BENCE CSATÁRI

Selected Issues Concerning the Party-State Control of the Hungarian Record Company in the First Decade of the Kádár Regime

The cultural policy of the Kádár regime can be situated within the East-West rivalry of the bipolar world that arose from the Cold War. Indeed, political leaders on both sides of the Iron Curtain asserted that the cultural life within their own system was more effective and flourishing than that on the other side of the artificial demarcation. The dictatorial leaders of the Eastern Bloc countries sought at all costs to prove that, in contrast to the 'decadent West', the cultural standard of their societies was more advanced, whether in public education or in the various branches of the arts. Moreover, they claimed that, guided by the never explicitly defined principles of "socialist morality", the youth socialised under Party-state conditions represented a superior culture to that of their Western counterparts. The free flow of cultural products between East and West was, however, severely impeded by the communist dictators, although it was impossible to hermetically seal the two blocs from one another. Thus, the Iron Curtain became a 'Nylon Curtain'; through various human connections and radio broadcasts, young people in East-Central Europe nevertheless became acquainted with the culture of 'rotting capitalism', including its popular music trends. It cannot even be claimed that all of this occurred with a significant delay, as relatives in the West could keep their less fortunate family members in East-Central Europe informed of the latest developments in a manner that was practically up to date. A delay did, however, materialise, stemming from the peculiarities of the Party-state system, whereby every new Western artistic current was initially prohibited, subsequently tolerated if deemed worthy,

https://doi.org/10.65017/NEB_EVKONYV.2025.301-320

and finally, to a very small extent, even promoted. All of this was executed through monopolistic institutions controlled via the Party-state hierarchy.

The monolithic character of the Kádár-Aczél cultural policy was manifest in the formation and direction of its institutional structure, and its primary objective was the realisation of Party-state control and the supervision and influencing of cultural processes. The popular music organisations that executed the intentions of the Party headquarters usually handled matters within a bureaucratic framework; lacking personal economic interests and connections, they often became impediments to the dissemination of certain popular music genres.[1] The explanation for this lies in the almost total absence of a market economy and the partial absence of a consumer society within the sphere of popular music. In such a political-economic-cultural milieu, the market- and success-oriented participants of the popular music scene found it difficult to advance, achieving only partial results in their efforts to gain recognition in the West. This was compounded by several other attitudes of power and state administration, typical of the socialist bloc countries, which specifically affected the cultural sphere and, within it, the actors of the popular music world. Among these, the system of strict foreign exchange controls must be highlighted, as it paralysed foreign management – or, as it was then termed, 'impressario' – activities, with respect to both concert organisation and record releases. In Western Europe, or indeed overseas, only a specified amount of money could be spent on these purposes in a given year, which most often proved insufficient for achieving long-term results. The other important method, known almost exclusively east of the Iron Curtain and adopted from the Soviet Union almost as customary law, was the monopolistic position of cultural enterprises.[2] This left its mark on the operation of every popular music institution, because it meant that personal connections between a band or soloist and the leaders and influential potentates of various institutions became more important than musical performance. This system of personal dependency, reminiscent of feudalism, led – in addition to the aforementioned management problems – to counter-selection, which

1 One example of this is the Party-state influence on the popular music programmes of Hungarian Radio, cf. Csatári 2016.

2 Cf. Dunkel–Nietzsche 2018.

partly explains the lack of success of Hungarian musicians abroad. This is not to claim, of course, that this latter factor was the sole determinant of success, but establishing a perfect relationship with the heads of popular music institutions was certainly essential for it.

Another important and natural corollary of this monopoly was the dictatorial role of companies operating without competitors; what they did not accept as a distributable song could not be released to the public. Perhaps the only exception to this was the position of the National Programme Organising Bureau[3], as its authority could not extend to the entire Hungarian popular music scene, and thus, in the field of concert organisation, individual productions less controlled by the state could also emerge. The monopolistic institutions dutifully and necessarily employed the tool of censorship, the intensity of which depended on the size of the audience reached by the musical work they published. In the socialist camp, the decisive factor for what could receive publicity was not the level of demand, nor its artistic value, but how well it corresponded to the requirements of the era, that is, the criteria of socialist artistic ideology. Of course, when comparing the countries of the Eastern Bloc, the intensity of censorship in the various artistic fields could not have been identical, if only due to the nature of the scene itself. The distribution of Party-state control varied from country to country, both over time and between artistic disciplines. In Poland and the Soviet Union, for instance, there was an official censorship office, but this did not necessarily mean that censorship was strictest in these countries. Regardless, the Soviet Union served as a model in this field as well; yet Poland, among other things, permitted one of the most famous Western rock bands, the Rolling Stones, to perform

