

KOSSUTH: ON THE NEW FUTURE OF CENTRAL EUROPE

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The conception of Zsigmond Kemény, the father of the Hungarian psychological novel, harmonizes with Ferenc Deák's standpoint and Kossuth's thoughts start out from the European and Hungarian realities. They all were very well aware of the fact – which had been obvious to all throughout the Reform Era (1825–1848) – that Hungary independently and without assistance would not be able to bring an embourgeoisement to fruition. Kemény and Deák believed in the future of the Habsburg Empire, and tended to cast the nation's lot with it.

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The father of the Hungarian psychological novel Baron Zsigmond Kemény once observed in connection with the pamphlets he had written after the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–1849 that some of the details of those writings had been designed to serve a practical purpose: the mitigation of the official political persecution. These pamphlets, describing the activities of the peace party, which had sought a peaceful resolution to the conflict, had been criticized by his contemporaries. Later on, as editor-in-chief of the *Pesti Napló* [The Pest Journal], a very influential newspaper of the 1850s, Kemény outlined a more comprehensive conception in which he explained his views on the history and mission of the Hungarian state. In this respect he was among the first to formulate some fundamental ideas that would make their effects felt in Hungarian political thought throughout the coming century. In his work *Forradalom után* [After the Revolution] Kemény considered the strong national feelings of Hungarians as a historical endowment, the basic content of which was – in his opinion – a demand for the constitutionality of the country. The political theory of the age perceived a clear break between absolutism and constitutionality. Consequently, it was deemed to be of secondary significance whether the given constitution gives the right to have a say in the life of the state to a

feudal diet of the privileged or to a bourgeois parliament. However, the demand for an independent statehood was only one of the factors on which external forces also produced a marked influence. In Kemény's view, even the "historical mission" of a nation could be affected by its external relations. Referring to one political axiom of his age, he claimed that there was a "European conviction" that there needed to be a counterweight against the Slavs, especially against Russia, and this counterweight could not be any power other than the Habsburg Empire. The weakness of Austria meant the weakness of Europe as well. Here Europe was obviously not to be understood as a mere geographical term, but as the world of the western civilization. Arising from this conception was the demand that the Austrian monarchy should be the first power of Europe; and thus the real task of the Hungarians was to reconcile this aim with another endeavour, namely, with their old, historical striving for the independence of the Hungarian state. Therefore, it was not by chance that at the end of his train of thought Kemény cited "the greatest Hungarian," or István Széchenyi. For Széchenyi had raised the problem of whether Vienna or Budapest should be the center of the empire and considered this dilemma as an option between West and East, or between a political life oriented toward the West or the East. The latter would open a new mission for Hungary: it may be "the legislator and dictator of the East." In other words Hungary might introduce and establish in the Balkan region the scale of values prevailing in the western world.¹

According to Kemény's pamphlet, an attempt had been made in 1848 to realize this great conception, but things had gone beyond the desirable limits. Although hidden within the potential of this double tendency was the possibility of the dual monarchy, or even of a prospective federalism, the objective that "Hungary's independence will be brought into harmony with the impressive unity of the Austrian empire" finally could not be attained. Nevertheless, by 1850 the pressure of the actual political situation left its mark on Kemény's wording, and he criticised himself very concretely. In his view, during the summer of 1848 Hungary ought to have assumed a part of Austria's public debt and to have re-defined the *Pragmatica Sanctio* as a law ensuring the fundamental right to common defence."² Here, however, he, who had always strongly emphasized the necessity of considering the external situation, forgot precisely about the realities of foreign policy as they had stood two years earlier. Namely, that in summer of 1848 every authoritative political actor of the continent had perceived the new German unity as a fact; and in a particular form in which the German provinces of the Habsburgs became a part of a unified German state, thereby reducing the relationship between "the king in Vienna" and his other countries and provinces to a mere personal union. This situation encouraged not so much the re-definition of the *Pragmatica Sanctio* as the formation of a military alliance with the new

German state, which the Hungarians in fact attempted to do.³ The Austrian government, for its part, did begin to make references to the *Pragmatica Sanctio*, an eighteenth-century family agreement among the Habsburgs, with the intention that – by taking advantage of the opportunity of interpreting it at their discretion – they might lay an ideological foundation for a counter-revolutionary offensive. The studious misinterpretation within Kemény's criticism was just as unambiguous as his objective. He wanted strongly to underline the sincerity of the policy aiming to harmonize the two major tendencies mentioned above: namely, the demand for the great power standing of the Habsburg Empire on the one hand and for a certain degree of independence for Hungary on the other.

