
Trust and Legitimacy in Hungary

László Kürti

(Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Miskolc, Hungary)

kurti1953@gmail.com

Introduction

In their newly edited volume, *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*, Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato state that in democratic societies ‘the acute crisis of citizens’ trust in their rulers is visibly worsening’ (2019: 6). They take as their examples Italy and the USA, where the former is characterized by ‘a succession of unelected governments to rule the country’, the latter — similarly to a large number of European states — with electors who ‘amply support ‘anti-establishment’ parties’ (2019: 6-7). The point that stirs my interest has to do with the highly problematic and amorphous notion: trust. There is a fair amount of social science literature on trust, and anthropologists have not shied away in interrogating it from various local perspectives. There is a general agreement that democratic states and their institutions must rely on legitimacy in order to rule over citizens. In an earlier analysis Pardo clearly defines the connection between the fundamentally intertwined concepts, democracy, legitimacy and trust: ‘In democracy, however corrupt, the power to rule needs authority, a *conditio sine qua non* in the necessary negotiation among different moralities. Authority, in turn, desperately needs trust’ (Pardo 2000: 7). For anthropologists the real challenge is to identify how and in what ways citizens rely on state institutions and deal with sensitive issues on the local level and how, in turn, state implements policies to obtain loyalty and trust from their citizenry.

In this analysis I discuss an important yet neglected aspect of everyday reality in society: the institutionalized Committee of Grievances (CG). Recently discovered documents of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, or communist party thereafter) archives in a regional town reveal that such committees fulfilled an important function : to promote trust not only in party members but in the population at large by allowing discontent to be voiced.¹ CGs might not have been as important or effective as Barbara Misztal suggests when she discusses the nature (*habitus*) of trust defining it as a ‘protective mechanism relying everyday routines, stable reputations and tacit memories’ (Misztal 1996: 106). However, such grievance hearings — and certain follow-up decisions made by party leadership

¹ In addition to my Budapest (Csepel) research, I have been conducting research for the past 20 years in Lajosmizse in Bács-Kiskun County, a town situated south of Budapest with 10000 residents. Recently, I interviewed several former communist party secretaries in that town at length; during one of our meetings it came to my attention that — contrary to what I had been told earlier — most of the files of the local party organization had not been destroyed, and in fact only a fraction had been handed over to the county central archive. After some negotiations, I received the files with the comment ‘hopefully someone will tell the truth about what socialism really was all about’. For more on the community’s history and culture in English, see Kürti (2009, 2004), on the political culture, Hann and Kürti (2016).

such as the powerful communist party secretaries (*párttitkár*) — allowed citizens of the socialist state to ‘push out of modern life fear and uncertainty as well as moral problems’, as Misztal suggests. In this essay I analyse workings of one local CG by combining interviews with former high-level party officials and argue that by the late 1970s — when Kádárism established itself as a prime example of a goulash-communism, leading to the epithet as the ‘happiest barrack in the socialist camp’ — a large proportion of citizens believed that the party could be entrusted with their complaints.² Through a consideration of such grievance narratives, I intend to elucidate how specific routines and reputations were established and memories produced in socialist Hungary and their effects on perception and behaviour.

Trust and Communism

As a cultural and political anthropologist with a special interest in unravelling what led to the demise of the party-state in the quagmire that followed, I am particularly interested to examine quotidian details of the ways in which party leadership catered to the needs of the populace and to discover a window for appreciating the party’s inner workings and hierarchic nature. Such an examination of the contradictory, often highly contested and negotiated nature of CG hearings yields important data with regard to the anthropocentricity of the socialist system and its errors and contradictions.³ It is evident, as indeed the factory workers in one of the largest industrial enterprises at Csepel during the 1980s have testified, that daily management of issues and conflicts situated the Communist Party and its cadres (more often referenced in Western discourse as *nomenklatura*) at the centre of power. Turning to the party apparatchiks with their problems opened new opportunities for citizens not only in the hope of solving sensitive matters but in creating new avenues for negotiation and reconciliation.

While the issue of trust ought not to be overestimated, in these cases trust (a term I use with regard to individuals) and confidence (between individuals and their institutions) were not merely moral or ethical concerns but also a means of maintaining the system — promoting actively an ostensibly ‘egalitarian’ socialist way of life and relativizing belligerent stasis between state and citizen.⁴ While an effort to deconstruct such a hall of mirrors may be fraught with complexity — it reduces a complex interplay of social relations in the past, albeit only 30-40 years later, to a single institution of conflict resolution and mediation — it is nonetheless

² The concept ‘happiest barrack’ is one of the more intriguing stereotypes in reference to the late 1970s and 1980s in Hungary (Argentieri 2011: 218; Boros-Kazai 2005: 369; Halmai 2011: 125). I have argued elsewhere that ‘happiness-ideology’ was one of the more salient yet sinister features of Hungarian Stalinism (Kürti 2013).