3 The National Programme Organising Bureau (in Hungarian: Országos Rendező Iroda, briefly: ORI) was a monopolistic company for domestic concert organisation, operating between 1958 and 1991 as the legal successor to the State Concert and Programme Directorate. It was headed by a series of directors: Éva Lakatos, Pál Keszler, László Bulányi, György Bali, and Iván Gál, followed by Lajos Gödöllői as government commissioner at the time of the regime change. As a censorial institution, it issued performance licences, provided that artists passed the ORI examinations, and it also determined their performance fees. Musicians were classified into A, B, C, and D categories based on their ability, which also determined their payment. On the one hand, the ORI organised concerts itself for musicians contracted to it; on the other, concerts booked by the musicians themselves had to be approved by it in advance. See Csatári 2008a.

in Warsaw in 1967, whereas in Hungary there was scant chance of this happening. This, and numerous other factors, calls into question Hungary's status as the 'happiest barrack' in the field of popular music, though in-depth comparative analyses have yet to be conducted. Here we arrive at the next important factor stemming from the nature of the Party-state political system: the exertion of pressure by those wielding the power of the Party and the state, through which they championed certain bands and elevated them to stardom for a time, or even for longer periods domestically, while excluding others from wider publicity. In the following, we shall examine more closely some elements of this system of power, one might say of patronage, as it related to record publishing in the first decade of the Kádár regime, which was established in 1956 with Soviet military and political assistance and through the betrayal of Imre Nagy's second government. The temporal demarcation is justified by the fact that the operations and scope of the Hungarian Record Company (in Hungarian: Magyar Hanglemezgyártó Vállalat, briefly: MHV)[4] were somewhat influenced by the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968, which was communicated by the Party-state as a reform.[5]

4 The MHV was established by Decree No. 206/1951 of the National Economic Council (NT) on 24 May 1951, absorbing several smaller, previously privately-owned record labels. The company thereby acquired a monopolistic position, which it retained in theory until 1986, but in practice for almost the entire duration of the Party-state era. Csatári 2008b, 61.

5 The essence of the New Economic Mechanism was a cautious opening towards market regulation alongside the existing system of command planning, covering the scope of material prices, certain wages and salaries, and consumer prices. This governmental experiment took place between 1968 and 1972, and was abandoned on Soviet instruction. Cf. Balassa 1970; Granick 1973; Barát 1994.

THE PARTY-STATE DIRECTION OF THE MHV[6] DURING THE YEARS OF REPRISAL (1957–1963)

The Hungarian Record Company, commonly known by its abbreviation MHV, was established by Decree No. 206/1951 of the National Economic Council (NT)[7] on 24 May 1951.[8] This fact shows that entertainment policy in this period was thoroughly subordinated to economic policy interests and was treated as a decidedly marginal issue, which was moreover subjected to ideological expectations. Accordingly, the decree's confidential clause stipulated two different record prices: the first category included records 'serving the construction of socialism', which were therefore state-subsidised, while the second included records subject to the standard rate of tax. The subsidy was to be covered by the budget of the respective Ministry of Culture. The pressing was initially carried out by a Soviet-owned company, meaning that the MHV – which numbered 15 employees and was headed by Jenő Fehérvári, a man with a background as a choir member but possessing only a primary school education – was at first more of a publishing entity. The idea of independent Hungarian record production, however, did appear as a stated goal.

The audit reports prepared by the specialised unit of the Ministry of Culture reveal a great deal about the authorities' relationship with the company, which enjoyed a near-monopoly throughout the Kádár regime, and about the state of record publishing. During an inspection by the Ministry of Culture in January 1958, the auditor Miklós Tihanyi established that 2,827 recordings had been made in six years, and that foreigners (here he was likely referring only to socialist countries) were satisfied with the quality. Of the recordings, made mostly in 1956–1957, 48.7% were classical music

6 The essence of Party-state control was that the activities of the state and public administration were determined by the directives of the various levels of the sole existing political party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP).

7 The National Economic Council directed the country's economy based on the national economic plans and harmonised the operations of the economic ministries and other economic bodies. It operated between 1949 and 1952.

8 MNL OL XIX-A-19-b, Box 28, 206/1951. and MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 33/1962 9. ő. e. 181–195.; Szentpéteri 2001, 228.

and 24.1% were dance music, with the remainder divided among movement songs,[9] folk music, and operetta, which otherwise had significant Hungarian traditions. The state auditors, in a manner typical of the era, found the quantity of dance music excessive and took particular issue with the fact that the MHV had not even coordinated this with the commercial sector, which they believed it ought to have done. Ministerial directives stipulated that songs distributed by the MHV should not be detrimental to public taste or culturally-politically harmful. For such reasons, they considered it a mistake to have produced three different versions of the hit song Csokoládé (Chocolate), claiming that this had frustrated the recording of certain works by Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók, the two most significant Hungarian ethnomusicologists and 20th-century composers. They deemed the costs of popular music recordings to be excessive, as the arrangement and recording of songs by Szabolcs Fényes[10] and György Behár[11] cost more than recording Bach's C major Sonata with Yehudi Menuhin. This was attributed to the large number of musicians (30–40) used to record the dance music and the vast sums spent on arrangement, with Mihály Tabányi[12] and Lajos Martiny[13] singled out. The auditor concluded: "The genre distribution of the

9 Movement songs were intended to demonstrate the superiority of communism, occasionally offering an insight into its history for society, especially the youth. Although not necessarily without musical value, they were placed at the service of a single ideology. Hungarian Radio readily broadcast these musical pieces, which were written on the Soviet model and often under political pressure.

