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An Anatomy of a Political Decision Pécs, European Capital of Culture

Which were the most important and farthest-reaching decisions of Hungarian cultural policy in the last ten years? Most people would probably opt for the building of the Palace of Arts in Budapest, which houses the Ludwig Museum, the National Dance Theatre and the Béla Bartók National Concert Hall. There are some for whom the making of the film law and the law on performative arts, or the launching of programmes like 'Közkinccs' (Public Domain), a credit programme for cultural institutions; PANKKK, a programme for pop, rock, jazz and world music; the Márai Programme, designed to help libraries and publishers; or the financing of the National Cultural Fund from the income of the gambling industry were the most important changes. Many surely agree with the building of the new National Theatre, the 'Millenáriis' cultural centre or the Holocaust Memorial Center. Or we could mention some exhibitions at Budapest museums which represented a real change and aroused great interest; the separate financing of independent theatres and contemporary dance companies, the opening of the A38 Ship, an exciting cultural venue on the Danube, and the 'Modem' Modern and Contemporary Art Center in Debrecen; the National Theatre Festival of Pécs (POSZT); the renovation of some theatres in provincial towns; or the new musical programme of MR2 Petőfi Radio. These were all born in the last ten years.

Yet I think that the decision of the decade was the election of Pécs as European Capital of Culture. This was the decision that involved the most actors, professional as well as political, incited the most debates, was the most diversified and had the furthest-reaching consequences. It could be analysed from the political scientific, sociological, economic, touristic, architectural and city planning point of view. Here I will only deal with the decision-making process and attempt to reveal its reasons and tell its story as I saw it then, from the insider's point of view, as minister of culture, and as I see it now, retrospectively. My point of view is not that of an outsider. However, my aim is not more than to understand the reasons underlying the decision.

The tender

The tender for the title of European City of Culture (ECC) had two rounds. In early March 2005, it was declared that seven cities got into the second round: Budapest, Debrecen, Eger, Győr, Miskolc, Pécs and Sopron. Although the invitation and the whole procedure of the tender was the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, the decision had to be made by the government.

When Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány offered me the ministerial post, it was his request that cultural policy, in line with general government policy, should put special emphasis on the cultural needs of youth and of countryside (i.e. non-Budapest) residents. As he argued these social strata (young people and countryside voters) had been the weakest points of the Socialist Party (MSZP), which was widely regarded as the party of elderly people. He did not need to convince me about the necessity of these goals, because I could easily identify with them – not only from the party political point of view, but also as a sociologist – and I looked forward to the ECC tender as an especially great opportunity for cultural decentralization, which would help us decrease the inequality of life chances.

I saw a historic chance for the realization of a culture-based urban development as a potential model for the whole country. I was interested to change the one-sided, dependent, and hierarchical core-periphery relationship between urban settlements in Hungary. Can we strengthen some areas outside Budapest culturally and to decrease the gap between the capital and countryside towns? My opinion was that the tender itself was at least as important as the decision about the eventual winner, since the tender would encourage intellectuals, students and other citizens living in these cities to imagine and debate about the future framework of their life. I was hoping that the debates about cultural self-determination would strengthen democracy; I wanted the tender to be more than a competition of mayors and local councils and become a competition of the local civil society who would thus get a chance to have a say in fashioning their own destiny.

I decided to visit the cities which were submitting a tender for the title of European City of Culture, one by one.

The cities

Out of the seven cities in the competition only one was led by an opposition Mayor, and it was Debrecen, in Eastern Hungary. The strategy of Fidesz in opposition was to suggest the government to put two cities forward to Brussels and let the European Commission (EC) to decide. Perhaps, they thought that in this case the EC would favor Debrecen against Budapest in this race. However, as an independent politician, I was not interested to focus on party politics I wished to see the facts of the matter in the first place.

First I visited Debrecen where there was clearly a vivid interest in the tender. Mayor Lajos Kósa (Fidesz) was tense and skeptical when it came to the topic of the tender. He thought that it was already a foregone conclusion and there was no point in wasting time talking about it. After our talk a press conference followed where representatives of the local media asked their questions in a confrontational manner, as if from the position of the aggrieved party. It seemed that they could not even imagine that it was actually an open competition. They were unshakeable in their belief that their tender was by far the best, so if Debrecen lose the competition, it would be absolutely unwarranted. My impression was that the local media was politically controlled by the leaders of the city.

The other visits were much more relaxed, because we could concentrate on the plans for the cultural capital project properly. In Sopron, the local management led by Dezső Walter received me with the calm serenity of the chanceless. Not that the beauty of the town and their project, focusing on the musical inheritance of Ferenc Liszt, did not justify their tender. But the fact that Sopron is in the vicinity of Austria limited the city's possibilities, since we had to take national economic considerations into account as well, namely that foreign tourists should spend as many days as possible on the territory of the country.

The project of Miskolc and Eger would have been really strong if they had submitted a joint tender. Miskolc was a serious candidate with a relatively good tender – perhaps the only thing that was missing was precisely what the historical aura of Eger could have added to it. The need for cultural development was an important point in the case of the former ‘steel city’; but the already existing cultural environment had to be taken into consideration as well. And in this respect, Miskolc definitely lagged behind Pécs. The Eger tender, however appealing it was – and Mayor Imre Nagy was dedicated to its support – could not supersede the others in itself, if only because the smaller size of the town. I felt a strong resolution in both cities to

build their future image on their cultural appeal. Eger gave more scope to its given historical traditions, whereas the Miskolc tender was exciting precisely because it set out to create new identity and traditions.

The Győr tender emphasized technological development, but it also included, for example, the transformation of the decrepit local synagogue into a concert hall. I was accompanied on my visit by Mayor József Balogh, who was just about to resign from politics. The tender writing team had vision, but apparently there was not as much civil support or political determination in Győr as in the other cities; besides, local cultural life was laden with tension (e.g. between the organizers of the Media Wave Festival and the city management).

My visit at the Budapest City Hall was agreeable and formal at the same time. Throughout the visit I felt that there were no stakes involved. It was as if the liberal Mayor Gábor Demszky and his team were certain that they would come out the winner. And in fact, Budapest is certainly the cultural capital of Hungary, where a whole set of outstanding cultural investments had been realized from the regime change up to 2005. Yet I felt that it did not necessarily follow that all the resources should continue to be concentrated here. Moreover, the inhabitants of Budapest had mostly no idea that their city was intending to become European Capital of Culture. It was to be feared that the ECC would simply disappear in the whirl of events.

In Pécs, one could immediately see that the ECC project was not only the business of politicians, but also that of the city's intellectuals, taken in the wider sense. Pécs had been preparing for the ECC from 2002, and the visionary plans of József Takáts and his team were convincing. And if Miskolc and Debrecen needed the ECC for development, Pécs needed it even more. Mining had collapsed; the city was struggling with a high unemployment rate; it became a 'dead-end city' on the periphery, with no decent motorways or highways leading to it. Ever since the Yugoslav Wars, Pécs had found itself on a no man's land, since it was not only hard to get there, but also quite impossible to continue one's travel towards Osiek and Sarajevo.

However, Pécs attracted our attention not only with its collapsing and underdeveloped workers' districts, but also with the cultural diversity of its inner city. The multi-layered Ottoman and German cultural monuments, literary and Church traditions, the Csontváry Museum, the heritage of Marcel Breuer and the Bauhaus, the Zsolnay district, the annual National Theatre Festival of Pécs (POSZT), the film festival, the thirty thousand students at the local university, the overwhelming Mediterranean atmosphere, as well as the beauty of the surroundings: the nearby Mecsek Hills, the spa at Harkány, the lake at Orfű, the national park of Gemenc, the historical monuments and the spa of Szigetvár and the wine district of Villány made Pécs extremely attractive. Considerations of cultural city planning and of cultural heritage seemed to converge in Pécs; moreover, there was a local community of young intellectuals who regarded the ECC project as an opportunity to break out of provincialism, and it seemed at the time that the mayor, who had great political influence, was letting them realize their ideas.

Political games

August 2005, the deadline for submitting the tender, was fast approaching. I decided to set up a new jury for the second round, in order to make the range of those evaluating the tenders as wide as possible. In the beginning of summer, György Szilvássy, the Prime Minister's chief of

staff summoned me, saying that they wanted to talk to me about the issue of the cultural capital. Present were: Péter Kiss, the minister directing the Prime Minister's Office; István Újhelyi, a Socialist MP and member of the party presidency; and Gábor Horn, Liberal MP and Secretary of State who was responsible for the cooperation within the coalition. Horn and Újhelyi quickly came to the point and both of them made it clear that what they said was the standpoint of the coalition. It would be desirable politically, they said, if Budapest won the tender, since no other city had the infrastructure and the economic power to organize the cultural year. If we chose a countryside city, they argued, we would hurt the Budapest voters and we would also create jealousy and political tension among other cities. They believed that smaller cities could only accept the victory of Budapest as a fair one.

I understood Gábor Horn's standpoint, even if I did not agree with it. He represented the interests of the liberal coalition partner, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). In Budapest it was Gábor Demszky who represented the party most of all, so if Budapest wins, then, through Demszky, the SZDSZ wins. It was around then that it became clear that liberal supporters were confined to Budapest, so there was no way for them to risk the loss of votes in the capital city for the support of another city. In my response I pointed out what my experience was during my visits: that the ECC stirred the intellectuals of the towns, in several cases it became a widely discussed public issue, and grew larger than merely an issue that is negotiated behind closed doors. And this is worth taking seriously. They did not seem to believe me; in fact, there were some who thought that the problem could easily be managed if the jury was constituted in the right way.

After this conversation my intention to set up an autonomous jury became even stronger. If I fail, that's it, but there is no way I am going to whisper into the ears of each member of the jury that the decision has already been made, but would they please do as if it was all in earnest.

A few weeks later Prime Minister Gyurcsány summoned me and said: I know you support the provincial towns, but the responsibility for the decision is mine. Budapest will come out the winner, but it will yield one month of the cultural year to Pécs and another to Miskolc. Call in László Toller and Vilmos Fedor [the Mayor of Pécs and the Vice-Mayor of Miskolc], and inform them of the decision. I tried to convince him to wait for the recommendation of the jury. I also mentioned that the development of towns and areas outside Budapest was a high priority area in the government program, and it would be a bad message if we promised one thing and did another. I myself had been sitting in Parliament on Mondays when the Prime Minister finished virtually every pre-agenda speech with the phrase: "Forward to the development of the provincial areas! Forward to the Republic!" Now was the opportunity, I argued, but I had absolutely no chance to turn his view..

I invited Toller and Fedor to the ministry. Vilmos Fedor, the Vice-Mayor of Miskolc came and I informed him of the Prime Minister's standpoint. Toller, however, sensed what was going on and did not come. He had learnt through other channels what Gyurcsány was up to, and sent a message that there was nothing to negotiate about. The jury would decide, he said, until then he would not come. His defiance was surprising and to a certain extent impressive; it also reflected the power relations within the Socialist Party.

The Toller phenomenon

László Toller, the Socialist Mayor of Pécs, arrived at the peak of his political career in 2005. He was also called a kingmaker, since in the previous year he had bravely stood out for the party congress to be able to decide about the person of the future prime minister, which in turn made it possible to elect Ferenc Gyurcsány. In the year of the tender Toller was at the top of his powers; as I saw it, he was among the five or six most influential politicians in Hungary. Yet he preferred to stay in his homeland, Baranya county. Once I asked him why he never became a minister if he had so much influence. He answered that he had been offered the post of interior minister twice, but he did not accept it, because he hates having a boss. A minister depends on the prime minister, while the mayor of a big town is his own master.

He was a smart politician with excellent, “man-of-the-street” type of communication skills. In spite of his informality it would be an exaggeration to call him a convinced democrat. In his methods of city management, he was a pragmatic politician, a populist and a local patriot, not entirely beyond reproach, who pulled all the economic and financial strings, and seriously mingled with the economic elite circles of Pécs. In his second term as Mayor of Pécs, his popularity reached unknown heights; rumour had it that even the local opposition ate out of his hands. He and Lajos Kósa, the Mayor of Debrecen – of the then-opposition Fidesz party, another strong mayor – had a mutual respect for one another, they often met, and not only in Parliament, but also in the Association of Cities with County Rights, of which Toller was the president.

Toller was absolutely aware of his limited knowledge of the cultural sphere, and he was intelligent enough to retreat to the background when necessary. He gave a free hand to the tender writing team of József Takáts and István Tarrósy – of course, only up to the moment when the money started to flow in. He could hardly tolerate protocol events and was a complete stranger on the European political scene. He did not say a word at the hearing in Brussels, he let the members of the tender writing team talk for him. At one of the yearly theatrical festivals in Pécs, he and I met the directors of Hungarian theatres together, but he modestly said good-bye after ten minutes. As a post-communist Socialist, he never gave a speech on the anniversary of the 1956 Revolution, and let a 1956 veteran talk instead. He only played those roles in which he could play authentically.

Dénouement

One of the hardest things in Hungary is to set up an independent yet capable jury for tenders. One often does not know who belongs where, who is indebted to whom, who has private interests hidden behind the common interest. That is why I decided to set up an international jury. After all, the tender for the European Capital of Culture is not only a Hungarian, but a European issue. I invited Ingo Weber, a German cultural adviser; Greg Richards, a British expert on cultural tourism; Pekka Timmonen, a Finnish manager of cultural city projects; Julius Horvath, a Slovakian professor; and Liz Barrett, a British researcher specializing in corruption. The invitation of Liz Barrett was intended as a message, because she had written her doctoral thesis at Oxford on Hungarian and Croatian corruption phenomena. I wanted to make it clear that we were going to play with open cards. The jury also had some Hungarian members: György Enyedi, an academician; Ábel Garamhegyi, Deputy State Secretary of the Ministry of Economy and Transportation; Márta Schneider, Deputy State Secretary of the Ministry of Culture; János Mátyás Kovács, a Hungarian economist living in Vienna; János Ladányi, a sociologist and professor of the Corvinus University of Economics; Zoltán

Somogyi, president of the Hungarian Office of Tourism; Mihály Vargha, an architectural critic and editor-in-chief of *epiteszforum.hu*, a website on architecture; Anna Wessely sociologist and art historian from the Eötvös University; and Péter Új, journalist and editor-in-chief of *index.hu*, the leading news site. I invited the latter because a few years before he had a conflict with the Socialist Party when one of their journalists sneaked in to an internal briefing by campaign adviser Ron Werber and wrote down what he had heard there, which created a pretty big scandal. I wanted to send a message that no one needs to sneak in here, anyone can see things from the inside; for example, by being a legitimate jury member. And, of course, I included him also because, due to his character, I wanted to give some ‘rock’n’roll feeling’ to the jury.

I wanted that, whatever the decision of the Prime Minister would be, the decision of the jury should be made on purely professional grounds. I assured the members of the jury that I would put forward their proposals to the Prime Minister without any changes. They knew however, that the decision would be made not by them but the cabinet. In September they visited all the candidate cities, and in the first half of October they sat down and discussed what they had seen. The jury negotiated in English all through. They made their decision by mid-October, but of course they kept it a secret, because we had agreed previously that they would not talk about it openly before the government decision was made. After the decision they were allowed a free hand – they could make statements and write articles, but not before. The government was supposed to decide by the end of October or the beginning of November.

In the beginning of October – before the jury put forward their proposal – Ferenc Gyurcsány summoned me again to say that he had reconsidered his previous standpoint and would not commit himself to any of the candidates. He did not justify his about-face, but neither did I ask. He probably realized that the safest would be for him to rely on professional legitimacy. I had observed that because of the constant pressure for decision-making, he tended to decide quickly, which enhanced the risk of mistakes, but was flexible enough to revise apparently bad decisions in time.

On October 18, the Prime Minister summoned me to his office for 8 p.m. I visited him together with the chief of my staff, Balázs Mesterházy, the former ministerial commissioner of the ECC tender. I had already informed Gyurcsány that the convincing majority of the jury proposed Pécs as cultural capital. (Ten of the fourteen members ranked the Pécs tender first, four ranked it second.) A few hours earlier the Mayor of Budapest, Gábor Demszky had visited the Prime Minister, and appeared to be untroubled when he left. I do not know whether Gyurcsány was familiar with the judgment of the jury when he talked to Demszky. In any case, the Prime Minister wanted us to come as late as 8 p.m, because he did not want the decision to leak out. He decided in favor of Pécs that evening so neither Toller nor Demszky were aware of his decision at that point. I do not know to this day what happened in those final days in the “Bermuda triangle” formed by Gyurcsány, Toller and Demszky, or between the coalition parties.

My visit at the Prime Minister’s office was short and friendly. Gyurcsány informed me that he would put forward the proposal about Pécs at the government session the following morning. He wanted to conclude the issue unambiguously. I called Minister of Justice József Petrétei before midnight, and that same night Mesterházy wrote the proposal and by 7 a.m. he handed it to Petrétei who had to endorse it according to the law.

Next day, on Wednesday, October 19, 2005, the government session started at 10 a.m. Beside the members of the cabinet Gábor Kuncze, Chairman of the SZDSZ, and Ildikó Lendvai, floor leader of the parliamentary faction of the Socialist Party were also invited. None of the ministers had received the proposal before the session it was distributed then and there. That the issue came to the agenda so quickly was unexpected and it caused a surprise for some. If I remember well, first Gábor Kuncze asked for the reconsideration of the decision in favour of Budapest. Liberal ministers Bálint Magyar, Kálmán Kovács, Miklós Persányi and secretary of state Gábor Horn joined him. This provoked a reaction on the other side: Socialist ministers József Gráf, Mónika Lamperth, József Petrétai, Etele Baráth, Ferenc Juhász, István Kolber and János Veres sided with the Pécs proposal. This was one of those rare occasions when the Socialist-Liberal fault line within the government became visible, this time in the debate concerning Pécs vs. Budapest. If I am not mistaken, the only exception was Ildikó Lendvai, who, although a Socialist politician asked for the reconsideration of the decision. Gyurcsány, however, did not hesitate to close the debate and announce Pécs as winner, referring to the visible majority. He asked me and cabinet spokesman András Batiz to inform the press who were already waiting outside.

At that moment the members of the government started to talk on their mobile phones frantically. Many of them informed people about the decision immediately. I called Toller and congratulated him. We agreed that a few minutes after my announcement in Budapest he would also announce the result in Pécs. This decision was not about money yet, but about the evaluation of the tenders. However, there was no doubt that Pécs would receive about HUF 36 billion (around 140 million euros) from EU sources. The city had never seen so much money devoted to culture before. That evening a spontaneous celebration began in Pécs. Then on October 25, Toller organized an official celebration where the Pannon Philharmonics gave a concert on Széchenyi Square, at the center of the city. It was great pleasure for me to say a few words to the several thousand crowds celebrating there.

In politics decisions are often born in a way that they cannot be traced back to one reason only. So it was with the decision about Pécs: several factors were at play at the same time. There was a mayor who saw a political opportunity in the tender and had enough influence in his party to realize his aim. There was an academic and civil community whose members had been seeing each other regularly for years, who had a vision about the future of the city and who came up with a mature conception for the tender. There was a minister of culture who insisted that the jury should be independent and the tender should be judged according to professional criteria only. And there was a prime minister who had the courage to reconsider his own decision and who could be sure of the support of his party at the moment of decision. Perhaps there were other components of which I am unaware. It might be a matter of mere chance that these components went in the same direction at a given moment. Yet I think this constellation was not entirely a matter of chance.

Epilogue

In December 2005 Ján Figel, the Cultural Commissioner of the European Commission congratulated in a letter for the successful arrangement of the Hungarian ECC tender. The idea of calling upon an international jury, an idea that was adopted in Hungary for the first time, was made the norm by the European Union. The decision of the Hungarian government

was approved by the European Commission in March 2006, and the great experiment of Pécs, European Capital of Culture began.

In April 2006 we won the parliamentary elections. Ferenc Gyurcsány gave the best performance of his entire career during the campaign. It was the first time in the history of Hungarian democracy that the ruling parties were reelected. The struggle was sharp we were a mere one per cent ahead on the party list before the Fidesz. Compared to the previous elections of 2002, the number of young people and non-Budapest residents who voted for the Socialist Party had significantly increased.

After the decision in favor of Pécs, Toller gradually squeezed out the civil tender writers from the decision-making process. On June 6, József Takáts, who had already signalled that there were negative tendencies in Pécs, resigned from his post as strategic advisor. On June 9, the second Gyurcsány government was formed, of which I was no longer a member. István Hiller, Chairman of MSZP, became head of the Ministry of Education and Culture that were merged into one again. On June 19, László Toller suffered a fatal car accident.

At this point the story of the ECC decision was over for me.