³ Since I deal with the complaints from the 1970s, I recommend the following English-language analyses of Hungarian society of that period: Asztalos Morell (1999), Ferge (1980), Hann (1980). My book also examines institutions within the Communist Party and its youth organization (KISZ) at the Csepel Works in Budapest (Kürti 2002).

⁴ Clearly, there are multiple uses and definition of trust (inter-personal, shallow, depersonalized, social, general, and so on), which is not my focus here.

worth considering that the Communist Party developed a unique cultural practice that aimed at combating social problems at the local-level by ‘listening’ to people’s complaints. Ostensibly, this was also part of the ‘personification’ of national politics that Martha Lampland references in her study on Hungarian rural society and relations of power in agricultural communities (Lampland 1995: 348). The sharing of information upon which the CG as an institution depended seemed to demand intimacy, friendship and trustworthiness as a pre-requisite. Anthony Giddens’ observation that trust has to be continually won and retained in the face of growing doubt or ‘manufactured uncertainty’ (Giddens 1994: 93), aptly captures the workings of the CG. This had less to do with actual power than with the personal style and charisma of party secretaries who had the ability not only to maintain trust but to ‘finish the job and sleep well at night’, as one informant told me.⁵ No matter how powerful the company or town’s communist party secretaries may have been, they had to report and answer to their superiors. Within the system of checks-and-balances, such cadres not only had to deal with the management of companies, trade union leaders (*szakszervezeti bizalmi*) and the Communist Youth League secretaries (*KISZ titkár*), they also had to listen to the ‘top man’ of the community, the council president (*tanácselnök*) and its leading body, the executive council (*végrehajtó bizottság*). More importantly, every community belonged to a particular district (*járás*) and these were under the supervision of counties (*megye*). Each district and county had its own communist party secretaries who kept a watchful eye on the decisions of their inferiors.⁶

Such bureaucratic machinery was certainly part of the manufactured uncertainties as well as contradictions of socialism (Kornai 1986, Staniszkis 1991). These ideas are shared by Katherine Verdery as well, who among the Eastern Europeanist anthropologist has attempted to answer the question about the collapse of socialism by looking at the ‘collision’ of the two international political economies, socialism and capitalism (1996). Just when the Soviet bloc crumbled, the political scientist and East European specialist J.F. Brown paraphrased six interrelated factors according to which public disenchantment with the communist regime may be understood, but among these most important was the social chasm in particular that ‘The majority of the workers everywhere had become so contemptuous of their regimes and so disaffected with them, that they would do nothing to support them. This finally sealed communism's fate’ (Brown 1991: 39).

In my book, *Youth and the state* (Kürti 2002), I describe conflicts between young workers and the Communist Party as a fundamental element of the general crisis that can reveal one of the principal, inherent contradictions of communism in Eastern Europe. Learning about factory life, workshop politicking and working-class youth ideas, I demonstrate that the worker was a fictionalized creation, particularly produced by early theorists of Marxism-Leninism as well as party ideologues of later socialisms (and not excluding those who were inclined to accept the

⁵ For the position of party secretaries, see Hann (1980: 113-115). For comparative material from the Soviet Union, see Humphrey (1983: 316-329).

⁶ Districts were abolished in 1983 providing county secretaries with even more power.

regimes' ideological projections; for example, classes of 'peasant-workers', 'socialist workers', 'working-class consciousness' and so on). Neither that of worker nor élite was a wholly unified, homogeneous category; both were composed of groups of individuals with diverse and often different interests. Although I formerly emphasized generational and gender conflicts, I overlooked an important aspect: the question of how contempt developed among them and the consequent bases of conflicting interests. Armed with new data on conflict management and the workings of grievance committees, I now argue that several major processes had to co-exist both for those in the work-force and those in the higher echelons of society.