The same ideas were presented in a somewhat more tinged and detailed form on the pages of his *Még egy szó a forradalom után* [One More Word after the Revolution]. Here, Kemény expounded his train of thought not only by following István Széchenyi's ideas but also with explicit references to them, thereby hoping better to authenticate his arguments. Thus, figuratively, Kemény like a good master mason further decorated the already impressive building of the Széchenyi legend. His starting point was a kind of natural endowment, which required an independent statehood as its means "to defend our race and to help it come into full fruition." His argumentation is interpreted in an up-to-date liberal manner. He insisted on a "a national development identified with the demand for freedom and bourgeois development (embourgeoisement)."⁴ The parts of his argumentation that refer to the past, understandably, show signs of a resentment: "though geographically we had been marked out as the center of the empire, yet in reality we have only become a simple part of the monarchy."⁵ It was this situation that Széchenyi had wanted to change by proposing that Budapest be not only the capital city of Hungary, but also the center of the empire. Thus, the Hungarian nation might reach its full development, and this might be not only a necessity of the empire but a European demand as well. When declaring that Austria "has a historical chance" because the common interests of its people had become stronger than ever before, Kemény made concrete and developed his Széchenyi-based train of thought, which emphasized a policy grounded in national interests and feelings.⁶

The first point – in Kemény's view – was that the Habsburg Empire should not be part of the unified German state because this would be opposed by the Slav, mainly the South-Slav peoples, who as a result would be permanently susceptible to outside agitation. Furthermore, the Habsburg Empire could not be an exclusively German state because in that case it could not fulfil its mission to carry through the embourgeoisement of Central Europe. In foreign policy terms, this meant that – as had been recognized and proposed by Eugene of Savoy – "our empire" ought to focus on a Turkish, rather than German orientation. In short, the

Austrian empire ought to concentrate on the vacuum taking shape in the Balkans in order to prevent the penetration of Russia into this region. Indeed, Baron Kemény would often “historicize” and “ideologize,” but a number of his remarks revealed a keen intellect. For example, in context of the political competition in the Balkan region, he prophetically remarked that any political force that Austria failed to overcome would later turn against it. Though he did not state that St. Petersburg conducted a pan-Slav policy, yet he rightly warned that a tsarist autocracy expanding in Southern Europe would by all means produce a disrupting effect on Austria with its considerable South-Slav ethnic minorities.⁷

From the viewpoint of policy towards the nations and national minorities, Austria had to face the European task of separating the immense bloc of the Germans from that of the Slavs. Considering the region’s geographical situation, Hungary might quite naturally be a *neutrale terrenum*, wedged in to separate these two blocs. But Hungary could only play this role if it would be strengthened once again, and if it could recover its relative independence. Then it could bring the internal unity of its own ethnic minorities to fruition on the basis of the idea of “a political nation,” without, however, conducting a policy of forced Magyarization.⁸ Thus, “our fatherland” – Kemény went on – would be the real intermediary, a political force that might also fulfil the mission of Austria. Furthermore, Kemény maintained that Hungary’s independence as defined by Act X of 1791 might be brought into perfect harmony with the empire’s great power standing by way of a dualist state structure.⁹

Baron Zsigmond Kemény’s pamphlets may have served well as a concrete political recipe had the Viennese political kitchen not concocted a quite different dish. According to Prime Minister Prince Schwarzenberg’s plan – which was very ambitious but devoid of the great-power-conditions for its implementation – the unity of Germany as the continent’s new hegemonic power, created by way of a totally Germanized monarchy, would be served up as a special “main dish” on the dinner table of the European states. However, this gastronomical enterprise met with failure. The food got scorched on the Viennese kitchen stove; and it took quite a few years before the dainty gourmets of the imperial capital resigned themselves to tasting the perhaps more rustic, albeit more nutritious Hungarian dishes.

