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Társadalomtudományi Szemle

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A konzervativizmus
[Conservatism]

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East German–Hungarian Cultural Relations 1949–1973¹

Abstract: After World War II, European countries' freedom to maneuver and make decisions was largely shaped by the tension between the two major military-political blocs and the obligations arising from the bipolar world order. Although this international status quo, rooted in the intense rivalry between the two sides, remained in place until the early 1990s, by the late 1950s, the arms race stalemate had made it clear to both the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as to the blocs they controlled, that they were mutually dependent and needed to cooperate. The response of Western powers to events like the 1956 uprising in Poznań and the Hungarian Revolution also showed that the United States had abandoned direct support for the East-Central European countries. "Essentially, it was from this point that the so-called softening-up, applied until the late 1980s, began. Its goal was to 'soften' the East European regimes by using Western economic aid, concessions, loans, and cultural, and diplomatic relations to pressure these governments into adopting more liberal domestic policies and pursuing a foreign policy less dependent on the Soviet Union. All this, however, occurred not only based on the de facto but also, from the mid-1970s, the de jure recognition of the European status quo" (Békés 2019: 147).

Keywords: bipolar world order; international status quo; softening-up policy; East-Germany; Hungary.

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The Impact of the European Detente on Cultural Relations among Socialist Countries

In 1965, as European political dynamics shifted, the Soviet Union directed socialist countries to revitalize and reassess their cultural and scientific relationships.² In response, some countries began adjusting their cultural and scientific policies to align

* The present study was prepared with the support of the Klebelsberg Scholarship program.

- 1 Both Hungarian and German historiography have yet to fully explore the relationship between Hungary and the German Democratic Republic. When it comes to the history of cultural and scientific exchanges between the two countries, only a handful of articles covering specific topics and one comprehensive study have been published. See Schmidt-Schweizer 2022; Somogyi 2018; Somogyi 2020; Somogyi 2023.
- 2 National Archives of the Hungarian National Archives (hereinafter: MNL OL) Institute of Cultural Relations. General documents 1958–1980 (hereinafter: XIX-A-33-a)-Elnöki-1971. Annual meeting 1971 (27. d.) Endre Rosta lecture, 15 February 15, 1971.

with new Soviet directives. In the spring of that year, the Political Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP PB) developed a new cultural and scientific policy concept, and at its meeting on September 14, 1965, it adopted guidelines for cultural relations with other socialist countries.³ These guidelines emphasized the importance of moving away from simply measuring quantity and instead they focused on deeper, higher-quality exchanges that recognized the cultural differences among nations.

However, renewing cultural and scientific cooperation among socialist countries was not smooth at all. Since the early 1960s, state and party delegations had to find common ground that would allow for the expansion of bilateral relations, despite existing ideological and cultural policy disagreements within the socialist bloc. Additionally, they needed to unite against the perceived threat of "capitalist softening-up." Ideological unity became more limited, focusing mainly on the basic goals of socialism and the principle of unified action in the international class struggle.⁴

Accordingly, differentiated objectives were set during bilateral negotiations. Rather than trying to persuade each other or enforce the exclusive acceptance of certain viewpoints, the focus shifted to clarify the needs of each party and determining what the other side could (and was willing to) fulfill. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, this approach led to more diverse, varied, and decentralized forms of cooperation in cultural relations between socialist countries. These new forms of cooperation were often outlined in five-year work plans. Notable progress was especially evident in scientific collaborations, as reflected in agreements between the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the scientific academies of other socialist countries, as well as the increasing number of inter-institutional partnerships.

The Beginnings: Cautious, Distrustful, Apparent Cooperation (1949–1959)

On October 19, 1949, just days after the German Democratic Republic (hereinafter referred to as GDR) was founded, Hungary officially recognized its sovereignty, and both countries established diplomatic missions in their capitals.⁵ A few months later, on June 24, 1950, during a visit by a GDR government delegation to Hungary, a declaration of

3 The agenda item was presented by Béla Köpeczi. During the discussion, Antal Apró, Pál Ilku, József Szirmai, and János Kádár contributed, suggesting only minor content and stylistic changes (<https://adatbazisokonline.mnl.gov.hu/adatbazis/mszmp-jegyzokonyvek/adatlap/2189>; accessed: July 13, 2023).