Francis Fukuyama has maintained that modern democracies can be classified as either low-trust (China, France, Italy) or high-trust (Germany, Japan, USA) societies and while I may not wholly agree it is not without merit (Fukuyama 1995). The notion of 'high-trust' may certainly pertain to the ideology of state socialism intent on bridging the gap between party and citizens. The longevity of interpersonal relationships and social institutions is, after all, based on trust; this was no different under socialism, despite the claims of some historians that modern notions of trust and distrust were the product of capitalism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries anchored to the 'concept of risk'.⁷ In the twentieth century, as Marková has pointed out, the totalitarian or semi-totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe 'had presented themselves as totally trustworthy. Their rhetoric was couched in terms of "humanity", "the well-being of the individual and society" and "equality among people".' (Marková 2004: 8). She adds: 'Yet despite this rhetoric, for the majority of citizens, the distrust of the regime was mingled with fear' (Marková 2004: 8).⁸ It is debatable whether distrust discouraged citizens from seeking assistance from party bosses. The cases of CG hearings I have analysed suggest that those who went to the party secretaries and committees with their grievances were hoping for a positive outcome for themselves. Without fear of repercussion or terror, unlike during the 1950s and early 1960s, now individuals often entrusted party leaders with issues ranging from workplace bullying, unfair compensation and street brawls and many more complaints were filed concerning private matters such as theft, family scandal, marital problems and custody battles. Piotr Sztompka argues, with Niklas Luhmann, that people behave as 'though the future were certain' (Luhmann 1979: 10) and that 'trust is paid ahead of time as an advance on success' (Sztompka, 1999: 26). Yet, distrust may be considered to be a negative mirror-image of trust. Is it only a linguistic coincidence that the Hungarian words trust (*bizalom*) and committee (*bizottság*) are from the same root?⁹ In the case of the CGs, trust (*bizalom*) created a sense of

⁷ According to Hosking the Reformation should be credited with developing a 'crisis of trust' (Hosking, 2008: 29-50).

⁸ Trust, suspicion and fear were certainly part of the ordering mentality of Stalinism as I have shown elsewhere (Kürti 2013). Two Hungarian films centre on these themes: Péter Bacsó's banned *Witness* (*A tanú* 1968, 1979), and István Szabó's gripping family drama, *Confidence* (*Bizalom* 1979). On these films see the reviews and analyses Portuges (2012).

⁹ The linguistic term is *bízik* (trust, entrust).

collective (socialist) identity by stimulating some kind of loyalty (trust, faith) in the party.¹⁰ At the same time, we might agree here with Ivana Marková that this notion existed in mutual but subversive and uneven symbiosis with distrust (*bizalmatlanság*), recalling as it did earlier communist tactics of institutionalized spying and anonymous reporting.¹¹

The CGs

Arguably, trust and mistrust are coterminous as can be seen from a former complainant's statement about communist party bosses, 'I don't trust them to solve my problems. They only work for themselves'. Consequently, increasing distrust by some in party institutions in which they had wished to place their confidence led to greater resentment. Individuals became more distrustful of professional party cadres and tried to check on their performance by means of inspections, audits, meeting of targets and outright gossip, all the more so when CG hearings resulted in an unequal compromise or negative outcome, leading to further grievances. Complaints not only presupposed an a priori trust but also created a system that Giddens has called 'generative politics' (1994: 15), linking state and society by reflexive mobilization to open up communication, mete out justice and correct misdeeds, disclosure and self-disclosure of information increased interpersonal trust, putting at risk those involved. Borneman observes in a different context, 'Punishing wrongdoers in legal trials is necessary to establish public trust in a rule of law, but it is also insufficient. State must also restore the moral integrity and repair the damaged self-worth of the wronged person' (2011: 49). Such feelings undoubtedly hampered relationships between citizens and officials on the one hand and, on the other, plaintiffs and the objects of their complaints. Trust is linked to distrust or suspicion, a duality that can be traced at least to the great witch-hunts of Europe. Thus, the binary of trust-distrust not only resulted in suspicious behaviour towards others, but also created fear ('What if people find out that I reported them about their behaviour?').

In many cases the CGs tried to make a positive contribution by allowing discontent to be voiced. They cut through red tape and served as a safety-valve by allowing workers to release tensions before discontent could escalate into major conflict. As a former official suggested, 'it was better for us to hear about problems before it became a serious matter. This way we were in charge of the entire matter and we could stop the conflict from getting out of hand and reaching county bosses'. Another function of the CG was to serve as a mechanism for channelling information especially in cases in which similar complaints reached party executives from different sources. The CG hearings also clarified some rules that were often unclear to members not fully aware of their roles and tasks. Finally, complaint functioned as a

¹⁰ More analysis on this duality can be found in Marková and Gillespie (2007).

¹¹ The culture of Stalinism and cold-war mentality has been described abundantly (Brooks 2000, Stites 1992, Tismaneanu 2003); for Hungary, among others, see Borhi (2004), Kürti (1998, 2013), Roman (1999), Valuch (2005). In the community discussed here, spying and secret police observation was a real threat during the 1950s (Farkas 2006).

warning signal, an indication of something amiss. In the view of a former communist party secretary, ‘special investigations and hearings would clarify misbehaviour and help us identify wrong-doers’.

