

# THE GABCIKOVO-NAGYMAROS DAM SOCIAL POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS

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## Background to the Gabcikovo-Nagymaros case

In 1977, Czechoslovakia and Hungary signed an International Treaty to build a joint water power station system on the Danube river, in the area of Gabcikovo, Czechoslovakia, and Nagymaros, Hungary.

However, as environmental movements began to rally against the planned construction, Hungary gradually withdrew support and suspended construction work during the late 1980s, and unilaterally terminated the Treaty in May, 1992. Slovakia continued construction and unilaterally put in operation the Gabcikovo dam by diverting the river to Slovakian territory in October, 1992.

The two sides charged each other with illegitimate and unjustified action. In the meantime, technical and environmental disagreements escalated into major domestic issues, in both countries, and resulted in a very serious international political and legal dispute. After several prime-ministerial summits, other high-level bilateral meetings, expert discussions as well as trilateral negotiations including the European Communities, the two sides still could not reach an agreement about whether unilateral actions on both sides were justified. The case was submitted to the International Court of Justice, where it is still under consideration.

The case of the Gabcikovo-Nagymaros Barrier System became a major dispute between two newly democratised countries in the East Central European region. Peculiar features of the conflict represent the outcome of several institutional and cultural variables, including deficiencies of regional conflict resolution mechanisms, nationalism and the underdevelopment of independent scientific institutions. Scientific analyses of the conflict, even historical documentations, are largely lacking. This paper offers a systematic sociological and political science analysis and interpretation of the causes, strategic actors and outcomes of the case.

## Social, political and cultural factors

The basic sociological and political science questions concerning the Gabcikovo-Nagymaros Barrier System (GNBS) on the Slovakian and Hungarian sides of the Danube are the following: What are the political, social, cultural, historical and economic factors behind the escalation of bilateral disagreements between the mid-1980s and 1995 between Slovakia and Hungary? How are these factors interrelated? How did the fall of communism and the transition to democracy in both countries and the whole region affect the conflict? What are the main reasons behind the fact that the two countries could not reach agreement? What was the role of strategic actors, such as the two governments; the two scientific communities; national and international environmental movements and NGOs; local-municipal governments and NGOs in the two countries?

The rapidly changing institutional structures, government agendas, socio-political forces, strategic actors and the specific scenarios of the transition to pluralist democracy in the two countries are briefly reviewed. The conflicts are the outcomes of the following seven factors:

### *Different pace and scenarios of democratic transition*

The first point is that the conflict was in a sense programmed into the different contexts of democratisation in the two countries. On the one hand, Hungary, along with Poland, was a forerunner of economic and political reforms in Eastern Europe during the 1980s. Janos Kadar's regime introduced market-oriented economic reforms, as early as 1968, followed by gradual democratisation.

The formation of a multi-party system during the late 1980s led to face-to-face "roundtable negotiations" between the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party - the communist party - and the democratic opposition, representing several new parties and free trade unions, during 1989-1990. Democratic elections were preceded by several years of gradual democratisation and pluralisation. Democratic transition was realised through a "negotiation scenario" in Hungary.

On the other hand, Czechoslovakia's communist regime, led by hard-liner Gustav Husak, represented a more conservative version of communism. Since the Prague Spring of 1968, the regime harshly suppressed any forms of political or even cultural opposition, fired potential free-thinkers from professional and academic jobs and imprisoned political activists such as underground Charter '77 group leader Vaclav Havel. In Slovakia, part of Czechoslovakia until December 31, 1992, interdependent political groups could not exist under the communist regime. The victory of the "velvet revolution" in December 1989 introduced democratic politics abruptly to the country. Democratic transition was realised through a peaceful "revolutionary scenario" in Czechoslovakia.

These different political contexts gave different roles to environmental movements in the two countries. A Hungarian NGO, the Danube Circle, winner of the Alternative Nobel Prize in 1985, warned that the environmental consequences of the dam may be severe and began campaigning against the proposed construction as early as the beginning of the 1980s. In Czechoslovakia, a similar independent movement could not enter the political scene.

During 1988, the Danube Circle organised demonstrations against the dam in Hungary with the massive support of tens of thousands of participants. Since direct protests against the communist regime would have been suppressed, but environmental protests were tolerated, the issue of the dam became politicised. As one of the largest investments of the country, the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros twin dam project plan, represented illegitimate communist policies and was viewed by independent and oppositional groups and their supporters as a symbol of the megalomaniac state socialist planning system. A similar popular movement could not present itself because of harsher repression in Czechoslovakia.

In this sense, the first point is that the conflict was programmed into the different contexts and pace of democratisation in the two countries. Environmental NGOs, independent movements and oppositional parties were able to represent an anti-government program and environmental values in reform-communist Hungary, while, in more repressive Czechoslovakia, such movements could not surface. As a result, post-communist positions on the dam became also very different. On the one hand, all the parties that formed the first democratically elected government - and even most opposition parties - in Hungary after 1990 opposed the building of the dams. On the other hand, in Czechoslovakia, the views of democratically elected parties in 1990 represented continuity with their communist predecessors vis-à-vis the GNBS.

#### *Limited independence of scientific communities*

The second point concerns the role of scientific communities - ecologists, biologists, geologists, hydrologists and other involved "hard" scientists - in the two countries. The limited independence of scientific communities also contributed to the escalation of the issue from scientific disagreement over evidence of ecological dangers to open political dispute.

