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Hungary 1956 – remembered in Latvia in 2006

To have a better analysis of remembrance of Hungary events in 1956, I divided my work in three parts – in the first, I collected all information from national textbooks, encyclopedias, newspapers and Internet dedicated to explain these events. I wanted to understand what the general interpretation of this protest is, what is stressed more and which events are mostly unknown for the majority of society. I also did little and unscientific research by asking my friends and course mates what exactly they knew about the Hungarian revolt to understand if people actually are informed about what had happened. The second part was dedicated exactly to the events which took place in 2006 and were dedicated to remember 1956. I tried to get a clear picture of how exactly events were shown in mass media and what other ways of remembrance as e. g. documentaries or conferences were used. As the political situation in Hungary nowadays is a bit unstable because many protests against the government and political leaders take place and are gaining huge attention in mass media – I also tried to collect information about these processes. The third and final part is dedicated to understand how the events in Hungary of 1956 influenced the society of Latvia and what similarities or connection chains are stressed in Latvia nowadays between our own history and events. This part was actually most interesting for me, as it included not only past events but also nowadays attitudes and common opinions of society.

The Hungarian events in 1956

To understand the events of Hungary in 1956 better – I had to get a clearer picture for myself, so I searched for information in national textbooks and actual encyclopedias. I also found some soviet encyclopedias with very short articles about the Hungary events which I think is useful to read as it shows the propaganda and manipulations of events in the Soviet Union. And it still left marks on some part of the society (especially the pensioners or people over 50, who are not so interested in history and had learned it some thirty or forty years ago from soviet textbooks).

The Hungarian protests of 1956 in soviet textbooks were named: “*Hungarian counter-revolutionary mutiny*”¹ – armed mutiny, which inner reaction together with the support of international imperialists turned against the people’s democratic system of Hungary. The counter-revolutionists used the mistakes made by the Party to achieve popularity among the students and working class, but as they understood the mass support for socialism system they hid the capitalistic ideas behind the “national communism”. The

“counter-revolutionaries” also terrorized active members of Party and Security instances, fired at legal institutions and founded the “national committees” in the countryside. The legal government of János Kádár asked for help and on the 3rd of November 1956 forces of the army gave their help to the working class in the liquidation of the counter-revolution on the bases of the Warsaw agreement (1955). For me, the most surprising part was to find out that there was an admission of Party mistakes in the encyclopedia – although they were not explained, the admission itself showed the hard regime of Stalinism in Hungary before 1956 and the coming elimination of the Stalin cult and harsh regime. The second thing was the idea of “national communism” as only a mask for a capitalistic future – this could partly be true but in a different sense – national communists indeed did not try to achieve the independence or settle market system in Hungary in the beginning, but to ease the political regime (as the majority of the political elite was Stalinists and still continued his methods although the leader was already dead for three years), economic demands and admit the unjustified killings of previous political leaders and intellectuals. Only seeing the reluctance of Party members to cooperate in any way, the demands for national freedom and the moving out of USSR Army forces rose.

The explanation in nowadays' textbooks is very different of course. It bases more on political and economic analyses and primary sources as “Demands of Hungarian students in 1956”, “Fragments from the radio speech of Cardinal Mindszenty on the 3rd of November”, “Response of defenders of Dunapentele to the ultimatum of USSR army officer”, “Fragments from the speech of USA President D. Eisenhower” and also fragments from the history books of 1956 and 1974 (in the regime of J. Kádár) about the events in 1956. Hungary, after the revolution, was seen as one of the most obedient countries to the orders from Moscow – although the high-speed industrialization, co-operatives and decrease of living standard called out overall dissatisfaction. After the death of Stalin, Moscow changed the political leader from Rákosi to Imre Nagy who wanted to make some economic reforms and rehabilitate victims of the soviet regime. The started reforms were seen as too extreme and with the support of Khrushchev, Imre Nagy was discharged. It had straight reaction in Hungary where mostly the students (the children of working class and peasants) and working-men took part in protests and demands for rehabilitate the victims of the Rákosi regime. Although in July of 1956, Rákosi was dismissed from post, the other members of Party (mostly Stalinists) did not react in any way to the demands. It raised more and more the anxiety and demands started to raise – the slogans for national freedom and demands to move out the USSR army forces. The raise in Poland and its violent oppression started the flow of protests, strikes and demonstrations in hugest centers of Hungary – in Budapest and Chepel. On the 23rd of October, huge demonstration of 300 000 people in Budapest took place. The decision to fire at protesters started a revolution as part of the army and internal business ministry members went over onto the protesters' side. Imre Nagy became leader of the government. One of the first things he did was the order to release Cardinal Mindszenty. The second was the liquidation of the Security Office (ÁVH). One can say that

