



BRITISH EMBASSY
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Sir

KÁDÁR'S HUNGARY: OR 29 YEARS IS A LONG TIME IN POLITICS

1. On 31 October, Janos Kádár will dine with the Prime Minister in Downing Street. He will be interesting for his wisdom and experience, and for his knowledge of the Kremlin's ways. He will be welcome because, as General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and undisputed master of Hungary, he has given communism in this small country something close to an acceptable face.

1956

2. It was not always so. 29 years ago, in November, 1956, Kádár made himself an international leper. In the tumultuous days of the Hungarian October, he spoke out boldly for Hungary. The old communist party had collapsed. Kádár said openly that if the communists were to rebuild their credit in Hungary they would have to start again from scratch. He willingly joined Imre Nagy's government. On 1 November he told Andropov, then the Soviet Ambassador, that if the Russians came in with their tanks he would go into the streets and fight them with his bare hands. Immediately thereafter caution, or ambition, or cowardice supervened. Kádár disappeared. He formed a quisling government

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and came back to Budapest in the wake of the Soviet tanks. He put his name to the safe conduct that persuaded Nagy and his companions to leave sanctuary in the Yugoslav Embassy. He raised no objection when the Soviet Secret Police kidnapped them as soon as they emerged. In the next few months Kádár steadily eroded what was left of Hungarian defiance and Hungarian freedom. He executed perhaps 2000 Hungarian patriots. In June, 1958, he judicially murdered Nagy, the legal Prime Minister of Hungary, and three of his associates. Some time afterwards this Embassy reported that Kádár might be able to enforce acquiescence; he could never hope for willing popular support. I remember; I drafted that report; how wrong I was.

Pre-1956

3. Kádár's career was a chequered one even before the 1956 uprising. He joined the illegal Communist Party in 1932, and was imprisoned several times by the Horthy regime. The Germans arrested him, but he got away. In 1945, with Budapest under Russian control, he came to prominence as the communists destroyed their opponents by salami tactics and established one party dictatorship. In that process, Kádár played the hard man's role. He became chief of Budapest police. When in 1949 László Rajk, his close friend, was eased out of the Ministry of the Interior, Kádár replaced him there. When Rajk was framed and tried, Kádár raised no objection. It is said that he persuaded Rajk to confess for the Party's sake with the promise

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that he would be saved. Rajk did and died. A little later Kádár himself was in prison again - for three and a half years, three in solitary. He was released only in 1955, in time to play the ambiguous role in the Hungarian uprising which left him, under the Russians, master of Hungary.

Kádár's secret: an unshakeable grasp of reality

4. Looking back, it is clear that even in 1956 there was much more to Kádár than careerism, cowardice and infinite flexibility. There can be little doubt of his firm commitment to communism: a commitment formed during the Horthy years, with his experience of working class misery; reinforced by his wartime trials and tribulations; and unshaken by the excesses of the fifties of which he was a victim. Kádár's record shows that he combines that commitment with an acute instinct for what is doable and what is not. He loves chess. Like a good chess player he is willing to make short term sacrifices and compromises for a better longer term position on the board. In September 1983, he said to you, Sir, that the Hungarians had learned in 1956 that they must deal with things as they are and not as they would like them to be. His success has come from sticking to that principle.

5. His behaviour in 1956 illustrates this. Kádár's record since then suggests that he probably wanted much what Nagy wanted: a decent Hungary under decent communist party leadership; an end to terror; concern for man today as well as man in a

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future Marxist-Leninist paradise. But Nagy allowed himself to be pushed beyond that, into a multi-party system and, when he renounced the Warsaw Pact, into neutrality. Kádár's grasp of reality told him that the multi-party system and free elections would mean the end of communism; and that neutrality would bring the Russians around Nagy's ears. So he betrayed Nagy.

6. With hindsight we can see that, in the aftermath of the uprising also, Kádár's ambiguous policies were shaped by that unshakable grasp of reality. He mercilessly punished those who had fought for Hungary: they threatened his own position and their sacrifice would placate Moscow. But from the very beginning Kádár was using conciliatory language about reconciliation and moderation and about the need to avoid any return to the Stalinist past. He called the events of 1956 a national tragedy when the ideologues were insisting that they were a counter-revolution.

