

The International Context of Hungarian Transition, 1989

European reunification and NATO expansion were in the realm of the impossible in 1989. Influential thinkers such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Charles Gati or John Lewis Gaddis counted with the Warsaw Pact on the long run. There was no question that fundamental change – democratization, economic transformation – were inevitable in Eastern Europe. East-West confrontation would give way to cooperation. But it still looked as though Soviet military hegemony in Eastern Europe would survive and the continent would remain divided, as it had been ever since 1947. As Henning Wegener put it November 1989, the „*Warsaw Pact...could well perform useful functions and enhance stability...*” if put on the basis of strict equality.¹ The initiative to go beyond Yalta towards a new European structure would not come from the West or the Soviet Union. East Europeans were able to exploit the historical window of historical opportunity created by the weakening of the dominating power to dismantle the iron curtain and to put an end to the vehicle of Soviet domination, the Warsaw Treaty Organization. From early 1989 Hungarian officials pushed for a radical transformation of the Warsaw Pact’s decision-making process. But opposition parties began to question the country’s membership in the organization early on in the year and top-level Hungarian officials broached neutrality in September.

In early 1989 reformers of the ruling party and the democratic opposition were split as to how far it was desirable or even possible to go towards full democratization and the restoration of national sovereignty. Although the Soviet leadership seemingly reconciled itself to democratization, renounced the Brezhnev doctrine, and agreed to partial troop withdrawal, Gorbachev was unready for the unification of the continent, or to renounce Moscow’s military and economic control of Hungary and was wary of the infiltration of Western influence.

The West faced a dilemma. Fundamental political and economic changes were required in Hungary to avoid massive unrest and potential crisis, which in turn could throw the country into disarray with unforeseeable consequences for regional stability. But if changes spiraled out of control the consequences could be dire. Thus the West supported transformation along a tightrope: going far enough to satisfy the domestic appetite for democracy and to stave off economic collapse, but stopping short of upsetting the status quo and thus peace and stability in Europe. In July 1989 the deputy head of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (HSWP) Central Committee’s foreign relations department, Imre Szokai summarized the Hungarian perception of Western attitudes: „*it is the firm view of our West European partners that to preserve*

¹ Presentation by Henning Wegener, 20 November 1989.

*European stability and the historically evolved status quo there should be no regime change in Hungary, Hungarian politics should not impinge the USSR's security, military and political interests (they consider even mention of exit from the Warsaw Pact a dangerous fiction)...The activities of (US) ambassador Mark Palmer and his associates are in stark contrast to this...*² But Palmer's activity did not necessarily reflect the views of his government. He later admitted to having had „differences of opinion with some members of the Bush administration about how aggressively an ambassador could support the opposition.”³ Although Washington's grand strategy was „to end the Cold War and the division of Europe through the peaceful, democratic transformation of the eastern half”⁴ in its practical implementation US policy was cautious and not all that different from the European approach. Reforms outpaced even the boldest objectives. As an example the Bush administration envisioned a transition period of a few years to full democracy. This was in tune with the situation in Hungary up to around mid 1989.

Soviet moves were hard to predict. Although Gorbachev repeatedly suggested that the Brezhnev doctrine would not apply, these statements were not sufficiently unambiguous⁵ moreover some elements of the Soviet elite deplored the „loss” of Eastern Europe.⁶ The threat of Soviet intervention influenced American thinking.⁷ Although successful Hungarian reforms could help *perestroika*, the loss of Eastern Europe could lead to Gorbachev's removal, which in turn could end reform and Moscow's reconciliation with the West. The retraction of Soviet power, which safeguarded regional stability, could lead to adverse consequences like the reappearance of regional conflict or even the resurgence of German hegemony. Rapid changes in the East could hinder the Western integration process. Ultimately the preservation of stability prevailed in Western thinking.

As Moscow's rule over Budapest mellowed Soviet and Hungarian visions for the future diverged and Hungary pushed for fundamental change in bilateral relations. The time seemed ripe. In the summer of 1988 Soviet foreign minister

² Javaslat a PIB részére, July 1989. MOL (Hungarian National Archives), KS 288. f., 5. cs., 1078. őe.

³ In Bodzabán Antal, Szalay Antal eds.: *A puha diktatúrától a kemény demokráciáig* (Budapest, Pelikán, 1994), 131.

⁴ Robert L. Hutchings: *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War. An Insider's Account of U. S. Policy in Europe, 1989-1992* (Washington, D. C., Baltimore and London, The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 46-47. See also Michael R. Beschloss, Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little and Brown and Company, 1993; George Bush and Brent Scowcroft: *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

⁵ Csaba Békés, *Európából Európába – Magyarország konfliktusok keresztüztüében* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2004).

⁶ Mark Kramer, „The Collapse of East-European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 3)”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, volume 7, number 1, winter 2005, 1-24.

⁷ Bush-Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 36.

