internal divisions within the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, and the broader geopolitical shifts initiated by *perestroika*. The paper highlights the background of the 1988 party conference, the dynamics of the leadership change, and the strategic positioning of Grósz within the party hierarchy. The findings suggest that Kádár's removal was driven not only by internal political pressures but also by Soviet geopolitical interests, marking an early step in the dismantling of the Socialist system in Hungary.

KEYWORDS: János Kádár, Károly Grósz, Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, Soviet influence, *perestroika*, political transition, Eastern Bloc, regime change, 1988 party conference, Hungarian state socialism

STRESZCZENIE: Studium stanowi analizę ostatniego etapu socjalizmu państwowego na Węgrzech, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wydarzeń majowej narady partyjnej w 1988 r. i okoliczności odwołania Jánosa Kádára. Autor stawia tezę, że dojście do władzy Károlya Grósza nie byłoby możliwe bez jednoznacznego wsparcia sowieckiego kierownictwa, które chciało rozszerzyć politykę reform Gorbaczowa na obszar Europy Wschodniej. Odkrywa bezpośredni i pośredni wpływ Związku Sowieckiego na politykę wewnętrzną na Węgrzech, szczególną uwagę kieruje na pogłębiający się kryzys gospodarczy, na wewnętrzne relacje w Węgierskiej Socjalistycznej Partii Robotniczej oraz na geopolityczne przemiany wywołane przez pierestrojkę. Szczegółowo przedstawia wydarzenia poprzedzające naradę partyjną w 1988 r., uzgodnienia moskiewskie oraz warunki organizacyjne przekazania władzy – podkreślając rolę politycznego awansu Grósza oraz konkretne przejawy sowieckiego wpływu. Zdaniem autora o odsunięciu Kádára przesądziły nie tylko czynniki polityki wewnętrznej, lecz w decydującej mierze sowieckie interesy geopolityczne i przetasowania władzy. Można je interpretować jako pierwsze kroki do zmian ustrojowych na Węgrzech.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: János Kádár, Károly Grósz, Węgierska Socjalistyczna Partia Robotnicza, sowiecki wpływ, pierestrojka, polityczne przejście, blok wschodni, zmiany ustrojowe, narada partii w 1988 r., ustrój socjalizmu państwowego na Węgrzech

Introduction

The May 1988 Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, hereinafter MSZMP) conference marked the end of a thirty-two-year period in Hungarian history which was dominated by the name of János Kádár. His persona became synonymous with the post-1956 era, but he had already played a significant role in the Communist movement before. He was succeeded as a general secretary by Károly Grósz, who had much more modest abilities than his predecessor. Grósz was given only seventeen months in power as he was unable to stop the collapse of the Socialist system. In my study, I attempt to show that without the support of the Soviet leadership, Károly Grósz would not have been able to carry out Kádár's removal. It is difficult to understand the changes that took place in the socialist bloc, including Hungary, without knowledge of international political and economic processes, which is why I endeavor to present those occurrences.

After the suppression of the 1956 Revolution, Hungary was considered an “island of peace” within the Socialist bloc. János Kádár, who ruled the country for the next thirty-two years, learned from the events of 1956 and made improvement of the population’s standard of living the focus of his policy. In this way, he wanted to prevent Hungarian society from rising up against the Communist system again. One of the system’s slogans became: *Those who are not against us, are with us*. They wanted to buy off society by offering limited consumption opportunities.¹ However, would anyone have been able to resist this temptation at the time?

From 1938 onwards, when the first anti-Jewish laws came into force, Hungarian society was under constant repression. During World War II, Hungary joined the Germans in their war against the Soviet Union, which claimed a heavy toll. Following the German occupation of the country in 1944, the situation of the Jewish community became untenable. After Soviet troops reached the border, the fighting spared no one, and industrial plants were almost completely destroyed or looted. After 1945, Hungary fell within the Soviet sphere of influence, which determined the political framework within which it would exist for more than four decades to come. With the support of the Soviets occupying the country, the Hungarian Communists of the *Magyar Kommunista Párt* (Hungarian Communist Party, MKP) dismantled the emerging democracy in less than three years. This period was exceptional because no other country occupied by the Soviets managed to maintain democratic conditions for so long. When Communists gained total power through nationalisation, they completely plundered society. Amidst unimaginable terror, they took the land away from the peasants, who were forced into collective farms modelled on the Soviet system. Some consider this to have been ‘the second Trianon’ (a reference to the 1920 peace treaty with Hungary, that deprived the country of a substantial part of its territory; the term means generally a political disaster imposed from without – editor’s remark) for the Hungarian people. By 1956, the situation in the country had become so untenable that even the smallest spark ignited the flames of revolution. During the glorious days of the revolution, there was a glimmer of hope that the country’s inhabitants would finally be able to decide their own fate, but this hope was dashed by the arrival of Soviet troops. Twelve years