7. In 1959 Kádár pushed the peasants back into agricultural co-operatives. But he allowed them to keep their private plots. There was no return to the collection of produce at the point of a gun. The agricultural structure Kádár went for was essentially the one Nagy had advocated. The result was communist Hungary's first success story. Even today, Hungary prospers largely on the back of its agriculture.



8. The story was the same in the cities. Once the post-revolutionary trials and executions were over, pressures eased. Politics were played quietly, in a minor key. There was no return to mad demands for impossible levels of industrial production. When Kádár visited a factory he went as a former worker and a fellow worker, not a god and a miracle maker. By the end of 1961 Kádár was able consciously to reverse Rákosi's slogan and proclaim that "he who is not against us is with us". After 14 years of super-charged politics, terror, uprising and retribution, Kádár had brought Hungary back to something approaching normalcy.

9. He has worked quietly ever since to convey the message that things in Hungary are normal. He speaks in public infrequently. When he does his style is conversational. The regime pursues a cult almost of impersonality. Kádár allegedly dislikes the media: he certainly appears very rarely. Under him, the emphasis is on Hungary's needs and interests as a small, internationally not very important, loyal member of the socialist world. The guiding principles remain the same. Keep the people contented: by steady material advance, an unprovocative political style, carefully measured safety valves like a little free speech and a good deal of foreign travel. On the other hand, constantly reassure Moscow by deeds as well as words that Hungary is trustworthy. Above all, never again permit a situation to develop in which the demands of the people clash with the requirements of Moscow, as they did in 1956. Kádár's

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grasp of reality told him that only by making concessions to consensus and consultation could he secure the future of communist party rule. So he did so. The result was his brand of national communism - in practice based on the Nagy prospectus, but pursued more cautiously and circumspectly, and under another name.

The Hungarian Reform

10. The Hungarian economic reform epitomises Kádár's policy of pragmatic national communism. Realism and pragmatism told Kádár that he had to keep living standards rising if he was to keep the people quiet; and he had got into politics in the first place to improve the lot of the working man. Realism also told him that Marxist-Leninist centrally-planned materialism was not delivering the material goods. The result was the "New Economic Mechanism": foreshadowed in much that Kádár and others said in the early sixties and even earlier; developed by the restless ingenuity of Hungarian economists; launched as a programme in the autumn of 1968; and pursued, sometimes slowly, sometimes vigorously, through stops, checks and restarts, ever since. The reform seeks to make the Hungarian economy work according to the realities of economic life, rather than dogma or diktat. Smaller, more manageable units. Cautious decentralisation of responsibility. More respect for the unchanging realities of human nature; more incentives for those who work effectively; and more scope for the man who wants to go it alone.



11. Kádár's hand in the programme can be detected throughout. He has written next to nothing about it. But he has appointed and supported the men who devised it; cut short the careers of those who opposed (and occasionally of those who wanted to go too far or too fast); added to the mix his wisdom about what the Kremlin and the people will tolerate. The stops and starts of the last 17 years reflect his caution and realism; the persistence with the programme his stubbornness and determination.

Political Life

12. The cautious liberalisation inherent in Kádár's economic reform is beginning to spill over into other fields. The amnesty of 1962 began a process of draining fear out of Hungarian life. It has by no means been completed. People still fear to write or to say in public what they believe, and there is pervasive fear of the future particularly when Kádár goes. But this anxiety is nothing compared with the terror which haunted Hungary under Rákosi and in the years between the uprising and the amnesty. People are saying and writing things today which could have got them hanged 35 years ago. We know of no manifestly political prisoners and of only a handful of people whose offences might be argued to be political. There is here not general contentment - people still resent the suffocating hypocrisy, the arbitrariness and inefficiency of the system - but a fairly wide-based acceptance that things are a lot better than they were and as good as they can reasonably be /expected



expected to be. It is even possible to argue that the regime is moving on to give political form to this process of liberalisation: elections in June this year where every seat was contested, where the electors exercised the right to choose people if not policies, and where more than one local Mr Big got his come-uppance.