4 MNL OL XIX-A-33-a-Elnöki-1971. Annual meeting 1971 (27. d.) Endre Rosta lecture, February 15, 1971 (27. d.)

5 The diplomatic mission was elevated to the rank of an embassy on December 5, 1953. See: Baráth–Gecsényi 2015: 115.

friendly cooperation was signed. Over the following days, economic, cultural, and technical-scientific framework agreements were concluded in this spirit.⁶ The cultural cooperation agreement, which only contained 11 articles, outlined only broad intentions. These included mutual support for exchanging experiences among those working in science, education, and culture, granting recommended scholars to conduct research in each other's public collections; sharing educational plans and methods; promoting the translation and publication of valuable progressive works; exchanging cultural articles; and organizing performances of plays, musical works, films, and visual art exhibitions. The agreement also encouraged cooperation between mass organizations, cultural associations, and writers' unions. Additionally, both countries pledged to promote the exchange of experiences in mass cultural work, particularly in factories and rural areas, and to cooperate in the fight against fascist and imperialist ideologies (Schmidt-Schweizer 2022: 145–147).

In the following years, reciprocal visits by party, government, and parliamentary delegations became routine, and although progress was slow, efforts were made to fill the framework agreements with content. However, concrete agreements in the economic, political, and cultural areas were often preceded by lengthy and bureaucratic negotiations. The execution of these agreements was frequently hindered by new conditions imposed by the German side. As a result, even those modest goals set in the annual work plans were often not met. In any given year, only a few events were organized in areas such as the screening of new films, performances by orchestras, art exhibitions, and the exchange of scientific achievements. Noteworthy in the early years of East German–Hungarian cultural relations was the year 1952: in the spring, German Film Weeks were held in several Hungarian cities, and in the fall, German and Hungarian cultural weeks were organized in Budapest and Berlin, respectively. (Schmidt-Schweizer 2022: 105).

The 1956 Hungarian Revolution caused a decline in Hungarian–East German relations across all areas. The GDR leadership, to prevent similar sympathetic actions among German youth and intellectuals, labeled the events in Hungary as a “coup by counter-revolutionary elements” as early as October 25, 1956. By early November, the GDR was among the first to congratulate János Kádár and sent significant aid to Hungary through the Hilfskomitee. At the same time, the travel facilitations introduced in 1956 were revoked, and visa requirements were reintroduced by the end of the year (Horváth–Németh 1999: 115–119). The participation of the Hungarian intelligentsia in

6 The cultural agreement was signed by József Révai on the Hungarian side and Anton Ackermann on the German side. The scientific and technical agreement was signed by Zoltán Vas, the financial agreement by Károly Olt, and the trade agreement by András Szobek. MNL OL M-KS 276. f. 54. cs. 105. ó. e., and XIX-J-1-j-NDK 4. b tétel sz. n./1959.

the revolution made the GDR's official bodies particularly distrustful and cautious, especially in the cultural sphere. Cultural exchange relations were effectively suspended, and travel was restricted.⁷

The normalization of East German–Hungarian relations began in the spring of 1958, signaled by a visit to East Berlin by a Hungarian party and government delegation led by Ferenc Münnich, as well as the appointment of a new Hungarian ambassador, István Rostás.⁸ However, relations remained characterized by a cool distance for years, dictated by the two countries' shared membership in the same political bloc and the obligations that entailed. East German diplomacy did not consider the ideological commitment of Hungarian communist leaders to be solid enough, and it criticized every corrective step taken to ensure the system's functioning, while jealously monitoring and opposing the development of trade relations between Hungary and the Federal Republic of Germany (hereinafter referred to as FRG).

At the same time, the GDR began to pay more attention to the German minority in Hungary. To strengthen its vision of a socialist German nation, the GDR sought to position itself as the primary homeland for German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, it closely monitored the situation of the German minority in Hungary, though its actions were guided more by political interests than genuine concern for the community. For example, during negotiations regarding family reunification or the release of prisoners held in Tiszalök, the GDR advocated for those affected but did not promote contacts between family members who had been expatriated to the FRG and those who remained in Hungary, nor did it push for easing the rules for visiting relatives.⁹ The GDR viewed such demands as part of West Germany's softening-up strategy and expected both the Hungarian government and German minority leaders to adopt a clear political stance aligned with its interests.