Shevardnadze admitted defeat: „*The West beat us in all important fields, we are unable to bear the burden of the continual arms race...Halting the arms race has absolute priority, we must use every occasion to reach agreements.*”⁸

Gorbachev hoped that Budapest would „*solve its problems by better utilizing the possibilities of socialism*”⁹ and still wanted to „*demonstrate the superiority of socialism.*”¹⁰ The Soviets failed to realize that the *ancien régime* could be discarded altogether. In July 1989, when the multiparty system was already recognized, Anatoly Dobrynin confided that the Soviet leadership had not even considered the possibility of a coalition government in Hungary.¹¹ Was Eastern Europe still an asset? CPSU analysts thought that trade with Eastern Europe „*greatly favored*” the Soviet Union.¹² Moreover Hungary suffered from a large and growing Soviet trade deficit in transferable rubles. But converting the system to dollars, which the Soviets proposed, could produce a crippling *Hungarian* deficit of 1,2 billion dollars within a year. Hungary depended on Soviet energy but bilateral trade seemed a zero sum game.

„*From the outset*” the socialist states „*formed a security zone, which provided strategic defense for the center of socialism. Today...the role of Eastern Europe remains essentially the same,*” CPSU analysts argued.¹³ In 1988 Gorbachev announced unilateral troop reduction in East-Central Europe and the western military districts. This coincided with Hungary’s budget-dictated decision in March to reduce its own forces and a party resolution on May 16 to push for Soviet troop withdrawal. But Gorbachev protested that the proposed reduction was hasty and should be a function of the Vienna arms reduction talks. The same applied to Soviet troop reduction. In Vienna Hungary pushed for the reduction of Hungarian forces and Soviet withdrawal. Although it seemed that the Soviet military „*no longer regarded the stationing of troops in adjacent states a prerequisite of security*”¹⁴ the Soviet position shifted slowly. In March Gorbachev rejected the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, which he sought to retain on a democratized basis.¹⁵ Soviet deputy foreign

⁸ A VSZ PTT varsói ülészaka, 15-16 July 1988. MOL, KS, 288. f., 5. cs., 1032. óe., 1988.

⁹ Jelentés az MSZMP PB-nak Grósz 1989. március 23-24-i moszkvai látogatásáról. Published in Baráth Magdolna, Rainer M. János szerk.: *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai magyar vezetőkkel* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2000), 178-185.

¹⁰ Gorbacsov beszéde a VSZ PTT bukaresti ülésén, 8 July 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, VST 1989, 107. doboz, 001367/12.

¹¹ Barabás jelentése Palmer és Dobrynin kijelentéseiről, 25 July 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Szu tük 1989, 83. doboz, 001245/3.

¹² Az SZKP KB Nemzetközi Osztályának feljegyzése, February 1989. *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai*, 250-251.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Szovjet álláspont a HCS tárgyalásokon, 16 January 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Európa 1989, 96. doboz, 00139/4.

¹⁵ Jegyzőkönyv Gorbacsov és Németh 1989. március 3-i találkozásjáról. *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai*, 156-168.

minister Aboimov regarded „*the presence of Soviet troops in Hungary an important guarantee of European security*” and was worried by statements demanding their full withdrawal.¹⁶ Soviet defense minister Dmitrii Iazov asserted that the Warsaw Pact was the token of European stability and would „*remain strong irrespectively of developments in Eastern Europe.*”¹⁷

Gorbachev’s „*common European home*” did not envision European reunification of as it ultimately unfolded. In April 1989 high-ranking MID officials explained that Gorbachev’s vision was built on „*the respect for European political and territorial realities, maintenance of the alliances*” based on cooperation. The German question would be solved on the basis of a common German identity but two German states.¹⁸ In briefing the Warsaw Pact allies on the Malta summit Gorbachev declared that although there was an „*objective need for efforts to overcome the division of Europe*” it was „*unacceptable to realize unity based on the liquidation of socialism and exclusively on the basis of Western values, the replacement of the Brezhnev doctrine with a sort of Bush doctrine.*”¹⁹ Thus the initiative for liberation had to come from outside the Soviet Union.

Neutral Austria, which had built a close relationship with Kádár’s Hungary was sensitive to challenges to Soviet control because of its precarious geographical position, the proximity of Soviet forces, and the potential flood of refugees. Only two days after the HSWP Central Committee (recognizing a fait accompli) made a historic decision on 11 February 1989 to accept a multi-party system and the reevaluation of the 1956 revolution, which removed the ruling party’s legitimacy, Németh explained chancellor Franz Vranitzky that Hungary would introduce democracy and a „*socialist market system.*” Vranitzky stated that „*the danger of domestic changes in Hungary spiraling out of control causes great anxiety in the Austrian leadership.*”²⁰ Hungarian diplomacy learned that the SPOE was baffled and deeply troubled by the broaching of neutrality and the question of 1956 and was skeptical about the possibility of „*real elections*” in Hungary.²¹ Friedhelm Frischenschlager stated that „*European stability rested on the status quo.*”²² Austrians emphasized

¹⁶ Jelentés Aboimov látogatásáról, 20 October 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Szu tük 1989, 84. doboz, 003982.

¹⁷ Jazov védelmi miniszter a VSZ-ről, 23 November 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Európa, 97. doboz, 00275/3.

¹⁸ Feljegyzés moszkvai konzultációról, 24 April 1989. MOL, XIX-J-1-j, Moszkva tük 1989, 84. doboz, 002112.

¹⁹ Jelentés a Minisztertanácsnak a VSZ tagállamai vezetőinek tanácskozásáról, 4 December 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-r, 144/HGY, 94. doboz.