¹ L. Béládi, “Velünk és bennünk,” in *Mit kezdünk vele? Kádár János (1912–1989)*, ed. Z. Vargyas, Budapest: XX. Század Intézet, 2007, p. 169.

after the 1944 siege of Budapest, many people were once again forced into the cellars in order to survive. During the reprisals that followed the revolution, 229 people were executed by the civilian and military authorities, many were imprisoned, and nearly 200,000 fled to the West. The quarter of a century of repression saw a significant easing in 1963 when a general amnesty was announced, although it did not apply to everyone.

Consolidation, followed by the introduction of a 'new economic mechanism' in 1968, served the purpose of encouraging as many members of society as possible to accumulate consumer goods. A significant proportion of the population was then able to acquire their own flats, houses, cars and holiday homes. This was a period of a great petty bourgeois transformation in Hungary.² This *social consensus* persisted until the 1980s. Due to growing economic difficulties, it was no longer possible to maintain the previous economic policy. At the 12th MSZMP Congress held in 1980, it was stated, albeit implicitly, that the growth that had been customary in previous decades had come to an end: "The fundamental condition for stabilizing and then further modestly improving the standard of living is that we solve economic tasks more effectively."³ As the economic situation continued to deteriorate, opposition groups grew stronger, demanding ever more loudly the resignation of the leadership that had been in power for decades, and a democratic transformation. This also had an impact on the MSZMP, in which the reformists began to gain ground once again. In 1985, the last party congress in the history of Hungarian state socialism took place. János Kádár wanted to seize the initiative once more, and so it was decided that the goal would once again be to achieve economic growth. In doing so, he wanted to achieve an increase in consumption, i.e. an improvement in the standard of living of the population. The consequence of this was that the Hungarian economy fell into a serious crisis in the following years, which could not be resolved without significant political changes. The first change took place in the summer of 1987, when Kádár dismissed György Lázár, who had been president of the Council of Ministers for 12 years, and appointed Károly Grósz, the former first secretary of the Budapest party organization, to replace him. Due to the further deterioration of the economic situation, a party conference was finally convened in May 1988, at which János

² A. Gerő, "1984: Szekrényosor, Lada, Vikendház," *Beszélő* 57 (1999), p. 57.

³ Á. Debreczeni, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt XII. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve*, Budapest: Kossuth Publishing House, 1980, p. 482.

Kádár was finally removed from office and Károly Grósz was elected general secretary. He was unable to bring about change, but he was able to assist in the democratic transformation that swept through Central and Eastern Europe in the autumn of 1989.

The 1980s

Although the 1970s may have seemed like a period of easing tensions and rapprochement between the two superpowers, their differing political and social systems ultimately prevented them from cooperating in the long term. By the 1970s, the Soviet Union had reached the peak of its power, with a presence on every continent in the world. In addition to Cuba, it had managed to gain a foothold in Central America, and after the liberation of the Portuguese and Spanish colonies, it also gained influence on the African continent. In the Middle East, the Arab states were its natural allies, as they were all opposed to Israel, which was supported by the United States. Due to the threat posed by the People's Republic of China, it had to station a significant number of troops in the Far East. Relations between the two communist countries were only restored in 1989.

As the Soviet Union gained more and more positions in the world, the United States lost its standing on the world political stage. Shaken by the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, the superpower sought agreement with the Soviet Union rather than confrontation in the 1970s. Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership mistakenly concluded from this that they could do anything and the United States would not intervene. This led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which proved to be a serious mistake in the long run. Due to the deterioration of the Soviet General Secretary's health, he participated less and less in decision-making, which was handled by a smaller group of people around him. Because of the fighting in Afghanistan, Western countries, led by the United States, boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which was a huge loss of prestige for the Kremlin. After Brezhnev's death in 1982, the situation deteriorated further. His successor, Yuri Andropov, also suffered from serious illness and was therefore unable to deal effectively with the problems facing the country. He led the Soviet Union for a total of 15 months and was succeeded by Konstantin Chernenko, who was in almost constant need of hospital care. He also died less than a year after coming to power. At that time, the following joke was circulating on the streets of

Budapest, which accurately described the situation at the time. “When János Kádár left for Andropov’s funeral, his wife asked him at Ferihegy Airport: Are you coming home after the funeral, or are you waiting for the next one there? Kádár replied: Who can say in advance?” His wife replied: “If you stay there, be sure to let me know between two funerals!”⁴ Following Chernenko’s death, the Soviet party leadership elected Mikhail Gorbachev, then 54, as its general secretary.