Frigyes Wild, leader of the German Association, maintained regular contact with the GDR embassy in Budapest starting in the latter half of 1956. In a meeting on October 2, 1956, he briefed Rudolf Helmer,¹⁰ the newly appointed GDR ambassador, on

7 For information on relations between the GDR and Hungary from 1950 to 1960, see MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK *Külügyminisztérium TÜK iratok, NDK 1945–1995* (hereinafter: XIX-J-1-j-NDK) 4. b tétel sz. n./1959 and *Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amts* (hereinafter: PA AA) *Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten* (hereinafter: MfAA) A 9246. From mid-1957, the critical reassessment of the work of György Lukács and Gyula Háy also began.

8 István Rostás (1906–1989) was qualified to be a tailor's assistant. He knew the following languages: German, French, Russian, Romanian. He was the head of the Embassy in Berlin from 1957 to 1962. See: Baráth–Geccsényi 2015: 249–250.

9 For more on this, see Tóth 2020: 85–130.

10 Rudolf Helmer (1904–2007) was a trained technical draftsman. From 1956 to 1959, he served as the ambassador of the German Democratic Republic in Budapest (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Helmer; accessed: July 13, 2023).

the situation of Germans in Hungary. Wild spoke openly about the community's distrust toward the association, the lingering effects of post-war state repression, and the challenges they faced: the public use of the German language was avoided out of fear, family reunifications were delayed for years, and confiscated homes and lands were not returned despite government promises. He emphasized that the Hungarian government was committed to addressing these issues and would soon establish the legal framework to do so. Wild also gave a detailed overview of the association's operations, including its organizational structure, staff, budget, and activities. The German side expressed particular interest in the restitution of houses. Wild requested a significant amount of German-language literature and materials highlighting the GDR's development to support the association's political lectures.¹¹

Wild hoped that by informing the GDR embassy—especially after it became clear that the Hungarian government would not fulfill its promises regarding the integration of Germans—he could make the community's problems part of the bilateral negotiations. However, he was disappointed in this hope. East German diplomacy was partly open to fulfilling specific cultural requests—such as teacher training, exchange visits, and providing instruments to orchestras—but did not go beyond that.¹²

Some criticism was expressed regarding education. During a visit to Hungary in February 1958, a German parliamentary delegation visited the German-language primary school in Gara and the Teachers' Training College in Pécs. According to the principal's notes, members of the German delegation made the following remarks: "In terms of settling the political and economic rights of the German minority, Hungary ranks among the last of the people's democracies. Comrade Dickmann told me about their experiences in Hungary and said that there is still much work to be done at the teachers' training college in Pécs, particularly in developing the language skills of the students."¹³

Coordinating the Framework and Content of Cooperation (1960–1970)

In order to deepen cultural relations, the governments of the GDR and the Hungarian People's Republic signed a new agreement on December 19, 1959, focusing on cultural and scientific cooperation (Schmidt-Schweizer 2022: 148–152). Signed by Minister of Culture Alexander Abusch and Minister of Education Valéria Benke, the agreement avoided antifascist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, emphasizing practical goals.

11 PA AA MfAA A 9083. 64–66, and PA AA A 9086.142.

12 MNL OL XXVIII-I-1, *Magyar Béla levele Wild Frigyesnek*, July 11, 1958 (34. d.)

13 MNL OL XXVIII-I-1, *Lovrity Sándor levele Wild Frigyesnek*, February 5, 1958 (34. d.)

Accordingly, the aim was to strengthen institutional ties, facilitate exchanges of ideas at scientific conferences, and to promote the translation, publication, and exchange of scientific and literary works and journals.

The agreement also included provisions for language departments, lecturer exchanges, and student exchanges at universities, vocational schools, and specialized institutions. Cooperation would extend across various fields, including literature, publishing, film, theater, music, the fine arts, folk art, mass culture, and libraries. The agreement also encouraged collaboration between cultural organizations, artistic associations, sports clubs, and radio and television stations. Additionally, it facilitated the activities of press agency representatives and press organizations in each other's countries and supported the exchange of journalists while mutually protecting copyright.

Article 11 of the agreement was especially notable, stating: "(1) The contracting parties will promote and support the widespread popularization of the achievements of the other country in all areas. (2) Both parties will support the establishment and activities of cultural and information offices or centers in the country of the other party" (Schmidt-Schweizer 2022: 151). The agreement also called for annual or multi-annual work plans to implement these initiatives. Just a month and a half later, on February 5, 1960, the GDR opened its Cultural and Information Office in Budapest, which quickly became active across a wide range of cultural initiatives.¹⁴

Although the distrust in cultural matters following the 1956 revolution had eased by the early 1960s, relations between Hungary and the GDR remained cautious. This was evident in the "Guidelines for Foreign Policy with the German Democratic Republic," drafted in the spring of 1961. The document noted that agreements had covered all major areas of state relations except for citizenship issues. However, to improve political relations, Hungary believed it was essential to coordinate its policies towards the Federal Republic of Germany closely with the GDR. Hungary also pledged active support to the GDR in securing a peace treaty, addressing the Berlin question and overcoming diplomatic isolation.¹⁵

14 MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK *Külügyminisztérium. Általános iratok, NDK 1945–1995* (hereinafter: XIX-J-1-k-NDK) 108-574-6296-2-1968. For the role of East German cultural offices and centers, see Josephine Events: *Die Imagepflege der Kultur- und Informationszentren der DDR im Ausland bis zur internationalen Anerkennung 1972/73* (www.bpb.de/themen/deutschlandarchiv/203946/die-imagepflege-der-kultur-und-informationszentren-der-ddr-im-ausland-bis-zur-internationalen-erkennung-1972-73; accessed: July 13, 2023); Schmidt-Schweizer 2022: 110-111.

15 OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-4. b. tétel 003455/1961 and XIX-J-34-b 16. d tétel 3/48/1960.

In the early 1960s, there was a noticeable increase in scientific cooperation and student exchanges programs in Hungarian–East German cultural relations.¹⁶ During this period, the GDR leadership placed significant emphasis on promoting the German language in Hungary, seeing it as a crucial vehicle for cultural and ideological transmission. The main goal, besides promoting the GDR, was to counterbalance the FRG's language expansion ambitions.¹⁷

The German minority became the primary beneficiaries of the GDR's efforts in Hungary. After World War II, as part of the collective punishment against Germans, community members were not allowed to study in their native language, and even public use of the German language was banned. The restart of German language education in schools in the late 1950s could only partially counteract these negative effects. As a result, the community had a strong interest in deepening exchange programs and developing language skills in a native German environment.

Cooperation in literature and the fine arts was hampered by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (German: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands [SED]), which, during this period, sought to enforce the dominance of socialist ideology in the arts under the guise of combating “modern dogmatism.” The SED encouraged workers to organize the arts. At national cultural forums held in 1957 and 1960, and at the Bitterfeld Conferences in 1959 and 1964, workers' creative efforts were glorified. The slogan of the first Bitterfeld Conference was “Grab your pen, buddy! The socialist national culture needs you!” (*Greif zur Feder Kumpel, die sozialistische deutsche Nationalliteratur braucht dich!*). The second conference's motto, “Work, learn, live in a socialist way” (*Sozialistisch arbeiten, sozialistisch lernen, sozialistisch leben*), underscored the SED's goal of imposing its cultural ideals across all aspects of society.¹⁸

At the meeting in Budapest in late January 1970, held for cultural officers working in socialist countries, a Hungarian Foreign Ministry official summarized the situation: “The Bitterfeld principles, by lowering cultural and artistic activities to a level of amateurism and promoting this as a model for all socialist countries, made it nearly impossible to sustain cultural relations for a time. In order to preserve the excellent organizational frameworks and forms of cooperation that have been established, we should

16 In 1963–1964, there were already 134 Hungarian scholarship holders in the GDR and 111 East Germans in Hungary. Schmidt-Schweizer 2022: 110.

17 For more details on this, see Praxenthaler 2002: 2–10, and Schmidt-Schweizer 2022: 110–111.

18 For more details on this, see *Bitterfelder Konferenz vom 24. April 1959* (<https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutsche-einheit/lange-wege-der-deutschen-einheit/501147/bitterfelder-konferenz-vom-24-april-1959/>; accessed: July 13, 2023); Németh 2002: 513–519.

temporarily focus on educational and scientific content, as well as cultural themes that present fewer challenges for our German comrades.”¹⁹

In these discussions, the Hungarian side consistently pushed to increase the previously agreed upon quotas and aimed to expand and deepen direct institutional contacts, which the German side did not oppose. For the 1968–1969 academic year, Hungary was permitted to send 15 university students and 32 vocational school students for full programs, 20 third- and fourth-year university students majoring in German for one-year partial programs, and five doctoral candidates. In return, 27 university students and two doctoral candidates from the GDR could study in Hungary.²⁰ Several higher education institutions established direct connections during these years, allowing students and instructors to participate in multi-week student and professional exchange programs.²¹ The National Széchenyi Library, the Berlin State Library, and the Deutsche Bücherei organized mutual consultations and lectures on library science. Hundreds of vocational students in both countries had the opportunity to spend two weeks in the other country, gaining professional experience and learning about new technologies.²² There was also progress in the arts: in the fall of 1968, the Hungarian State Opera performed in Berlin, and the German State Opera performed in Budapest to great success. The Hungarian State Puppet Theater also performed at the Berlin Festival Days and the Friedrichstadt-Palast ensemble was invited to Budapest. In music, the focus was not only on the mutual performances of ensembles but also on

19 MNL OL XIX-A-33-a-Elnöki-Nagy-Miklós-megb-1970 (42.d.) *Feljegyzés*, January 28, 1970.

20 MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK 108-712-1968, and 108-712-1425-2-1968 (28. d.). In the years that followed, the two countries' leading education politicians held more regular and intensive exchanges of views, which were welcomed by both sides. In early February 1972, Sigfried Beier, Deputy Minister of Education, held talks in Budapest and assessed the signed work plan as “reflecting the high quality and prospects of the rapidly developing relations between the two countries in the field of public education.” MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-72 (1161)-1972 (86. d.), *Feljegyzés*, February 21, 1972.

21 Thus, direct relationships were established between the University of Agricultural Sciences in Debrecen and the University of Rostock; the College of Agricultural Sciences in Keszthely, the University of Agricultural Sciences in Gödöllő, and the Faculty of Agriculture at Humboldt University in Berlin; the University of Forestry and Wood Sciences in Sopron and the Faculty of Forestry at the Technical University of Dresden; and the College of Agricultural Sciences in Mosonmagyaróvár and the Faculty of Agriculture at Friedrich Schiller University. MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK 108-712-1968 *Tervezet*, February 7, 1968, and 108-712-1425-2-1968 (28. d.). *Magyar-NDK kulturális munkaterv kiegészítő jegyzőkönyve*, April 16, 1973.

22 MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK 108-712-1968 *Tervezet*, February 7, 1968, and 108-712-1425-2-1968 (28. d.). *Magyar-NDK kulturális munkaterv kiegészítő jegyzőkönyve*, April 16, 1973.

the further education of young musicians and ensuring their participation in music competitions held in both countries.²³

The Hungarian delegation was pleasantly surprised that negotiations in Berlin in early 1969 for the next two-year scientific and cultural work plan proceeded in a warmer atmosphere than expected, marked by “mutual understanding and a willingness to compromise.”²⁴ The Germans appreciated the involvement of József Bognár,²⁵ president of the Institute for Cultural Relations (Hungarian: Kulturális Kapcsolatok Intézete, *hereinafter referred to as KKI*), who also observed that “tensions in cultural circles have eased, and isolation has lessened.”²⁶ The 1969–1970 work plan placed significant focus on celebrating key anniversaries for both countries: the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (Hungarian: Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság), the 20th anniversary of the GDR’s founding, and the 25th anniversary of both countries’ liberation. The plan reflected growing scientific and cultural ties, with special attention given to expanding academic and educational cooperation. The German delegation highlighted the success of talks with the Hungarian educational delegation in East Berlin in December 1968 and encouraged a visit to Berlin by Pál Ilku as soon as possible to further expand cooperation. The most problematic area of cooperation remained the visual arts. After the Germans firmly rejected the proposed exhibition by the Kilencek Art Group,²⁷ the work plan only vaguely mentioned the possibility of a Hungarian fine arts exhibition.²⁸

The Impact of the East German Policy Adjustments (1970–1973)

Negotiations in the following years continued in a constructive and open atmosphere. Discussions on new five-year strategic plans took place in Budapest from January 18

23 MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK 108-712-1968 *Tervezet*, February 7, 1968, and 108-712-1425-2-1968 (28. d.). *Magyar-NDK kulturális munkaterv kiegészítő jegyzőkönyve*, April 16, 1973.

24 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-0037911-1969. *Nagy Lajos kultúrattasé jelentése*, January 15, 1969.

25 József Bognár (Szombathely, 1917–Budapest, 1996) earned a teaching diploma in Hungarian-German studies in Budapest in 1940. Between 1946 and 1956, he was a member of the government multiple times. From 1961 to 1969, he was the president of the Institute for Cultural Relations. In 1968, he was one of the developers of the economic reform known as the “new economic mechanism.” From 1973 to 1987, he served as the director of the World Economy Research Institute at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

26 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-0037911-1969 (69. d.) *Nagy Lajos jelentése*, January 15, 1969.

27 archivum.mtv.hu/photobank/item/MTI-FOTO-QXBTNW5EYUNwaTk2KzhpR1NyQjVvUT09; accessed: September 20, 2023.

28 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-0037911-1969 (69. d.) *Nagy Lajos jelentése*, January 15, 1969.

to 22, 1971.²⁹ The German side emphasized that they were “deeply interested in and committed to further developing the achievements of the past year.”³⁰ Both parties agreed that the dynamically developing political and economic relations between the two countries, highlighted by mutual visits of their leaders in the previous year, should be matched by developments in the fields of culture and science. They aimed to promote this through increased direct communication between the institutions and organizations involved in cooperation.³¹

No problems of principle arose during the negotiations. However, the German side announced that due to the development of their diplomatic relations, they were required to accommodate many students and Germanists, while their own needs were growing faster than expected. As a result, they could not fully meet the expectations of either the socialist countries or Hungary in terms of providing full or partial training for Germanists. The Hungarian side, referring to their ability to “counteract the FRG’s softening-up activities among this [the German] population,”³² requested a greater role from the GDR in supporting the cultural needs of Germans in Hungary. The GDR delegation asked the Hungarian side to specify their request and proposed a ministerial-level agreement. Since the KKI had already submitted detailed requests related to this issue, the response could be interpreted as a polite rejection. This interpretation was reinforced when, a few months later, the German side did not support the conclusion of a separate agreement, arguing that “this entire issue is a sensitive matter for the GDR” and that they did not want to create the impression of interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. The German side was clearly hinting at the fact that Romania, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union, with significant numbers of ethnic Germans, had not made similar requests. In fact, these countries had rejected external cultural support for their German communities. Therefore, a separate agreement with Hungary could have negative repercussions and set a precedent.³³

Regarding the long-term cultural and scientific plans for the following five years, the parties agreed that they should emphasize cooperation and improve quality “based on political consensus.”³⁴ During the discussions, Sándor Demeter, vice president of

29 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Feljegyzés*, January 25, 1971.

30 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Feljegyzés* Gyenes András és Everhartz megbeszéléséről, January 22, 1971.

31 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Feljegyzés*, January 25, 1971.

32 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Feljegyzés*, January 25, 1971.

33 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Berlini nagykövetség jelentése*, March 23, 1971.

34 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Feljegyzés*, January 25, 1971.

the KKI, strongly requested the assistance of the GDR Foreign Ministry in resolving the issue of opening the Hungarian House of Culture, which had been pending for years. Ambassador Herbert Plaschke³⁵ and Everhartz, head of the foreign ministry's department, acknowledged the legitimacy of the Hungarian request and expressed regret over the significant delays in the construction.³⁶ During these days, German diplomats also held talks with Deputy Foreign Minister András Gyenes. They emphasized that "the GDR party and state leadership highly values the current state of our relations. They particularly emphasized the significant progress made in the past year and stated that [...] this may be more important and useful to them than to us for obvious reasons."³⁷

In order to make cultural relations more intense and transparent, the Council of Ministers decided in September 1970 to authorize the Ministry of Culture to establish cultural cooperation committees with socialist countries. These committees handled operational tasks primarily. The Hungarian–East German Cultural Cooperation Committee was established in the spring of 1973.³⁸

The change in the East German side's attitude was closely related to the internal process that were unfolding in the GDR in these months. The political, economic, and cultural programs announced by Walter Ulbricht in the previous years had proven unsuccessful, and the need to address this reality could no longer be postponed. It was clear that corrections were necessary. Ulbricht, having lost the support of the Soviet Union, found himself in a vacuum. On May 3, 1971, at the 16th meeting of the SED Central Committee, he was forced to resign, and his successor was Erich Honecker, the former leader of the youth organization (German: Die Freie Deutsche Jugend, hereinafter referred to as FDJ). The Eighth Congress of the SED, held in June 1971, essen-

35 Herbert Plaschke (1929-2010), an economist by training, was a diplomat and served as the ambassador of the German Democratic Republic in Budapest from 1967 to 1973. (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Plaschke; accessed: July 7, 2023).

36 During the talks, Márton Kalász was introduced to the German delegation. He had recently been sent by the KKI to Berlin as a staff member of the Hungarian Cultural Institute, which had been operating for a year without its own building or headquarters. MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Feljegyzés*, January 25, 1971.

37 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-71/00662/-1971 (77. d.) *Feljegyzés Gyenes András és Everhartz megbeszéléséről*, January 22, 1971.

38 MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK-1452-2-1973 (38. d.) *Feljegyzés a Magyar-NDK Kormányközi Kulturális Együttműködési Bizottság létrehozásáról*, February 3, 1973 and MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK-1452-2-1973 (38. d.), *Kádár József levele*, February 8, 1973.

tially endorsed the principles formulated as “steps towards a new orientation”³⁹ in the debates of the previous months.

A significant shift occurred in the cultural sphere with the revision of the Bitterfeld principles. While amateur movements continued to play an important role in literature, visual arts, and theater, ensuring broad social participation in controlled cultural activities, the rigid expectations placed on professional artists were eased. No longer were they required to focus solely on meeting daily political needs or depicting socialism exclusively through the lens of productive work. “Socialism must be depicted in its beauty, but also with its problems and complexities.”⁴⁰ Erich Honecker echoed this statement, declaring that there were no taboos in the arts and that experimentation was encouraged.

Thus, the multidimensional approach to socialist society gained legitimacy, also expressed in the slogan “*Neues Leben—Neues in der Kunst*” (New life—new in art). The more flexible cultural policy and greater creative freedom initiated an intense renewal process within all artistic associations, where internal operations were also re-regulated amid heated debates. Additionally, artists who had been sidelined and had shown passive resistance during the Bitterfeld cultural policy, such as Fritz Cremer, Stephan Heim, Günter Kunert, and Stephan Hermlin, were once again welcomed back into the cultural sphere.

At a meeting of the Visual Artists’ Association, which received extensive press coverage, Fritz Cremer stressed that “the time has come to address real problems and the actual state of visual arts within the Association.”⁴¹ In the Writers’ Association,

39 Ambassador Imre Kovács reported on the preparations for the 8th Party Congress of the SED in several analytical reports. For more details, see MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-50 (001156) – 1971 (76. d.). His superiors, recognizing the embassy’s informational work, judged that there was a “lag in understanding the background and effects there, and in revealing the details of the context. This is largely attributed to deficiencies in the embassy’s network of contacts.” MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-2772-1971 (71. d.).

40 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-NDK-108-50 (001156) – 1971 (76. d.) *Kovács Imre nagykövet jelentése az Államtanácsnak az irodalom kérdéseiről tartott tanácskozásáról*, March 5, 1971. In his work *Berlin – Zárt Övezet* [Berlin—Closed Zone], Márton Kalász shares his memories of his time in Berlin during the 1960s as a scholarship holder and in the early 1970s as a staff member at the House of Hungarian Culture. Through his personal experiences and friendships, the author provides a sensitive and vivid portrayal of the cultural life in the German capital and the political processes that took place.

41 The press covered Cremer’s speech even though the renowned sculptor had declined to participate in the Berlin exhibition organized as a preparatory event for the national fine arts exhibition claiming that the exhibition represented a lower artistic standard than his artistic perception. MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-108-70 (00689) -1972. 76. d.) *Kovács Imre nagykövet jelentése az NDK kulturális életének néhány kérdéséről*, April 21, 1972.

Hermann Kant, the vice president, gained prominence, and his previously banned novel *Das Impressum* quickly sold out in bookstores. Intense debates unfolded at the Congress of the Film and TV Creators' Association, held from April 7 to 9, 1972, where the flaws of the previous cultural policy were openly discussed. While speakers acknowledged that the 75% drop in cinema attendance was partly due to the rise of television, they largely blamed the decline on the dull and uninspired films being produced. Discussions focused on increasing the critical role of films, shaping audience tastes, building greater trust between state authorities and filmmakers, and fostering cooperation among film artists in socialist Europe. During the congress, two previously banned DEFA films, *Der Dritte* (Her Third) and *Sonnensucher* (Sun Seekers), which offered realistic depictions of life, were reinstated. Unfortunately, they could no longer be screened as the original copies had been destroyed.

As part of the “policy of re-evaluation,” the concept of “two German states, two German nations” was emphasized more than ever, while some adjustments occurred. Accordingly, a unified German nation no longer existed due to the different social developments in East and West Germany. In the GDR, the building of socialism and the establishment of “worker-peasant power” created a new, socialist type of nation. Embracing the traditions of classical progressive German culture was central to this identity, with the GDR positioning itself as its sole representative. This led to a policy of distancing from the FRG, accelerating the dismantling of intra-German cultural ties. However, this approach also caused tension within the socialist bloc, as many European socialist countries, including Hungary, were already strengthening the cultural and scientific cooperations with the FRG.

After the 8th Party Congress of the SED, the East German leadership continued to promote the idea of “two German states, two German nations” while also working to normalize relations between the two states. It supported the European *détente* process and aimed to facilitate the ratification of the Soviet–FRG and Polish–FRG treaties. At the same time, it cautiously began cultural cooperation with several developed capitalist countries.

In order to reduce the GDR's international isolation, efforts were made to strengthen its international cultural relations, with increased attention given to ties with socialist countries. Individuals in key positions within international scientific, educational, and cultural organizations were invited for exchange of experiences. Moreover, when negotiating cultural work plans, the GDR adopted a more flexible approach to accommodate the other party's requests.⁴² Hungarian diplomacy viewed this opening process positively, as Ambassador Imre Kovács⁴³ highlighted in his report:

42 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-108-70 (00689) -1972. 76. d.) Kovács Imre nagykövet jelentése az NDK kulturális életének néhány kérdéséről, April 21. 1972.

Currently, the party “firmly controls the transformation process, but in some cases, middle- and lower-level officials need encouragement from above to consistently implement the SED’s 8th Party Congress guidelines. As a result, the SED is engaged in a two-front struggle: not only fighting against bourgeois ideological infiltration but also pushing back against conservative forces, which has sometimes led to dismissals. In this phase, the GDR is adopting and placing great value on the experiences of other socialist countries, particularly in the cultural field, where there is strong interest in Soviet, Hungarian, and Polish approaches.”⁴⁴

The growing dynamism of East German–Hungarian cultural relations from the mid-1960s onward is evident in the expanding cooperation across various areas of “socialist culture” and the increasing institutionalization of cultural exchange. On June 10, 1966, Hungary and the GDR signed an agreement in Budapest outlining the conditions for the mutual operation of cultural and information centers. This agreement elaborated on Article 11 of the cultural and scientific cooperation agreement signed over half a decade earlier.⁴⁵ As a result, in the spring of 1968, the GDR upgraded its existing cultural and information office, which had been operating for nearly a decade, into its Cultural and Information Center in downtown Budapest at Deák Ferenc Square. The new center featured a library, a cinema, and a shop selling cultural items, all under much-improved conditions.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Hungary began negotiations to establish a similar institute in East Berlin.⁴⁷

Based on the above, it can be concluded that several factors influenced East German–Hungarian cultural relations during this period, though their significance shifted over time. The most important factor was their shared membership in the same political bloc and the need to align with Soviet expectations. Consequently, the topics and approaches in their bilateral relations were shaped less by the countries’ actual

43 Imre Kovács (1914–1986), a trained baker who served as the ambassador of Hungary to Berlin from 1970 to 1974. See: Baráth–Gecsényi 2015: 207.

44 MNL OL XIX-J-1-j-108-70 (00689) -1972. 76. d.) Kovács Imre nagykövet jelentése az NDK kulturális életének néhány kérdéséről, April 21. 1972. For more information on this, see: MNL-A-33-b-009/18-1972 (120. d.) Jelentés, October 9, 1972.

45 MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK-108-574-6296-2-1968 (76. d.), *Megállapodás*, October 22, 1968.

46 The institute located at 3 Deák Ferenc Square was officially inaugurated on May 8, 1968. The renovation and reconstruction of the building, based on Hungarian and German plans, cost a total of 13 million HUF. – MNL OL XIX-J-1-k-NDK 108-574-6296-2 (76.d.) The parties began negotiations regarding the new location and operation of the GDR Cultural and Information Center in early 1964. For more details, see PA AA MfAA C 525 71.

47 The documents do not reveal why Hungary delayed opening its own center in Berlin for nearly a decade. The GDR opened its information center in Budapest in 1960, the same year the agreement was signed.

needs and more by the demands of the broader Cold War conflict between the two political blocs.

This is reflected in the opening-up process seen in cultural relations among socialist countries from the mid-1960s, driven largely by strategic changes in the ongoing struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Throughout this time, East Germany's leadership, with its more rigid foreign and domestic policies, remained wary of the Hungarian leadership, which occasionally tested the limits of its restricted freedom of action. Additionally, East Germany faced a unique situation due to the existence of the two German states and its quest to be the sole representative of the German nation. This led to even stronger Soviet influence over East Germany compared to other socialist countries.

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