

1. THE POLITICS OF THE ROUNDTABLE TALKS

Unity and Division: The Opposition Roundtable and Its Relationship to the Communist Party

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Diverse Opposition and the Concepts of Transition

If I am to summarise the question of the birth and future of the Opposition Roundtable, I would say that it does not look like a permanent institution. First of all, it restricts the sovereignty of the organizations belonging to the Opposition Roundtable; it restricts them in the process of defining themselves, and the closer we come to elections, the greater is the degree by which they should differ from one another, since they are competitors. What we can see is that differences in opinion are greater among themselves in a number of areas than between the various organizations and the MSZMP.

These words were uttered by the secretary of the Central Committee (CC) of the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party (MSZMP), György Fejti, at the meeting of the CC on May 8th, 1989, when the proposal to create a political reconciliation forum (a national roundtable) was on the agenda.¹ Preparations had already been underway for months and Fejti, who was responsible for the preparation of the talks, drew this premature conclusion on the basis of experience there. However, the Opposition Roundtable survived despite all internal dissent and provided an opportunity for the most important opposition organizations to become interlocutors with the Communist Party during the peaceful transition leading towards democracy. Fejti's words reflected the Communist Party's negotiating strategy of trying to divide the opposition. On the one hand, the whole nature of the transition could be decided by the success or failure of this attempt to divide the other side; on the other hand, the question of how the opposition organizations defined their relations with the Communist Party was of great importance.

Two interconnected processes determined the way leading to negotiations. The leadership of the Communist Party had to realise that there was a need for radical economic and political reforms which transcended the framework of the existing system, since the system itself, which had plunged the country into a deep financial and economic crisis, was no longer functioning. It was negotiation and compromise which appeared the best solution to the Communist lead-

ers to carry out the transition—before the emerging opposition groups were to become too strong. The MSZMP was preparing for a partial loss of power (and responsibility) but it did not wish to hand it all over.

The deep crisis, which eroded the regime rapidly, could be denied until the latter part of 1988, and this fact speeded up fragmentation within the MSZMP. A new political and economic elite had taken shape by the end of the 1980s, an elite which realized that it had a vested interest in implementing radical reforms. The most favorable solution for them was to start the inevitable political transformation and to ensure that a peaceful and gradual version of this process took place. Therefore, the containment of political radicalism was in the interests both of those in power, who were attempting to save the system and who wished to limit changes to the creation of a "new model", and of those members of the elite who were interested in organized retreat, in avoidance of any violent redistribution of position, and in capitalizing on the favorable conditions during the time of transition towards a new system. There were many people in the MSZMP besides those who realized the inevitable need for basic changes regardless of their personal interests.

One of the decisive elements of the processes leading to negotiations was the emerging special relationship between the MSZMP and the newly organized political forces. The majority of the leaders of the Communist Party were planning a system of alliances, with the help of which they would be able to retain hegemonic power within the framework of "socialist pluralism". The economic views of the radical reformers were close to those of the opposition groups which viewed Western-style liberalization as the goal of transition. Nevertheless, their interests regarding the pace of creating a pluralist democracy coincided to a larger degree with those opposition groups which were planning a gradual transition of the political system and which were less radical in their demands.

The era of limited economic reforms was for good by the end of the 1980s. There was no alternative to a monetarist handling of the crisis, which was also advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to a vigorous western orientation, to the attraction of capital, which made changes in the economic structure possible, and—in general—to the liberalization of the economy in a country which was in debt and, therefore, in a dependent situation. Therefore, the main direction of political transition was determined also. However, even the opposition asked itself the question whether it was permissible to have a basic transformation of the economy—under the leadership of the reform communists—before a democratic settlement of the political situation. The opposition was not united on the questions of the new economic system. The leaders of several opposition organizations cherished illusions concerning the difficulties of transition and a number of them subscribed to a hazy, "third way" concept, which envisaged a development different from that of the West. The only way to bring about the unity of the opposition was to limit the common goal of removing political obstacles to the transition towards democracy. The *ad hoc* crisis therapy and the inevitable liberalization remained the responsibility of the "reform communist" government.

The system had not only sunk into an economic crisis but also into a moral one by the end of the 1980s. Almost no-one took communist ideology seriously, not even those in power. The only way out of this situation was for the leaders of the Communist Party to emphasize the reform-minded nature of the MSZMP itself by relying on the unique past of Hungarian reforms within the Soviet bloc. The leading personalities of the reform wing who came into the foreground after the fall of Kadar in 1988 were to authenticate this new face of the party; personalities such as the father of previous economic reforms, Rezső Nyers, Imre Pozsgay, who represented the idea of democratic political transformation and national independence; and Prime Minister Miklós Németh, who represented the new reform-minded generation. All of these were supported by a new phenomenon: so-called *reform circles* were founded within the local organizations of the MSZMP, indicating the emergence of a radical reform movement which gained more and more ground as one of the factors of the process leading towards democracy.³

The reformers of the establishment and the members of the reform movement alike wished to transform the Communist Party fundamentally, to play a leading role in the transition relying on the traditions of reforms, and to find an appropriate place among the political forces of the new system. One of the conditions of this endeavor was that the opposition should respect their efforts.

The dominant group of these leading reformers was represented by Imre Pozsgay. He had direct contact with by far the strongest opposition organization, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and several so-called historical parties (parties which had been violently banned in 1947-1949); he lent a helping hand in the reorganization of these parties. Another group, represented by the former social democrat Rezső Nyers, took part in the formation of the organization called the New March Front (UMF). He wanted to create a framework for talks and co-operation with this organization by involving members of the liberal-minded opposition from the very start.³ Local reform forces were seeking contacts separately with the independent trade unions and, at the same time, they also provided direct assistance to the opposition by putting pressure on the leaders of the MSZMP.

In consequence the emerging opposition organizations had to make clear their relationship with a fragmented Communist Party. It only seemed sufficient to separate the orthodox communists from the reformers. If the opposition organizations wanted to step onto the political stage united, they had to find a common starting point. It was not only the multi-colored nature of the opposition which created problems, but also the fact that the leaders of the individual opposition groups maintained looser or tighter relationships with different groups of the communist reformers. The MSZMP was trying to divide the opposition since it wanted to hold talks on transition with them separately. What sort of negotiating situation would come into being became a key issue.

The beginning of the Polish Roundtable talks in February 1989 exerted a catalytic effect both on the ruling party and on the opposition. However, the situation of the Polish opposition, centred around Solidarity and legitimized by

the support of mass movements, was basically different from that of the independent organizations in Hungary.

There were two sizeable opposition groupings during the Kadar era: the liberal-minded democratic opposition was called "bourgeois radical", whilst the basically third-way popular-national group was termed "national radical." The handling of the two groups by the MSZMP changed after 1988. The democratic opposition, which radically opposed the system, qualified as the enemy, whilst the other group was euphemistically termed "alternative."⁴ The dominant group of the democratic opposition published a programme entitled *Social Contract* in 1987, which not only rejected the communist system by calling the demands of the 1956 Revolution "timely", but also pointed out that a new era had started with the dissolution of the "Kadarite consensus." However, the compromise proposal included in the program urged the establishment of a controlled but legally-based one-party system. It looked to such as the starting point for an evolutionary development towards pluralistic democracy.⁵ A precondition of the plan was the ability of the group to force the representatives of power to the negotiating table. However, by the time that this might have happened, events had already overtaken the content of the proposed changes.

The other opposition group appeared before the public with the co-operation of Imre Pozsgay. The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), which had been founded as an independent movement in the fall of 1987, did not occupy an unambiguous political position. Even one year later, at the time of conversion into an organization, it characterized itself as "neither oppositional nor belonging to the governing party." Its long-term goals included a democracy based on the principles of self-governance and parliamentary representation.⁶ Nevertheless, these principles, heretical to the Communist Party, seemed to be conducive to a compromise, if its end result were to be some sort of limited pluralism, or perhaps a coalition, which would permit the continued supremacy of the MSZMP.

The Democratic Forum—which was far from being united and provided an opportunity for people with different orientations to enter the political arena—was reluctant to provoke the representatives of power, and thus it placed the reform wing led by Pozsgay in an awkward position. Nevertheless, Pozsgay's position was strengthened by the fact of his influence on the strongest opposition organization, whilst the MDF received protection in the form of the support of one of the most respected reform communists.

In late 1988 and early 1989, the Communist Party was preparing to have its own concept of a constitution and bills reforming the public laws accepted, and it endeavored to gain support from outside. However, the wishes of the leaders of the party became illusory as a result of events simply gathering speed. The March 1989 programme of the MDF suggested that an extraordinary and freely-elected constitutional national assembly be convened. Besides drafting a constitution, this body was also to have created a democratic election law.⁷ This idea was aired by the leaders of the Forum at a January 1989 meeting with representatives of communist intellectuals. The possibility of a later coalition, thought to

be inevitable by a number of MDF leaders, also arose during discussion, but the Forum set free elections as a precondition of its creation.

A long debate was held within the MDF about the possibility of transforming itself into a party. The populist leaders promoting the "third way" concept wished to preserve the more spiritual coalition movement nature of the Forum. The ostensible leader of the radical right, Istvan Csurka, did not consider the formation of parties and the speedy creation of a multi-party democracy the key issue; he believed that the political activity of the population at large was the most pressing question. This wing of the Forum was not really concerned with the constitutional matters of the transition; instead, it demanded that the Communist Party should renounce power in favor of the real representatives of society. Therefore, it did not plan to hold talks on the transition itself and its rules. The radical right precluded the possibility that a parliament embodying monopolistic power should create a new constitution. The weakness of the right's ideas lay in the lack of clear plans regarding the establishment of a constituent assembly.

The Democratic Forum, as the opposition organization with by far the largest support, was not especially interested in creating unity on the opposition side because it believed that it possessed the ability to enforce its interests even without this unity. However, it distanced itself from joint opposition action only in cases which seemed to be too risky. The democratic opposition, which enjoyed considerably less support among the people, was left alone several times—e.g., when it organized an anti-government demonstration—for the reasons mentioned above.⁹

The members of the democratic opposition established a loose organization called the Network of Free Initiatives (SZKH or Network) in early May 1988, and then in November the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) was founded as a liberal party. The originators of the Network believed, before the MSZMP meeting in May 1988 which led to the ousting of Janos Kadar, that the rapid deterioration of the economic and political situation was threatening catastrophe. They expected a long transition in accordance with the realities of the time and continued to insist on the compromise agreement plan of the *Social Contract*. To achieve this goal it was essential for the opposing parties to decrease their fear of each other and, further, to have members within them who were willing to compromise. The worries of the liberal-radical opposition concerning transition stemmed mostly from the fact that the means of recovery from the deep crisis, and its attendant grave social consequences, had to be accepted by the people at large. They thought that compromise had a double system of conditions: on the one hand, the strengthening of the reform wing of the ruling party, which would accept the responsibility of the MSZMP for the emergence of the crisis and commit itself to a peaceful solution, and, on the other hand, the determined behavior of the opposition organizations accepted by society.¹⁰

The Network was not able to acquire as much social support for its policies as the MDF had. It seemed that there would be two players in the country's

political life: on one side, a gradually eroding MSZMP and on the other, the burgeoning MDF. The idea was also floated that the government—lacking vigorous resolution in the policy area—might be trying to compromise with the moderate opposition, and the democratic opposition, therefore, decided that it would form a party without wasting further time.