Following the suppression of the 1956 Revolution, Hungary took a different path from other socialist countries. The focus of János Kádár’s policy was to avoid another revolution at all costs. He achieved this by offering society the opportunity to consume rather than engage in politics. His famous slogan reflected this aspiration: “Those who are not against us are with us.” In order to implement the economic policy shift, the mechanism of economic management had to be transformed. Television and cars were symbols of consumption in the Western world and part of everyday life, whereas in Hungary these goods had only just appeared. The State Economic Committee entrusted the development of the reform concept to Rezső Nyers, István Friss and Imre Párdi. The basic principles of the new economic management concept were developed with the involvement of more than 130 experts. Based on the submitted material, the MSZMP Central Committee decided at its meeting on 25–27 May 1966 that the new economic management system would be introduced on 1 January 1968.⁵ It was also agreed that, taking into account the practical experiences, the reform would be completed later. The new economic management system introduced in Hungary abolished the annual or five-year breakdown of plans at company level. In this system, companies were encouraged indirectly (through prices, taxes, subsidies, loans, etc.). The central element of the new system was corporate profit sharing. The state sought to set indirect regulations in such a way that companies would be interested in achieving national economic goals through profit sharing. The reforms that had been initiated were ultimately not continued because, as a result of the political change in 1972, conservative forces seized the initiative.⁶

⁴ I. Katona, *Politikai vicceink 1945-től máig. A helyzet reménytelen, de nem komoly*, Budapest: Móra Publishing House, 1994, p. 209.

⁵ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (Hungarian National Archives, hereinafter MNL), MNL-OL 288. f. 4/80-81. ó. e. Guidelines for the Reform of the Economic Mechanism (25–27 May 1966).

⁶ J. Honvári, *XX. századi magyar gazdaságtörténet*, Budapest: Aula Publishing House, 2006, pp. 413–426.

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This was a bad moment, as oil price rises had caused transformations in the global economy to which planned economies were unable to respond, or could only respond very slowly. In the 1970s, Hungary had access to cheap Western loans, which were used for industrial investments and to raise the standard of living of the population, rather than to transform the economic structure. Due to the improper investment of loans, the dollar-denominated national debt gradually increased over the decade, reaching a critical level by 1979. This made it necessary to raise the previously subsidised consumer prices. This was when the symbolic 3.60 forint bread price of the era came to an end. The country was saved from bankruptcy by joining the IMF and the World Bank in 1982. This accession was also due to the fact that Moscow, due to its weakened position, was unable to prevent the Hungarian side from conducting negotiations with international partners as it had done previously.⁷ Following accession, with the help of a standby loan from the IMF, Hungary managed to avoid events similar to those in Poland. In the following years, the country's leadership did everything in its power to stabilize the financial situation, a goal they achieved by 1985. Kádár concluded from this successful stabilization that the problems had been solved and that it was possible to return to the previous economic policy. At the party congress held in March 1985, this was laid down in a resolution: "In the next planning period, a noticeable improvement in the standard of living must be achieved by increasing the income-generating capacity of the national economy, stimulating economic development, efficient management, increasing productivity, making better use of working hours and improving work discipline."⁸

After the congress, the national debt, which had been on a downward trend until then, began to rise again. The economic restructuring that had begun earlier slowed down due to political pressure, and measures to stimulate consumption were reintroduced. A year later, investments began to grow again, but the structure remained unchanged. As a result, imports increased again, which led to a renewed increase in public debt. By 1989, gross public debt had reached \$20 billion, and the budget deficit had increased fivefold compared to 1988.⁹

⁷ A. Apor, "The crisis of the happiest barracks. Hungary on the way to indebtedness," *Bonus Nuntium* 3 (6) (2024), pp. 5–14.

⁸ Á. Dús, *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt XIII. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve*, Budapest: Kossuth Publishing House, 1985, p. 581.

⁹ M. Barát, *A magyar gazdaság vargabetűje*, Budapest: AULA Publishing House, 1994, pp. 104–106.