chaos started – the armed groups invaded the government institutions, party committees, also the killings of Security office members (more than one hundred victims) took place as revenge for killed victims. On the 1st of November USSR started secret talks with the government of Rumania, Poland and Yugoslavia for using their troops in Hungary. On the 4th of November the new puppet government was founded with János Kádár as leader, who officially asked the USSR to come and help to solve the situation. But when there came no reaction from the Western countries, Imre Nagy turned to the UN and declared the secession from the Warsaw pact. At the same day, soviet army invaded Budapest (2 000 tanks, 150 000 soldiers) where they had to fight with some armed groups, especially in industrial areas. There were 2 502 dead persons, 19 226 injured from Hungarian side and 720 dead persons and 1 540 injured from Soviet side, including those who were executed as they refused to kill citizens. After the invasion, the new government started massacres – 20 000 people were arrested from whom 2000 were executed, including the leader Imre Nagy (although the new soviet government had promised him a safe comeback – he hid at the Yugoslavian embassy, the promise was not kept and he was taken, imprisoned and killed in Rumania two years later). 200 000 Hungarians emigrated; the revolution committees in the countryside worked until 1957 and their major weapon were general strikes. János Kádár started new, more moderate reforms to calm down the society which guaranteed a higher life quality and freer regime from communist ideology comparing to Latvia. The primary source gives a clearer impression of that time's events. It shows the moderate demands of students in the beginning – as the destruction of Stalin monuments or change of National Emblem and National holidays and at the end when the speech of Cardinal included the wish for independence and the fear of forthcoming invasion of USSR army. Especially, I liked the fragment from Eisenhower speech: *“The force would be against both - the true interests of Eastern European nations and the principles of the United Nations that we should always obey”*². That was the way, how Western Europe and USA answered to the demands of Imre Nagy – the principles of the UN did not allow the use force.

The textbooks and added primarily sources gave quite a clear idea of what had happened in Hungary in 1956 in general terms, also mass media used very often time scales of events to clarify the chain of events, although it does not really explain the economic or social reasons as it was done in the textbook. Mass media concentrated more on political oppression and the “fight for independence and freedom” in Hungary, although I really think the situation in this period was not simple: the government leaders were communists by themselves and had worked in the system for more than ten years. The question of how they saw the possible future of Hungary could be quite arguable. Also the society which in the end was so united and aimed for more independence from USSR, in the start could have been quite doubtful about the aims of protests – to achieve more moderate regime or to change it at all? The revolution in Hungary is also a very good example of one of the revolutionary theories – “revolutions arise in moments when after a very harsh, totalitarian regime, the political elite tries to ease it (as

Khrushchev did), but not as much as to fulfill the expectations of society. The unfulfilled expectations are reason to revolt.” Unfortunately, the textbook does not provide us with information about these possible differences in expectations and aims which surely could be found in the Hungarian society. Secondly, the textbooks totally lack to inform about the Soviet army which invaded Hungary – who invaded actually, did some refuse to attack people, how did the officers react and act. Similarly, information about the unsanctioned execution of the security office and party members during the revolution is scarce – the fact is just mentioned. The final and curious thing are the estimations of the amount of people participating in the demonstration on the 23rd of October – it varies from 100 000 to 300 000 in current textbooks and newspapers.

The remembrance of the Hungarian revolution in Latvia

Our President V.Vīķe-Freiberga took part in the anniversary of 50 years after the Hungarian revolution; secondly, the protests against the government leader F. Ģurčāns. The information about events in 1956 also started to circulate in newspapers and Internet sites. I collected information only from newspapers (mostly Latvian) and Internet portals. Actually the results of research are quite scarce as there were only historical information about what actually had happened in Hungary, but no conferences, documentaries or even new history books were released in the days of remembrance (23rd of October – 4th of November). Although, it is quite pathetic, it can be explained in a very simple way – firstly, we do not have a Hungarian embassy in Latvia – we have an ambassador with his seat in Tallinn, and we do not have a Latvian embassy in Hungary – just an ambassador with his seat in Vienna. Additional, the Hungarian society here in Latvia is very tinny and this could be the main reason for a lack of any noticeable events in Latvia, connected to 1956 (we have some exhibitions connected to the Hungarian architecture, new art - “Hungarian Gaudi – Eden Lehner”, ceramics and also literature like epic and poetry). The Hungarian President L. Šajoms came to Riga in the spring of 2006, but the talks were not about the history, but about the NATO summit and the EU problems. We can surely consider that relations between Latvia and Hungary are more based in everyday political issues, sometimes on culture, but rarely on history or economics as both countries are quite far away from each other and historically had never any close relations. This explains as well the lack of knowledge in the majority of the people (except historians) who have very misty ideas of what had happened in Hungary – by asking I usually got an answer like: “there had been some kind of revolt or protest against communism or something”, so actually the main issue should be to give articles in which the main general events would be explained (as details are only for very oriented and interested people) and this is exactly what our biggest newspaper did.