Yet, from the perspective of the Communist Party, the CG functioned as a controlling mechanism that eventually turned the institution on its head. Hearings were either informal or formal. Informally, anonymity was (more or less) assured since only the party secretary and aggrieved individuals were present, a structure favoured by most workers over the large party assemblies. Formal hearings called for the plaintiff and those the party secretary summoned. In this sense the CG was not a regular committee with a stable membership. On the contrary, led by the local party chief, its membership evolved according to the nature of conflict. It was the party secretary who decided whom to interrogate, which institutions to contact and what subsequent action to initiate. ‘I knew who to turn to in every instance, this was one of the most important assets I had at my disposal’, admitted a former secretary of the Communist Party at the Kossuth State Coop.¹²

While it is true that the power and inner workings of the Communist Party were held in contempt by citizens, save those directly involved with its maintenance, organization and hierarchy, the material demonstrates that the committees were not entirely unpopular among party members. The CG complaints procedure could be instigated via a letter, but a personal appearance was required to follow at the local party office wherein the aggrieved party was to give a verbal account as to the nature of his or her grievances. The gist of the matter was then written up on the official complaint sheet (*Panaszfelvételi Lap*), signed by both the party secretary and the complainant. Locally, each party secretary (*párttitkár*) was responsible for hearing grievances and if the matter warranted or could not be resolved directed to the Disciplinary Committee recommending further action.

CG hearings

What was the nature of some of the grievances? The overwhelming majority of complainants reveal dissatisfaction; about 100 complaints archived between 1975-1979 shows that one-third of formal complaints arose as a result of what the complainants perceived as an abuse of power by superiors. In other complaints (about one-third of the total) neighbours, renters and workers claimed some sort of disharmony and friction. In addition, about five percent of the complaints concerned grievances of spouses. In one case, a father distressed about the kindergarten’s refusal of full day care of his five-year old son turned to the party secretary for help. He reasoned that they both work in a nearby city in three shifts and:

‘I’m a member of the communist party since 1957 who worked relentlessly every time to fulfil all his required communist Saturdays (voluntary free labour) to build the kindergarten. The chief nurse suggested that we find work locally so we could

¹² I thank here Péter Czigány (1943-2018), the former communist party secretary at the Kossuth State Coop, for his assistance and providing me with important files.

get a full day program for our son at the kindergarten. I beg Comrade Secretary, to take into consideration that we don't have to give up our good jobs for this problem.'

The local party secretary sent the complaint to the town-council for final decision. The solution was moderately in favour of the couple: 'We cannot fully comply with your wishes but we can offer lunch to your son, but no afternoon care. As a solution we suggest that your grandparents, who live with you in the same house, take care of the child after he goes home from the kindergarten.'

Questions concerning the Roma minority were also raised in some grievances. In one instance, residents complained about the Roma migrants moving in to the neighbourhood: 'The past few years, six Roma families moved into their new homes in the Lilac Street, due to a special loan-system by the bank. At the moment, the seventh family is moving in. With this a new colony is forming but the behaviour of the Roma is unbearable. The embittered residents are asking for help.' The party secretary turned to the town and asked for a report on the developing situation on the Lilac Street. Several reports were filed concerning both the residents and the 'seventh family moving in.' One official visited the Roma neighbourhood and established that there were altogether 25 families living there in squalid conditions. The town's council president (*tanácselnök*) in his decision allowed the 'seventh family' to obtain a new home in Lilac Street arguing that the 'the family is orderly and the father has a job for several years now at the local with Water-Machinery Factory'. Ironically, the person filing the original complaint against the Roma was also Roma himself!

Work conditions, relations of workers to each other as well as to their superiors, petty theft, absenteeism, alcoholism and low work-morale were common topics in grievance hearings. At one of the local state farms, a man was hired as an odd-job man but his alcoholism and absenteeism led to his eventual dismissal. Yet, a local shepherd hired him as a helper, a deal necessitated by the lack of free-labour available (shepherds traditionally worked together with their family members, especially their wives). After working for two months, the hired hand received part of the agreed salary which led to a dispute. The party secretary ordered the local cooperative to force the shepherd to pay the amount he owed to the helper.

A petty theft at the Peace Cooperative Farm (*Béke Szakszövetkezet*) became a major investigation involving even the court and the police. One member of the communist party at the Coop reported that one of the electricians stole two light switches at the stables. The case was reported by a party member, MK, but neither the Coop president nor the internal monitoring committee rectified the situation by impeaching the wrongdoer. When the accuser reported everything to the police, the case was referred back to the Coop as an internal matter. MK was reprimanded by his superior for disclosing sensitive information to the outside. Finally, a hearing ensued and the CG fired the electrician and asked the Coop president and MK to work on good terms in the future. A somewhat similar minor case concerned an alcoholic who cursed her colleague with the words 'a dirty communist'. Four eyewitnesses were questioned and all admitted that the alcoholic woman 'likes to curse'. Although she denied the accusation, the

party secretary noted that ‘since our investigation brought to light all the facts she was immediately dismissed from her job’.