10 Szabolcs Fényes (1912–1986) was a Ferenc Erkel Prize-winning composer and one of the most important figures in dance song composition, though he also wrote operettas. The Fényes Szabolcs Prize, which recognises creative work in popular music, is named after him.

11 György Behár (1914–1995) was a composer and singer. His major works include: Szállnak a darvak (The Cranes are Flying), Badacsonyi emlék (A Memory of Badacsony), Te adtad nékem az első álmot (You Gave Me My First Dream), Szemembe nézz (Look into My Eyes), Rozsda lepi már az emlékeimet (Rust is Covering My Memories), Úgy szeress (Love Me Like That).

12 Mihály Tabányi (1921–2019) was an eMeRTon Prize-winning accordionist and jazz musician, and the most popular accordionist of the 1940s and 1950s.

13 Lajos Martiny (1912–1985) was a pianist, composer, and conductor. He was a founding member and leader of the Hungarian Radio dance orchestra. For years, he was the musical director of the Hungarian Ice Revue. Between 1940 and 1982, numerous jazz and dance music records of his were released in Hungary. The release of the first Hungarian rock and roll single in 1957 is associated with him and his eponymous ensemble. In 1987, his LP It's A Hap–Hap–Happy Day was released in West Germany.

records shows that production has shifted entirely towards entertainment records, to the detriment of cultural policy objectives."[14] As there was high demand for popular music records, which they had no chance of satisfying, the audit came up with an idea characteristically faithful to socialism: the diversity of dance music records should be reduced, which would allow for more copies of the same record to be pressed and would also enable them to drive down the budget for fees.[15]

It was not only the ministry that sent auditors to the MHV; the director of the MHV, Jenő Fehérvári, also reported on its operations to figures such as György Aczél.[16] In his report, he stated that he did not consider the distribution of records by the Bicycle, Radio and Electrical Retail Company (KERAVILL) to be professional, proposing that this network should only sell records if there was no bookshop in the given locality, although even in the latter, there was not always a professionally trained sales staff knowledgeable about popular music. He did, however, consider the latter suitable for propagating musical works that served cultural policy. In his ideologically charged report, he urged Aczél for the assistance of the Comecon countries,[17] within which framework he believed a further 30,000 records could be produced, as the gramophone record was an item in short supply throughout the entire region. For this very reason, he deemed it necessary that, "If we do not want to get stuck with dance music and operetta records, these easily manufactured mass-produced items, but rather place emphasis on ensuring that the gramophone record, this beloved tool of our cultural revolution and of the high-quality entertainment of the masses, is available in a wide selection in shops for customers and that we can also meet export demands, then after the profiling that has taken

14 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 9, 488066-VI/1958.

15 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 9, 488066-VI/1958.

16 György Aczél (1917–1991) was the foremost cultural politician of the Kádár regime, serving as Deputy, and later First Deputy, Minister of Culture, as well as Secretary of the HSWP Central Committee supervising culture between 1967–1974 and 1982–1985, and Deputy Prime Minister between 1974–1982. The principle of the „three Ts" in cultural life – support, tolerance, prohibition (in Hungarian: támogatás-tűrés-tiltás) – is associated with his name.

17 The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) was the economic cooperation organisation of the Central and Eastern European socialist countries between 1949 and 1991. Cf. Kaser 1965; Nagy 2007; Crump–Godard 2018.

place, we must continue to deal with the question of developing record production."[18] The director naturally fitted the development of record production into the framework of the three- and then five-year plans.[19] This meant that, like other large socialist enterprises, it was determined in advance, in three- and five-year periods, how many of which type of record should be released. This was not practical, as it failed to account for the trends and fads characteristic of popular music.