The two-factor strategy had already crystallized by the time that the SZDSZ was formed in November 1988. On the one hand, it aimed at peaceful transition based on dialogue, whilst, on the other, it made efforts to organize society into a form of "counter-power" and had a *radical* set of demands which truly signified a new era. For instance, the demand for rehabilitation in respect of 1956 and the introduction of a multi-party system could be included in this context.

The first program concept of the SZDSZ, as that of the MDF, still demanded a constituent assembly." Nevertheless, its ideas regarding transition changed over a few months, and by the beginning of 1989 it favored a compromise for a transitional period. The leader of the party, Janos Kis, spelled out the arguments: there was neither a balance of power nor accepted rules of the political game, and the opposition drew strength primarily from the weakness of the party state rather than from genuine mass support. He feared that insisting on a confrontational line might result in unforeseen government reaction, and, therefore, the SZDSZ wished to progress transition by way of conflict which would make it possible for the communists to retreat step-by-step. It endeavored to facilitate the separation of the various factions within the Communist Party by putting pressure on the party and it also wished to push the reformers towards a policy of compromise.'

The Free Democrats' final version of the scenario of transition was completed by May 1989, when they made their detailed ideas public in a pamphlet entitled *The Program of Regime Change*.¹³ In early March, when the leaders of the Communist Party invited the important parties one by one to hold discussions, the SZDSZ was already making its point on the basis of this concept. According to the Free Democrats, negotiations were needed with the aim of agreeing both on an electoral law appropriate for a pluralist democracy and on the political "rules of the game" in the period leading up to free elections. In other words, they rejected the creation of a new constitution before free elections as well as the establishment of the office of the President of the Republic and the Constitutional Court. They also considered it essential to publicize the talks, given that neither negotiating party was empowered with the necessary social authorization as far as negotiations deciding the future of the country were concerned.¹⁴

The SZDSZ was already trying to secure its ability to represent and to push through that section of its program demanding the creation of a democratic constitutional state and its ideas concerning the scenario of transition within the framework of united opposition action. There was no doubt that this was the only way for it to acquire the necessary popular support. Moreover, the MSZMP did not really want to win over the Free Democrats as negotiating partners; in

fact, it wanted to isolate them from the moderate opposition which was thought to be more flexible in negotiating a compromise. At first, the Communist Party categorically rejected the Free Democrats' proposal that the opposition organizations should negotiate with the representatives of power as a coalition bloc.¹⁵

March 15th is the principal national holiday for Hungarians, the anniversary of the Revolution of 1848. This day is a symbol of the struggle not only for civil rights, but also for national independence. An opposition tradition was taking shape in the years of communist rule: smaller and larger demonstrations were organized in Budapest separate from the official celebrations and the police did their best to suppress them. However, the situation had changed by March 1989, when the authorities could not, and did not, attempt to prevent a joint demonstration of opposition organizations. The action was a great success and proved the principle of strength in unity.

Janos Kis took advantage of the situation and, in a speech delivered in front of the Parliament building, he urged the creation of a coalition of the democratic parties and organizations so that the MSZMP should face a strong rival and negotiator which could not be ignored.¹⁶ Four days later a proclamation was accepted at the Free Democrats' meeting in accordance with the above; this called on independent organizations to establish a *roundtable* with the intention of joining forces against the Communist Party during a peaceful transition.¹⁷ However, it was not this initiative which led finally to the establishment of the Opposition Roundtable, since another organization, the Independent Lawyers' Forum, which was independent from the political parties, released a similar statement, and the Free Democrats thought it wiser to join this initiative.¹⁸

Besides the two most significant opposition organizations, the MDF and the SZDSZ, others also appeared on the stage of Hungarian political life. The Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz) had already been founded in March 1988. Its political ideas—concerning a liberal, constitutional state and a market economy—were similar to those of the Free Democrats, whilst their anti-government radicalism was even more marked. Its strategy differed slightly from that of the SZDSZ, although. Fidesz members based their radical anti-government stance on their constitutional rights and behaved as if there were conditions in place characteristic of a normal constitutional state. Their behavior, based on existing laws and manifested in spectacular political actions, severely provoked the leaders of the Communist Party, which is why it was Fidesz which was attacked most brutally.¹⁹ The Communist Party tried to separate Fidesz, together with the SZDSZ, from the moderate opposition. Fidesz members were not very willing to accept compromise solutions, especially if they believed that such solutions would delay the inevitable changes. At first the Free Democrats did not even want to discuss the transition with the Communist Party and were willing only to co-operate with those opposition forces which shared their views. They initiated the creation of the opposition coalition in order to formulate a common political platform.²⁰

A special group of opposition organizations was constituted by the reviving *historical parties*. There was an idea among the leaders of the MSZMP that the

coalition of the years 1945-1947, when the Communist Party ruled together with the Social Democratic Party, the Independent Smallholders' Party, and the National Peasants' Party, could be revived. They hoped that it might be better to make a compromise with politicians who had retired from political life during the Kadar era than with the leaders of the new opposition organizations.

Sharp conflicts arose within the historical parties during their reorganization, not completely independent of the question of their relationship with the MSZMP. Parties split, rival groups mutually excluded one another, and it was difficult to find a balance between the older and the new leaders of the parties. These historical parties could rely primarily upon their traditions and the attraction which their names exerted. Hardly anyone knew their leading politicians and they had scarcely any time to work out their programs. They could not cite their opposition activities and, instead, talked of the grievances suffered at the hands of the Communist Party during the liquidation of the multi-party system and the Stalinist terror.

However, the reorganization of some historical parties had certain antecedents. Associations had been formed within the framework of the Patriotic People's Front led by Imre Pozsgay since the mid-80s which now constituted the bases for the reorganization of parties. First of all, the Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Endre Friendship Society should be mentioned;²¹ this organization was under the leadership of Karoly Vigh, who had close contacts with Imre Pozsgay. An association promoting the heritage of the National Peasants' Party was also founded within the framework of the People's Front; from this emerged the Hungarian People's Party in February 1989. The leading functionaries of the Patriotic People's Front could be found among its leaders. The situation of the People's Party was made no easier by the fact that the heritage of a "third-way", national radicalism was also claimed by the dominant faction of the MDF. Moreover, the party had neither respectable politicians nor a solid intellectual background.

The two most important historical parties, the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) and the Social Democratic Party of Hungary (MSZDP), both started their political life anew with a number of internal conflicts, which were still going on during the roundtable negotiations. The factions opposing one another not only waged a war for power, but they were also split regarding their relationship with the reformers within the Communist Party.

The Independent Smallholders' Party did not have clear-cut ideas about the nature of the transition. It shared the view of those parties which saw the solution in a constituent assembly.²² The FKGP never rejected proposals for negotiations, and so it reacted positively to the proclamation of the UMF, which suggested that a National Committee be called into being for managing the transition. According to a statement issued after a meeting of the leaders of the Communist Party and the Smallholders' Party on March 4, 1989, the Smallholders' Party agreed with the proposal of the MSZMP that "all constructive social forces" should participate in future talks and, furthermore, that the negotiations should concern the electoral system and the principles of the constitution-making process as well as social and economic questions.²³ However, many party mem-

bers in the FKGP and in other opposition parties were taken aback when Vince Voros delivered a speech at an official celebration on March 15th emphasizing the importance of joining forces at a time when the whole opposition, separately from the representatives of power, was organizing a demonstration.²⁴

The temporary success of the Communist Party's tactics was shown by the fact that a representative of the other significant historical party, the Social Democratic Party, also spoke at this official celebration. In fact, he emphasized that his action did not signify a joining of the MSZMP, nor did it mean accepting shared responsibility for the policies of the past decades. The leaders of the Communist Party paid special attention to fostering good relations with the Social Democrats for two reasons; firstly, since the MSZDP had been forcibly united with the Communist Party forty years before, and, secondly, since they wanted to close the gap between the MSZMP and Social Democratic policies with more and more radical reforms.²⁵ The Social Democrats were in a special situation: they constituted the only left-wing party, by definition of the opposition, and so they had to define their relationship with democratic socialism as a goal at the time of the fall of "actually existing Socialism." Moreover, they had to consider their relationship with the trade union movement which had been integrated into the power structure of the Kadar regime and whose support they now wished to secure for themselves.

The social democrats defined themselves unambiguously as being on the side of the opposition, whilst their willingness to negotiate in early 1989 was similar to that of the Smallholders'. This was indicated in the statement issued after talks between the communist and social democratic leaders in early March, in which Party Chairman Andras Revesz showed openness towards accepting the position of the MSZMP. He thought it feasible to hold two- or multi-sided negotiations whose goal should be to ensure that "the transition towards parliamentary democracy and the constituent process will be based on the co-operation of constructive social forces."²⁶

It seemed possible until mid-March for the leadership of the Communist Party to carry its policy through. They wished to manage the transition by basing it on negotiations with the opposition organizations individually and "pan-society" consultational (i.e. non-binding) roundtable talks. If the MSZMP had been able to have its concept accepted by the multicolored and divided factions of the opposition, which were at an early state of organization, then the party could have expected successful negotiations and—through them—the maintenance of its hegemony. It seemed possible that the new constitution would be written on the basis of the official draft and that the reformed Communist Party would stay in power, naturally as the strongest member of a coalition government, after the extraordinary elections with a democratic franchise. The communist leaders considered radicalism rather than the programs regarding the new political system as being the dividing-line in their relations with the opposition parties. They attempted to prevent the unification of these parties by relying on the differences among them.²⁷

The Unification of the Opposition and Preparation for Talks

The representatives of eight organizations met at the invitation of the Independent Lawyers' Forum (*Fiiggetlen Jogdsz Forum*, FJF) on March 22nd, 1989. The Opposition Roundtable²⁸ (*Ellenzeki Kerekasztal*, EKA) was founded at this session.²⁹ It was no surprise, after the previously published statements of the MSZMP and the bilateral talks among the different parties, that the Communist Party leadership would soon suggest the establishment of some sort of consultative forum. The opposition had to find answers to at least three, closely interrelated questions: 1) How it envisaged the operation of the Opposition Roundtable and what role it would assign to it during negotiations; 2) What it would like to discuss and with whom; and 3) What kind of relationship it would like to form with the MSZMP and the latter's satellite organizations.

The representatives of the various organizations arrived at the statutory meeting with different or undeveloped ideas. For the opposition to agree on unambiguous answers to the basic questions, it was necessary that the Communist Party should create a situation with concrete negotiating proposals which put pressure on the opposition.

The leaders of the Hungarian Democratic Forum were not very enthusiastic about an organization embodying the unity of the opposition because it might diminish the Forum's leading opposition role, and the necessity of reconciling views with others went hand-in-hand with narrowing elbow-room.³⁰ It was not, therefore, the major leaders of the party who participated in the talks; although the selection of the delegates proved very fortunate. Gyorgy Szabad and Laszlo Solyom, as well as Jozsef Antall, who joined them later, were all firmly committed to the creation of a democratic constitutional state and the facilitation of a peaceful transition. The official position of the MDF initially declared that there was no need for an overall opposition organization, but only for a consultative forum, which would leave total freedom of action and the possibility of separate negotiating combinations in the hands of the organizations.³¹ If this concept had prevailed, it would not have unequivocally excluded the previously applied bilateral reconciliation forms upon which the Communist Party had based its plans.³² The majority of the opposition parties, similarly to the MDF, did not wish to commit themselves to creating a joint "top" organization from the outset.

However, the Free Democrats resolutely suggested close co-operation against the policies of the Communist Party. They succeeded in having their ideas accepted only gradually. At first, they persuaded everyone to agree that, even if they did not call into being a "top organization," they should hold regular negotiations and the participating organizations should themselves adhere to the positions which had been agreed on by all. The representative of the FKGP proposed that the positions accepted by all should be declared by all of the organizations in concert. The criteria of belonging to the Opposition Roundtable were also established at the statutory meeting, and it was also decided that compulsory

decisions would be agreed on by consensus only; that is, that each organization had the power of veto.