²⁰ Jelentés a Minisztertanácsnak , 15 February 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Ausztria tük 1989, 19. doboz, 00342/2.

²¹ Osztrák vélemények az átalakulásról, 21 February 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Ausztria tük 1989, 19. doboz, 001225.

²² Osztrák vélemény az átalakulásról, 3 March 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Ausztria tük 1989, 19. doboz, 001225/3.

Gorbachev's precarious position and the dire consequences of his potential removal.

Aside from Wiener Allianz president Ernst Baumgartner, who advocated Hungary's return to the principles of Leninism,²³ Austrians recommended slow and predictable democratization. The general secretary of the Austrian Foreign Ministry Klestil queried Gyula Horn about the limits of transformation and when these would lead to tension with the USSR. Austrians feared the ramification of change for themselves. Foreign minister Mock was concerned that the Hungarian decision in February to remove the electronic border fence would increase the number of East European refugees to Austria. Growing financial burdens could lead Austria to alter its refugee policy.²⁴ By July and August Austrian socialists expressed anxiety that the HSWP may fall to pieces and anarchy would set in, a danger just as real as the reversal of reforms. Their message, as reported by the Hungarian embassy in Vienna, was that „*Hungary should not cause a headache for Europe again.*”²⁵ Austrian views remained unchanged throughout the year. ÖVP's spokesman reiterated that the USSR and the stationing of Soviet troops abroad was an important factor in stabilizing Eastern Europe, a statement likely prompted by rumors of an impending Romanian attack on Hungary.²⁶

Austria was part of Italy's *Quadrangone* initiative launched in Budapest in November, which aimed at promoting regional cooperation between Italy, Yugoslavia, Austria and Hungary in the field of industry, science, transportation and environmental protection. Italian foreign minister De Michelis saw this as Italy's contribution for the region to find its place in the „*common European home.*” But the project, which received Soviet and American blessing, wasn't entirely altruistic. Reminding of an old rivalry between Rome and Berlin an Italian official explained in mid October that it was „*more advantageous for Hungary to use Italy's mediation towards the EC than Germany's.*” One must take into account, he argued, that balance of powers problems may arise „*once Germany is unified.*”²⁷ Hungarians were receptive, but problems arose with Yugoslavia and Austria at an early stage. In 1990 *quadrangone* was broadened into a *pentagonale* but the initiative petered out.

Archives contain little evidence on Bonn's policies towards the security and political aspects of the transition. With *Ostpolitik* Bonn built close relations with

²³ Megbeszélés Prattnerrel, 25 April 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Ausztria tük 1989, 19. doboz, 00225/10; Beszélgetés Baumgartnerrel, 18 April 1989. ibid.

²⁴ Jelentés Klestil látogatásáról, 7 March 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Ausztria tük 1989, 19. doboz, 00125.

²⁵ Jelentés osztrák véleményről, 6 July 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Ausztria tük 1989, 19. doboz, 001225.

²⁶ A bécsi nagykövetség számjeltávirata, 3 August 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Ausztria tük 1989, 20. doboz, 003390.

²⁷ A római nagykövetség jelentése, 10 October 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, EK 1989, 110. doboz, 002988/6.

Budapest. German economic activity was particularly strong and the FRG became Hungary's largest Western trading partner. Bonn's approach paid off in 1989 when the Németh administration drove a nail into the GDR's coffin by opening the border to East German citizens who decided not return to their homeland.²⁸ Not for economic favors (which Budapest counted on and received), but as test case of Hungary's democratization. In June a German-Soviet joint declaration was issued, which affirmed self-determination and commitment to overcome the division of Europe. Commitment to self-determination had already been made and Gorbachev's notion of European unity was likely different from Kohl's, who on June 12 declared that Germany would do nothing to destabilize Poland or Hungary by intervening in their affairs. Two days later Kohl outlined his position on Hungary: He told Gorbachev that Hungarians should not „accelerate too much, because you might lose control of your mechanism and it will start to destroy itself.”²⁹ When Horn broached the question of Soviet troop withdrawal on the occasion of the German chancellor's visit to Budapest in December 1989, Kohl did not express an opinion on the topic.³⁰ More information is available on French policies.

Robert Hutchings observed „*Eastern Europe had little place in this (French) strategic vision except as part of the distant goal of a Europe free of the superpowers.*”³¹ French historian Thomas Schreiber has written that some French political circles were not enthusiastic after the Polish elections and the opening of Hungarian boundaries to East Germans, Mitterrand himself remained cautious.³² Both statements are supported by Hungarian documentary evidence. Only briefly had Eastern Europe ever played a pivotal role in French policies. From 1920 Paris supported the Little Entente to safeguard France's eastern security – against Germany and Russia – but failed to provide explicit security guarantees.³³ From the mid 1930s the French backed down from the system they created in Eastern Europe. Although the 1960s saw a renewed French interest in the region Paris was not about to take responsibility for it and French economic activity was by far overtaken by West Germany's. Mitterrand turned down Kohl's offer for a common policy even though France was wary of German

²⁸ See Horn Gyula, *Cölöpök* (Budapest: Zenit, 1991); Horváth István, Németh István: *És a falak leomlanak* (Budapest: Magvető, 1999).