The last parliamentary elections of the socialist era took place in 1985, and differed in several respects from the system previously in place. The reform was necessary in order to better motivate citizens to participate in the elections. They wanted to achieve this by offering the possibility of choice, that is, by creating the illusion of democratic elections. At its meeting on 11 November 1982, the MSZMP Central Committee took a position on the further development of the electoral system. This meant that they made double or multiple nominations compulsory, introduced a system of substitute representatives and substitute councillors, reintroduced the national list and simplified the electoral system. It was proposed that the electoral law should require two or more candidates to be nominated, as it was believed that citizens would participate more actively in elections if they had a real chance of being elected. A substitute mandate could be obtained by an unelected candidate who received at least 25 per cent of the votes. Ten per cent of the representatives on the national list could enter the National Assembly, and those on the list were nominated by the National Council of the Patriotic People's Front. One of the most important measures in the process of changing the system was to simplify the procedure for recalling representatives. Withdrawal could be initiated by the Patriotic People's Front or at least 10 per cent of the electorate. Citizens then decided the fate of the representative by secret ballot.¹⁰ The new electoral system was regulated by Act III of 1983, on the basis of which the 1985 elections were held. The election results refuted the de-politicization of Hungarian society. Although the authorities successfully prevented genuine opposition candidates from running, 41 of the 78 valid spontaneous candidates still managed to enter parliament. These representatives thus made up more than 10 per cent of the 387-member National Assembly. Another important element of the electoral system reform was the restoration of the national list, which allowed 30 people to enter parliament. These people were leaders of large social organizations, public bodies and movements, who were thus exempt from constituency work. The new electoral law also increased the number of members of the National Assembly from 352 to 387. The 1985 elections brought about the largest change in representation since 1949. Sixty-three per cent of the representatives entered parliament for the first time, although

¹⁰ MNL, MNL-OL 288.f.4/188; *ibid.*, Further development of the electoral system MSZMP KB extended meeting (11 November 1982).

the leading role of the Communist party was not questioned, as 75 per cent of them remained party members.¹¹

Kádár went this far to maintain his power, even though the reform policy pursued by Gorbachev would have given him considerable room for manoeuvre. Due to the gradual deterioration of public sentiment, he finally made some changes in the leadership. He replaced György Lázár, who had been president of the Council of Ministers for twelve years, with Károly Grósz, then 57, who had been MSZMP first secretary in Budapest. Kádár remained in the driver's seat and wanted to keep control despite the deteriorating situation.

Who Would Succeed Kádár?

“If János Kádár retires or dies in 1980, the country will mourn him. The system was unimaginable without Kádár, just as Kádár was unimaginable without his system.”¹² János Kádár's role is still a subject of debate in Hungary today, but everyone agrees that his influence on the country's 20th-century history is unquestionable. By the 1980s, he had become synonymous with the country, developing a positive father figure image thanks to the fact that the majority of society felt that he had achieved something. After the suppression of the 1956 Revolution, Kádár was the most hated man in the country, but a quarter of a century later, he became a good comrade in the eyes of the Hungarian people. Nevertheless, due to Kádár's advanced age, it was necessary to find his successor. The question did not arise seriously until a new leader appeared in Moscow who wanted to implement changes. After Mikhail Gorbachev's appointment in March 1985, a generational tension gradually developed, which ultimately made it necessary for changes to take place in the Socialist Bloc. Although Gorbachev stated in every forum how much he respected Kádár, behind the scenes he was preparing to bring to power someone he considered suitable.

The first official bilateral meeting between János Kádár and Mikhail Gorbachev took place on 25 September 1985. Kádár gave a lengthy account of the events that took place in Hungary between 1953 and 1956, followed by a presentation of the country's current situation. In his speech, he devoted

¹¹ I. Romsics, *Magyarország története a XX. században*, Budapest: Osiris Publishing House, 2003, pp. 532–533.

¹² L. Lengyel, “A kádárizmus alkonya. Kádár János és rendszerének hanyatlása,” in *Ki volt Kádár? Harag és részrehajlás nélkül a Kádár-életútjáról*, ed. Á. Rácz, Budapest: Rubicon-Aquila Books, 2001, p. 157.