Like Kemény, Lajos Kossuth and his followers both at home and in emigration also recognized the importance of foreign-policy realities, but they evaluated the lessons drawn from the struggles of 1848–1849 in another way. Although they started out from similar premises, they came to different conclusions. In their opinion, too, there was a need for a shield against the German and pan-Slav pressure, but they saw Austria as unsuitable to play this shielding role, not so much because it was too weak as because it would block the national development of peoples living within its borders. Therefore instead of preventing interference on the part of the great powers, Austria would provoke it. The resolution of the diffi-

culty – as had been first proposed by Kossuth in his draft constitution of Kütahya (1851) – lay in a kind of minimalist defensive military alliance of the small nations living along the Danube River on the territory of the Austrian empire, which was bound to disintegrate. This alliance might be developed by the participants into a confederation based on consistently democratic principles. From the viewpoint of the great powers at the time, the problem can thus be summed up: the form itself was of a secondary importance, what really mattered was that such an alliance could also fill Austria's transitionally vacant place in the often mentioned system of the European balance of power.¹⁰

Kossuth, of course, drew his conclusions from this new conception of policy to be conducted towards national minorities. Although owing to the intrigues of the Vienna camarilla the nationalities had revolted in 1848, the Hungarian National Assembly in its act on the national minorities had recognized as early as June 1849 that the right of "a free national development" was also due to the national minorities. Thus, the new, independent Hungary to be built on principles proposed by the draft constitution would be the common homeland of all nationalities living in Hungary, because no Hungarian embourgeoisement and self-determination could be achieved without reconciling these demands with the similar rights and interests of other nationalities.¹¹

At first sight it is clear that both Kemény's conception, which harmonizes with Ferenc Deák's standpoint, and Kossuth's thoughts on these matters start out from the same European and Hungarian realities. Both of them were very well aware of the fact – which had been obvious to all throughout the Reform Era (1825–1848) – that Hungary independently and without assistance would not be able to bring an embourgeoisement to fruition. Indeed, it was beyond doubt that, for example, without foreign capital neither a modern capitalist economy, nor a rapid-rate economic growth, nor an intensive intellectual progress would prove to be achievable. The two different answers as a matter of fact also include answers to the questions of where (and how: directly or indirectly) should capital import – which was indispensable due to lack of an adequate capital accumulation in Hungary – come from. Who and from what position should negotiate on the price and necessary conditions of that import? Or to put it another way: whether the particular Hungarian interests will appear subjected to the imperial interest, or will they be treated as claims of equal rank with the former in the related decisions? Decisions that might without any exaggeration be viewed as ones decisive for centuries to come. However, in respect of the scale of values, there was a marked difference between the two conceptions. Kemény's position was based on the classical liberal principles, and he professed a more limited conduct towards the national minorities. Kossuth was more open to extending the democratic rights of nationalities and could, to some extent, step beyond nationalist biases. Another neuralgic point of their answers was the way they judged the actual state and great

power standing of the Habsburg Empire. Kemény, Deák and their companions believed in the future of the empire, and tended, with responsibility, to cast the nation's lot with it. They did not deem it a fatal sacrifice if – arising from this situation – the nation's right of self-determination would have been limited to a certain extent. Kossuth and his followers, in turn, tended to consider remaining a part of the Habsburg Empire as a death sentence and, with a similar responsibility, searched for a chance to get rid of the Empire in order to attain a full national self-determination that would lead to Hungary's full independence as a nation state. They regarded this as the only chance for Hungary's national survival when the Austrian empire inevitably collapsed. This would allow the country to shape its own future.

These two approaches, indeed, express a real alternative because (1) these two scales of values had become sufficiently separated by the middle of the nineteenth century that they could mark out two different courses of social and political development for the future, although they both remained within the framework of modern bourgeois society, which was based on a market economy; and (2) during the 1850s it was not possible yet to “objectively” discern which of the two approaches would be appropriate for the empire. The Habsburg Empire itself, to wit, offered contrasting interpretations of itself: one that it would be stable, the other that it would not.