In the communist era, the Soviet-style Academies of Sciences functioned in both countries as transmission belts of the respective communist parties. Even after the democratic transformation of both countries, the scientific communities of both countries remained largely dependent on government funding. In both countries, the private as well as the non-profit/non-governmental sectors in scientific research and education are extremely weak even in the mid-1990s. Few independent researches could mobilise symbolic and financial resources, represent their views vigorously vis-à-vis official positions and collaborate across national boundaries. Many scientists represent government views and the majority of the scientific community supports official positions in both countries. The same ecological, geological, and hydrological, issues are evaluated very differently by the majority of scientists in the two countries. Typically, scientific communities differed along national boundaries and experts of the two sides were constructing opposing scientific "facts." Political elites could easily present these facts in an adversarial framework. The weakness of substantial independent expert analysis contributed to the polarisation and adversarial framing of the issue.

#### *Nationalism: political, historical, cultural and ethnic factors*

Historical, cultural and ethnic issues also contributed to the polarisation of opinion about the dam. Some Slovaks see Hungarian termination of construction as an effort to maintain unique relations with ethnic Hungarians living in the Gabčíkovo area. Even official Slovakian documents point to the Hungarians' supposed refusal of the 1920 Trianon Treaty, that fixed the border of the Danube bed, in relation to the recent discontinuation of work.

A popular Hungarian argument suggests that the aesthetic value of the Danube bed represents a national heritage that would be destroyed by construction work. The memory of historical, cultural and ethnic conflicts of the past added a peculiar social and psychological dimension and offered cognitive schemes for a nationalist framing of disagreements on both sides.

The third point of this analysis is that different kinds of nationalism have framed the issue between the two countries. In Hungary, the internal colonialism of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy towards its national minorities and Hungarian responsibility for historical injustice has been rarely criticised thoroughly and colonialist discourse has not been deconstructed. The Treaty of Trianon, that significantly reduced the size of the country and rendered millions of Hungarians as minorities in new states, is seen by many Hungarians as an unjust geopolitical decision. However, Hungarian nationalist discourse did not relate to the GNBS case directly. The other part of the hypothesis is that at the same time, nationalism became a central principle of legitimation in the newly independent nation-state of Slovakia, and Slovak nationalism targeted Hungarian attitudes towards the past and related them directly to the twin dam project.

Moreover, the comprehensive Friendship Treaty, signed in 1995 by the two countries, as well as efforts for an international legal resolution of the conflict by the ICJ have significantly lessened the influence of these factors in the case. However, historical, cultural and ethnic nationalism became rather influential during some of the earlier phases of the dispute.

#### *Weak civil societies and scarce transborder communication*

The fourth point would suggest that communication between agents of civil society, especially, opinion-making intellectuals, journalists and the

general public, has been scarce during the years of the conflict. Scientific, political and economic, as well as historical, cultural and ethnic arguments were often presented in a one-sided and self-centred way by political elites and the mass media in both countries. As history books of the two countries teach different versions of history, recent debates were also interpreted differently by the two publics. Few Slovaks speak Hungarian, few Hungarians speak Slovak and the same is true for journalists. As a result of scarce transborder/translinguistic communication and the lack of a common public understanding and framing of the issues, mutual fears, including unfounded political, economic and cultural myths, survived on both sides. The lack of common understanding and survival of mutual fears also contributed to the escalation of the issue from ecological, scientific and technical disagreements to a fully blown political conflict. Civil societies remained defenceless against political interpretations of the issue.

#### *The use of the GNBS issue for political legitimation*

The fifth point unifies and integrates the first four. The influence of several factors contributed to the escalation of disagreements to a major international political and legal issue. In the context of the different democratic transitions of the two countries, several factors, including the limited independence of scientific communities, historically adversarial cultural and ethnic heritage, weak civil societies, scarce transborder/translinguistic civic communication and mutual fears, contributed to a situation in which political elites were able to use the issue of the dam for political legitimation in both countries.

On the one hand, Hungarian democratic parties that had opposed the dam project as a symbol of communism could not change their position when they became governing parties with an anti-Communist agenda. On the other hand, Czechoslovakian leaders also could not give up their original plans without the feeling that they did so under Hungarian pressure. This may be especially the case in newly independent Slovakia where the democratic regime uses a pronouncedly national legitimation. In short, the GNBS case was used for political legitimation on both sides, although in different ways, which again contributed to the escalation of the issue.

#### *Lack of regional conflict resolution institutions*

The sixth point is that the lack of regional conflict managing or mitigating institutions also contributed to the escalation of the conflict. After the Warsaw Pact and COMECON disintegrated in 1990, few new regional institutions filled the institutional vacuum. Although both countries became affiliated members of the European Union, this did not create new institutions of regional or bilateral co-operation. Specific Central or Eastern European regional institutions also did not materialise. The co-operation of the "Visegrad countries," Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, did not create any institutions for regional conflict resolution or mitigation. The sixth point suggests that since such institutions - among them, a regional arbitration mechanism or court - were lacking, the issue of the GNBS escalated to a point where only European and global international institutions, such as the EU and the ICJ, could offer a solution to the conflict.

#### *The role of the European Union and the International Court of Justice*

Finally, the seventh point concerns the role of major international institutions in the GNBS dispute. One related argument suggests that European Commission mediation efforts could not have achieved agreement because the two countries are still not fully integrated as member states. A comparative analysis of similar disputes in the EU and in other regions may prove or weaken this point.

The other argument would suggest that the ICJ offered an international legal mechanism for the consolidation and resolution of the conflict. On the basis of comparisons with other cases, one may suggest that without submission to the legal authority of this international institution, the conflict could have escalated further. This line of argument about two newly democratised countries may support the general assumption of political sociology that democracies relatively rarely fight each other and tend to resolve conflicts peacefully.