It was essential to the relationship of the new organization with the Communist Party that it defined itself as an opposition. It was only from an unambiguously oppositional position that anyone, as a member of the Opposition Roundtable, could convincingly argue in the ensuing debates, and so one of the basic factors of legitimacy inside the organization became opposition to the *whole* communist regime. Some organizations had to defend themselves because of their "suspicious" connections from the very beginning.

The MSZMP—under the leadership of György Fejtő, who had been authorized to organize the talks—reacted to the birth of a united opposition organization quickly, attempting to disrupt it before it could crystallize. The MSZMP invited randomly-picked organizations, one-by-one, to hold talks, ignoring the other organizations of the Opposition Roundtable. The satellite organizations of the Communist Party, such as the National Council of Trade Unions (SZOT) and the National Council of Hungarian Women (MNOT) were also among those invited.

Fejtő's move had exactly the opposite effect from what he had expected. At the March 30th session of the Opposition Roundtable, Balint Magyar managed to have most of the elements of the Free Democrats' negotiating strategy accepted. The major points of the concept were as follows:

1. It was unacceptable that the Communist Party should determine the participants in, the dates of and the agendas of, the negotiations.
2. Bilateral talks were needed, where both the Communist Party and the opposition should decide themselves which organizations could take their place on their respective sides. In this way it would be certain that the ruling party would not create an artificial "central" position for itself between the opposition and organizations which were even farther to the left than itself.
3. The Opposition Roundtable should demand that it be accepted in this united form as a negotiator and its organizations should reject any separate talks.
4. The opposition should not approach the reform wing of the MSZMP; it should consider the power center of the party as its negotiating partner.
5. Parliament should not pass the new constitution before free elections, whilst the essential laws of the transition could only be introduced into Parliament by the Government after a consensus had been achieved during the talks.
6. The task of the negotiations was to define the rules of transition.
7. Economic questions should not be included in the agenda and all other issues should be avoided on which the opposition was not likely to adopt a unified position.³³

However, the provocative initiative of the MSZMP brought about a strong sense of solidarity among the organizations of the EKA. They excluded at the outset any negotiations without all of their member organizations. They did not reject participation in the proposed talks from the first, but they set conditions in

their response. These conditions were mainly concerned with the process of drafting a new constitution, the role of the negotiations in respect of law-making, and the bilateral nature of the talks.³⁴ However, the Communist Party did not want to enter into such bilateral talks which could be interpreted as a confrontation between the representatives of power and society, nor did it wish to guarantee that all of the agreements made at the negotiations would be passed by the legislature.³⁵

The MSZMP was still hoping that it would be able to disrupt the unity of the opposition in time. In early April it seemed that these hopes were not totally unfounded. Frailty in the unity of the opposition showed itself not only in the emerging conflict within the Smallholders' Party when one of the wings of the party was willing to start separate talks with the Communist Party; some of the members of the Opposition Roundtable were behaving at the April 7th meeting as if they had simply not clarified their position a week earlier and as if the MSZMP had met their requirements. The representative of the MDF also leaned towards concessions because he feared that, were negotiations cancelled, the Communist Party might feel itself empowered to have its own constitutional concept passed by Parliament. Nevertheless, the Alliance of Free Democrats and Fidesz still insisted that their conditions should be met in advance. Finally, their position prevailed and no organizations of the Opposition Roundtable appeared at the meeting organized by the MSZMP.³⁶

The failure of the first round of negotiations did not make the MSZMP reconsider its previous policies. Gyorgy Fejti pointed out at a session of the Political Committee on April 19th, 1989, that the opposition politicians, with whom the party had been holding informal talks, were afraid of being isolated inside their own organizations, and that this was why they did not want to appear to be too conciliatory. They considered the Free Democrats, who urged opposition between the two blocs, the "evil spirit" of the opposition, since it was primarily they who had thwarted the success of the ideas of the Communist Party regarding the roundtable talks.³⁷ However, the MSZMP had to accept the opposition's proposal for preparatory talks. The Opposition Roundtable entrusted two scholars of constitutional law, Laszlo Solyom and the Free Democrat Peter Tolgyessy, with the task. It was Tolgyessy who had drafted the section of the SZDSZ program on the transformation of the constitutional system. At the preparatory talks both endeavored to find solutions which would make a clean sweep legally and politically.³⁸

The proposal of the opposition thwarted the plans of the MSZMP on several points since it effectively comprised the Free Democrats' concept as described above. At the time of the preparatory talks, one of the sources of conflict lay in the different approaches to the problem of legitimacy. Naturally, the opposition organizations challenged the legitimacy of the rule of the Communist Party and of the Parliament convoked after the elections of 1985. At the same time they themselves could not claim to be legitimate before free elections, even if they were convinced that their support amongst the electorate exceeded that of the ruling party by a wide margin.

In the absence of legitimate political forces, it was especially important to establish the legitimacy of the negotiations. In order to do that, the opposition set a target of creating conditions for—and the legal bases of—a constitutional state and relegated everything else to the authority of the new parliament. This basic lack of legitimacy accentuated the need for publicity for the negotiations and for "social control"—the transparency and acceptability of the process. It was important both to conclude the talks as rapidly as possible and to hold elections at the earliest possible date—for the sake of generating legitimacy. At the same time they wanted to ensure that those conditions would be created with as few compromises as possible.

The Hungarian Democratic Forum urged on several occasions, both publicly and in the Opposition Roundtable sessions in April, 1989, that elections be held ahead of time, in autumn. The MDF declared in its statement that it would support such a transitional government which would enact the political program of the MSZMP's reform wing and which would undertake to hand over power to a government enjoying the support of the new Parliament in December, 1989.³⁹ The Free Democrats, on the other hand, believed that an early election would do more harm than good. They pointed out that it was the hard-liners identified with Karoly Grosz and his followers who were urging an early election, whilst, in opposition to them, Imre Pozsgay and the other reformers wished to have an extraordinary congress before elections, since they expected to prevail over the orthodox wing.⁴⁰ The Opposition Roundtable was divided over this issue from the beginning. The arguments of the representatives of member organizations were often focused on the relationship with the reform forces of the Communist Party. The problem of the internal division of the Communist Party came into the foreground with the strengthening of the reform wing and the rapid development of the reform movement. Members of the EKA debated whether it would be a good idea to establish separate relations with the various wings of the ruling party and whether it would be worthwhile to hold separate talks with the reformers, thus helping to promote divisions inside the ruling party.

The reform communists' offensive gained momentum inside the MSZMP, but Gyorgy Fejti's team, which had been empowered to hold the talks, insisted on the same strategy. They were holding clandestine background talks with leaders of the opposition and were trying to disrupt the unity of the opposition by isolating the radical SZDSZ and Fidesz. The members of the Political Committee hoped that they would be able to make an agreement with the historical parties and perhaps with the MDF, and in this way prepare a coalition to be formed after the election.⁴¹ However, the communist leadership made another tactical mistake when it accepted the Political Committee's proposal at the May 8th session of the Central Committee, which initiated the establishment of a political reconciliation forum. The decision spelled out suggestions concerning the structure, the agenda, and the participants of the negotiations, despite the fact that the preparatory talks with the opposition had not been concluded.

The resolution urging this initiative provoked the Opposition Roundtable once again. The question again arose during a debate on a proposal to put the talks on hold until the reformers had taken over the running of negotiations inside the Communist Party. Finally the Opposition Roundtable declared the unilateral initiative of the Communist Party an attempt to break off negotiations and rejected it. However, independent of this initiative, the debate over the potential partners on the governing side was revived among the opposition members.

One of the symptoms of the power struggle inside the Communist Party was an informal suggestion—which became public—that the EKA should hold talks on the transition, not as the partner of the Communist Party, but as that of government. The growing prominence of two ministers of state (Imre Pozsgay and Rezső Nyers) in the Nemeth government, which became more and more independent of the party and which promised more and more radical reforms, offered better prospects of an agreement than the delegation close to First Secretary Karoly Grosz.⁴² If the power-center had been transferred from party to government, the latter might have been able to change the nature of the talks on transition. However, some opposition politicians doubted the reality of such changes and did not really sense a turning point despite the strengthening offensive of the reformers, whereas others urged that the Opposition Roundtable be an active participant in shaping the balance of power within the Communist Party even at the price of building a special relationship with the reformers. They thought that the best solution for the opposition would be to negotiate with Pozsgay's reform wing.

The representatives of the opponents of such a special relationship, above all the Free Democrats and Fidesz, argued that it would be worthwhile to support a victory of the reformers over the orthodox forces, but the former had to fight their struggle themselves inside the MSZMP: The aforementioned representatives were also opposed to holding talks with the government since supreme power was still in the hands of the Communist Party, and they did not wish to create uncertainties in respect of the front line between power and opposition. This latter position ultimately prevailed in the debates, which meant that the original negotiating strategy of the Opposition Roundtable was maintained.⁴³ At the same time, the opposition representatives indicated to the leading reformers that "they would not be opposed" to their joining the talks.

In this way the MSZMP failed once more to force the opposition to retreat or to disrupt the unity of the Opposition Roundtable as a result of its ultimatum-like initiative. However, it did not see the situation as hopeless and planned new clandestine background talks with certain opposition parties. Fejti still believed that his party had failed because the militant, rigid position of the Free Democrats had prevailed in the sessions of the Opposition Roundtable.

Nevertheless, the negotiating position of the Communist Party further deteriorated. The ceremonial reburial of the executed Prime Minister of the 1956 Revolution, Imre Nagy, and of the other martyrs was fixed for June 16th. The Communist Party was pressed to conclude an agreement concerning the start of

the actual talks by this event since an imminent mass demonstration was threatening further deterioration in its position. The hard-liners were forced on to the defensive, and the spreading reform movement and the activities of the leading reformers developed links. A demand for an extraordinary party congress grew stronger; it was a precondition of a drastic transformation of the party and—through it—of the whole political system. The reform movement pressurized the leaders of the MSZMP to start negotiations on the transition and it urged that reform politicians should be the party's delegates.⁴⁴ In this way the Fejti group, which had been entrusted with the preparations, found itself between the devil and the deep blue sea.

It was, once again, the position of the Free Democrats which prevailed in the debates of the Opposition Roundtable. At this point Peter Tolgyessy and Ivan Peto, as well as the Fidesz leader, Viktor Orban, stood for a welcome to the emergence of the reform circles, although they maintained that they should negotiate only with the official MSZMP delegation. They thought that time was not on the side of the communists and that no concession should be made which might be presented as a product of power politics at the session of the Central Committee in late May.⁴⁵ The hottest debate in the preparatory talks at that time centered on the question of how many sides the table should have. The MSZMP suggested four-sided negotiations as a sign of compromise. According to this idea, the *third side* of the national roundtable would have been made up of organizations which "belonged neither to the MSZMP nor to the Opposition Roundtable" and which would have been invited by the Communist Party. They wished to keep the *fourth side* for observers who might participate in the debates but who could not vote.⁴⁶

Fejti already knew by the session of the Political Committee on May 26th, 1989 that they had to act swiftly; otherwise the Communist Party would be made the scapegoat for the failure to establish a national roundtable. Clandestine talks had not produced the expected results, either, and the verbal agreements were all renounced by the representatives of the Democratic Forum, the Hungarian People's Party, and the Social Democratic Party. The only hope for Fejti was that the representatives of the "moderate opposition" would conclude during the talks that the Free Democrats and Fidesz only wanted publicity but did not wish to compromise.

At the May 31st session of the Opposition Roundtable the relationship with reform communism was again raised during the debate on negotiating strategy. On this occasion it was Viktor Orban who represented the most radical viewpoint. He argued that the views of the reform communists which were similar to those of the opposition rested on totally different bases, which was why there could be no common platform with them. With regard to preparatory talks, the debate touched two critical points: the limits of compromise and the deadline for concluding an agreement concerning negotiations proper.

Both sides held trump cards. The position of the opposition was strengthened by the fact that the Communist Party was pressed for time, not only be-

cause of the reburial of Imre Nagy on June 16th., but also because of President George Bush's impending visit, and by the decision of the International Monetary Fund to suspend credit. On the other hand, the MSZMP was able to blackmail the Opposition Roundtable by having the so-called cardinal laws necessary for transforming the political system passed by Parliament without consultation, had the talks not been started immediately. In this situation several members of the opposition believed that it would be wise to accept a June 10th deadline for the preparatory period; negotiations could then be started suitably after the Imre Nagy reburial. Viktor Orban was most opposed to signing anything before the burial since he thought that this would bring about a radical change in the political situation. It was also he who adopted an intransigent position on possible compromises regarding participants in the negotiations and their competence.

The SZDSZ seemed to waver briefly when it showed a willingness to respond positively to the government's proposal for separate talks. In April the Free Democrats had suggested that a government of experts be set up for the period of transition, and, although Miklos Nemeth had rejected the proposal, they believed that the transformation of the government in May and its distancing itself from the Communist Party were hopeful signs. However, the Opposition Roundtable rejected this idea in concert and it was never raised again.

It transpired in the concluding phase of the preparatory talks that even Fidesz did not insist rigidly on its anti-compromise position. The success of the tactical maneuvers of the Opposition Roundtable was endangered by the fact that the secret service had passed accurate information to the communist leadership about what had happened at their sessions. After the opposition had ascertained that the MSZMP was unwilling to compromise on certain questions, it attempted to neutralize the unfavorable parts of the agreement as far as possible. It was not able to prevent the satellite organizations of the Communist Party from receiving formally equal status as the "Third Side" at the National Roundtable, but it managed to have the idea accepted that each side should have one single vote and, moreover, that the Third Side was not empowered to veto any agreement concluded between the Opposition Roundtable and the MSZMP. However, the opposition could not prevent the MSZMP from placing economic questions on the agenda of the negotiations.

The Opposition Roundtable could be satisfied with the June 10th agreement concluding the preliminary talks. The MSZMP had to accept the most important elements of the opposition's policy and, in addition, it had to commit itself openly to a democratic, constitutional state. The opposition succeeded in ensuring that the declared goal of the negotiations was the creation of legal preconditions for the transition and that constitutional changes should not precede the agreement. In this way it prevented the Communist Party from driving its ideas through Parliament by bypassing negotiations. The agreement also declared the principle of consensus and contained political guarantees regarding the validation of future agreements and the peaceful nature of the transition.⁴⁷

The signed agreement did not yet encompass the more concrete topics of the negotiations and the definition of the structure of the talks, and it was rather vague also about publicity. However, these things could not prevent the convening of the opening session of the National Roundtable talks three days later, an event which marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of the peaceful transition.

Conflicts Within and Without

In mid-June 1989, as negotiations proper began, the MSZMP was still in possession of all formal power, but its position was becoming weaker and weaker. The reforms did not slow down erosion; on the contrary, they accelerated the process and the reformers' position within the Communist Party became stronger. The internal struggles manifested themselves in the transformation of the structure of the leadership also.⁴⁸ The influence of First Secretary Karoly Grosz, who did not agree with the radical changes but who did not have enough power to prevent them, gradually declined. The hard-liners attacked Pozsgay for initiating the Movement for a Democratic Hungary,⁴⁹ which attempted to establish contacts among politicians who belonged to different parties. The growing pressure exerted by the reform circles was demonstrated by the fact that the party leadership could not avoid a demand to organize the congress earlier than planned.⁵⁰ Regarding the roundtable talks, an important decision of the Central Committee named Imre Pozsgay as the Communist Party's candidate for the Presidency, though the Opposition Roundtable rejected the creation of this position before free elections.⁵¹ The leaders of the Communist Party also had to battle with mutinies by parliamentary representatives since the agreement concluded with the opposition questioned the legitimacy of Parliament and curtailed its authority. Moreover, the opposition continued to attack certain parliamentary representatives by using a legal opportunity for the revocation of a mandate by electors.

Outside circumstances also made the position of the MSZMP more difficult. The bloodbath in Tienanmen Square afforded an opportunity to attack all communist regimes. The catastrophic results achieved by the Polish Communists at the "partly free" elections which followed the compromise concluded at their roundtable talks gave a warning also. The West supported the Polish and Hungarian reforms—Bush's visit to these two countries in July signified as much—but it expected substantial reforms in political and economic fields alike as a precondition of actual assistance in the grave economic-financial crisis. Experts within the opposition knew that outside help was indispensable, but such assistance seemed politically unfavorable, if it were to stabilize the position of the reforming Communist Party.⁵² Those who wished to slow down the reform process could not expect real help from the Soviet Union, either, since Gorbachev had declared reforms an internal issue for Hungary, whilst only vaguely hinting at the necessity of preserving socialism.

Despite being in a tight corner, the MSZMP successfully represented its interests in the next and very important phase of the talks, which was to define the agenda of the National Roundtable and the structure of negotiations. The delegation of the Communist Party tried to incorporate into the discussions the creation of the office of President of the Republic and the Constitutional Court, although the opposition had already rejected this proposal; in addition, it wished to give economic questions equal weight to political ones. It also had definite ideas on the matter of the three-level negotiating structure.

It became clear even a few days after the beginning of the National Roundtable talks on June 13th that the members of the Opposition Roundtable were not still united regarding the policy to be pursued *vis-a-vis* the Communist Party and the means of pressure to be put on the other side. The Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Society, supported by the other parties, attacked the radical activities of Fidesz before the reburial of Imre Nagy, whilst the Young Democrats (with the help of the SZDSZ) rejected such criticism as intervention in their internal affairs. Whilst speaking about the history of the democratic opposition, Balint Magyar remarked how relative was the validity of the considerations of *Realpolitik* which had been mentioned by the moderate opposition.⁵³

Nevertheless, the radical wing of the opposition did not take up an uncompromising position during the continuing preparatory talks. Balint Magyar gave an account of the agreements concluded there to the Opposition Roundtable and it was decided, firstly, that the issues of creating the office of President of the Republic and the Constitutional Court would be incorporated into the topics for negotiation. The skilful tactics of the MSZMP boxed the opposition into a corner. It was at the insistence of the opposition that a clause had been inserted into the basic agreement which provided that bills within the authority of the National Roundtable but lacking consensus should not be introduced into Parliament. The representatives of the Communist Party interpreted this in a way which would permit anything not incorporated into the topics of the talks to be decided freely by Parliament. Therefore, Balint Magyar justified the inclusion of the question of the office of President of the Republic in the negotiating topics by pointing out that this was the only way to withdraw the bill from the agenda of the session of Parliament in late June. At that time it seemed that this compromise did not mean a requirement to agree because there was no suggestion whatsoever that the issues should be discussed as a "package," that the agreements concluded in the various questions should be linked together.

The delegation of the Opposition Roundtable had to accept the formal equalization of economic issues for similar reasons. This seemed to be the only way for them to influence the laws affecting the institutional system of the economy and the government's role therein. The attempts of the opposition in this area were primarily negative. They wished to control the process of change in area of property ownership, changes which threatened that the government would make irreversible decisions for the period following elections. Moreover, it was impossible to come to an agreement on economic matters because the

economic interests and the economic political goals of the three sides were irreconcilable. Regarding an urgent cure for the crisis and economic liberalization, the opposition had had heated debates with the Third Side rather than with the ideas of the government in the first place.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, there were sharp divisions of opinion among the various organizations of the Opposition Roundtable and the Third Side also. The opposition not only wished to place responsibility for the crisis on the Communist Party, it also expected that the West's support of the reforms would be coupled with coercion to implement a political transition as well. At the same time it was in the opposition's interest to prevent the collapse of the economy since it would have to take into account the legacy of the next government. These contradictions forecast failure for the economic talks.

The MSZMP succeeded in persuading the Opposition Roundtable to accept the *three-level negotiating structure*, that is, the introduction of an intermediate level between the plenary sessions and the talks of the working committees dealing with broader topics. The plenary sessions were designed only to approve agreements formally, whilst the real political debates over the questions which the working committees could not solve were intended to be settled on the intermediate negotiating level. The opposition also realized the rationality of the suggestion, but this meant that the publicity of the talks would be endangered. Although political debate might be undertaken at this intermediate level, it had only the status of working committee, whilst the basic agreement provided that only plenary sessions should be public. This situation gave rise to heated debate from the beginning until the Opposition Roundtable succeeded in making these intermediate sessions public after mid-August.

The relationship with the MSZMP divided the opposition from the beginning of the talks, but these differences became marked in only a few questions—although it is true that they were very important from the point of view of power. The debate appeared hidden inside minor constitutional issues or intermingled with them. The Free Democrats presented the most detailed and coherent program for creating the bases of liberal democracy, and this program was promoted consistently by one of the key players in the talks, Peter Tolgyessy. In most cases the representatives of the Hungarian Democratic Forum sided with him. The debate centered primarily on the degree of acceptable compromise and—in relation to this—the balance of political power, and not on constitutional principles. One of the most important questions of the debate was: to what extent should the opposition take relations within the bastions of power into account and to what extent could the opposition influence them? The clash between the different strategies appeared as a dilemma between politics of principle and *Realpolitik* in the debates of the Opposition Roundtable.

No sooner did the actual talks get under way and the various specialized committees dealing with modifications to the Constitution, activities of the parties, the electoral system, criminal law, freedom of information, and guarantees against violent resolutions start to work, than the debate over the relationship with the various wings or individuals of the Communist Party recommenced.

The most heated debate during negotiations concerned the establishment and duties of the office of President of the Republic, a debate which revealed the differences between the strategies of the various opposition organizations. The views adopted on this question were related to the division of power and ideas relating to a coalition following the elections. It was these differences concerning the head of state which showed most clearly the fault lines among the organizations of the Opposition Roundtable.

The Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP)—which was admitted into the Opposition Roundtable in early June—first introduced the motion, at the July 6th session, that no obstacle should be placed to Pozsgay's early election as President. The representative of the party argued that the opposition would not be able to run a potential rival and that if the election of the President preceded parliamentary elections only by a short time, then the MSZMP might take advantage of its popular politician's success. The motion was seconded by the BZSBT, and it was even thought possible that some opposition organizations would find in Pozsgay their own presidential candidate. The representative of the Independent Smallholders' Party thought that the recommendation should be deliberated upon and invoked the example of the Polish transition; what he had in mind was the idea that the Communist Party would hardly accept a deal under which it was certain to lose power.⁵⁵

The SZDSZ, Fidesz and MDF were all strongly opposed to the proposal. Jozsef Antall in the name of the Forum emphasized that a question of principle was under consideration, and so Pozsgay himself should not be included in the debate. He suggested that the Speaker of the Parliament should fill the position of head of state during the transition—but with limited authority. Peter Tolygyessy, speaking for the SZDSZ, spoke sharply against the Christian Democrats' proposal and even questioned their being opposition members. Janos Kis pointed out that the need for stability during the transition period did not justify the early election of a president, and so the principled position should not be yielded at all. He did not exclude the possibility of a power deal but stressed that any deal concerning positions could be made only in the knowledge of the election results.⁵⁶ The debate then closed with the acceptance of the motion of the Hungarian Democratic Forum.

During the next session, issues related to suffrage came to the fore and the major fault-line between the organizations of the Opposition Roundtable was revealed in the course of debate on these questions. The MSZMP had realized, after losing the July by-elections, that its original idea regarding elections would amount to political suicide; it was, therefore, willing to accept the compromise proposal of the MDF. However, the historical parties inside the opposition protested.

For two weeks it seemed that the question of the relationship with the MSZMP would not cause friction within the opposition. However, a turning point came on July 21st. The Hungarian People's Party (MNP) put forward a suggestion at a session of the Opposition Roundtable and justified the motion

with the emergence of a political crisis and the danger of political backsliding.' The People's Party proposed that parliamentary elections be brought forward to December and that, for their sake, the tripartite talks should end by mid-August and the President of the Republic should be elected before the parliamentary elections. A heated debate immediately broke out on the topic. The Christian Democrats not only supported the idea, but they also doubted whether there was a valid resolution of the Opposition Roundtable rejecting the election of the President before free elections. Fidesz and the SZDSZ did not even want to hear of any re-discussion of the issue, which had already been decided. According to the Free Democrats, no new political situation had emerged and concerns over political backsliding were baseless. Ivan Peto declared that communist manipulation could be detected behind the suggestion, whilst Balint Magyar pointed out that the real issue was the possibility of Pozsgay's election as President, and so they could only talk about the question of which party wanted it before free elections. Eventually, the debate was adjourned at the suggestion of the MDF with the resolution that they would adhere to the former common position of the opposition but would not make a final decision regarding the President of the Republic in the committee which dealt with the drafting of the Constitution.⁵⁸

The proposal of the People's Party coincided not only with the question of a speedy conclusion to the talks, but also with the matter of holding elections ahead of time with the agreement of the Communist Party leadership. This became evident in the July 24th session of the Political Committee also when the state of the roundtable talks was on the agenda. Imre Pozsgay and Gyorgy Fejti were the key players in conducting the talks and their views determined the MSZMP's position. Fejti, who was skeptical about the success of the negotiations, wanted to box the opposition into a corner. He believed that a deadline should be set to the agreement because this was the only way to force the opposition to retreat; and if there was no agreement, the communists might stand up from the table claiming that it was not they who had caused the failure. Karoly Grosz suggested that the delegation should insist on its position on questions of party law and the law on suffrage, whilst it might be more flexible on the issue of the President of the Republic. Party Chairman Rezso Nyers believed that the question of the President of the Republic was equally important, whilst he warned against an over-rigid and ultimatum-like manner at the talks.⁵⁹

At the end of July, the opposition felt that the communists wished to speed up the talks, and, at the same time, they detected signs of a turn towards hard-line politics also. The delegates of the MSZMP in the working committee dealing with party law unexpectedly drew back from the agreements concluded up to that point, rejecting talks on the drawing up of accounts for the property of the MSZMP and their distribution, as well as on the banning of party organizations from the work-place. The members of the Opposition Roundtable interpreted the change in different ways. For instance, the Christian Democrats at once drew the conclusion that hard-line communists had taken advantage of the absence of

Pozsgay and that this only proved that the reform wing should be strengthened. The Young Democrats came to a diametrically opposed conclusion—namely, that personal guarantees could not be relied upon: if Pozsgay could be replaced at any time and the views of the MSZMP changed, it was not worth making concessions. Janos Kis, in the name of the Free Democrats, warned that they should not debate who were the "good guys and bad guys" in the Communist Party, but that, instead, they should make it clear that there would be no agreement on this basis.

Since Gyorgy Fejti took a rigid position even at the intermediate-level talks in late July, the negotiations on party law were terminated in the committee—that is, what happened was exactly what the leaders of the Communist Party had feared: the chance of agreement was delayed. Now Fejti raised the idea for the first time that they should resolve the impasse by means of a *package deal*—that is, they should balance the differences with concessions in various other fields and conclude a comprehensive agreement in this way.⁶⁰ Soon the technique of negotiating a package deal became a crucial question.

The MSZMP tried to bring pressure to bear on the other side in a rather different way also. One of the members of the committee which was dealing with the issue relating to the Constitution, the Deputy Minister of Justice, made a statement to the effect that the government had not withdrawn its bills for ever and that, if negotiations dragged on, it might even leave the negotiating table. The background of this declaration was that the delegates of the Opposition Roundtable had started to review each paragraph of the existing constitution and did not consider the government's draft as the starting point. The opposition wished to have its own concept accepted and insisted that each and every paragraph in the Constitution referring to state socialism should be deleted. This was a very slow process but finally they exceeded their original goals. In practice, although not on paper, a new constitution was born.

This achievement, however, was still distant at the end of July. Gyorgy Fejti tried to obtain an answer to the question whether the opposition was finally willing to discuss the issue of the office of President of the Republic and the establishment of a Constitutional Court. He was obviously aware of the divisions in the Opposition Roundtable on this matter. For the time being he received an official answer: according to the opposition, there was no need for these institutions during the transition period.⁶¹ It seemed that the opposition had solidly maintained its original, united position since the organizations wishing to adhere to that position still enjoyed a majority. The question was, however, not settled finally; the debate was merely adjourned.⁶²

Agreement and Breach

On August 15th, 1989, the Political Committee of the MSZMP had an exhaustive debate on the state of the roundtable talks and the policy to be pursued. The majority of the communist leaders—Grosz and Pozsgay also—hoped that the National Roundtable talks could be concluded quickly. Fejti was skeptical—he thought that the opposition was facing an endurance test and that it was not decided what course events would take. The separate talks with some of the organizations of the Opposition Roundtable were still going on in the background, but more effective were Imre Pozsgay's personal contacts with opposition politicians. With regard to the conflict within the opposition over the question of a Head of State, which had already become public, Pozsgay gave the Political Committee an account of the proposal under preparation by the Democratic Forum. According to this, the MDF wanted a President of the Republic who would have moderately strong authority, who would be closely controlled and who would be elected not before parliamentary elections and *directly* by the people. Pozsgay deemed it important to "break the unity of the opposition based on blackmail." He thought that aspect of the opposition's strategy detrimental which did not find favor with the reform wing of the Communist Party as a separate factor. He also discussed the issue of potential coalition partners and stated that there would be no coalition offer before the elections, but he also indicated that the MSZMP might select potential partners. He thought it possible to come to an agreement with some parties even if the talks with the whole Opposition Roundtable failed.

Fejti was also of the opinion that, if they could not agree, then they should conclude a pact with one part of the opposition and the Third Side. He considered it impossible that they would be able to make an agreement with the Free Democrats and Fidesz, but he believed that if an agreement could be made with the Democratic Forum then the Smallholders' Party would also change sides. He proposed that they should insist on the position of President of the Republic and that they should offer the opposition seats in the Constitutional Court in exchange. The Political Committee made some highly important decisions after long debate: the negotiating delegation should come to an agreement on the questions of party law and the law on suffrage, it should recommend the establishment of a Constitutional Court, it should insist on the creation of the office of President of the Republic and the direct election of the head of state. The resolution rejected the opposition's demand that party organizations leave all workplaces and that the workers' militia (the party's own armed force) be immediately disbanded rather than merely transformed.⁶³

Very soon important events took place at the Opposition Roundtable session also. Jozsef Antall submitted a package from the Hungarian Democratic Forum which attempted to summarize the different opposition ideas and mould them into a compromise, so that they would be able to present it at the National Roundtable talks.⁶⁴ Various elements of the package approached the ideas of the

MSZMP—for instance, the direct election of the head of state—whilst on other points there were still major differences. Its most important aspect, however, was that it followed the same logic as Gyorgy Fejti, who thought the acceptance of a package a possible form of deal. This form precluded a detailed agreement on the issues essential to the transition and made possible only a comprehensive agreement which incorporated the solution of all of the questions under debate. It also included the creation of the office of President of the Republic before the elections, although the opposition had not been willing to discuss this issue at first. Jozsef Antall argued that the only chance of an agreement was to make a deal on all of the questions. However, the Free Democrats, Fidesz and the Social Democrats believed that it would be imperative to have the Party Law and the Electoral Law, indispensable for the transition, accepted; and that the questions on which there was still no agreement could be discussed further.

The debate over Antall's proposal both rearranged and aggravated the fault lines in the Opposition Roundtable. The MNP, the KDNP, the BZSBT, and the KDNP sided with the MDF, whilst the SZDSZ, the MSZDP, Fidesz, and the representatives of the independent trade unions were opposed to the suggestion. They pointed to the connections between the Forum's proposal and the negotiating strategy of the communists and demanded that they should try to come to an agreement whilst retaining their principles. The Young Democrat Laszlo Kover even asked Antall to what extent the Forum had agreed the package with the MSZMP since it was unrealistic if its acceptance could be surmised. The Free Democrat Ivan Peto declared that the proposal was not a compromise plan at all, since it offered something to the communists when the opposition did not wish to make any concessions at all.⁶⁵

It was an open secret that there were regular talks between Pozsgay and the politicians on one side of the Opposition Roundtable. Trust among the organizations of the Opposition Roundtable declined drastically after mid-August. To make Pozsgay the President of the Republic might have been part of a deal in the interest of peaceful transition, but the Democratic Forum did not dare to make a statement to this effect and insisted on constitutional arguments.⁶⁶

The different positions of the two camps of the Opposition Roundtable rested on different analyses of the situation. The Forum attached greater importance to events inside the Communist Party than did its debating partners and attempted to exert influence on those events through the roundtable discussions. The reformers were likely to win as the Communist Party was preparing for its congress, but it was not a foregone conclusion. The resistance of the hard-liners manifested itself several times during the talks. The MSZMP did not make any compromise regarding the property of the party, the banning of party organizations from the work-place, or the disbanding of the workers' militia, though Pozsgay would have been willing to do so. There was also some fear that the parliamentary representatives would mutiny if the roundtable talks dragged on too long and finally the cardinal laws necessary for the transition could not be passed by Parliament. There was, therefore, logic in opposition support for the

Pozsgay wing in the form of acceptable compromises. Naturally, the reform communists also wanted to have a share of power in the new system, firstly, with the help of Pozsgay as President, and, later, as members of a government coalition with their radically transformed party. It was also an open secret that they considered the Democratic Forum as one of their potential partners.⁶⁷ The leaders of the Forum were also worried about the international situation; they were not sure that the Brezhnev Doctrine belonged to the past and that the Soviet Union would give the green light to the changes in Hungary.

Both the Free Democrats' and Fidesz's approach to, and analysis of, the situation were essentially different. They preferred to concentrate on the dynamics of development and concluded that it was not worthwhile making a short-lived deal at the expense of giving up their principles. They did not think it important to hold elections by the end of the year, if only because their organizational strength and popular support were lagging behind those of the Communist Party and the Democratic Forum. The Free Democrats were aware of the erosion of the MSZMP and wished to weaken its position even more. They believed that it was not the opposition's task to support the reformers from outside with concessions given at the talks. They thought that, if the reformers won at the congress in early October, they could make an agreement with them then with better conditions, and that, if the hard-liners prevailed, the concessions would be even more unjustifiable.

The radical wing of the opposition thought it a precondition for a real political transition that the Communist Party should be excluded from power; they considered it important, therefore, not only not to conclude an agreement with the party but also to weaken its position. They were adamantly opposed to giving the MSZMP an important position in the form of the office of President of the Republic. They endeavored to give as many people as possible the courage to cut the umbilical cord which attached them to the communist regime and so they regarded the termination of party organizations at the work-place and the disbanding of the workers' militia as crucial questions. One of the driving forces behind their radicalization was their attempt to prevent a long-term alliance between the so-called national wing of the opposition and the reformers led by Pozsgay. In opposition to the presumed separate deal, they represented the concept of total political transformation, according to which the assertion of their principles established at the beginning of the talks was a precondition for free elections. They thought that if the Opposition Roundtable as a whole insisted on these principles, then the MSZMP might be forced to retreat and only the deadlines set by them would be discarded.

Concerning events abroad, they considered as important those which pointed towards radical changes in the whole region. The communists had suffered a crushing defeat in the elections in Poland, which called into question the entire reason for prearranged positions in the roundtable talks. The formation of the Mazowiecki Government showed that a seemingly logical compromise might lose its validity very quickly; therefore the election of Jaruzelski as President

was not an example to be followed in Hungary. They wanted to make the public realize that the Brezhnev Doctrine was obsolete and that is why they urged Moscow to denounce the interventions in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968.⁶⁸ The Free Democrats believed that the necessity of recovering from the economic-financial crisis would speed up the process of orienting the country towards the West. The crisis which emerged with the flight of East Germans to Hungary—which happened exactly at the crucial phase of the roundtable talks—again proved that the Hungarian government preferred the West to its former allies.

The strategy of the two opposition groups had diverged terminally by the time of the intensive phase of talks in mid-August. Although the MDF withdrew its package, Imre Pozsgay declared, in the name of the MSZMP delegation, that they were only interested in a comprehensive agreement, and so they were treating the partial agreements which had already been concluded as parts of a package and would introduce them into Parliament only after their final acceptance.⁶⁹ They set mid-September as the deadline for reaching an agreement.

On August 29th 1989, the Opposition Roundtable held a dramatic, ten-hour session, in which the question of the President of the Republic was the center of discussion. A temporary agreement was made only after a long debate full of turning points and accusations. This stated that the parties would consider whether it was acceptable to them that Parliament should elect a President of the Republic after free elections and—meanwhile—that the Speaker of Parliament should fill this office. Dissolution of the Opposition Roundtable seemed to be inevitable during the debate on several occasions since the Christian Democrats, the Smallholders and the representatives of the People's Party preferred the direct election of the President *before* parliamentary elections, whilst the Free Democrats, the Young Democrats, and the Social Democrats vetoed the proposal. The MDF argued that the direct election of the President would settle the dispute because no-one could challenge the decision of the people. By way of contradiction, the representative of the SZDSZ pointed out that the Communist Party did not only want to acquire the office of President; it also wished to have this ambition legitimized by the people and was counting on the support of part of the opposition. Jozsef Antall protested against the allegation that he and his followers would support Pozsgay's election, but supporters of the direct election of the President did not name their own common candidate who might have stood some chance against the popular reform communist politician.

There was no hope that the delegation of the MSZMP would accept the proposal of the Opposition Roundtable regarding the temporary filling of the office until sometime after the parliamentary elections. Moreover, it was not only the issue of the President which gave rise to conflict between the two sides. Several questions had been settled by the committees of the tripartite talks, which had already been approved at intermediate level, but the front lines had hardened their positions on some crucial matters. The MSZMP showed no flexibility on these questions, mostly because of internal conditions within the party. The

reformers were preparing for a crucial conference in which they wanted to create a totally new party and the issue of a negotiated transition was put on the back-burner. The fight among the various groups of the Communist Party could not be continued at the National Roundtable and because of this internal instability, the negotiating position of the party had to be approved by the Central Committee. However, this body gave a green light only to those proposals which did not involve a retreat on crucial questions. Therefore, the delegation of the MSZMP was not willing to make any compromise concerning the property of the party and party organizations in the work-place; and, in addition, Pozsgay was forced to withdraw the promised concessions after the CC meeting of September 1st.

The problem of the internal condition of the Communist Party came to the fore again at the September 4th session of the Opposition Roundtable. The fault line inside the opposition appeared not only in the matter of the President of the Republic, but the debate over acceptable and non-acceptable compromises became more and more heated also. Some argued in favor of a speedy agreement and concessions in the interests of achieving this by saying that, after the expected split of the MSZMP, there might not be one force available which could influence Parliament to ensure that accepted agreements would be enacted into law.⁷⁰ Communist Party leaders were genuinely concerned about the possibility of collapse of Parliament. In order to avoid this, they deemed it necessary to introduce the essential Bills of Transition at the September session. However, their success was questionable because the MSZMP had decided earlier that it would be willing to settle only for a comprehensive agreement at the National Roundtable, but the radical wing of the Opposition Roundtable adamantly insisted on its position of principle in a few questions.

The leaders of the MSZMP knew that time was not on their side. In order to conclude the talks quickly, Pozsgay suggested a splitting of the opposition with the help of their "tactical allies." Prime Minister Miklos Nemeth believed that elections ahead of time, in December, were necessitated by the critical state of the economy because strong restrictive measures were preconditions of a hoped-for agreement with the International Monetary Fund.⁷¹ Imre Pozsgay informed the members of the Political Committee on September 5th that, on the basis of information gained from certain circles of the opposition, there was hope for a compromise regarding the election of President, in contrast to other questions under debate. In reality the differences of views inside the Opposition Roundtable had not changed at all.

On September 11th, one week before the planned signing of the comprehensive agreement, a decision concerning the acceptance or rejection of the compromises could not be delayed any longer at the Opposition Roundtable session. After Antall's proposal Peter Tolgyessy, on behalf of the SZDSZ, and Viktor Orban, in the name of Fidesz, declared that their position was final and there was no place to go from there. They wanted to prevent a further softening of the views of the opposition. Tolgyessy even indirectly accused the Forum of recommending acceptance of the communists' views on the questions under de-

bate. As they had made their positions of principle clear on several occasions, the representatives of the radical side attempted to prove that too much flexibility would be counterproductive even from a tactical stand-point. They did not accept the argument of the MDF that the communists were willing to conclude an agreement only in the form of a package, since the agreement on the start of talks had produced exactly the opposite. The deadlock was not broken and so what they could agree on at this Opposition Roundtable session was only the creation of the office of President of the Republic; the method and date of the election, as well as the duration of the term of the President, were left undecided.⁷³

A breach was unavoidable. This became clear at the next, particularly hectic, session of the Opposition Roundtable on September 15th. The Free Democrats and the organizations sharing their position had reached the limit of concessions which could be made in the interest of a successful conclusion to the talks and the preservation of the unity of the opposition. The Free Democrats, rigorously sticking to the principles of democracy, could not possibly accept a constitutional solution which threatened to lead development astray in the first and decisive phase of the political transition. It was not only distrust which motivated them. They had strong reasons to assume that the good relations between Pozsgay and the leaders of the Forum might result in an alliance for a longer period of time. In such an alliance, on the one side there would be the reform forces of the old system, supported by a directly-elected president who would enjoy strong legitimacy and, on the other, the strongest party of the opposition and its minor allies. They thought that such a Grand Coalition would marginalize the liberals and prevent liberal-directed development. Moreover, they were opposed to a presidential system which might have evolved in case direct elections were introduced as a matter of principle.⁷⁴

In contrast to this opinion, the MDF and its allies thought that the new compromise could be accepted in the interest of a successful peaceful transition and that with such they could establish the bases of democratic development. They trusted Pozsgay and saw no danger or any harm to themselves if the people chose him as President in a direct election. However, what was even more important was that they did not want to risk those historic achievements which the Opposition Roundtable had accomplished in creating foundations for a democratic system. They did not give up hope of being able to convince the radical wing of the opposition by emphasizing this point until the very end, but they did not budge from the position which was identified by the peripheral conditions of the agreement with the MSZMP.⁷⁵ The delegates of the MSZMP also hoped that the radical wing of the opposition would change its mind, their hope being based on the fact that radicals were participating in the work of the sub-committee which was preparing the crucial laws. It is true that, even after the dramatic session of the Opposition Roundtable on September the 15th several arguments were put forward both for and against; both sides tried to suggest compromise solutions so that the achievements of the talks would not be in vain. However,

they could not resolve the basic dilemma. It became obvious that the remnants of opposition unity had been destroyed by the differences.

It was Peter Tolgyessy who put an end to the hopeless debate, which was revived time and again, when he announced that the Free Democrats would not sign any agreement which contained a provision for a President to be elected directly by the people. Jozsef Antall concluded that there was nothing left to do at the current session of the Opposition Roundtable except to declare that the opposition could not achieve a united position. At first, Tolgyessy asked that their differences should not be made public before the plenary session which ended the talks. Viktor Orban went further and stated, threateningly, that, if an announcement should be made at any time before the plenary session, his party would make a declaration which would prevent the Opposition Roundtable from signing anything, since the MSZMP would have no-one to make an agreement with. Clearly, he was referring to his party's power of veto.⁷⁶

Nothing indicated at the National Roundtable negotiations what was in the offing. Intensive efforts were made for the preparation of an agreement until the very last minute. Those who intended to refuse to sign an agreement were also present at the drafting of the essential Bills of the Transition. The leaders of the MSZMP, especially Imre Pozsgay, expected, despite the bad omens, that the talks could be concluded in the form of a package in accordance with their original plans and that, at worst, the radical wing of the opposition would make a separate statement on some questions. However, this is not what happened.

On the day assigned for signing the agreement, September the 18th the Opposition Roundtable first held a discussion. The Free Democrats announced then the form they had chosen for indicating their dissent. Tolgyessy pointed out that they had the right to kill the pact with their veto, but that they did not want to prevent any other members of the Opposition Roundtable from signing it. Nevertheless, it was not enough for them to make their dissent public in a clause, they would refuse to sign the agreement and had drafted a statement justifying their decision. Fidesz and the Social Democrats joined the SZDSZ. Jozsef Antall, who represented the other side declared, resignedly, that the Forum would make a separate statement also, and a political struggle started among the members of the Opposition Roundtable.

However, the Free Democrats had not played all their trump-cards since they did not announce before the concluding plenary session of the National Roundtable that they would initiate a referendum on the four essential questions remaining open. The signing ceremony of the agreement was televised live. It now transpired that, in front of the whole world, three organizations of the Opposition Roundtable, the SZDSZ, Fidesz, and the League, refused to sign it, whilst the Social Democrats accepted it with the provision that they did not agree with the election of the President of the Republic before parliamentary elections.

It was not only the announcement itself but also its manner which created consternation. Peter Tolgyessy attacked the representatives of the MSZMP in an even harsher voice than he had done during the talks. He declared that the op-

position had been able to fulfil its task, the removal of obstacles in the way of a peaceful transition to democracy, only to a limited extent since the leadership of the MSZMP had rejected any substantial compromises, and so it, the opposition, did not see any guarantees that the elections would be truly free. He also announced that they would not prevent the implementation of the agreement, but that they would like to see the disputed questions decided in a referendum. Laszlo Kover on behalf of Fidesz struck a similarly harsh note.

That part of the opposition which had decided to sign the agreement was put on the defensive. Gyorgy Szabad and Jozsef Antall were forced to emphasize that, with regard to the issues of the workers' militia and party organizations in the work-place, they themselves could not possibly take a more radical position, but that they considered the agreement even more important. Imre Pozsgay, who had been visibly shocked by the announcement, also used strong words in rejecting such a belittlement of the achievements of the negotiations, as well as the impolite rude language used, but he also adopted a similarly harsh tone when criticizing the radical opposition. Finally Tolgyessy stated that the Free Democrats did not belittle the achievements—which was exactly why they did not veto the agreement—but that they could not assume responsibility for the possibility that the development might lead to a presidential system and not to a democratic transition. The signing of the agreement then took place in a less than ceremonial mood.⁷⁷

What followed belonged to a new phase of the transition which witnessed changes in relations not only between the opposition and the ruling party, but also among the various opposition organizations.

The imposition of a referendum carried its own risks, but it provided the only escape from a situation in which those who had rejected the agreement might have found themselves, if they had had to explain why they were opposed to the President of the Republic being elected directly by the people, whereas such an initiative (i.e. the referendum) produced an immediate attacking move and was appropriate enough to make the many who had been watching the talks passively take sides. The referendum offered the only opportunity for the people themselves to legitimize the election of the President by Parliament (in an indirect way) and, at the same time, oppose the reform communist candidate (also indirectly). It soon transpired that the question referring to the election of the President was worded rather misleadingly, with the three further questions serving only as aids to this deceit. The Communist Party had only itself to blame for providing an opportunity to connect the question of the election of the President—on which public opinion was deeply divided—with those of the workers' militia, party property and party organizations at work-place, on which there was broad social consensus.

With regard to these latter issues, the parties of the Opposition Roundtable were in agreement and the only controversial question was whether they could sign the agreement at the cost of delaying a decision and risking that the MSZMP would dig its heels in permanently. The signatories to the agreement

thought that the compromise already accepted was realistic and, moreover, that the questions which remained open were not necessarily relevant to the guaranteeing of a peaceful transition and legal conditions for free elections. However, they also recognized that they exerted considerable influence on equal opportunity and, therefore, on the future balance of political power. On the other hand, the opponents of the agreement hoped—and voiced this hope in a separate statement—that, after the MSZMP's congress in early October, the government would introduce a bill into Parliament which would be in accordance with the opposition's position.⁷⁸

The reform politicians of the MSZMP were planning to disband the Communist Party and to establish a new party. However, before the congress—no matter how much they had committed themselves to a democratic transition—they could not handle the problem. They knew that they should accept the demands of the liberal opposition on the basis of the principles of parliamentary democracy, but at the same time they hoped that their transformed party would remain an element in government after the elections also, and they attempted, therefore, to keep as much of their organizational strength and material superiority as possible. The defeat of the principle of democratic legitimization had serious consequences for the successor party, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), which was formed on October 7th, 1989.

At the time of the agreement which brought the National Roundtable talks to a conclusion it could not be seen what changes would occur—and how quickly—with the collapse of the East European regimes. It was to be expected that a radical anticommunist phase of the political transition would start with the conclusion of the agreement guaranteeing peaceful transition. The Free Democrats and their allies quickly collected the signatures necessary for the referendum and then the campaign acquired an increasingly strong anticommunist tone. They attacked the Socialist Party, which had been founded by the reformers and labelled as the successor party, much more vehemently than they had the Communist Party proper during negotiations. This was the only way for them to ensure that the referendum campaign would be victorious and to establish the conditions for later election victory.

The SZDSZ did not treat the MSZMP as a monolithic bloc earlier, although it insisted on holding negotiations only with the official party leaders. The Free Democrats thought that the function of the reform movement was to put pressure on the leadership and to make it possible for the MSZMP to implement the negotiated political transition from within. In the spring of 1989, therefore, they had warned those who were planning to split the Communist Party that they should give up the attempt. In the autumn, at the time when they declined to sign the agreement, their immediate goal was already total political transition. In order to achieve this they wished to prevent the Socialist Party, which was founded on the ruins of the Communist Party, from acceptance as a legitimate participant in the political transition. They thought it a precondition of total political transition that, not only would the orthodox communist party be ousted

from power, but also that the reform communist-socialist successor party would be compelled to hand over power. Considering contemporary power relations, this, in practice meant the prevention of a coalition with the MDF.

The suspicion that such an alliance might be in the offing was well-founded. The member organizations of the Opposition Roundtable which had signed the agreement, and especially the leaders of the Democratic Forum, were closely connected to Imre Pozsgay. Jozsef Antall had been playing a leading role as one of the representatives of the MDF at the roundtable talks, but he did not have any formal party office. In fact, it was a foregone conclusion within the inner circle of the MDF leadership that he would be nominated party president at the national convention in October 1989, but he had to retain the support of the leaders who maintained close ties with Pozsgay. He himself also established a reasonable relationship with Pozsgay during the informal talks held in the summer.

The MDF found itself in a difficult position after signing the agreement which concluded the negotiations. Even if it were true that compromise was acceptable at the time of signing the document, there was no doubt also that this consideration quickly became outmoded. The struggle during the referendum campaign was not only between representatives of the opposition and power. It was also a new challenge for the MDF to have to face the appearance of the two liberal parties, which resulted in a more balanced power structure within the opposition. The relationship came even more into balance after the MSZDP and then the FKG P also entered the referendum campaign. In parallel with this increasing competition inside the opposition, the relationship of the Forum with the MSZMP, and then with the Socialist Party became more and more problematic.

The MDF reacted to the anticommunist radicalism of the referendum campaign by edging closer to the socialists, if only because it felt that time would vindicate its own prediction, namely that, after the foundation of the Socialist Party, the Nemeth government would push the abolition of the workers' militia and of party organizations in the work-place through Parliament. The Socialist Party recommended to its followers that they answer three of the four questions affirmatively at the referendum; it was opposed only to the issue of the election of the President. The national meeting of the MDF on October the 22nd and 23rd left the unambiguous feeling that the Forum was closer to the MSZP than to the liberal opposition.⁷⁹ This feeling was reinforced when the MDF tried to escape from this precarious position by calling for a boycott of the referendum.⁸⁰

At the referendum of November 26th more than 95% of the electorate voted in favor of disbanding the workers' militia, accounting for party property, and de-politicizing the work-place, but there was only a razor-thin margin on the question of the election of the President. However, this hairsbreadth success fundamentally changed the political landscape. Support for the socialists plunged. It had long-standing consequences in that the parties rejecting the agreement opened the radical, anticommunist phase of the political transition in

parallel with establishing the essential legal preconditions for a peaceful transition. In this new situation the MDF fought its battle with its increasingly serious rival, the Free Democrats, by adjusting itself to the radical anticommunist campaign. On March 25th, 1990, in the first round of free elections, the MDF received fewer than 4% more votes than the SZDSZ. However, two weeks later, when the majority of seats was decided in the single-member constituencies, the MDF won 165, the SZDSZ 94, the FKGP 44, Fidesz 22, and the Christian Democratic People's Party 21 seats. Since, during the campaign, the relationship with the MSZP was almost wholly identified with the position taken on the question of the totality of the political transition and its quality, each of the opposition forces violently attacked the socialists. The MSZP with almost 11% of popular support and 33 seats in Parliament, which it won in spite of a strident campaign waged against it, was relegated to the role of a small, isolated opposition party.

After the elections Jozsef Antall formed a coalition government with the participation of the MDF, the Smallholders' Party and the Christian Democrats. Beforehand, however, an agreement was concluded as a part of the negotiated transition: the MDF and the SZDSZ, which had been waging a bloody war during the campaign, concluded a pact which provided for modifications to the constitution complementing,⁸¹ to some extent, what had failed at the roundtable talks.⁸²

To summarize, one can agree with the conclusion that the signatories to the agreement guaranteed the incorporation into law of the achievements of the National Roundtable, whilst those who initiated the referendum secured the elimination of uncomfortable compromises. However, the agreement bore the imprint of a separate deal, whilst the referendum bore the marks of a violation of the agreement. This is why any subsequent assessment of the transition must be characterized by ambivalence.

(Translated by *Tamás Magyarics*)

Notes

- 1 *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárti Központi Bizottságnak 1989. évi jegyzőkönyvei* [The Minutes of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party in the Year 1989], ed. by Anna S. Kosztricz et al. (Budapest: Magyar Országos Levéltár, 1993), vol. 1, pp. 852-872.
- 2 Patrick O'Neil, *Revolution from Within: The Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and the Collapse of Communism*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998).
- 3 The Political Committee of the MSZMP called upon Rezső Nyers to give up the organization of the movement in its resolution of March 22nd, 1988. (*Beszéled*, 1999, No. 9, p. 63.) However, the statement of the Central Committee issued concerning the session of September 27th, 1989 declared the establishment of the New March Front, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, and "other alternative organizations" as "remarkable and something which needs further analysis." (*Nepszabadság*, 29th September 1989.)
- 4 Ervin Csizmadia, *A magyar demokratikus ellenzék (1968-1988): Monográfia* [The Hungarian Democratic Opposition (1968-1988): Monograph] (Budapest: T-Twins 1995), pp. 438-439.

- 5 Miklos Haraszti, Janos Kis, Ferenc Koszeg, Otilia Solt: *Social Contract: The Conditions of Political Settlement*, in *Beszelo Osszkiadds*, vol. 2 (Budapest: AB-Beszelo, 1992), pp. 749-791.
- 6 The deed of foundation of the Hungarian Democratic Forum. *Lakitelek*, September 3, 1988. (*Hitel*, 1988. No. 1, pp. 50-51.)
- 7 The programme of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Hitel*, 1989. No. 10, pp. 50-52).
- 8 The minutes of the meeting, in *A demokracia alternativdi hazdnkban* [The Alternatives of Democracy in Hungary] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1989).
- 9 Its most characteristic example was the anniversary of the 1956 Revolution on October 23rd, 1988 when the MDF called upon its followers to stay away from the demonstration when it heard the news that it had been banned.
- 10 The Founding Proclamation of the Network of Free Initiatives, *Szabad Demokratdk*, 1989, Nos. 1-2, pp. 46-47, and Janos Kis: "What Should We Be Afraid of?" *Beszelo Osszkiadds*, vol. 3, pp. 217-220.
- 11 The Programme Concept of the SZDSZ. *Szabad Demokratdk*, 1989, Nos. 1-2, pp. 17-18.
- 12 Janos Kis, "Mit képvisel a Beszelo?" [What Does the Beszelo Represent?] *Szabad Demokratdk*, 1989, No. 102, pp. 5-6.
- 13 *A rendszervdltds programja*. [The Program of Regime Change.] Budapest: SZDSZ, 1989, pp. 22-30, 67-76.
- 14 The 4th March 1989 Position of the Caretaker Body of the SZDSZ. *Magyar Nemzet*, March 6, 1989.
- 15 Report of the meeting: Will There Be a Constructive Opposition? *Nepszabadsdg*, March 7, 1989.
- 16 *Magyar Nemzet*, March 16, 1989.
- 17 "An Open Letter to Our Friends in Hungary", in Andras Bozoki (editor-in-chief), Marta Elbert, Melinda Kalmar, Bela Revesz, Erzsebet Ripp, and Zoltan Ripp (eds.), *A rendszervdltds forgatokonyve: Kerekasztal-tdrgyaldsok 1989-ben I. kotet* [The Script of the Regime Change: Roundtable Talks in 1989. Vol. I.] Budapest: Magveto, 1999. p. 57.
- 18 The demand was drafted by Imre Konya and he made it known at the general assembly of the SZDSZ, *ibid*, pp. 54-56.
- 19 See the related documents in Andras Bozoki (ed.), *Tiszta lappa!. A FIDESZ a magyar politikaban 1989-1991* [With a Clean Slate. FIDESZ in the Hungarian Politics, 1989-1991], Budapest: FIDESZ, 1992.
- 20 Political program statement. Accepted by the congress of FIDESZ, November 20, 1988, *ibid.*, pp. 110-113.
- 21 Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky was a politician in the Smallholders' Party before 1945; he lost his life during the German occupation as a participant in the resistant movement.
- 22 The guiding principles of the temporary leadership of the Independent Smallholders, Agricultural Laborers and Civil Party for the elaboration of the party program. *Hitel*, 1989, No. 3, pp. 40-41.
- 23 *Nepszabadsdg*, March 6, 1989.
- 24 *Nepszabadsdg*, March 16, 1989.
- 25 Rezszo Nyers was speaking about the progressive traditions of the Social Democratic Party in a televised interview on December 19, 1988.
- 26 *Nepszabadsdg*, March 6, 1989.
- 27 The Political Committee of the MSZMP was discussing the general political situation at its session on 21st March 1989. Gyorgy Fejti, who had been authorized to hold talks, delivered a report on the position of the opposition parties and the policy related to them. He thought that the independent trade unions might be willing to establish a permanent political reconciliation forum, but he considered the concept of the Alliance of Free Democrats to be dangerous. The latter believed that there was a need for negotiations because neither side was legitimate, but the MSZMP was in need of legitimizing talks to a greater degree, and they wanted to seat the representatives of the society and government opposite each other at the negotiating table. Fejti did not think it likely that the Free Democrats would be able to rally the other parties around themselves, unless the MSZMP was pursuing "a foolish policy." Magyar Orszagos Leveltar (hereafter: MOL) M-KS-

288. f. 5/1058.—Some documents of the MSZMP are published in Csaba Bekes-Malcolm Byrne (eds.): *Political Transition in Hungary, 1989-1990*. Manuscript for the international conference held on June 10-12, 1999. (Budapest: National Security Archive—Hideghaboru-tortenei Kutatóközpont—1956-os Intézet, 1999).
- 28 For earlier accounts of the Opposition Roundtable see: Anna Richter (ed.): *Ellenzeki Kerekasztal: Portrévázlatok* (Opposition Roundtable: Portraits), Budapest: Otlet, 1990.; László Bruszt: "Negotiated Revolution in Hungary" *Social Research*, Vol. 57. No. 2. 1990. 365-387.; Andras Bozoki: "Hungary's Road to Systemic Change: The Opposition Roundtable" *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 7. No. 2. Spring 1993.; Bela K. Kiraly and Andras Bozoki (eds.): *Lawful Revolution in Hungary, 1989-94*. Boulder: Social Science Monographs distributed by the Columbia University Press, 1995.; Andras Sajó: "Roundtable Talks in Hungary" in Jon Elster (ed.): *Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 69-98.; Rudolf L. Tokes: *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.; Erzsébet Szalai: *Szereprda*. (Role Play) Budapest: Századvég, 2000.; Andras Bozoki (ed.): *Alkotmányos forradalom* [Constitutional Revolution] in Bozoki et al. (eds.): *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*. Vol. 7. Budapest: Új Mandatum, 2000.
- 29 The eight organizations were as follows: Hungarian Democratic Forum, Alliance of Free Democrats, Independent Smallholders' Party, Social Democratic Party of Hungary, Federation of Young Democrats, Hungarian People's Party, Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Friendship Society, the Democratic League of Independent Trade Unions. (Later, in June 1989, the Christian Democratic People's Party joined the E.K.A.)
- 30 József Debreczeni, *A miniszterelnök: Antall Józsefes a rendszerváltás* [The Prime Minister: József Antall and the Political Transition], (Budapest: Osiris, 1998.), pp. 52-53.
- 31 Minutes of the founding session of the Opposition Roundtable, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, vol. 1, pp. 63-72.
- 32 The position of the MDF was not in connection with the negotiating plans of the MSZMP. At the session of the Political Committee on March 21st 1989, György Fejtő assumed that the Forum was "biding its time". MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/1058.
- 33 Balint Magyar's remarks at the session of the Opposition Roundtable of 30th March 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, vol. 1. pp. 77-80.
- 34 The statement of the Opposition Roundtable on 30th March 1989, *ibid.*, pp. 86-87.
- 35 The statement of the expert of the MSZMP on 6th April 1989, *ibid.*, pp. 90-93.
- 36 The Minutes of the session on 7th April 1989 of the Opposition Roundtable and its letter to the MSZMP, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, vol. 1. pp. 94-116.
- 37 The Minutes of the 19th April 1989 session of the Political Committee of the MSZMP. MOL M-KS-288.f. 5/1062.
- 38 The negotiating principles of the Opposition Roundtable were summarized in a proposal which was accepted at the session of 19th April 1989 and sent in a letter to the MSZMP CC, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 1. pp. 146-148.
- 39 *Magyar Nemzet*, April 20, 1989.
- 40 Balint Magyar gave voice to this opinion. It was later reinforced by György Fejtő's contribution to the debate over the draft of the Party Law at the session of the MSZMP's CC on May 8, 1989, in *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárti Központi Bizottságnak 1989. évi jegyzőkönyvei*, Vol. 1. pp. 777-778.
- 41 The Minutes of the session of the MSZMP CC Political Committee on May 2, 1989 (MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/1063); and the session of the MSZMP CC on May 8, 1989, *ibid.*, p. 854.
- 42 The proposal was made public in an irregular way, in an interview with the political scientist László Lengyel, with a suggestion that Imre Pozsgay agreed with it (*Magyar Nemzet*, May 8, 1989).
- 43 The debate and decision of the session of the Opposition Roundtable on May 10, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, vol. 1. pp. 233-292.
- 44 The standpoint of the meeting of the reform circles in Szeged, in Attila Agh, József Geczi, József Sipos (eds.), *Rendszerváltók a baloldalon* [The Promoters of Political Transition on the Left: Reformers and Reform Circles, 1988-1989], Budapest: Kossuth, 1999. pp. 201-211.

- 45 *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 1, pp. 330-341.
- 46 The resolution of the MSZMP CC on May 29, 1989, in *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1989. évi jegyzőkönyvei*. Vol. 1. p. 395.
- 47 The text of the agreement is Document No. 2 in this volume.
- 48 The MSZMP CC elected a four-member party presidium at the session of June 23-24, 1989 under the leadership of Rezső Nyers, whilst the other members were First Secretary Karoly Grósz, Imre Pozsgay, and Miklós Nemeth. At the same time, the name of the Political Committee was changed and was expanded to include 21 members. *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1989. évi jegyzőkönyvei*, Vol. 2, pp. 1184-1225.
- 49 The Minutes of the session of the MSZMP Political Committee on June 13, 1989, (MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/1068).
- 50 The resolution of the session of the Central Committee on June 23-24, 1989 set October as the date of the special congress. *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottságának 1989. évi jegyzőkönyvei*, Vol. 2, pp. 1091-1183.
- 51 György Szabó repeatedly made this position clear in the letter of intent of the Opposition Roundtable at the plenary session of the National Roundtable talks on June 21, 1989, two days before the session of the CC which made a decision. See Document No. 5 in this volume.
- 52 Balint Magyar made a remark to Ambassador Mark Palmer referring to this situation when the American diplomat visited the Opposition Roundtable. *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 2, p. 36.
- 53 The session of the Opposition Roundtable on June 15, 1989, *ibid.*, p. 55.
- 54 Karoly Grósz also pointed out at the session of the MSZMP Political Executive Committee on August 15, 1989 that a "new front" had been opened because, at the economic talks, the Third Side, notably the National Council of the Trade Unions (SZOT) was more an obstacle to the agreement than the opposition. MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/1075.
- 55 *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 2, pp. 290-295.
- 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 296-298.
- 57 According to the Hungarian People's Party, the deterioration of the foreign political conditions was marked by strikes and ethnic tensions in the Soviet Union, and the pressure exerted by the orthodox communist countries. They expected increasing social tensions in domestic politics and referred to the combination of communist parliamentary representatives with an aim of dissolving the National Assembly. *Ibid.*, p. 476.
- 58 *Ibid.*, pp. 478-497.
- 59 The Minutes of the session of the MSZMP Political Executive Committee on July 24, 1989, MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/1072.
- 60 The session of the National Roundtable talks on July 27, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 2, p. 641.
- 61 *Ibid.*, pp. 647-653.
- 62 At the session of the Opposition Roundtable on July 27, 1989, the SZDSZ, the MDF, the Independent Smallholders' Party, and Fidesz voted down the viewpoint of the Hungarian People's Party, the Christian Democratic Party, and the Bajcsy-Zsilinszky Society. The Social Democratic Party did not participate in the sessions at that time because of internal conflicts.
- 63 MOL M-KS-288. f. 5/1075.
- 64 The text of the package submitted on August 17, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 3, pp. 223-225.
- 65 The session of the Opposition Roundtable on August 23, 1989, *ibid.*, pp. 252-275.
- 66 Imre Pozsgay later recalled that he had had regular contacts with the leaders of the MDF during the negotiations, but he denied that they had made a deal. Imre Pozsgay: "Szeljegyzetek a rendszerváltás vélt vagy valóságos titkaihoz" [Marginalia to the Alleged or Real Secrets of the Political Transition] in Sandor Kurtan, Peter Sandor and Laszlo Vass (eds.), *Magyarország évtizedkönyve 1988-1998* [Hungary's Decade Book 1988-1998], Budapest: DKMKA, 1998, Vol. 2, p. 940.

- 67 Imre Pozsgay made a statement on this and the Hungarian press published his interview in *Der Spiegel* in *Magyar Nemzet*, July 4, 1989.
- 68 The letter of the SZDSZ to Mikhail Gorbachev, which was handed to the Soviet Ambassador to Budapest on August 18, 1989.
- 69 The session of the National Roundtable talks on August 25, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*. Vol. 3. pp. 421-423.
- 70 The remarks made at the session of the Opposition Roundtable on September 4, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 4. pp. 56-77.
- 71 The Minutes of the sessions of the MSZMP Political Committee on August 31, and September 5, 1989. MOLM-KS-288. f. 5/1076. and 5/1077.
- 72 The session of the Opposition Roundtable on September 11, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 4. pp. 274-275.
- 73 The session of the National Roundtable talks on September 11, 1989, *ibid.*, pp. 317-320.
- 74 János Kis, "1989: A vig esztendő" [A Merry Year] *Beszéled*, 1999. No. 10. pp. 38-39.
- 75 János Kis wrote that they had wanted to make a compromise even at the last minute. They suggested to the MDF that they would sign the agreement, if the proposal for legitimizing the president with a direct election were abandoned. They believed that, if they could agree in this question, reconciliation in the other three open issues could be continued. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 76 *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 4. pp. 380-390.
- 77 The plenary session of the National Roundtable talks on September 18, 1989; see Document No. 6 in this volume.
- 78 The statement of the parties which signed the agreement made on September 18, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*. Vol. 4. pp. 512-513.
- 79 József Antall, who was elected president, declared: "there cannot be a stable coalition serving the interests of the nation without the MSZP now or in the future." István Csurka commented on the election of Lajos Fűr as the MDF's candidate for the President of the Republic that he was not chosen against Pozsgay, but beside him so that the people would be able to choose between good and better. *Nepszabadság*, November 24, 1989.
- 80 The viewpoint of the presidium of the Hungarian Democratic Forum on November 13, 1989, in *A rendszerváltás forgatókönyve*, Vol. 5. p. 235.
- 81 *Ibid.*, pp. 644-654.
- 82 János Kis, "1989: A vig esztendő" [A Merry Year] *Beszéled*, 1999. No. 10. p. 43.