The interesting part is the mass media's attention on protests during the time of remembrance of the protest. The protests were organized by the right-conservatives Fidesz during the days of remembrance against the leader of government Ģurčāns, who had been accused of lying about the economic conditions

of the state to achieve good results in the national parliament elections. His lies were uncovered soon after the elections, by a published audio tape: *“We have done everything wrong. This is very serious. None of the European countries had done such a huge amount of stupidity. In the place of leading a country, we lied in the morning, all the day and in the evening”*³. Political analysts are considering now that Fidesz used the dissatisfaction of society caused by harsh economic reforms and lack of trust in governmental institutions to achieve their goal – a victory in the elections of municipalities. The Fidesz also stress the past of Ćurĉans who is leader of Socialist party and was also an active member of Young Socialist organization and nowadays should not be the person who represent the country in the remembrance of events in 1956 (worth mentioning is that some veterans of the fights in 1956 did not even shake the hand of the Prime Minister during different ceremonies). Although the leader F. Ćurĉans is accused of many crimes like the participation in “black market” deals, acquaintance with entrepreneurs and the harsh expressions, the main reason of protests are the unfulfilled economic and social expectations after joining the EU, and the harsh social reforms. It should also be considered that among protesters were people who violently used this situation to achieve their own aims, for example, to rob some shops, burn cars or take a tank – either for amusement or for violence in the name of violence.

Similarities and influences in Latvia

Although events of 1956 happened quite far away, it hardly influenced our intelligentsia and underground organizations made by students and scholars. It also could be seen as a warning to our “*national communists*” who, after the death of Stalin, similarly tried to ease the regime, stop the increase of migrants from the USSR and the high-speed industrialization – they were stopped in 1959 by Moscow's political elite and some Latvian Party members who wanted to gain the leading power. Our intelligentsia, protesting against the violent oppression of revolution in Hungary, expressed themselves in poetry and art. One of our most known and best poets wrote a poem about “the red wine in the streets of Budapest”. The lack of information, the regime which did not allow to express clearly what had happened created a paradox – everyone knew what had happened, and was shocked, but in the same time the fear of the regime and possible consequences did not allow people to demonstrate or express their dissatisfaction somehow, except of poetry in allegories, or in art. The end of the revolution in 1956 stopped the underground movement of students and scholars who met and spoke about the past and the possible independence of Latvia, who wrote some slogans or newspapers about the events. As these underground organizations understood that there will be no help from Western countries, the usefulness of their actions (which counted as highly dangerous – you could be deported or imprisoned for that) begun to be doubt and soon after 1956 these underground movements vanished quickly.

The current connection between this event and Latvia is mostly seen in the expression and partly apology of Vladimir Putin previous year when he said that although the Russian federation does not carry any responsibility for the Soviet government, he feels the moral obligation to apologize for past events.

These expressions dedicated to Hungary for 1956 and Czech Republic for 1968 had raised expectations to hear a similar apology for the occupation of Latvia in 1940 and the deportations to Siberia in 1941/1949, which we still have not heard as Russia neglects in any way that the Balts had been occupied (they reluctantly agreed on the existence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact). I think this is a very good example of how the memory of history influences the actual international relations between countries and societies.

Are there any parallels between the Hungarian and Latvian people concerning the hostility towards the Soviet Union?

Latvia was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940; the whole political, economical and social system was changed completely – the private capital, including land and houses were nationalized in favor of the socialistic government, Latvian army was disband and most of the officers had been shot (similar to Poland), currency was changed from Latvian Lats to Rubles, soon afterwards the repressions against intelligentsia and mass deportations to Siberia (in 1941 and 1949) started. After a year of soviet repressions, a lot of Latvians considered the German soldiers as liberators. Through the terrible years of World War II (as the German rule showed soon enough its true face) before the second Soviet occupation which lasted until 1991, most of the nation hoped somehow to gain the country's independence again. But the neglect and indifference from Western side towards the fate of the Baltic States as well as the harsh totalitarian regime and the ways of dealing with disobedience from Soviet officials' side quite fast annihilated any possibility of huge protest or revolt in Latvia during the Soviet times (1940-1991). Although, the hostility towards Soviet Union was high, the consequence of either poor economic and social conditions or political repressions and historical maltreat through all years of Soviet occupation were an even greater fear of the regime. So the possibility to express hostility and disobedience came only after 1986 when Mikhail Gorbachev announced the time of "perestroika", which later developed into a national independence movement and the gaining back of Latvian independence in 1991. I would say that the hostility towards the Soviet regime was similar as both countries had experienced times of independent republic before, which was ceased unjustly and harshly by the World War II, only Hungarians had its own state (although with a "puppet" government), Latvia instead was incorporated into the Soviet Union and therefore had less possibilities for strikes, revolts or disobedience.

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³ Sedlinieks A. „Ungārija. Maksa par sociālismu.”, *Žurnāls Nedēļa*, 2006-10-23.

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