²⁹ Third Concersation, Gorbachev – Kohl, July 14 1989. National Security Archives, Washington, D. C. Russian and East European Archive Data Base, 1989 – Present, Box 16. Cited by: Békés, *Európából Európába*, 301-302.

³⁰ Feljegyzés Kohl látogatásáról, 21 December 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, NSZK tük 1989, 65. doboz, 004164.

³¹ Hutchings, *American Diplomacy*, 15-17.

³² Thomas Schreiber: *Les Actions de la France à L'Est ou les Absences de Marianne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), 198-200.

³³ Magda Ádám: *The Little Entente and Europe, 1920-1929* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1993); Anthony Adamthwaite: *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940* (London: Arnold: 1990).

designs in the eastern half of the continent. Paris may have found it too risky to support changes that threatened to upset stability behind the iron curtain. Domestic changes had to satisfy the criteria of stability and predictability.

Initially Mitterrand was forward looking. In November 1988 he talked to party first secretary Grósz about the need to transcend Yalta and for Europeans to decide on their own fate. Mitterrand emphasized the need for cooperation „against American cultural expansionism on the wings of Japanese technology.”³⁴ Perhaps a subtle hint, that it was more important to rid France of the US than to rid the East of the Soviets. In early 1989 French business circles took an active interest in Hungary. Although in Hungarian estimation France recognized that Germany was making economic inroads, not even a symbolic measure was taken to facilitate Hungarian exports to France.³⁵ French response to the abolition of the single party system was cautious. It was reported that because of the anxiety exhibited by political circles regarding the pace of reform the French company Matra canceled its plans to create a joint venture in Hungary.³⁶ On February 15 Mitterrand’s advisor, Loic Hennekine told László Vass that Paris supported Hungary’s reforms, but Paris did not want these to destabilize the continent, or to lead to political and economic crisis.³⁷ A Hungarian summary of French views emphasized that they deplored „demagogic” demands such as Hungary’s exit from the Warsaw Pact. Paris did not understand why, in contrast to Poland, the government backed down against the opposition. A more gradual, predictable reform process was required.³⁸ Although Jacques Attali opined that in ten years time Hungary might become member of the European Community,³⁹ on 28 February 1989 minister of planning Lionel Stoleru told the president of the National Planning Office, Ernő Kemenes, that the EEC wanted to become a bastion in the economic struggle against the US and Japan therefore transition in the East should not impede the strong union of the twelve. Rapid acceleration of the reforms in Eastern Europe, Stoleru thought, would lead to catastrophe.

In October the HSWP was dissolved ending the party state system that had existed in Hungary since 1948. The communists’ rapid demise alarmed the

³⁴ Tájékoztató Grósz franciaországi látogatásáról, é. n. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 35. doboz, 00547.

³⁵ A Külügyminisztérium feljegyzése, é. n. (January 1989). MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 35. doboz, 00428.

³⁶ A párizsi nagykövetség rejtjeltávirata, February 17 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük, 1989, 35. doboz, 0070/1.

³⁷ A párizsi nagykövetség rejtjeltávirata, 15 February 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 35. doboz, 00104.

³⁸ Francia nézetek az átalakulásról, 25 April 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 35. doboz, 001104/1.

³⁹ A párizsi nagykövetség rejtjeltávirata, 17 February 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország 1989, 35. doboz, 001104/6; Jelentés Stoleru és Kemenes megbeszéléséről, 28 February 1989. ibid. 001104/8.

French Socialist Party, which opined that the victory of the right wing was not in the interest of Western Europe or Hungary.⁴⁰ On November 17 Elysée general secretary Jean Louis Bianco explained that Western assistance to Hungary should not interfere with Hungarian-Soviet relations. The USSR had clarified the limits of East European change, which were the continued existence of the alliances and the inviolability of boundaries, conditions that the US and Western Europe accepted.⁴¹ Quai d'Orsay director Jacques Blot described the dangers of an exclusive German orientation to a Hungarian diplomat arguing that France could provide the right political, cultural and economic counterbalance.⁴² In early December former president Valéry Giscard D'Estaing met state minister Pozsgay. Giscard D'Estaing claimed to agree with Mitterrand that the transition period in Hungary would be lengthy. But membership in the EEC required compatible economies and membership in NATO, which according to Giscard ruled out even Austria's entry.⁴³

It was apparent to Hungarians that France wanted slow and limited change. According to a briefing of Mitterrand's talks in the GDR the Hungarians received from the French embassy in East Berlin he regarded unification a German matter but preferred to maintain the GDR's international status. Unification could not lead to destabilization in Europe and boundary changes.⁴⁴ In Budapest (January 1990), while his Hungarian hosts underlined the importance of French support of the transition, Mitterrand declared that he came to give an impetus to bilateral relations and to discuss the future of Europe. Earlier, he argued, Europe had been under the „*tutelage*” of great powers but Malta offered the opportunity to transcend this. After 1945 there was no stable continental balance, which had to be rectified through negotiation. German unification was unavoidable, but should not be hastened. It would take at least ten years to build a European confederation. Political and legal arrangements would have to be made between the two halves of Europe to guarantee security and economic cooperation.⁴⁵ Thus the Soviet bloc would survive at least temporarily. In this respect there was no change in Mitterrand's position since 1988.