a great deal of attention to clarifying the roles of Mátyás Rákosi, Imre Nagy and himself in relation to 1956. It is regrettable that he did not explain the events in greater depth, as this might have given us more insight into his political motivations and why Imre Nagy ultimately had to be executed. Kádár then outlined the differences that, in his opinion, had resulted in a Hungarian version of socialism. By describing the characteristics of agriculture, the electoral system and the economic management system, Kádár wanted to demonstrate to Gorbachev that his Hungarian comrades had always pursued reforms, sometimes even in the face of opposition. Kádár then moved on to present the country's financial situation. Gorbachev listened patiently to Kádár's remarks, but did not allow himself to be misled. "Comrade Kádár, is it not that you wanted to achieve some kind of goal in your policy with the help of Western capital, but you crossed the line, and now difficulties have arisen, and inevitable stagnation has ensued?"¹³ In his reply, Kádár cited the changes in the global economy in the 1970s and the lack of assistance from the Soviet Union as reasons for falling into debt. Gorbachev thanked Kádár for his account of the political lessons of Hungary's history and replied as follows: "We believe that as long as Kádár is there, it is a guarantee that Hungary will continue to move forward with the Soviet Union in the future."¹⁴ However, Gorbachev's response then took an interesting turn:

But I would like to give you some friendly advice; as the years go by and times change, use your power more wisely. This is what Hungary and the Soviet Union need, but also the entire socialist community. Because János Kádár is a significant political figure on the world stage. (...) You are completely devoted to the cause of revolution, but you must conserve your strength and prepare worthy successors. This is a matter of enormous importance.¹⁵

Gorbachev clearly contradicted himself in his reply, but he also surprised Kádár, who began to make excuses and defend himself, saying that he would have resigned from power years ago, but they would not let him.

¹³ M. Baráth and J.M. Rainer, *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai magyar vezetőkkel*, Budapest: 1956 Institute, 2000, p. 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

In 1972, when I turned 60, I wrote a letter to the Central Committee requesting my retirement. [...] I assumed that a change of general secretary always involved some kind of explanation, and I wanted to set an example of how to resolve the issue normally under socialism. The Central Committee rejected my request. I had already sent my letter to L.I. Brezhnev. [...] At our next meeting, he said to me loudly: "Your Central Committee was right."¹⁶

Gorbachev replied: "I share your opinion."¹⁷

The first official visit between the two leaders probably did not take place in the most pleasant atmosphere, although the resolution adopted by the MSZM Party Committee claimed the opposite.¹⁸ It is clear from the conversation that Gorbachev was aware of the current situation in Hungary and, albeit indirectly, tried to let Kádár know that it was time for him to retire. This was not unusual for Gorbachev, as he had made significant personnel changes among the CPSU cadres after his appointment. He replaced two-thirds of the provincial and district party secretaries and 40 per cent of the Central Committee secretaries with appointees between the ages of 40 and 50, thus embarking on a spectacular rejuvenation process, which was confirmed by the CPSU Congress held in February 1986.¹⁹ After the meeting, the following questions arose regarding Kádár's removal: Why? How? When?

There were two reasons for the 'why' from Gorbachev's point of view. The first was that he wanted leaders at the helm of the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe who were open to the reforms he had initiated, and to adopting them. The other reason was the respect surrounding Kádár's persona in the Socialist Bloc. Following the deaths of Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Mao Zedong and Tito, he was considered a grand old man of the Communist movement, as evidenced by the fact that Deng Xiaoping personally met Kádár during his 1987 visit to China. He was also highly respected among the Soviet citizens, so Gorbachev had every reason to get rid of him.

The Soviet leader had two possible options; one was to overthrow Kádár by force. This would probably have been unlikely, as the Soviets did not want to send tanks to Budapest again. The other possible route was to select someone

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 61–62.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁸ MNL, MNL-OL 288.f.5/950, Oral briefing on the Moscow talks between János Kádár and Mikhail Gorbachev (26 September 1986).

¹⁹ G. Dalos, *Gorbacsov – ember és társadalom*, Budapest: Napvilág Publishing House, 2011, pp. 75–77.

from the upper echelons of the political leadership and help them gain power through various channels. In the end, the Soviet leadership chose the latter.

By then, the situation had become much more complex, as this was a period of great change in international politics. First of all, at the end of 1985, the Soviets did not yet have anyone at hand who could replace Kádár. At that time, Gorbachev was still making personnel changes within his own country, which he completed at the 1986 congress. Following the announcement of the policy of openness, or *glasnost*, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred, which consumed the significant part of Soviet economic, financial, military and intelligence capacity. In addition, relations with China were still being settled, in which Kádár, who had special ties with the Far Eastern country, played an important role.²⁰ At the same time, Budapest played an important role in relations between the West and the East, which were also important to Moscow, as it wanted to normalize its relations with the United States. For the abovementioned reasons, Gorbachev had to choose carefully the moment when he would remove Kádár from power.