An interesting but typical detail is that representatives of the authorities saw the MHV's technical development as being of a high standard, whereas the musicians did not. To promote development, from 1 January 1959, based on an agreement between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Metallurgy and Machine Industry, the Cable Factory (in Hungarian: Kábelgyár) produced records from sound recordings made by the MHV in exchange for a licence fee, and then sold them itself to wholesale companies. However, distribution was hindered by the fact that the production of record players had fallen behind schedule – a point raised by Pál Jakab, the acting head of the Ministry of Culture's Finance and Organisation Department, on 2 January 1962.[20] This operational mechanism did not live up to expectations, as it made record production even more fragmented, a situation against which even classical composers raised their voices. Furthermore, it exacerbated tensions among musicians, although the repertoire of recordings was ultimately always formally approved by the General Directorate for Theatre and Music, and later by the ministry's Department of Music and Dance, which thus did not relinquish control to another ministry. The distribution of certain branches of popular music was by this time accepted for economic reasons, as they realised it could be sold to the public more easily than classical music, and as experience grew, they also sought to reduce the technical demands of popular musicians.[21] Tibor Sárai, General Secretary of the Association of Hungarian Musicians, complained in this context to the Scientific and Cultural Department of the Central Committee of the HSWP that classical music was much less

18 MNL OL XIX-I-4-aaa, Box 51, 64. ő. e. 2198/1958.
19 MNL OL XIX-I-4-aaa, Box 51, 64. ő. e. 2198/1958.
20 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 33/1960, Box 41, 94088-VI/1961.
21 MNL OL XIX-I-4-aaa, Box 20, 122088-VI./1959.

in demand than popular music. By way of comparison, he noted that while 300 copies of Bartók's piano work, Colinde, were put into circulation and most of those were not sold, the hit song Pancsoló kislány ('Splashing Little Girl') sold 95,000 copies.[22]

The popular music policy of the MHV was unequivocally determined by the HSWP's Scientific and Cultural Department, which reveals a strict attention and an intention to influence the works to be published, naturally taking into account exclusively the interests of Party-state control. Director Jenő Fehérvári's report from October 1961 clearly proclaims the inferiority of popular music: "The selection of our popular music recordings presents a serious problem. In this genre, it is extremely difficult to ensure a standard that fully meets cultural policy criteria. We compile the material for our dance music and Hungarian popular song recordings from works approved by the Dance Music and Hungarian Popular Song Committee (correctly: the Dance Song and Chanson Committee, and the Hungarian Popular Song and Art Song Committee – B. Cs.)."[23] In the selection of popular music, the MHV also counted on the Music Publishing Company (in Hungarian: Zeneműkiadó Vállalat), insofar as it endeavoured to make recordings of pieces already published by them in sheet music form; indeed, the MHV's annual recording plans were sent to the Music Publishing Company for review. Jenő Fehérvári acknowledged that the financial basis for the company's survival was the sale of dance music, and although he expressed his reservations about it, he did admit that the standard of their recordings had shown much improvement. At the same time, he took issue with the fact that, contrary to official cultural policy, the KERAVILL Company placed the emphasis on popular music in its distribution of records, because these were easier to sell.[24]

During the 1962 audit, Miklós Tihanyi reviewed the work of the most frequently employed dance music performers – Márta Záray, János Vámosi, Lehel Németh – and bandleaders – György Behár, Vilmos Körmendi, and Mihály Tabányi. Distorting the facts, he claimed it was unjustified to make so many recordings with them because there was no demand, and furthermore,

22 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 33/1960 15. ő. e. 219–240.
23 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 33/1962 9. ő. e. 181–195.
24 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 33/1962 9. ő. e. 181–195.

they used up too much studio time compared to classical musicians because they were not sufficiently disciplined, often recording their songs months later. He mentioned as a negative that, despite the limited capacity, dance songs were recorded that, according to data from the Copyright Protection Office, were not played either on the radio or in entertainment venues, for example, the songs Nem tagadom (I Don't Deny It) and Szalmaláng (Flash in the Pan). Furthermore, the report noted the absence of a catalogue of new releases, which would have been a fundamental prerequisite for sales. The lack of imagination in the titles of dance songs (e.g., Veréb a fán – 'Sparrow on the Tree') was also criticised as a reason for the lack of sales success in the popular genre. It seems this relative lack of success caused a considerable headache in the higher echelons of power, because on 28 January 1963, István Balázs, head of the ministry's Audit Department, also wrote to Pál Ilku, the Minister of Culture, about the matter of stagnation, the build-up of unsold stock.[25] We can be certain, however, that although the cultural leadership in the early 1960s would have expected higher sales figures from the popular musicians it championed, they could only have fallen short of the plans because they did not receive sufficient publicity and advertising. The other reason for the failure is to be found in the rather limited nature of MHV's production and distribution capacity.

THE PARTY-STATE CONTROL OF THE MHV DURING THE FIRST PHASE OF CONSOLIDATION[26] (1963–1968)

The audits conducted by the Ministry of Culture during this period also provide a point of reference for judging the activities of the various popular music institutions and assessing their room for manoeuvre. In March–April

25 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 33/1962, Box 44, 94088-VI-1962.