Alongside France Britain was the architect of the interwar order in Central Europe. London sought to balance French presence in the region and tried

⁴⁰ Jelentés a francia szocialista párt véleményéről, 3 November 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 35. doboz, 001104/1.

⁴¹ Feljegyzés Bianco és Vass megbeszéléséről, 17 November 1989. Mol, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 35. doboz, 00724/8.

⁴² Feljegyzés megbeszélésről Blot külügyi főigazgatóval, 22 November 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 00724/9.

⁴³ Feljegyzés Pozsgay és Giscard D'Estaing megbeszéléséről, 6 December 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Franciaország tük 1989, 35. doboz, 001104/9.

⁴⁴ Jelentés Mitterrand NDK-beli látogatásáról, 2 January 1990. A Külügyminisztérium Irattára (Archive of the Foreign Ministry, later: KIT), NDK SZT 1990, 51. doboz, 108-13.

⁴⁵ Jelentés Mitterrand látogatásáról, 23 January 1990. KIT, Franciaország SZT 1990, 26. doboz, 00160/6.

unsuccessfully to identify a state on which to build British regional policy but soon became disenchanted with the successor states⁴⁶ and would not pursue an active regional role again. As Geraint Hughes has shown „*traditional British policy towards Eastern Europe...emphasized stability rather than self-determination...violent uprisings...could have a dangerous impact on European security.*”⁴⁷ In 1989 London perceived similar threats if the reforms went too far. Robert Hutchings argued that „*British thinking...saw few prospects for meaningful change and many dangers for the cohesion of the West.*”⁴⁸ Geoffrey Howe admitted that East European changes raised a number of strategic issues, primarily in Western policies towards the USSR.⁴⁹ Initially London suggested that Hungarian reforms may improve Gorbachev’s chances. Margaret Thatcher, who had been skeptical of Kádár’s reforms,⁵⁰ told foreign minister Péter Várkonyi in mid March 1989 that the success of Hungarian „*perestroika*” could influence Gorbachev’s choices and serve as a model for the USSR. Thatcher disclosed having told Gorbachev that Hungary was a showcase of socialist transformation.⁵¹ The terminology, *socialist transformation* a term used by the conservative wing of the reform communists in Hungary, suggested that Thatcher was mindful of Soviet concerns. A few days earlier the British ambassador in Budapest had asked opposition leaders to be more patient with the Hungarian leadership and not cause unnecessary complications.⁵² In September Thatcher assured Gorbachev of sympathizing with the Soviet position according to which reform in Eastern Europe could not question the Warsaw Pact.⁵³ In acknowledging Soviet primacy in Eastern Europe the prime minister acted in the traditions of British policy towards that region since 1944. Hungarians were told that European stability rested on Soviet security, which enjoyed priority over reforms in Eastern Europe. The Foreign Office expressed Thatcher’s cautious views even more emphatically.

On October 11 Foreign Office officials explained that the future of Eastern Europe depended on the progress of the USSR, which was the most dangerous state in Eastern Europe and it was important that it felt secure. Dissolution of the Warsaw Pact would increase the Soviet sense of insecurity with

⁴⁶ Gabor Batonyi, *Britain and Central Europe 1918-1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Geraint Hughes, „*British Policy towards Eastern Europe and the Impact of the 'Prague Spring' 1964-1968*” *Cold War History* Volume 4, Number 2, January 2004. 134.

⁴⁸ Hutchings, *American Diplomacy*, 14.

⁴⁹ Bodzabán – Szalay, 153.

⁵⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 455-457.

⁵¹ Jelentés Várkonyi londoni látogatásáról, 17 March 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Anglia tük 1989, 15. doboz, 00412/13.

⁵² Várkonyi feljegyzése Hornnak, 11 March 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Szu tük 1989, 83. doboz, 001245/1.

⁵³ Memorandum of Conversation, 23 September 1989. In Békés Csaba et al. szerk.: *Rendszerváltás Magyarországon 1989-1990*.

unpredictable outcome. Therefore Britain attributed great significance to regional stability and advised the reform states to be cautious: too many things should not be changed at a time, though London hoped to provide economic assistance to Poland and Hungary. The question was how this could be done without jeopardizing mutual security. Finally the British declared that they hoped for the presence of reform communists – Pozsgay, Németh, Horn – in the coalition government after the election, which would be able to expect London's support just like Solidarity.⁵⁴ On November 27-28 state secretary of foreign affairs László Kovács met William Waldgrave, David Ratford and Percy Cradock in preparation of Németh's meeting with Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher's dilemma, they informed Kovács, was how to help reforms without „causing problems for Gorbachev.” Changes had to be „peaceful and evolutionary” not to endanger European stability. They claimed that in her recent talks with President Bush Thatcher argued that in order to offset the uncertainty caused by the rapid changes in Eastern Europe the two military alliances needed to be preserved while broadening their contacts. Concerning the EEC Thatcher's proposal was a treaty of association for Hungary, but full membership was a function a long-term change of European structures.⁵⁵

At their meeting on 13 December 1989 Németh claimed that for the first time it was unlikely that Moscow would intervene. The most important thing he thought was for Gorbachev to succeed. Although he was under fire „*the KGB and the army stands behind him.*” Németh pleaded for Western assistance in the transition, which otherwise stood no chance. Hungary's success could bolster Gorbachev and reforms in other socialist states, while failure could have a negative impact. Németh expressed his gratitude to Thatcher and President Bush for avoiding even the semblance of profiting from East European processes. Németh was grateful for a Western policy that eschewed strident rhetoric – in contrast to 1956 – that doesn't mean that he liked being told to stay in the Warsaw Pact. It's no coincidence that he tried to persuade Thatcher and later Bush that Moscow would not intervene. Had the general public known about the Western stance on the preservation of the status quo, it would have created an outcry.

