FINAL REPORT

VISEGRAD SCHOLARSHIP AT THE VERA & DONALD BLINKEN OPEN SOCIETY ARCHIVES

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Project title: Facing political corruption in state socialism

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Project description

The goal of the query in the Open Society Archives was to gather empirical material for my ongoing dissertation project under the working title "Facing political corruption in state socialism". My project started in September 2017, but dates back to the time of my master's thesis from 2014. It is based on the assumption that from the 1970s onwards, the communist nomenklatura had expanded and legalized structures of privileges and opportunities for political corruption and office abuse. I study this qualitative change before and after the 1970s by looking at cases of fraudulent housing investments and automobile coupons allocation. To empirically present and elaborate on this argument, I focus on Poland and the German Democratic Republic during the 1980s. In an in-depth historical narrative, I intend to describe and analyze the exposure of political corruption cases, popular moods and discourses concerning the topic and the official process of political and legal reckoning and administering justice against the fallen leadership in both countries.

More specifically the idea for the research at OSA was to gather factual information on all five research topics (communist privileges and office abuse in general before and after 1970, fraudulent housing and car allocation, exposure of corruption, surrounding discourses, political and legal ramifications). Apart from establishing simple facts, I wanted to ask about the nature of the data: how was the reporting formulated, how was the problem of corruption analyzed and which arguments were used? What motivated the actors to present particular information and to contextualize them? The research plan included looking at possibly all kinds of corruption reporting not only from Poland and the GDR, but from other countries as well. I expected to find in the Radio Free Europe collection professional and media discourses on practices and fight against corruption - coming from local media coverage and foreign experts on Eastern Europe (correspondents, scholars). With accordance with the themes of the 2018 Visegrad Scholarship, the goal was to establish, how political facts about corruption were created and how they then functioned on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Archival Query

After a catalogue search on site in Budapest I ordered boxes with descriptions directly relating to my topic ("corruption", "communist privileges", "profiteers of the system", "economic crime", "bribery"), as well as those with labels promising interesting material for my study: "morale", "popular moods", "communist party – inner life", "party discipline", "crime", "police", "political humor". I ordered files covering the 1970s and 1980s, but wandered into earlier and later decades as well. The list of fonds and consulted boxes is to find in the section "List of documents".

What I received was to a large extent press clippings from American, Austrian, British and German press; translations and summaries from Western and local media to English and transcripts from television and radio programs. Smaller percentage of the materials consisted of in-depth reports based on diverse sources with expanded interpretation from RFE employees or memos based on interviews with people who left the Eastern Bloc. In the case of Polish files, present were also transcripts of the programs from contemporary RFE broadcasting. These materials described events in countries covered by RFE (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, USSR and Yugoslavia). Data on the GDR ended around 1972 and was very scarce.

I was able to gather ample material on instances of corruption and office abuse generally (when it was possible, I focused on cases where state or party officials were involved). I read about high profile corruption scandals in all above mentioned countries. Even more material regarded discourses, internal discussion and interpretation of the topic in the Eastern Bloc. I was able to access communiqués from socialist press agencies reprinted in main daily papers (most of them from organs of the national central committees of communist parties), local reporting, longer theoretical articles, short TV or radio appearances with comments on corruption, legal analyses, articles by western scholars and journals.

The nature of the files was less favorable to find detailed information on political and legal ramifications of corruption among state officials, in form of party or state probes, commissions, hearings, criminal investigations or trials. Apart from the Polish case, information from other countries were limited to small press communiqués stating that a certain group within the communist party was formed or concrete investigations or court trials were started. I could not find information from bottom-up level, helpful to determine when, how and why officials, journalists or ordinary citizens exposed cases of corruption.

The abundance and variety of textual sources I found encourages to question the stereotype that communists did not discuss corruption among their ranks or simply blamed capitalism or outside enemies for every instance of this malaise. One can witness a debate, where many ways of thinking

about the problem coexisted. The authors during state socialism presented corruption diversely: as a technical problem to be solved with legal tools; a philosophical one having to do with the human individualism and focus on personal well-being; an ideological one solvable with more political education. Some authors were optimistic, claiming that the problem will soon seize to exist. Other looked at it with a deep sense of helplessness and claimed that socialism becomes more similar to capitalism and recreates its mistakes.

Here are some more detailed remarks regarding the consulted data.

- During research I was amazed how much time and energy was devoted to different public anti-Brezhnev campaigns during the terms of Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev. These measures included ridiculing the fallen leader in the media, re-naming factories and other objects (among others a warship) honoring him and political and legal reckoning with office abuse among officials connected to him. One has to wonder whether this topic enjoys the attention it deserves in secondary literature about the USSR (300-5).

- Radio Free Europe analysts used various tactics to denounce socialism. The standard mode relied on criticizing the socialist project as a whole from a liberal-democratic and capitalist perspective, as ineffective economically and violating human right. But what I learned, they also chastised socialism for breaking its own promises, as if testing its realities from the perspective of its own value system. It was exemplified by ridiculing the proletarian credentials of party elites, claiming that they replaced economic elites as the exploitative class.