But who should be his successor? Gorbachev's comrades in Kremlin could ask this pressing question, as Kádár had not really revealed his cards regarding his successor until the mid-1980s. As a result, both in Moscow and at the MSZMP headquarters on Jászai Mari Square in Budapest, the comrades were groping in the dark about the identity of the possible successor. However, after the 13th MSZMP Congress, and the November 1985 meeting with Gorbachev, he realized that he had to address the issue of succession. Kádár wanted to choose his successor with his characteristic thoroughness. He wanted to avoid a random change of leadership, which could have occurred in the event of his unexpected death or the situation becoming uncontrollable. He was also aware that he had to find a successor who could work together with the leadership of the Soviet Union, Hungary's greatest ally. In private, he remarked that he intended to remain in the position of General Secretary until the next congress in 1990, after which he would retire from politics. History ultimately decided otherwise.

The question of Kádár's succession had been on the agenda among members of the Hungarian political leadership since the 1970s. On his 60th birthday, he submitted his own retirement request, which was rejected by both the

²⁰ A. Apor, "Kádár és Kína," in *Bátorság nélkül meddő a tudomány: Tanulmányok Schmidt Mária tiszteletére*, ed. D. Baczoni and I. Ötvös, Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 2023, pp. 82–89

MSZMP Central Committee and the Political Committee. Moreover, Brezhnev, who had previously wanted to remove Kádár, also supported his remaining in power. At that time, however, the two chosen successors, Zoltán Komócsin and Károly Erdélyi, the “favorite sons,” died.²¹ László Maróthy, whose star had been steadily rising during this period, was ultimately not even appointed to the Political Committee at the party conference in May 1988. In the first half of the 1980s, two groups emerged in the party from which Kádár’s successor could be chosen. One was led by Ferenc Havasi, who was the economic policy secretary of the MSZMP Central Committee, and the other by the Grósz-Berecz duo. Kádár’s logic was that the two groups would keep each other in check and then, at a given moment, he would bring his preferred candidate to power. Finally, in the mid-1980s, Imre Pozsgay, János Berecz and Károly Grósz reached the final stage of the political obstacle course that Kádár had set up for young party officials aspiring to power.²² All three had held increasingly senior positions in the power apparatus since the 1970s, making them likely candidates for the post of general secretary. Károly Grósz ultimately emerged victorious from among the candidates and was appointed MSZMP general secretary in May 1988.

Of course, this could not have happened without the strong support of the Soviets. Károly Grósz probably came more seriously into the Soviets’ sights during Gorbachev’s visit to Hungary in June 1986. Grósz was appointed MSZMP First Secretary in Budapest in December 1984, thereby gaining control of the country’s largest party unit. In this capacity, he was among the first to speak at the 13th Party Congress held in 1985. In his speech, he sharply criticised the country’s economic situation, to which Kádár replied during a break in the congress: “Such things should not be discussed in public.”²³ Nevertheless, Károly Grósz was elected to the MSZMP Political Committee at the congress. According to a *Pravda* correspondent on the scene, he gave one of the best speeches. When Gorbachev was in Budapest for political talks and propaganda events, he tried to find time to get to know the MSZMP politicians. This attempt was unsuccessful because Kádár forbade members from discussing politics with the Soviet General Secretary.

²¹ K. Medgyesi, *Apagyilkosság. Kádár János és Grósz Károly küzdelme*, Budapest: Open Books, 2022, p. 63.

²² R. Tőkés, *A kialakított forradalom. Gazdasági reform, társadalmi átalakulás és politikai hatalomutódlás 1957–1990*, Budapest: Kossuth Publishing House, 1998, p. 253.

²³ K. Medgyesi, *Apagyilkosság*, p. 87.

Due to the gradual deterioration of the economic situation, consumer price subsidies were continuously reduced, leading to significant price increases. This, in turn, led to further social discontent, which ultimately prompted János Kádár to take action and make changes in the leadership. On 25 June 1987 he dismissed György Lázár, who had been President of the Council of Ministers for twelve years, and appointed Károly Grósz in his place. Following his election as the new prime minister, he announced his Economic and Social Development Program, the essence of which was: "...by renewing all spheres of social and economic life, we will give new impetus to the construction of socialism and create the resources necessary for economic development..."²⁴ Following his appointment, the Soviets naturally extended an invitation, and in 17–18 July 1987 Grósz travelled to Moscow, where he was received by Nikolai Ryzhkov and Mikhail Gorbachev. At the meeting, the Soviet General Secretary congratulated Grósz on his appointment and assured him of the moral and political support of the Soviet leadership. The extent to which the Soviets were keeping an eye on the situation in Hungary is best illustrated by the fact that Gorbachev cited Grósz's speech in Salgótarján held a few days earlier, on 9 July 1987, as an example of how he too wanted to speak openly about problems in the Soviet Union.²⁵ Could this be a coincidence?