Thatcher stated that Gorbachev needed Hungary as a positive example as opposed to Poland, which in her view was heading for crisis due to its catastrophic economy. She emphasized the need for a „*responsible*” Hungarian opposition. British aid took the form of a 25 million pound know-how fund.⁵⁶ According to a Hungarian appraisal in early 1990 London was still worried

⁵⁴ A Külügyminisztérium feljegyzése, 11 October 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Anglia 1989 tük, 15. doboz, 00412.

⁵⁵ Kovács konzultációja a brit kormány képviselőivel, 27-28 November 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Anglia tük 1989, 15. doboz, 004387.

⁵⁶ Jelentés a Minisztertanácsnak, 14 December 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Anglia tük 1989, 15. doboz, 003935/1.

about destabilization stemming from radical changes in Eastern Europe and emphasized stability to be preserved by the two alliances, Soviet security concerns being recognized as legitimate.⁵⁷ In early 1990 foreign minister Horn told Douglas Hurd that Hungary was „*looking for a new, realistic framework of security*” with neutrality being a viable option since the USSR no longer offered an „*adequate guarantee*” given the uncertainty prevailing there. Hurd emphasized the importance of NATO in guaranteeing US presence in Europe and in constraining Germany, which was a „*European interest*.”⁵⁸

Just like the member states, the EC groped for an appropriate response to the eastern challenge. In January Jacques Delors talked about the advantages of a single European market, but concerning the common European house Giovanni Januzzi told the Hungarian ambassador in Brussels that the EC had no intention of „*surrendering its own building*.”⁵⁹ The community sent mixed signals. At the July summit of the G7 it was decided that the EC would coordinate aid to Poland and Hungary offered by the G24. Simultaneously Januzzi outlined EC expectations for Hungary, welcoming its rapprochement with the community without expecting it to „*eschew socialism*” and to adopt „*wild capitalism*”. Hungary could have a government under the leadership of the communist party with a membership in the WTO like French participation in NATO. For the sake of European stability, Januzzi claimed, it was Hungary’s „*obligation*” to remain in the Warsaw Pact.⁶⁰ In the same month a Hungarian request for the removal of quantitative limitations on Hungarian exports and a Yugoslav type asymmetrical trade agreement was rejected. In September the EC decided on a 300 million ECU aid to Poland and Hungary, which also got 50 million ECUs for environmental protection. By the Paris summit in November it became clear that changes in Eastern Europe were irreversible.⁶¹ As a result the Phare program was launched, GSP was given and quantitative restrictions were lifted for Hungarian industrial products. But the concessions were carefully calibrated to involve only a small number of Hungarian goods, involved only a few percent of export and protected EC commodities from Hungarian competition.⁶²

Early in the Cold War the US sought to undermine communist regimes in Eastern Europe. After 1956 liberation was discarded and gradually the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe was accepted even though the US never

⁵⁷ A londoni nagykövetség jelentése, 8 February 1990. KIT, Anglia SZT 1990, 11. doboz, 00835; A Külügyminisztérium feljegyzése, 21 February 1990. *ibid.*, 2510.

⁵⁸ Jelentés Hurd látogatásáról, 5 March 1990. KIT, Anglia SZT 1990, 11. doboz, 0010801/1.

⁵⁹ Németh József jelentése, 3 March 1989. MOL, Küm XIX-J-1-j, EK 1989, 110. doboz, 00155/8.

⁶⁰ A brüsszeli nagykövetség a Külügyminisztériumnak, 24 July 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, EK 1989, 111. doboz.

⁶¹ Holland tájékoztatás az EGK párizsi találkozásáról, 18 November 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, EK 1989, 111. doboz, 004275/2.

⁶² See Pater Van Ham: *The EC, Eastern Europe and European Unity – Discord, Collaboration and Integration since 1947* (London, New York: Pinter, 1993), 173.

renounced eventual democratization. In the 1950s Washington saw Soviet presence in the heart of Europe as a menace to European stability and peace. In the 1960s and 70s this position changed gradually. The national independence and sovereignty of East European countries was no longer seen as the prerequisite of Western security or of European stability and peace. In 1972 Secretary of State William Rogers told Kádár that the US wanted to develop bilateral relations „as it suits Hungary without disturbing its relations with third countries.” The „reassociation” of Eastern Europe with the West did not mean continental reunification. In 1975 Kissinger wrote about the restoration of independence *and* autonomy in Eastern Europe, the contradiction between the two notions was apparent enough.