Kádár's Standing

13. Sitting as he does at the centre of the web of power in this country, Kádár has had a hand in all of this. His standing here has moved by almost imperceptible steps from that of the quisling who came back behind the Russian tanks to that of the father of his people. The secret of his resurrection is that he has in practice delivered much of what those in 1956 fought for, and the Hungarian people recognise it. Maybe he would claim that he saw this all along. Certainly, he has worked skilfully to secure Hungary as good a deal under the circumstances as it was ever likely to get.

14. When I came here in 1983 I reported my belief that in the free election which would not happen Kádár would get 70% of the votes. Since that time he has aged a little. Earlier this year the Party Congress appointed a formal deputy to lighten his work load. There are suggestions that he is past it; losing his grip; on his way out. There is something in them, but I think they are exaggerated. Kádár has won the affectionate respect of most Hungarians. He can look back with a certain satisfaction on the things that he has achieved since 1956.

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Whither Hungary?

15. That said, I do not believe that Kádár's Hungary is a particularly durable or stable place. Kádár and the Hungarian people have become partners in an undeclared conspiracy. They have quietly developed their own brand of national communism, which bears less and less resemblance to Soviet practice and theory, whilst avowing doctrinal orthodoxy in order to keep the Russians off their backs. Kádár's Hungary is built on this gross hypocrisy. Its success flows from an untypical self-restraint - a result of the hard lesson on 1956. When discontent stirs, when the leadership's patience falters, when Moscow becomes demanding, memories of 1956 are enough to restore self-discipline. But the Hungarians are a volatile, talkative people, a nation of individualists. And more and more younger people have no direct recollection of 1956. As long as Kádár is in charge, this stability based on hypocrisy will survive; he has the authority, experience and hard-headedness to hold the act together. But, once he goes, the double standard, the naked pragmatism without ideological foundation, may be exposed. That is why the Hungarians are so anxious about what might follow Kádár.

16. So though Kádár has done much, he has not completed his masterpiece; and I doubt whether at 73 and showing his age he now has time to do so. He brought Hungary back from catastrophe in 1956. He built a tentative sort of national unity. He gave Hungarians communism with a reasonably human face. He has kept

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the Soviet Union relatively contented and the Hungarian people relatively happy. But neither he nor his Hungary can look to the future with certainty, nor even with a great deal of confidence. Hypocrisy is no basis for a stable society, and as I have said there is even more hypocrisy here than in other communist states. Hungarian society remains fraught with contradictions and tensions. Despite economic reform, the economy is ill-equipped to satisfy mounting needs and expectations. The international situation too poses a question mark, as the firm hand of Gorbachev makes itself felt. No one can be certain what sort of place Hungary will become after Kadar has gone; but everyone here reckons it likely that in the short-term at least it will be a worse one.

Implications for Western Policy

17. The West, and Britain in particular, has encouraged Kadar in the policies he has pursued. It was clearly in our interest that Hungary should become a more organic place, proud of its national identity and resistant to anything which absorbed it into a communist monolith. Kadar's visit to London will, I hope, take the encouragement still further. I believe that the policy is paying off. The West, and Britain in particular, has an influence in Hungary unimaginable in the old days.

18. How can we take this process further? Your recent despatch on British policy towards Eastern Europe provides valuable guidelines. You describe our objectives in this

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part of the world as being to weaken Soviet control over its satellites by supporting a policy of evolutionary change. This is ^What we are doing in Hungary; and already there are faint, pale signs of a revival of indigenous political life. We need to pursue that policy further as the Kádár years draw to a close. I hope to put to you ideas on how our policy towards Hungary should develop, within the framework of the guidelines you have set out, when we have all had a chance to look at Kádár in action close up.

19. I am copying this despatch to Her Majesty's Ambassadors in Moscow and Eastern European capitals; at Bonn, Paris and Washington; and at NATO in Brussels.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant

Peter Unwin

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