26 The consolidation officially began with the amnesty of 22 March 1963, falsely proclaimed as general by the Kádár regime. From this point on, the authorities clearly chose a strategy based on a policy of raising living standards to win the sympathy of society. Repression nevertheless continued, and it soon became clear to the political leadership that without reforms, the economy of state socialism was incapable of development without external

1964, Ernő Lénárt and Géza Várady, and in April–May 1965, Márta Dominek, carried out audits at the MHV.[27] The comprehensive, detailed reports shed light on, among other things, organisational changes and the nature of socialist work practices. From 15 February 1965, Jenő Bors became the director, while his predecessor, Jenő Fehérvári, took over the newly created Production Department. Production continued to be carried out by the Budapest Record Factory, which operated as part of the Cable and Plastics Factory (renamed the Electrical Insulator and Plastics Factory from 1 January 1964). Warehousing was handled by the RAVILL Wholesale Company, and foreign trade was managed by the Kultúra Book and Newspaper Trading Company, although from 1963 it was the MHV that concluded the contracts for the quantities of records to be supplied with both foreign and domestic trading companies. The creation of recordings and wholesale distribution were thus brought under a single authority from 1 January 1964, as the manufacturer first handed over the materials to the MHV's organisation rather than directly to the distributors and warehousing companies. This created an opportunity for greater censorship, since the finished records could be checked once more by the MHV before distribution. However, the company was only able to fulfil 60–70% of its delivery obligations due to a shortage of labels and sleeves; according to the audit, this was because their financial incentive had decreased (though it had not been high previously, as they had to surrender surplus revenue to their superior body, the Cultural Fund, supervised by the Ministry of Culture).

The entirety of record production, however, remained under the purview of a total of six ministries: the production of labels and sleeves belonged to the Ministry of Light Industry (in whose supervised factories – the Metropolitan Printing House, Globus – labels were produced only to the extent of their spare capacity, in the absence of a framework agreement), the pressing of records to the Ministry of Metallurgy and Machine Industry, and the other work phases to the Ministry of Domestic Trade, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Finance. The MHV's own operational system was also fragmented, partly because it had

assistance. This realisation led to the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968.

27 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 70, 129088-VI-1964.

no influence over the pressing work, due to the plant being independent of them. Furthermore, during this period the MHV did not yet have the authority to supervise all production stages simultaneously, which could have resulted in a reduction of the turnaround time for popular music records. Although the recording time decreased, the pressing time increased, so the commercial delivery of records did not become faster. In any case, Pál Ilku and János Csergő, the Minister of Metallurgy and Machine Industry, concluded an agreement on the operational procedures of the MHV in 1963. As they phrased it: "The MHV is obliged to ensure that the programming of record releases takes place in accordance with the national economic requirements placed upon the gramophone record."[28] What fell into the sector corresponding to the interests of the national economy could henceforth be interpreted very flexibly, and current cultural policy considerations could also be justified on this basis. At the same time – the date and signature are missing from the documents – an Artistic Council for Record Production was formed, whose members represented the Ministry of Culture, the Ministries of Metallurgy and Machine Industry, Domestic Trade, and Foreign Trade, as well as the Copyright Protection Office, Hungarian Radio and Television, and the Association of Hungarian Musicians. In principle, this body approved the schedule of recordings, but it also designated the light entertainment works that it deemed worthy of being made into a gramophone record, specifying the number of copies for each record, including any potential re-pressing, or reissues. The chairman of the council was an expert from the ministry.[29]

The royalties from MHV sales were paid in a „socialist manner," while referencing the regulations of the Bureau International des Sociétés gérant les droits d'enregistrement et de reproduction mécanique (BIEM), the international organisation managing mechanical rights. This meant that since retail was limited in Hungary, reference to BIEM's practice could only be made with restrictions, as the MHV exclusively supplied records to the RAVILL and Kultúra companies. These companies, however, paid royalties on the entire quantity of records delivered to them, meaning it was not the number of copies sold that counted, but the number dispatched. This,

28 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 70, 129088-VI-1964.
29 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 70, 129088-VI-1964.

of course, was not profitable for the distribution company either, because there were unsold copies and copies sold at a reduced price, in which case royalties were paid on the full price. From 1 January 1962, the Copyright Protection Office (SZJH) agreed that due to the so-called stagnation (unsold stock that had reached the shops), the two state companies could withhold 10% of the royalties calculated for all records to cover such cases, which, however, contradicted BIEM regulations. Therefore, from 1 January 1963, a new provision came into effect, whereby authors were only entitled to royalties for copies invoiced to retailers from RAVILL's warehouses. The MHV wrote to BIEM in this regard, stating that after 1963, royalties were paid to authors only for copies sold – as should have been the case all along – after deducting the turnover tax. The payment of foreign royalties nevertheless caused further problems for the Kultúra Company[30] due to the strict foreign exchange controls.[31] Moreover, they had accumulated 1.1 million forints of unsold stock.[32]

The recording costs and fees paid to musicians by the MHV clearly show the influence of the HSWP Central Committee's[33] guidelines,[34] although

30 The MHV's foreign currency costs for travel abroad were also covered by the Hungarian Kultúra Foreign Trade Company, but the need for current forints was met by the company itself. This is clear from Jenő Bors's request to Mrs Andrásné Barna for permission for his trip to Moscow, where the import of Soviet records was discussed. MNL OL XIX-I-4-rr, Box 37, 9. t. 114146/1972.