On February 13 1989 President Bush publicly committed the US to a policy that moved beyond containment. The Cold War had to end where it started, in Eastern Europe, which was elevated to the top of the international agenda on April 17. A free Eastern Europe would „reinforce further development in East-West relations and all its dimensions.”⁶³ In reality the *realist* Bush administration was cautious about promoting change in Eastern Europe. For Bush and Scowcroft keeping Gorbachev, who was called the most pro-Western Russian leader in a century, in power took precedence over all other considerations. Stability took precedence over promoting democracy.⁶⁴ Although Bush claimed that his Eastern European policy was bolder than his predecessors’, historical records suggest that this may not have been so. Prior to the Reagan – Gorbachev meeting in 1988, the NSC urged the President to tell Gorbachev that that United States was dedicated to transcending the division of Europe and the best guarantee for European stability was to make progress in this area.⁶⁵

On the other hand NSC advisor Scowcroft’s memorandum to President Bush prior to the Conference in Malta reveals a more cautious approach: the United States would not negotiate „on the future of Europe” and will „not take unilateral advantage of” the Soviet Union’s relations with Eastern Europe, but the people of the region „must be allowed to determine their own political and economic futures.”⁶⁶ A few days later a high-level official of the State Department declared that „Malta would not be about Yalta”, the leaders would not decide the fate of Eastern Europe.⁶⁷ Presidential advisor Edward Rowny warned against Malta becoming a „terms summit” and cautiously advocated „more reform and greater freedom.”⁶⁸

⁶³ Hutchings: *American Diplomacy*.

⁶⁴ On the political philosophy and aims of the Bush administration regarding the Soviet Union see: James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul: *Power and Purpose – U. S. Policy Toward Russia After the Cold War* (Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ NSDD 305, Objectives of the Moscow Summit, April 26 1988. National Security Archive, Washington, D.C. End of the Cold War, Box 3.

⁶⁶ Scowcroft to Bush, „*Objectives for Malta Meeting*”, November 10 1989. Ibid. Box 4.

⁶⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, Kamman, Kutuzov, November 25 1989. Ibid. Box 3.

⁶⁸ Memorandum by Edward Rowny to the Secretary of State, November 27 1989. Ibid. Box 4.

Hungarian-US relations improved over the decades, but still suffered from the remnants of the cold war: trade controls on the US part, espionage and illegal acquisition of technology by Budapest. Although the Hungarians desperately wanted a relaxation of Cocom restrictions and permanent MFN status, both were denied. The American response to Hungary's critical balance of payments deficit was insensitive. Presidential envoy John Whitehead complained about Hungarian surplus in bilateral trade. In April State Department officials told a Hungarian diplomat that Hungary „*could not count on large financial support from the US even though political developments could possibly justify it.*”⁶⁹ Budapest understood that Washington expected predictable, gradual and peaceful change. Lawrence Eagleburger praised Hungarian boldness in opening the Austrian border and expressed sympathy for its reforms.⁷⁰ US sources suggested that Washington expected changes to remain under control. Moscow's tolerance limit was thought to be unpredictable.⁷¹ In May President Bush's visit to Warsaw and Budapest was announced. Soviet reactions were mixed. Shevardnadze welcomed the visit and declared that Moscow would respect nations' right to choose their own path.⁷² But an article in *Krasnaya Zvezda* of 12 May accused the US of „*driving a wedge between the socialist countries*” of „*trying to alter the balance of power on the continent,*” and of „*casting doubt on European realities.*”⁷³ In a private message on July 4 Gorbachev asked Bush to be „*more considerate if he wants to help.*”⁷⁴

In his dramatic visit to Budapest Bush stressed non-intervention. Party president Nyers argued that Hungary's freedom of maneuver had never been so broad since 1947. Prime minister Németh claimed that the „*Brezhnev doctrine is dead*” and said that Hungarian reforms could strengthen Gorbachev's hand. According to the Hungarian records Bush, expressing *verbatim* what other Western leaders were saying, declared that he „*did not mean to cause problems for Gorbachev or the Hungarian leadership and has no intention of interfering in the relations between Hungary and its allies.*”⁷⁵ In Hutchings's version Bush added, „*the better we get along with the Soviets the better it is for you.*”⁷⁶ The President met members of the

⁶⁹ A washingtoni nagykövetség rejteltávirata Pataki megbeszéléséről, 12 April 1989. MOL, XIX-J-1-j, USA tük 1989, 9. doboz, 00625/5.

⁷⁰ A washingtoni nagykövetség rejteltávirata, 11 May 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, USA tük 1989, 9. doboz, 002245/3.

⁷¹ A washingtoni nagykövetség feljegyzése, 15 May 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, USA tük 1989, 10. doboz, 0016/2.

⁷² Szovjet tájékoztatás a Külügyminisztériumnak, 12 May 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Szu tük 1989, 83. doboz, 001057/1.

⁷³ Megjegyzések a Krasznaja Zvezda cikkéhez, 30 June 1989. Mol, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Szu tük 1989, 86. doboz, 003062.

⁷⁴ Jack Matlock, *Autopsy of an Empire – The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), 198.

⁷⁵ Feljegyzés Bush látogatásáról. MOL KS 288. f. 11. cs., 4460. öe.

⁷⁶ Hutchings, *American Diplomacy*, 66.

opposition, who made a poor impression. Referring to the modest economic package Nyers informed Gorbachev that the President's visit „*left no illusions*” but that Bush emphasized American neutrality in domestic affairs.⁷⁷ In late September President Szűrös broached Hungary's neutrality to Brent Scowcroft, who reiterated that the US „*wanted to appear helpful but not provocative.*”⁷⁸

Beside concern about the Brezhnev doctrine and *perestroika* there was another problem. On September 13 Lawrence Eagleburger warned that „*reform in the Soviet bloc and the relaxation of Soviet control over Eastern Europe are bringing long-suppressed ethnic antagonisms and natural rivalries to the surface and putting the German question back on the agenda.*” Eagleburger suggested that the US would not be the key player: „*it is ultimately the Europeans themselves who have the principal stake in making the transition to a new and undivided Europe a peaceful and orderly one.*”⁷⁹ Concern about regional security was not unfounded. Hungarian-Romanian relations plummeted and on June 19 the Ministry of Interior warned the HSWP leadership of Romanian preparations for military action against Hungary in the fall.⁸⁰ In this light, Hungarian leaders, including future Prime Minister József Antall reaffirmed Hungary's commitment to the Warsaw Pact.⁸¹ Antall told Aboimov that Hungary wanted „*guarantees*” within the alliance „*against potential attack from the neighborhood...we cannot exclude the danger of (Romanian) attack.*” But Aboimov may have been aware that Hungary was already exploring other possibilities: „*any breach of European stability would create a very dangerous situation.*”⁸² In his assessment of the Malta summit Gorbachev claimed that Bush „*accepted the stabilizing role of the military-political alliances...and caution was needed in the withdrawal of troops stationed abroad as well.*”⁸³ At Malta Gorbachev pledged non-intervention, troop-withdrawal, and chance for Eastern Europe to choose its political system. In return Bush pledged not to take advantage of the situation.⁸⁴ For the time being European security structures would remain. According to State Department officials the alliances would be „*pillars of European security.*”⁸⁵

⁷⁷ Jelentés az MSZMP PIB-nak Nyers és Grósz 1989. július 24-25-i moszkvai látogatásáról. *Gorbacsov tárgyalásai*, 194.

⁷⁸ Az Országgyűlés elnöki titkárságának jelentése, 26 September 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-k, USA admin 1989, 24. doboz, 4243-4/T.

⁷⁹ A washingtoni nagykövetség jelentése. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, USA 1989 tük, 9. doboz, 001335/1989.

⁸⁰ Az MSZMP KB NKO javaslata a pártelnökség számára, 30 June 1989. MOL KS 288. f., 59. cs., 1. öe.

⁸¹ As Horn put it: our „*membership in the Warsaw Pact is not open to question.*” Jelentés Aboimov látogatásáról, op. cit.

⁸² Aboimov találkozója ellenzéki politikusokkal, 17 October 1989. MOL, Küm, XIX-J-1-j, Szu tük 1989, 84. doboz, 003982.

⁸³ Jelentés a Minisztertanácsnak a VSZ tagállamai vezetőinek tanácskozásáról, opcit.

⁸⁴ Matlock: *Autopsy of an Empire*, 272.

⁸⁵ Várkonyi, Kamman, Hornblow, Swihart megbeszélése. KIT, USA SZT 1990, 9. doboz, 0050.

In 1989 communist rule in Hungary was on the verge of collapse. The only way out of impending economic catastrophe and the ever-increasing domestic pressure for democratization and restoration of national sovereignty was for the ruling party to gradually dismantle its dictatorial rule. Archival records reveal what Western officials of various levels actually said about their policies towards Hungary, which can be reconstructed as follows. At least in part the Cold War was about the retraction of Soviet power behind the Soviet Union's boundaries and the reunification of the continent. When the moment came Western powers saw both an opportunity and dangers ahead.

Transition from a relatively stable and predictable world to an unpredictable and possibly unstable one was risky. Despite statements in memoirs to the contrary relations to eastern Europe was still subordinated to policies towards the USSR. Western leaders *unanimously* repeated that their policies in Hungary did not mean to „*cause problems for Gorbachev.*” Fears of German hegemony (amplified by the prospect of unification), the threat of regional chaos and conflict made a continued Soviet *hegemony* in a democratized and cooperative form an appealing solution. The West, while seeking „*gradual and peaceful*” transition to democracy put stability and peace before full self-determination in Eastern Europe. In the new structure the two, cooperative parts of Europe would be bound together by a network of political, economic and security arrangements, but the division would stay nonetheless. Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe would be reduced or even eliminated, but the Warsaw Pact would stay.

Moscow gave repeated assurances that the Brezhnev doctrine was dead and that it tolerated democratization wherever it led. But the Soviets made it clear that they preferred it to stay within the confines of socialism. The West was also willing to see democratic governments under reform communist leadership. Gorbachev hoped to preserve the Soviet bloc in a more democratic form: the Soviet leadership regarded the Warsaw Pact as a pillar of stability and peace. Full troop withdrawal was a long-term prospect. There was a meeting of minds between Gorbachev and Bush about the need to preserve European stability and its pillars, the two military blocs. But in the course of that year events moved beyond this scenario and Moscow refrained from trying to halt the process. The West, in the face of irreversible transformation of East European scene and German unification would accept the eventual restoration of self-determination and the full loss of communist power in Eastern Europe. But continental reunification would be a long and painful process for the former subjects of the iron curtain.