Kossuth planned his Kütahya draft constitution, which he had worked out during his internment in Turkey and which contained many of the principles discussed above, to be submitted to a future free parliament of Hungary. At the same time, he also regarded it as a basis for negotiations to be continued with the leaders of nationalities in Hungary and of the neighbouring peoples. According to his draft, Kossuth wanted to have all the organs of state power, from the legislature down to the county and local authorities, elected on the basis of a universal suffrage. Criminal proceedings would be based on juries, and the rule of law would be controlled and assured by a constitutional court. The importance of the municipalities and the counties – and also their constitutional “checks-and-balances-role” against the central power – would also be enhanced by the practice that these local authorities would elect the members of a Senate, which would replace the Upper House. In territories populated mostly by the nationalities the county would automatically grant collective political rights, and a true self-government, to the national majority living there. In addition, these ethnic groups might also form nation-wide organizations to safeguard their particular interests, in a way somewhat similar to the autonomies of ex-territorial religious denominations. All this would be completed with an extensive right to use the local vernaculars in political, cultural and ecclesiastical life alike. The draft constitution speaks in a similar spirit of the armed forces as well as of some other questions such as education. Although Kossuth had first proposed the formula of a “democratic repub-

lic” as a constitutional form, later, however, out of some realistic-policy considerations, he left the question open. Thereby he made a concession to the form of “constitutional monarchy” as it had originally appeared in the Debrecen Declaration of Independence of 1849.¹²

The most democratic nineteenth-century scheme for the structure of the Hungarian state was included, with certain modifications, by Kossuth in a noted document, prepared in 1863, which described his project for a Danubian Confederation. The discussion was designed for strictly diplomatic use and by no means meant to be propagated to the general public. This was a proposal for a confederation of states to be basically formed jointly by Hungary, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia by way of their “legislative assemblies” and plebiscites. In addition to common governing bodies for foreign affairs and defence, the document also envisaged an economic community. This project essentially contained all the democratic guarantees that had been laid down in the Kútahya draft constitution. As to the internal structure, the American pattern was proposed. In addition to a House of Representatives to be elected in proportion to the total number of population, another chamber of this common legislature, a Senate, was also proposed to be formed. In this body each member state would be represented by delegates in equal number. The Federal Council (government) would alternately hold its sessions in the capitals of the member states. In matters concerning home politics, each member state would make its decision in a sovereign fashion, provided that the given state adhered to the common basic principle: the fullest equality of ethnic groups and religious denominations. Concerning the Transylvanian question, Kossuth was thought to have given the greatest concession possible when he proposed that Transylvania be transformed into an independent state, which was only attached to Hungary by a personal union.¹³

Kossuth had sent the text of his scheme to the Milanese newspaper *L'Alleanza* so that it might help to propagate his ideas. But editor Ignác Helfy somehow misunderstood Kossuth's cautious intention, and published the text in full in his newspaper. Unfortunately, this indiscretion enabled the government-party press, which until then had branded Kossuth as a nationalist, to accuse him of cosmopolitanism and of forfeiting Hungary's historical rights. Moreover, the politicians of the nationalities would soon find that the decisive part of the Hungarian political elite distanced itself from Kossuth's proposal. Thus, the leaders of the Danubian peoples concerned could not appreciate Kossuth's ideas according to their appropriate significance. In this way the document, which had been designed and written to lay foundations for the region's long-term strategy of development, ultimately became nothing but a milestone on the road that finally led to the Compromise of 1867.

Notes

1. Zsigmond Kemény, *Változatok a történelemre* [Variations to history], Budapest, 1982, (hereinafter: Kemény), 246–259.
2. *Ibid.*, 309–310.
3. Delegated to the German constitutional assembly in Francfort, László Szalay's tasks also included to form a military alliance and customs union with Germany. See Gábor Erdődy, *A magyar kormányzat európai látóköre 1848-ban* [The Hungarian government's European horizon in 1848], Budapest, 1988, 46–48.
4. Kemény, *op. cit.* 425.
5. *Ibid.*, 403.
6. *Ibid.*, 439 ff.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 492, 516, 546.
9. *Ibid.*, 518–538.
10. György Szabad, *Kossuth and the British "Balance of Power" Policy*, Budapest, 1960.
11. György Szabad, *Kossuth politikai pályája* [Kossuth's political career], Budapest, 1977, 170–176.
12. For the history of Kossuth's draft constitution and its variant readings, see György Spira, *Kossuth és alkotmányterve* [Kossuth and his draft constitution], Budapest, 1989.
13. György Szabad, "Az önkényuralom kora (1849–1867)" [The age of absolutism (1849–1867)], In *Magyarország története (1849–1890)* [The history of Hungary (1849–1890)] (Ed. by Endre Kovács), Vol. 1., Budapest, 1979, 709–713.