31 Strict foreign exchange control was an economic peculiarity of the Party-state system, whereby foreign currency could only be obtained through the central bank in order to prevent too much foreign currency from leaving the country. This also included the requirement for state-owned exporting companies to surrender the currency earned from the sale of exported goods to the central bank, in exchange for which they received forints.

32 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 70, 129088-VI-1964.

33 The Central Committee of the HSWP was also known, somewhat euphemistically, as the party's „parliament," which alluded to the fact that under Party-state conditions, this relatively large body of about sixty to eighty people functioned as the decision-making organ. It met on average every three months and also elected the top leading officials. Between its sessions, however, supreme power was exercised by the Political Committee (Politburo).

34 Outstanding among these are the cultural policy guidelines adopted by the HSWP Central Committee on 25 July 1958, which projected, among other things, that the establishment of socialist conditions could take the longest in cultural life compared to other sectors, and also that „If there is no Party and state direction, there is no socialist culture either. [...] the task of state bodies is also to curb harmful, negative tendencies and to thwart hostile attempts." Ságvári–Vass 1973, 269–270. More and more popular music styles were

a diverging trend can also be observed due to the institution's specific circumstances. In terms of performers, the MHV spent the most money on the classical music category; operetta received on average half of this, and dance music a quarter. The cost of arrangement, however, was highest in popular music, the explanation for which can be found in the lack of sheet music. The supervisory role of the Party-state is also demonstrable in the fact that on 27 March 1964, at the request of the Ministry of Culture's General Directorate for Theatre and Music, the MHV submitted a detailed list of fees paid to performers and coaches for forwarding to higher Party bodies. Here, besides the duration of the artists' employment, the aspects of artistic performance and economic efficiency were also examined. In terms of recording duration, the predominance of classical music (60%) was significant in 1963, while light entertainment music accounted for only 22%, and the third-placed category, prose (language lessons), took up only 8%. The situation had changed by 1966 to the extent that, due to low demand for classical music, popular music received 68.5% of the total volume in 1965. The annual recording plans were approved by the Ministry of Culture, within which the quarterly plans were adjusted to the free time of the contributing artists. The Ministry of Domestic Trade only had a say in production, so coordination with them began at the production stage, although reaching a compromise also meant consent to distribution. Compared to classical music, popular music naturally had a shorter turnaround time (60–70 days, whereas for classical music it could be over 400 days). The amount of mounted (i.e., usable) time per recording hour was rather low; in popular music in 1963, it was 1 minute and 4 seconds, which indicates poor technical conditions, the cumbersome adoption of more complex procedures, and the under-qualification of the technical staff.[35]

The audit also noted a decline in domestic record sales, which was explained by the fact that still only 5% of households owned a record player, even though these products received a 40% price subsidy from the state. The background to this was the spread of tape recorders, which

continuously added to the category deemed harmful, and only after their domestication did they become recognised, that is, classified into the „tolerated" category.

35 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 70, 129088-VI-1964.

caused a drop in dance music record sales. Mrs Andrásné Barna, head of the ministry's Department of Music and Dance, suggested to the auditors the establishment of an expert committee to sell the unsold records. In a letter dated 17 June 1965, she wrote that, keeping the principles of economy in mind, a withdrawal of bonuses should have been applied to dance bands after exceeding the critical 50 days spent in the studio. The monopolistic position, however, did not incentivise the MHV to take such steps, and our sources do not attest to any measures in this direction. The 1965 audit only mentioned that, based on experience, they tried to set limits on the recording time for dance music records; the time from the compilation of the record to it being ready for duplication could not be longer than six weeks, but there was no mention of a penalty if the plan was not met.[36]

It followed from the MHV's monopoly on record releases that their promotional activities reflected socialist conditions; radio and television advertised the records only every six weeks, yet even so, they were the most active compared to other popular music institutions. This can be attributed to the fact that they had no competitors, and even by using their capacity to the fullest, they could not meet the demand. In 1963, only three official record shops operated in Budapest, and it was around this time that the opening of the Rózsavölgyi Music Shop[37] was discussed. All other retail outlets only dealt with gramophone records as a secondary activity. The audit recommended that unsold records be pulped, as their material could be recycled. Otherwise, the old records would have represented internal competition for the newly released ones. At the same time, they wanted to increase „capitalist export"; indeed, on 13 October 1964, the Kultúra Company wrote a letter to a West German company, Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft (DGG), proposing they jointly establish a pressing plant in Hungary and help distribute Qualiton products. The investment would have rested 40–60% on the shoulders of the West Germans, but the plan was not successfully implemented – as the document suggests, precisely due to the veto of the Kultúra Company.[38]

36 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 70, 129088-VI-1964.