Due to the worsening situation, it became necessary to make real personnel changes in the political leadership. The opposition demanded that "Kádár must go,"²⁶ as he was held responsible for the situation in the country. The MSZMP members also embraced the demand for Kádár's removal after it became clear who the Soviet-backed successor would be. Grósz's plan was not only to oust Kádár from power, but also, like Gorbachev, to transform the MSZMP Political Committee in order to carry out the reforms he deemed necessary. Of course, none of this could happen without Moscow's approval. The Soviets were monitoring events in Hungary, as we can see from Vadim Medvedev's report to Gorbachev: "...there is a serious economic and socio-political crisis in the country. If this situation persists and urgent political measures are not

²⁴ "A Magyar Szocialista és Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1987. július 2-ai állásfoglalása A gazdasági-társadalmi kibontakozás programjáról" ("Resolution of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party of 2 July 1987 on the program of economic and social development"), *Népszabadság* 4 July 1987.

²⁵ "Azt kell termelni, ami gazdaságos. Grósz Károly látogatása Nógrád megyében" ("We must produce what is economical. Károly Grósz's visit to Nógrád County"), *Népszabadság* 9 July 1987.

²⁶ J. Kis, F. Kószeg, and O. Solt, "Társadalmi szerződés. A politikai kibontakozás feltételei" ("Social contract. Conditions for political development"), *Beszélő* (special edition), June 1987.

taken, it could be a real source of serious socio-political upheaval.”²⁷ The report focused on János Kádár’s political campaign:

Kádár’s sudden activation is noteworthy for his meetings with the secretaries of the Budapest city (party) committee, several district first secretaries, and leaders of industrial and agricultural enterprises, as well as his preparations for meetings with trade unions. [...] Kádár clearly does not want to retire as a failed politician; he has decided to link his own person with the political renewal of the party, which is why he is postponing the resolution of the main issue.²⁸

The report then takes an interesting turn, confirming that Kádár’s removal would not have been possible without the Kremlin’s support. “In this regard, it seems necessary to take advantage of Ryzhkov’s and Yakovlev’s imminent trip to Hungary and do everything possible to ensure that the Hungarian leadership fully recognizes, by the party conference in May, how complex and demanding the current situation is.” They then described announcing the forced demotion to Kádár. “Through reliable channels, it would be possible to convey to Kádár the opinion that this situation does not bode well, not even for him personally.”²⁹ Moreover, the account confirms that Grósz and Berecz were the Soviet choice. Political maneuvering did indeed begin, and in February 1988, Gromyko, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, visited Budapest and held talks with Kádár for several hours. In April 1988, Nikolai Ryzhkov, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, visited Hungary. Károly Grósz welcomed him at the airport, and they held talks lasting several hours, but he also met with János Kádár. Also in April 1988, Gyula Thürmer travelled to Moscow on behalf of Károly Grósz to clarify a few issues that had arisen, one of which was how they viewed the situation prior to the party conference. He was received in the utmost secrecy by Alexander Yakovlev, one of the most important personalities in the Soviet party leadership. During the meeting, the phone rang in Yakovlev’s office and Gorbachev was on the other end of the line. Suddenly, Yakovlev handed over the phone and Gorbachev said the following to Thürmer: “Gyula, listen to what Yakovlev has to say and tell everyone affected at home.”³⁰ Yakovlev then

²⁷ M. Baráth and J.M. Rainer, *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai*, p. 207.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 208.

³⁰ Personal letter from Gyula Thürmer to the author.

summarized the situation as follows: the change of leadership in Hungary had taken too long and needed to be speeded up. “We know that Comrade Kádár will make a wise decision. We consider Comrade Grósz a worthy successor.”³¹

Prior to the party meeting, on the evening of 17 May 1988, KGB Deputy Chairman Colonel General Vladimir Kryuchkov arrived in Budapest, where he was met at the airport by Gyula Thürmer acting as “János Kádár’s personal representative”.³² Kryuchkov first went to see Kádár, then met Grósz. There are no records available about what they discussed, but from the telephone conversation between Gorbachev and Kádár on the next day, we can conclude why the KGB colonel general actually came to Hungary:

Gorbachev: Hello, Comrade Kádár! I received your message. If I understand correctly, you will present a well-thought-out concept at the party meeting [...] It is important that during the current transitional phase, all changes take place under Comrade Kádár’s leadership, in his presence, and with his position within the party being preserved. This is how I interpreted what Comrade Kryuchkov said. I welcome your decision.³³

In other words, Gorbachev sent Kryuchkov to Hungary to oversee the transfer of power. As had happened several times before in his life, Kádár was now promoted and appointed president of the MSZMP. This position was created because they did not dare to completely oust Kádár, as he was a respected personality in the country. The position itself did not carry any real power, and he did not even remain a member of the MSZMP Political or Central Committee. The new general secretary was Károly Grósz, who, in a vote following the party meeting, appointed a Political Committee loyal to him. Among the new members, there were only two who had already been members of the body at the 13th Party Congress. Kádár did not want this radical change either, and a few months later, in a moment of clarity, he admitted to Grósz: “Look, Comrade Grósz, I know that you see the party conference differently. What happened was not lawful. Some people skilfully organized the ousting of the other members of the leadership. I wanted a gradual change, but they wouldn’t let me. I no longer have any support in this leadership.”³⁴

³¹ Ibid.

³² Thürmer, Gyula. *Az elsikkasztott ország*, Budapest: Korona Publishing House, 2009, p. 109.

³³ M. Baráth and J.M. Rainer, *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai*, p. 122.

³⁴ G. Thürmer, *Az elsikkasztott ország*, p. 112.

After the Party Meeting...

The party meeting in May 1988 marked the end of the era associated with the name of János Kádár and the beginning of the final phase of state socialism in Hungary. “The General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party played a sad and lonely role when he delivered his farewell speech at yesterday’s meeting of the Hungarian Communist Party.”³⁵ “A man who had outlived his era, a leader whose time had come to an end,” wrote a journalist from The Times in an article about the party conference on 23 May 1988. Károly Grósz had risen to the top and enjoyed great popularity both at home and abroad. Nevertheless, without external support, he would not have been able to obtain the post of MSZMP general secretary. Although the Soviet Union was already struggling with serious internal problems at the time, it was still able to use its secret service to affect to its advantage the course of events in its sphere of influence.

Gorbachev wanted to implement *perestroika* not only in the Soviet Union, but also in the countries of the Socialist Bloc. However, the leaders of these countries did not understand Gorbachev’s reforms. Most of them agreed with the resolutions of the CPSU 20th Congress and even regarded them as their political origin, but *perestroika* was something they did not understand, so they turned against it. Why was János Kádár the first domino to fall for Gorbachev?

There were two reasons for this. One was Kádár himself, as he was highly respected in socialist countries. He was considered the elder statesman of the Communist movement at the time; he knew Stalin, worked with Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov and Gromyko, and also knew Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. This was a burden for Gorbachev, as he had only joined the Communist Party after Kádár had been imprisoned by Rákosi. But when Kádár visited China again in 1987, thirty years later, Deng Xiaoping sought out Kádár at his residence. Therefore, Kádár’s removal was of paramount importance to Gorbachev. Unlike Kádár, Grósz’s personality was more acceptable to the Soviets, as he had more modest abilities and charisma and was better able to adapt to different situations.

Another reason was that Hungary had always been at the forefront of reforms, so Soviets believed that many in the MSZMP apparatus sympathised with Soviet initiatives. Therefore, they wanted to help a general secretary who could credibly represent renewal come to power. As a head of the Agitation

³⁵ F. Várnai, *Mr. Kádár*, Budapest, Hírlapkiadó Vállalat, 1989, p. 103.

and Propaganda Department and then as MSZMP first secretary of Borsod District and Budapest, Károly Grósz had accurate information about the state of the Hungarian economy. Moreover, thanks to his time spent close to power, he was able to establish connections that could help him remove Kádár from office.

Károly Grósz was given only 17 months in power, although his political career got off to a good start, as he was received by US President Ronald Reagan, and succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with Israel and Republic of Korea. However, his meeting with Ceaușescu in Arad on 28 August 1988 and his speech at the People's Stadium, which threatened 'white terror,' sealed his fate. Until November 1988, he held the position of MSZMP secretary as well as that of president of the Council of Ministers. He then appointed Miklós Németh as his successor, who was first president of the Council of Ministers and then, after 23 October 1989, led the country as an interim prime minister. With this move, Grósz relinquished the opportunity to reap the rewards of the regime change. At the congress held in October 1989, he did not join the newly formed party, but retired to his home in Gödöllő. Shortly afterwards, he was diagnosed with a serious illness, from which he soon died.

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