Another major case erupted after abuse of power by the president of the Cottage Cooperative (*Háziipari Szövetkezet*) came to light. It occurred at the time when the Coop was fused with the Metal Cooperation in 1974. Employee’s grievances concerned allocation of work that included improper classification of their jobs. Several workers felt that their rights on the job were violated even more by the director of the Coop who refused their claim and decided to turn to the communist party secretary for help. The case of Mrs János Sági is especially revelatory as to how the CGs worked and the kind of minuscule politicking in which actors engaged to solve certain sensitive issues, especially those that concerned superiors. Mrs Sági claimed that when she reported for work, she was ordered by the director of the Coop to take her paperwork and move her desk into another room. When asked why, the director ‘without any warning and screaming at the top of his head responded that he would “throw her out of the company immediately and cut her throat”.’ Two days later, three leading executives of the communist party took the deposition of Mrs Sági. In the minutes, the complainant explained the entire affair naming some half-dozen colleagues who were present at the moment she was forced to leave her regular desk job. The matter escalated further when the communist party secretary as well as the president of the Coop gave an entirely different version of the woman’s relocation to a new job. Finally, the case went to a higher-level, the town’s communist party secretary summoned all witnesses, including the Coop’s president to appear before the committee of grievance. The Coop’s president admitted being boorish but argued that he was not satisfied with Mrs Sági’s skills accusing her ‘of being susceptible of intrigues, a conduct she was reprimanded for’. A few days later, the discontented woman handed in her resignation and ceased working at the Coop for good.

Common cases filed were mismanaged gender relations and sexual abuse. A mother of twins, for example, filed a complaint against her estranged partner and father of the children. She asked the town’s Child’s Protection Agency (*Gyámhatóság*) for monthly allowance and child-support but her request was rejected with the excuse that she did not need any extra social assistance. The woman wrote an open letter to the national weekly Women’s Newspaper (*Nők Lapja*) where she was advised to turn to higher authorities ... because she might even lose her maternity right to her children’s. She went to the local communist party chief and filed a formal complaint, a smart move for the party secretary took a strong position by contacting the Child’s Protection Agency both regionally and locally. The outcome was positive: the mother received immediate monetary assistance and monthly state child-support with the proviso ‘to start immediate court procedure to establish legal parental rights for her twins’.

In one case, the wife of the veterinarian led a team of four women who filed a complaint against the driving instructor of the County Automobile Club. Their letter sent to the communist secretary of the town reads as follows:

‘We report that from the beginning of May 1977, we have been taking classes organized by the Bács-Kiskun County Automobile Club. Part-time instructing of

the driving classes is done by István Juhász. Already at the first class, the instructor became physically intimate with one of us almost causing an accident. This happened with someone else too. He continually abuses his power by asking us to pay for his cigarettes and lunches and also to give him tips. Several times he made us wash his car. Because of his bad and aggressive manner, we decided to file a complaint with the County Automobile Club already. However, since the representative of the County Automobile Club only wrote a letter of whitewashing mildly reprimanding the instructor, we believe, that he will have a chance to continue his misbehaviour. We found out that his rough style was a problem previously but nobody dared to complain about him; people shut their mouth because they know that the instructor can fail them during the exam. We should mention also that the instructor was dismissed by his former employer for similar reasons (“literally he actually had to run out from the place”). Presently, his bosses defend him maximally, a situation which to us is a strange concentration of power at the Automobile Club. Locally, everyone knows that there is almost impossible to do something against such a brute because he has “good connections” and can take care of every problem. This kind of behaviour and life-style is against the interest of our society for it undermines the socialist norms of co-habitation and increases the negative climate of opinion. This kind of person is not qualified to work with people. Reading this letter and the attached minutes, we ask you Comrade Secretary, to pay attention to this matter and do whatever is in your power that Mr István Juhász will never ever have a chance to take advantage of his position as an instructor.’

Eventually, the case was solved: the instructor had to leave teach driving classes elsewhere!

Another case also concerned the issue of ‘socialist cohabitation’.¹³ Relationship between a woman and man living with three children (one from the mother’s previous marriage) turned antagonistic and she decided to ask the local town council for another apartment. Her request was denied because of housing shortage. Not finding an adequate solution, the woman sought the assistance of the party secretary who ordered a full investigation into the matter. This took place ten days after the court decision that forced the father to pay child support and asked the couple to arrange a separate room for him to live in the same house; the kitchen and the bathroom they were to use jointly. In her testimony the woman claimed that her partner continually abused her and the children. During the CG hearing the father denied all charges but admitted that since the court decision they stopped communicating with each other. The

¹³ Socialist cohabitation, never specified, was codified in the Civil Law IV of 1959. Expressions ‘cooperation’, ‘interest of the working people’, and ‘proper conduct’ are used in conjunction with socialist cohabitation; in 1991, the new Civil Law XVI changed cohabitation to ‘good morals’ (*jóerkölcs*).

woman promised that if everything continued legally there would be no further complaints on her side. The CG in its decision made the following remark: ‘We call everybody’s attention to refrain from any kind of behaviour which undermines the rules of socialist cohabitation, not only because this would hurt the development of the children, but it would also make their living situation even more unbearable’.

In another case, a widow and mother of 12 children fought two state farms concerning her 0.5-hectare land nationalized by a cooperative of which she was not a member. Although the law required the cooperatives to reciprocate with land of the same dimensions, the woman did not accept it claiming ‘the land was relatively small in value and far from her farm’. Moreover, she requested that the cooperative either pay the market-value of the land taken from her or provide an equally valuable agricultural land near to her farmhouse. To assist her claim, the communist party secretary pressured both coops to find a suitable solution. Finally, the woman’s own cooperative graciously offered some additional compensation to the widow.

Conclusions: Trust and legitimacy

The literature on state socialism of the Eastern European variety, particularly on the nature and working of the communist party, is replete with discussions of hierarchical dominance, control and unequal power relations. I have presented examples from my field-work material on the workings of one local communist party cell and especially the workings of its committee of grievances (CG). Two important questions remain to be answered: Why would disenchanted individuals, workers and party-members turn to the secretaries to investigate and solve their problems? Why not instead go to company executives, trade union leaders or, in some instances, directly to lawyers and courts? The answer lies in one of the inherent contradictions omitted in previous analyses — that is, in balancing the ‘negative control’ of the party referenced by Swain (1992: 155). Interviewing former party members and secretaries, it became clear that overwhelmingly the complainant’s purpose in bringing the complaint was altruism, to prevent a recurrence for others. As one interviewee argued: ‘I made the formal complaint hoping that my case prevents someone else suffering like I did’.

The other question — namely, why CGs responded insufficiently to citizens’ grievances — is equally important. One of the obstacles has to do with language-based cognition. In Hungarian, the words *panasz* or *sérelem* are the most common expressions for grievance, complaint or discontent. However, the very action *panaszkodni* (to complain) is coterminous with being a stool-pigeon (*árulkodás*) both words with strong negative connotation. Therefore, *árulkodás* has in popular parlance often been connected to the notion of lying (*hazugság*), or being a traitor.¹⁴ More than that, the term *árulkodás* is related to the notions of ‘commodity’ and ‘price’ (*áru*) with the meaning extended to betrayal of someone for monetary reward or

¹⁴ I have discussed such cases in family disputes (Kürti 2000).

some sort of ‘encapsulated interest’ (Hardin, 1999: 24).¹⁵ Yet, in view of the absence of public shaming or punishment of wrong-doers, such grievance hearings did not bring about catharsis or significant psychological solace for two reasons. First, the complainant could feel ashamed for bringing up personal grievance in front of the committee, especially if there was no beneficial solution at the end. And secondly, since managers and party bosses were often the target of complaints themselves in which case no fair decision or justice could be meted out, forcing complainants’ further shame or dropping the case entirely.

Finally, it is worth noting that the notions of trust and distrust, similarly to confidence or reliance, are not connected only to historical anthropological reflections on the years of the Marxist-Leninist states. Surveys conducted after the collapse of the socialist state in Hungary suggest that citizens continually distrust major institutions (courts, police, government) as well as politicians. Concomitantly, distrust in interpersonal relations has been on the rise in Hungary since 1990 (Balázs 2008, Giczi and Sík 2009, Rose-Ackerman 2001, Utasi 2002). Surveys also revealed that trust in institutions was lowest in Hungary, followed by Poland and Slovenia (Boda and Medve-Bálint, 2011: 27-51). Similarly, the percentage of Hungarian citizens’ confidence in civil service declined from 70 to 50 between 1981 and 2000 (Walle, Roosbroek and Bouckaert 2008: 58; see also Mishler and Rose 1997).

Has the level of trust changed since 2004, a date Hungary joined the EU? A 2018 Eurobarometer survey reveals that 28 percent of Hungarians trust their national parties, the EU average is only 18 percent; 46 percent trust the Hungarian Parliament, the EU average is 35 percent; and 56 percent trust the EU Parliament, the EU average stands only at 48 percent (Eurobarometer 2018: 7).¹⁶ There are important differences across Europe, however, as for example, 40 percent of the Swedish population has confidence in their national political parties. While citizens in Scandinavia and the Baltic states have the highest level of trust in the EU (more than sixty percent); Greece, the UK and the Czech Republic scored the lowest level of trust. Actually, among all EU member states the Irish have the most positive image of the EU (64 percent). Among the former Soviet-bloc countries, Poles and Romanians are ahead of the Hungarians in agreeing that their voice counts in the European Union (Eurobarometer 2018: 11). What is the situation at the local-level, where we as anthropologists can best discern popular feelings and discontent? At a recent public hearing I attended in the town I have described, I counted less than 15 people attending. Such low attendance would augur that notions of trust and distrust, confidence and responsibility, as well as civic duty, continue being both amorphous and inconspicuous. The grievance committee introduced here was an attempt by the Communist Party of Hungary to ease social tension among citizens during late socialism.

¹⁵ Economists are in thrall to the notion of emphasizing trust as a commodity (Dasgupta 2000), and political scientists to the notion of benefits and interests (Hardin 1999). The idea that trust is connected to money has been offered by Geoffrey Hosking (2012).

¹⁶ The solid economic performance for this high-level Hungarian support is one of the reasons for this; the other has to do with the illiberal populist governmental rhetoric of Victor Orbán (Kürti 2017: 234-235; Pelonen 2018: 318).

It was all in vain, yet with all the complaints it did achieve one thing: leaders of the party echelon became keenly aware that the crumbling system was beyond repair. This recognition paved the way for an élite-led smooth transition of 1989-1990. What came after is another exciting challenge for anthropologists to unearth and analyse but as a recent survey testifies, the erratic ebb and flow of public trust in state institutions may lead to a serious erosion of legitimacy in the post-socialist state.

References

- Argentieri, F. 2011. Hungary: Appraising the past and adjusting to the present. In L. Sharon S. L. Wolchik, and J. L. Curry (eds), *Central and East European politics from communism to democracy*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Asztalos Morell, I. 1999. *Emancipation's dead-end roads? Studies in the formation and development of the Hungarian model for agriculture and gender (1956-1989)*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Balázs, Z. 2008. Politikai bizalmi válság (Crisis of confidence in politics). *Politikatudományi Szemle*, XVII (1): 113-129.
- Boda, Zs. and Medve-Bálint, L. 2011. Intézményi bizalom a régi és új demokráciákban (Institutional confidence in old and new democracies). *Politikatudományi Szemle*, XXI (2): 27-51.
- Borhi, L. 2004. *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945- 1956*. Budapest: CEU Press.
- Borneman, J. 2011. *Political crime and the memory of loss*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Boros-Kazai, A. 2005. Hungary, in Frucht, R. (ed.) *Eastern Europe. Introduction to the people, lands, and culture*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- Brooks, J. 2000. *Thank you, Comrade Stalin! Soviet public culture from revolution to cold war*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, J.F. 1991. *Surge to Freedom: The End of Communist Rule in Eastern Europe*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cook, K. S. ed. 2001. *Trust in society*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Dasgupta, P. 2000. Trust as a commodity. In. D. Gambetta (ed), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, electronic edition, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, <http://www.sociology.ox.ac.uk/papers/dasgupta49-72.pdf> (accessed on 18 February 2019).
- Eurobarometer. 2018 *Standard Eurobarometer 90*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Farkas, Gy. 2006. Összeesküvés-történet egy ÁVH dossziében (History of a conspiracy in a secret police file). *Századok*, 39: 57-87.
- Ferge, Zs. 1980. *A society in the making. Hungarian social and societal policy, 1945-1975*. White Plains: M.E. Sharpe.
- Fukuyama, F. 1995. *Trust. The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. New York: The

- Free Press.
- Giczi, J. and Sík, E. 2009. Bizalom, társadalmi tőke, intézményi kötődés (Confidence, social capital and institutional attachment). *TÁRKI Társadalmi jelentés 2009*. Budapest: Táarki.
- Giddens, A. 1994. *Beyond left and right*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Halmai, G. 2011. (Dis)possessed by the spectre of socialism: nationalist mobilization in ‘Transitional’ Hungary. In D. Kalb and G. Halmai (eds), *Headlines of nation, subtexts of class*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Hann, C. 1980. *Tázlár, a village in Hungary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hann, C. and Kürti, L. 2016. Agrarian Ideology and Local Governance: Continuities in Postsocialist Hungary. In A. Berich and T. Retka (eds), *Knight from Komarov to Petr Skalník for his 70. birthday*. Prague: AntropoEdice.
- Hardin, R. 1999. Do we want trust in government? In M. E. Warren (ed.), *Democracy and trust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hosking, G. 2008. The Reformation as a crisis of trust. In I. Marková and A. Gillespie (eds), *Trust and distrust: Sociocultural perspectives*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Hosking, G. 2012. Structures of trust: Britain and Russia compared. In M. Sasaki and M.D. Marsh (eds), *Trust: comparative perspectives*. Leiden: Brill.
- Humphrey, C. 1983. *Karl Marx collective. Economy, society and religion in a Siberian collective farm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kornai, J. 1986. *Contradictions and dilemmas. Studies on the socialist economy and society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kürti, L. 1998. Hungary. In S. P. Ramet (ed), *Eastern Europe: Politics, culture and society since 1939*. Bloomington: Indian University Press.
- Kürti, L. 2000. The Socialist Circus: Secrets, Lies, and Autobiographical Family Narratives. In R. Breckner, D. Kalekin-Fishman, and I. Miethe (eds), *Biographies and the Division of Europe: Experience, Action, and Change on the ‘Eastern Side’*. Opladen: Leske – Budrich.
- Kürti, L. 2002. *Youth and the state: capitalism, communism, and class*. London: Pluto Press.
- Kürti, L. 2004. Picture Perfect: community and commemoration in postcards. In S. Pink, L. Kürti and A. Afonso (eds), *Working Images*. London: Routledge.
- Kürti, L. 2009. Olivia’s Story: Capitalism and Rabbit Farming in Hungary. In L. Kürti and P. Skalník (eds), *Postsocialist Europe: Anthropological perspectives from home*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Kürti, L. 2013. Cold war happiness: singing pioneers, internal enemies and Hungarian life under Stalinism. In J. Pieper-Mooney and F. Lanza (eds), *De-centering Cold War history*. London: Routledge.
- Kürti, L. 2017. The plow and the horse: Political turmoil in a working-class district of Budapest. In I. Pardo, I. and G. B. Prato (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Urban Ethnography*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Lampland, M. 1995. *The object of labor. Commodification in socialist Hungary*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Luhmann, N. 1979. *Trust and power: Two works by Niklas Luhmann*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Marková, I. 2004. Introduction: Trust/risk and trust/fear. In I. Marková (ed.), *Trust and democratic transition in Post-communist Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marková, I. and Gillespie, A. eds. 2007. *Trust and distrust: sociocultural perspectives*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Mishler, W. and Rose, R. 1997. Trust, Distrust and Skepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Post-Communist Societies. *Journal of Politics* 59(2): 418-451.
- Misztal, B. 1996. *Trust in modern society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pardo, I. 2000. Introduction—Morals of legitimacy: Interplay between responsibility, authority and trust. In I. Pardo (ed.), *Morals of Legitimacy: Between Agency and System*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Pardo, I and Prato, G. B. 2019. Ethnographies of Legitimacy: Methodological and Theoretical Insights. In I Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Pardo, I. and Prato, G. B. (eds). 2019. *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Pelonen, E. 2018. Performing the nation: the Janus-faced populist foundations of illiberalism in Hungary. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 26 (3): 308–321.
- Portuges, C. 2012. Confidence (Bizalom) A film by István Szabó, Second Run DVD essay, http://www.secondrundvd.com/release_confidence.php (accessed on 25 February 2019).
- Roman, E. 1999. *The Stalin years in Hungary*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Rose-Ackerman, S. 2001. Trust and honesty in post-socialist societies. *Kyklos*, 54 (2-3): 415–443.
- Staniszki, J. 1991. *The dynamics of breakthrough in Eastern Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stites, R. 1992. *Russian popular culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swain, N. 1992. *Hungary: The rise and fall of feasible socialism*. London: Verso.
- Sztompka, P. 1999. *Trust: A sociological theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tismaneanu, V. 2003. *Stalinism for all seasons. A political history of Romanian communism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Utasi, Á. 2002. *A bizalom hálójában. Mikrotársadalmi kapcsolatok, szolidaritás* (In the safety net of trust: Micro-communal relations, solidary). Budapest: Új Mandátum.
- Valuch, T. 2005. *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a XX. század második felében* (Hungary's social history in the second half of the XX century). Budapest: Osiris.
- Verdery, K. 1996. *What was socialism and what comes next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Walle, Van de S., Roosbroek, Van S. and Bouckaert, G. 2008. Trust in the public sector: is there any evidence for a long-term decline? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 74 (1): 47-64.