37 The Rózsavölgyi Music Shop has existed since 1850 and has now become an emblematic site of music history in downtown Budapest, in Szervita Square.

38 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 70, 129088-VI-1964.

The audit conducted at the MHV in April–May 1965 acknowledged that the production of classical music remained loss-making, but popular music generated a profit of more than 4.5 million forints. An external analyst – Károly Sági, a group leader at the 46th branch of the Hungarian National Bank – erroneously interpreted the long turnaround time in relation to popular music as producing unsaleable records, because he believed their arrival in shops involved a great loss of time, resulting in a large amount of dormant stock. He failed to add that the demand for dance music records was so great that customers were willing to buy them even with delays of up to six months. Not even the addition of the jazz genre to the MHV's palette in 1964 could be a sufficient remedy for the shortage; among other releases, the Qualiton Jazz Ensemble's record appeared, yet by 1965, jazz was already described as being of only moderate interest. The integration of dance music into the MHV's plan always occurred according to the cultural and commercial goals of the moment, which was an example of flexibility pointing towards market factors. For better promotion, a showcase of new MHV dance music records was prepared on 16 April 1965, which featured József Németh and Kyri Ambrus as well as the first Illés recording[39] and the Bergendy band.[40] From another direction, however, the repertoire of record publishing came under attack. In a letter to János Molnár, Deputy Minister of Culture, on 6 July 1966, Antal Szatmári, Secretary of the Permanent Committee of the International Centre for Research on Workers' Songs, expressed his indignation regarding the poor promotion of workers' songs, particularly emphasising the indifference of cultural centres. The ministry, however, did not take the outrage entirely seriously; according to an internal memorandum prepared for János Molnár by Deputy Head of Department Antal Gőnyei, Szatmári was overzealous, and so they wrote him only a neutral-toned reply, in which they assured him of the future promotion of workers' songs.[41]

39 The titles of the songs on the first Illés EP, a so-called extended play record, were: Protonok tánca (Dance of the Protons), Séta az aranyhúrokon (A Walk on Golden Strings), and two English-language cover songs (Shannon's 'Little Baby' and The Routers' 'Bucket Seats'). Cf. Jávorszky–Sebők 2005, 62.

40 MNL OL XIX-I-4-c, Box 83, 129088-VI-1965.

41 MNL OL XIX-I-4-o, Box 76, 1. t. 73129/1966.

The audits at the MHV were also discussed in the highest circles. For example, Károly Polinszky, Deputy Minister of Culture, reported to György Aczél on 26 August 1966 about the inspection that had concluded on 10 August 1966. Polinszky's role in this case was purely related to economic matters; ideological control belonged to Aczél. In this report, he described the facts with almost engineering precision about the record club organised by the MHV, which, with its 900 members, was a failure, despite having been created to improve record distribution and increase profits. Members received the seventh record free after purchasing six, but the club's operation was loss-making because only 13 – „already" 28 by 1967 – records were on the repertoire, and furthermore, two of these had to be chosen, compulsorily, from 20th-century Hungarian classical music. To improve distribution, a public opinion poll was conducted, and advertising contracts were signed with the newspapers *Magyar Ifjúság*, *Filharmónia Műsorfüzet*, *Népszabadság*, and *Film Színház Muzsika*. One reason for the failure may have been that the participants in the commercial sector were not interested in sales, but the harbinger of the New Economic Mechanism could be felt in the fact that the MHV began to engage in market research, albeit at a rudimentary level. Television and radio played an important role in their promotion, as did the record sleeves, which became more sophisticated and eye-catching than before. This was also necessary because from 1 July 1966, the trade of Soviet gramophone records was transferred from the Művelt Nép Book Distribution Company to the MHV. In addition to advertising, thrift played an important role in the MHV's programme; in 1965, they saved 204,000 forints, which the audit interpreted as the implementation of the Party and government resolutions of December 1964.[42]

Márta Dominek conducted a special audit, a so-called „targeted investigation," at the MHV between 6 and 13 July 1967, due to a minor incident whose ripples reached as far as Deputy Minister Károly Polinszky. The Ministry of Domestic Trade and the Ministry of Culture had agreed on the opening of record shops in Debrecen and Szeged, and the costs of opening the two shops were financed from the MHV's company development fund. However, due to an accidental clerical error in a sum – which, as it later turned out, was of no significance anyway, because the MHV had already

42 MNL OL XIX- I-4-c, Box 94, 129088-VI-1966.

paid the agreed-upon amount – RAVILL complained about the MHV to the Ministry of Culture. The Deputy Minister ultimately ruled in favour of the MHV in the matter.[43]