- One can generally speak of two "modes" of publishing about corruption in the Eastern Bloc: the regular mode and the campaign mode. During the regular mode, the press published criminal statistics, informed occasionally about cases being exposed or prosecuted. During the campaign mode, short articles about corruption appeared almost every other day, although usually not conveying new information. Moreover, almost every big-scale crisis of the system had at least one accompanying corruption scandal. In Hungary, the whole year of 1964 was spent on a big anti-corruption campaign against smuggling. The biggest trial of that period was of Onody Lajos, head of state gastronomical enterprises (300-5-46:1). In the beginning of the Prague Spring, army officer Jan Sejna was charged with misappropriation of 300,000 crowns worth of state owned alfalfa and clover seed and fled to the US (300-7-7:3). The Western commentators, looking for attractive topics to write about, declared that these scandals broke new ground. During another anti-corruption build-up in 1981 in Poland, "The Daily Telegraph" commented that "… corruption is in effect an institutionalized part of the system. Poland is the first country to have admitted this, let alone to have given any facts and figures and names … " (300-50-1:348). Later on the Gorbachov's *glasnost* policies, with detailed information about corruption

and swift prosecutions within communist party ranks, were again commented as "unprecedented".

On April 29, I presented a talk entitled "Cold War Corruption Discourses". During this presentation, I showed different ways of talking and writing about corruption in the Eastern Bloc. I started with my observations regarding the changing categories within the Radio Free Europe archival collection. Namely, between 1950 and ca. 1965 the category "communist privileges" exited parallel with "corruption" (and derivates). The former category covered office abuse for personal gain. The latter – petty corruption, bribery, kickbacks, economic crime, currency and financial violations. According to my hypotheses this division was influenced by the popular "new class" discourse, e.g. way of criticizing communist elites as abandoning the socialist egalitarianism in the name of stabilization of rule and self-enrichment. Moreover, the Western observers feared that during Stalinism corruption charges were abused to combat political opponents and wanted to clearly divide these two labels. During the 1960s these two archival categories merged in the RFE collection.

In the next part I presented examples of classical socialist discourses, which equalized corruption with capitalism. Although these discourses shared this presumption, they drew different conclusions from it. First, I showed examples from media and political statements which optimistically declared that with the development of socialism, corruption will cease to exist. Second, I presented quotes from the 1970s, whose authors observed that in order to economically catch-up with the West, socialist countries needed to be in close contact with the West, what inevitably will bring more corruption. This price, however, had to be paid in the name of economic prosperity and technological progress. Moreover, the state will need to address unintended consequences of such "... ideological, political and moral influence from the West..." (300-5-46:1). Third, I commented on two quotes from Czechoslovakia from the 1970s in which superiority of private over common interest was seen as an evidence of the failure of the socialist project. Finally, I presented examples of reversed way of thinking, that is, the idea that corruption comes from socialist monopoly, big government, bad management and lack of market competition. I used an example from Hungary from 1984. The Hungarian Trade Control Board informed about cases of fraud and embezzlement in grocery stores. This institution stated that corruption was not a result of liberalization of commerce and the re-appearance of private stores, but quite the opposite - corruption was present in big state retail conglomerates, and not in small private shops. The remedy to corruption was therefore the extension of the network of private shops, what directly contradicted the communist policies of many decades.

During the discussion after the talk, István Rév stated that during state socialism even the "normal" use of office, without its "abuse", was unjust and unacceptable. He pointed out that communist party functionaries enjoyed inequality under the law and immunity from prosecution. Moreover, many unacceptable behaviors were perfectly legal. Iván Székely called my attention to controversies involved in corruption research and asked, whether I would identify corruption with strict universal markers and limits preferred by social scientists and international organizations such as Transparency International, or rather understand corruption in a way it was defined locally and historically in concrete place and time. András Mink warned that corruption charges were often misused to discredit political opponents within the communist party. In Hungary corruption was used as the official reason why economic reforms could not be carried on further and only some cases were presented to the public. I greatly benefitted from all of these comments and critiques and will integrate them into the final work.

Conclusions

The research I undertook at the Open Society Archives was very productive and its effects will find their way into my dissertation. I mostly benefited from the one-of-a-kind collection of press clippings from different Eastern Bloc countries in their original languages, as well as English summaries of official press coverage. The material I gathered will be used to contextualize and give background to the cases I intend to analyze in-depth based on other primary sources. During my time as a Visegrad Scholar I greatly enjoyed help and discussions with OSA employees and fellow Visegrad Scholars.

List of documents

I. **205-2 Records of the Open Media Research Institute, Research and Analysis Department, Subject Files of Ustina Markus Relating to the Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic**

1. 205-2-40:1

2. 205-2-40:2

II. **300-5 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute, Analytic Research Department**

3. 300-5-41:4

4. 300-5-46:1

5. 300-5-140:42

6. 300-5-151:21

7. 300-5-170:35

8. 300-5-190:32

III. **300-7 US Office**

9. 300-7-1:3

10. 300-7-2:2

11. 300-7-3:2

12. 300-7-4:2

13. 300-7-6:6

14. 300-7-7:3

X.   300-120 Western Press Archives

68. 300-120-13:15

69. 300-120-13:16

XI.   300-3 German Affairs

70. 300-3-1:7

71. 300-3-1:9

72. 300-3-1:33