CONCLUSION

The first decade of the Kádár regime was a rather contradictory period for Hungarian record production. This segment of culture was kept under strict Party-state control throughout, and through this, the authorities could easily keep under their influence what kind of music Hungarian citizens had access to. The texts of the aforementioned audits reflect the attitude of the cultural policy leadership and the communist bureaucracy towards the popular music scene, and the tone of their writings, the drawing of their conclusions, and the formulation of their intentions all bore the imprint of the communist era. During the period of Kádár's reprisals,[44] the authorities were less permissive towards styles that were then only just beginning to spread, such as jazz or rock and roll, whereas the period between 1963 and 1968, based on a policy of alternately tightening and slackening the reins, gave these more space. We cannot, however, ignore the circumstance that the MHV could only operate in accordance with the ideological expectations of the Party-state in these years, and great importance was attached to the Party apparatchiks placed at its head, who were unconditional supporters of the communist regime. Alongside Jenő Bors, another „expert" placed in this position, Péter Erdős,[45] who was parachuted in precisely in 1968, became of outstanding significance. The establishment of his power is a

43 MNL OL XIX- I-4-c, Box 110, 129088-1967.

44 For a detailed account of this, see Kiss 2016.

45 Péter Erdős (1925–1990), the ‹pop caesar›, was one of the leading censors of popular music life in the Kádár regime. Between 1958 and 1959, he headed the Theatre Department of the Copyright Protection Office. Between 1960 and 1966, he studied at the law faculty of Eötvös Loránd University in the evening programme. He worked at the MHV from 1968, where he soon became head of the secretariat and then head of the press department. Although according to his official position he was never the first or second person in the company, for a long time he was regarded as the de facto director of popular music life, holding the informal second position in the hierarchy behind director Jenő Bors – another peculiarity of the Kádár system. The intention to thwart the „black sheep" bands (Beatrice, Hobo Blues Band, P. Mobil) and the punk bands is associated with his name.

typical Party-state career trajectory, which is why a new era began in the history of the MHV from this year.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

Sources

National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, MNL OL)
MNL OL, XIX-A-19-b – Papers of the National Economic Council
MNL OL, XIX-I-4-aaa – Ministry of Culture, Papers of Deputy Minister György Aczél
MNL OL, XIX-I-4-c – Ministry of Culture, Papers of the Main Department of Inspection
MNL OL, XIX-I-4-o – Ministry of Culture, Papers of the Main Department of Public Culture
MNL OL, XIX-I-4-rr – Ministry of Culture, Papers of the Main Department of Music and Dance Arts
MNL OL, M-KS, f. 288, cs. 33. – Papers of the Scientific and Cultural Department of the HSWP Central Committee

References

Balassa, Bela 1970: The Economic Reform in Hungary. *Economica,* February 1970. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.2307/2551998

Barát Mária (ed.) 1994: *A magyar gazdaság vargabetűje*. Budapest, Aula Kiadó.

Crump, Laurien–Godard, Simon 2018: Reassessing Communist International Organisations: A Comparative Analysis of COMECON and the Warsaw Pact in relation to their Cold War Competitors. *Contemporary European History,* February 2018. 85–109. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000455

Csatári Bence 2008a: Az Országos Rendező Iroda története (1958–1989). *Fons,* 2008 (15) 1. 51–80.

Csatári Bence 2008b: *A Kádár-rendszer könnyűzenei politikája*. PhD-disszertáció. Budapest, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Kézirat.

Csatári Bence 2016: The Popular Music Policy of Hungarian Radio in the Kádár era. In Kiss, Réka–Horváth, Zsolt (ed.): *NEB Yearbook 2014–2015*. Budapest, Committee of National Remembrance. 189–204.

Dunkel, Mario–Nietzsche, Sina A. (ed.) 2018: *Popular Music and Public Diplomacy. Transnational and Transdisciplinary Perspectives*. Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839443583

Granick, David 1973: The Hungarian Economic Reform. *World Politics,* April 1970. 414–429. https://doi.org/10.2307/2010118

Jávorszky Béla Szilárd–Sebők János 2005: *A magyarock története 1*. Budapest, Népszabadság könyvek.

Kaser, Michael 1965: *Comecon: Integration Problems of the Planned Economies*. London–New York–Toronto, Oxford University Press.

Kiss Réka 2016: 1956: Discourses and Reprisals. In Kiss, Réka–Horváth, Zsolt (ed.): *NEB Yearbook 2014–2015*. Budapest, Committee of National Remembrance. 93–122.

Nagy László 2007: *Ötven év a KGST-ben, ötven év az EU-ban. Hasonlóságok és különbségek az Európai Unió és a KGST döntéshozatali rendszerében, valamint az együttműködés szervezésében és végrehajtásában.* Budapest, Agroinform.

Ságvári Ágnes–Vass Henrik (ed.) 1973: *A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt határozatai és dokumentumai 1956–1962*. Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó.

Szentpéteri József (chief ed.) 2001: *Magyar Kódex 6. Magyarok a XX. században. Magyarország művelődéstörténete 1918–2000*. Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó.