

BENCE KERESZTES

**Revolution or civil disobedience? – the interpretation of the taxi blockade
in the *Beszélő* between 1990 and 1994**

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Abstract: In October 1990 taxi drivers protested against the rising fuel prices, which were introduced by the newly elected government after the change of regime. The event which later became known as the taxi blockade, divided the political parties and the Hungarian press. Many columnists interpreted it as an organized putsch attempt against the government or as a mass demonstration. In my study, I analyze the changing press coverage of the blockade in the early 90s in the magazine *Beszélő* (in English: *the Speaker*), which was a samizdat outlet during the late Kádár regime. The authors at first emphasized their fear from a possible violent riot on the streets and used as many as 56 metaphors. However, after the blockade they highlighted the non-violent way of it and interpreted it as a civil disobedience. In my study, I am willing to show how the authors saw the role of the civil society at these times, when political scientists and politicians struggled to define it as well. Furthermore, I attempt to answer the question: how the authors (some of them as former dissidents) could adapt a new language in the new democratic system.

Keywords: taxi blockade, *Beszélő*, samizdat, civil society, change of regime

Introduction

In my study, my aim is to show the changing interpretations of the taxi blockade in the liberal magazine, the *Beszélő* (*the Speaker*) from the beginning of the blockade until December 1990. The authors, first, emphasized the chaotic, revolutionary atmosphere of those days and they drew many parallels with the Revolution of 1956. After the agreement between the Antall government and the trade unions, they started to call the taxi blockade a demonstration or civil disobedience, instead of the responsibility of the government. Then they started to draw the main inferences from it.

The question is why they called attention to a possible uprising and used so many metaphors regarding to 1956? Why did they switch their language after the events? Before answering these questions, I will summarize the historical background of the taxi blockade and its general press coverage which – as we will see – was crucially divided. Moreover, from the articles we can see a transformation period when the former dissidents adapted the language of the new democratic system.

The general interpretations of the taxi blockade in the Hungarian press

After the fall of the communist system in Eastern Europe in 1989-90, Hungary became a free democratic state after 45 years of communism. The first elections were held in the spring of the 1990s, based on the 1989 agreement between the oppositional parties and the former state party (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party). It resulted in a victory for the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF) led by József Antall and the Free Democrats became the biggest oppositional party.

The newly elected government faced an economic crisis, which created a political crisis in Hungary. The Soviet Union stopped oil supplies to its European partners due to the war between Iraq and Kuwait, and because of the increasing oil prices, the HDF government had to raise fuel prices. However, the government did not communicate it properly. One day before the announcement, their spokesperson stated that they would not raise fuel prices but on October 24, a few minutes before midnight, they released a communiqué contradicting their previous statement. This misleading communication led to the occupation of the gas stations and the next day the taxi drivers, who had the most difficulties with the new decisions, decided to gather at Heroes' Square. They occupied the bridges in Budapest and closed many junctions in many Hungarian cities, demanding reduced fuel prices.¹

There was a common fear among many citizens that the government could use police forces against the taxi drivers. They previously were warned by Balázs Horváth, the minister of the interior on Friday (October 27). Horváth, who had substituted the prime minister, József Antall, due to his illness, declared on the radio that if the taxi drivers had not left their places until noon their cars would have been removed by the police with the help of the Hungarian Army. Finally, it did not happen because Árpád Göncz, as the highest commander of the armed forces by constitution, ordered to stop the action. The next day, on October 28, the youth section of the HDF organized a demonstration in front of the building of the Parliament to protest against the blockade. The tension grew between those who opposed the taxi blockade and the supporters of it. However, on Sunday the worker unions finally agreed with the government on a reduced oil price and the blockade was ended by night.²

The blockade was the first political crisis after the transition, which divided society. Throughout the autumn of 1990, intellectuals and politicians continued to debate about the blockade. In the Parliament, the government, by the proposal of Árpád Göncz, decided that every taxi driver who took part in it, could receive amnesty, and would not be punished.³

¹ "Bénult utak, nincs megállapodás", *Népszabadság*, October 27, 1990, 1

² "Vége a blokádháborúnak". *Népszabadság*, October 29, 1990, 1.

³ "Lesz kegyelem- Vihar a blokádúgyben," *Népszabadság*, February 20, 1991, 1.

The liberal or left-wing newspapers described the blockade as a demonstration, while the right-wing press narrated it as a putsch attempt against the HDF government. I agree with László Kéri who emphasized the media's responsibility in his studies. According to Kéri, the media was rather a blockade party at that time.⁴

However, there were many critical articles too, mostly among the right-wing oriented press, in which the authors compared the event to the revolution of 1956. Whether as a revolution or as a counter-revolution. István Csurka, a representative of the governmental party, was one of the first who called the blockade a putsch, which, according to him, was organized by the former – though still active – secret agents of the previous Kádár regime.⁵ His interpretation was quite similar to those former communist interpretations which declared that the revolution of 1956 was a counter-revolution.

In the first few days, most of the authors expressed their fear of a possible riot control against the taxi drivers or the government, while others began to blame them for the traffic problems. Csaba Könczöl, for example, wrote in his article in *Magyar Nemzet* in which he reported that the taxi drivers had taken over the country and, apart from the fact that they had the right to do it, it was unacceptable to shut down the whole country.⁶

In opposition to these viewpoints, other opinions expressed the peacefulness of the event. In 1992, on the anniversary of the blockade, István Tanács in the *Népszabadság* interpreted the blockade as a civil demonstration,⁷ while the *Kurír*,⁸ declared that a whole country was sitting in the striking taxis.

However, the definition of the blockade was not sure at that time. There was no consensus between political scientists and political parties regarding the question of what was the blockade: a civil disobedience or just an illegal demonstration against rising fuel prices? If the Parliament would choose the second definition of it, many taxi drivers would end up in jail, which would cause dangerous consequences for the new parliamentary system. By the proposal of Árpád Göncz the Parliament gave amnesty for the protesters but the right legal definition of the blockade was unanswered. Was it a civil disobedience or something else? One year later there was a conference organized by the István Bibó College for Advanced Studies where the speakers, mostly political scientists, tried to answer this question.

⁴ Kéri mentioned the report of László Murányi in the television who tried to regulate on of his interviewer in his report. László Kéri, *Hatalmi kísérletek*, Helikon Kiadó, 1991, 244

⁵ Miklós Somorjai, *A taxisblokád a sajtó és közvélemény kutatások tükrében*, PPE BTK, 2003, 22.

⁶ Csaba Könczöl, "Túsz ország," *Magyar Nemzet*, October 29, 1990, 2.

⁷ István Tanács, "A blokád emléke és tanulságai," *Népszabadság*, October 26, 1992, 7.

⁸ Reggeli *Kurír*, October 27, 1990. In: Somorjai, 2003, 18.

As András Bozóki stated, the taxi blockade – by definition – had elements which should be understood as a social movement and as a civil disobedience at the same time.⁹ According to Tamás Csapody the blockade did not have a deep moral claim as other civil disobedience actions because the rising fuel prices were not a moral issue, rather an economic question. As he said: when a group of people decide to start civil disobedience, they state that a current law is ethically unacceptable despite the fact that the Parliament accepted it.¹⁰ As he wrote the concept of civil disobedience originated from Henry David Thoreau, the American essayist, who refused to pay his tax as a sign of protest to the American wars against the Indians and Mexico. Thoreau stated that when a government is unjust, people should refuse to follow the law and distance themselves from the government in general.¹¹

The practice of civil disobedience is usually the outcome of unsuccessful meetings between the government and trade unions, civil society, and/or organizations which was not the case with the taxi blockade. It was a reaction from the taxi drivers to the news of the rising fuel prices. As Szabó emphasized, the usage of CB radio created a common communicational space for the protestors¹² who could organize their actions easily, but he did not think that it was a social movement. Instead, it was a spontaneous mass reaction. However, according to Bozóki, it was a peaceful, non-violent action despite the minor conflicts which is generally true for most civil disobediences.¹³ In 1991 the speakers of the conference could not agree on whether the taxi blockade had been a civil disobedience or not, but they demonstrated their opinion towards the government's economic policy, which was seen from the results of the local election in October 1990. At the end of the conference most of the speakers stated that Hungarian citizens were disappointed in the new democratic system which could have dangerous outcomes if the government and the new political parties would not change their relationship with the civil society. They also agreed that Hungarian citizens did not take part in the change of regime and during the blockade they wanted to raise their voices.

Several years later the authors confirmed their opinion. Máté Szabó, a political scientist stated, there was a danger at that time, that Hungarian citizens could lose their trust in the newly formed democratic system.¹⁴ According to him, Hungarian citizens did not take part

⁹ András Bozóki, *A polgári engedetlenség eszméje és gyakorlat in: A Polgári engedetlenség helye az alkotmányos demokráciában*, T-Twins és Típográfiai Kft, 1991, 99-100.

¹⁰ Tamás Csapody, "Polgári" engedetlenség magyar módra, In: Polgári. 1991, 87.

¹¹ Henry David Thoreau: Civil Disobedience, 1849.

¹² Máté Szabó's comment to the debate, Vita In: Polgári, 1991, 120.

¹³ Bozóki, *A polgári*, 1991. 99-100.

¹⁴ Máté Szabó, *The Taxi Driver Demonstration in Hungary Social Protest and Political change In: Human Rights and Civil Society in Hungary (1988-2008)*, Parliamentary Commissioners' Office, Budapest, 2009. 204

in the democratic changes during the transition period, so by expressing their solidarity towards the taxi drivers, they could feel that they did something for their future, but as László Kéri pointed out, their lack of representation was crucial in the new democratic system.¹⁵ However, the taxi blockade remained a typical single-issue protest and did not become a general social movement.

The rising fuel prices affected every Hungarian citizen, only the difficulties of the taxi drivers could remain the mainstream problem in the media.¹⁶ On October 28th, delivery companies' representatives consulted with the government and the consultation was seen on television. As we can see there was not a common agreement under the right usage of the civil disobedience and the exact meaning of it, which can be seen on the pages of the *Beszélő* throughout the autumn of 1990.

The *Beszélő*, which was close to the Free Democrats after the change of regime, had different interpretations throughout the analyzed period. Members of the editorship previously were members of the Hungarian Democratic Opposition, which consisted of mostly left-wing, liberal philosophers, and writers.

Inspired by the Polish Solidarity movement, they launched their own samizdat journal, the *Beszélő*, whose most important aim was to publish those topics which were banned from being published in the legal Hungarian press. Topics like the fallen revolution in 1956, the situation of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia and Transylvania (Romania), poverty and refusal of compulsory military service had only appeared in samizdat publications. Tamás Csapody¹⁷ and András Bozóki¹⁸ questioned that these actions could not be identified as a civil disobedience with western European terms, because they called attention to the illegitimacy of the whole system. The editorship of the *Beszélő* valued those people who disobeyed the Hungarian law due to its immorality and they published their cases regularly. Although, as we will see in the next chapter, they did not want to raise popularity for violence against the state.

When the blockade broke out, their voice was as radical as the politicians of the Free Democrats, and Miklós Haraszti and Ferenc Kőszeg, the chief editor, called their readers' attention to a possible violent conflict between the police and the protestors. In the following, I will show how the interpretation of the blockade changed in the *Beszélő* over time. I will focus on the moment when the authors (beyond Haraszti and Kőszeg) began to interpret the blockade as civil disobedience, rather than revolution compared to

¹⁵ László Kéri, *Összeomlás után*, Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1991, 59.

¹⁶ Szabó, *The Taxi Driver*, 207.

¹⁷ Csapody, „*Polgári*”, 1991, 85.

¹⁸ András Bozóki, *Gördülő rendszerváltás*, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2019, 163.

the fallen revolution of 1956. Furthermore, I try to analyze how did they see the possible consequences of the blockade and the situation of the civil society.

Analysis of the *Beszélő*

In my paper, my aim is to show the changing interpretation of the blockade in the liberal-leaning *Beszélő*, during the 1990s. On October 28, two days after the blockade broke out, the editors released a special edition focusing on the current events. There were several journalistic materials in it, like reports from the bridges, opinion articles and other reports about the difficulties of local people in Budapest.¹⁹

In the special edition of the *Beszélő*, many authors, such as Miklós Haraszti and Ferenc Kőszeg, drew parallels between the revolution of 1956 and the taxi blockade. They emphasized the danger in the situation, which was the government's mistake, and Haraszti and Kőszeg called attention to possible violent action between the protestors and the police. Although, at the same time, Haraszti highlighted the role of the taxi unions, as an organization which can consult with the government.

Moreover, they thought that the newly elected government lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens which means that the legitimacy of the Hungarian parliamentary democracy was in danger. They even thought that the parties and unions should have consulted but they had not been strong enough for it. They also saw the government as unreliable and unable for the consultations with the protestors.

Miklós Haraszti stated that the deputy prime minister and minister of the interior, Balázs Horváth – who acted as prime minister instead of József Antall due to his illness – communicated similarly to Ernő Gerő. The basis of Haraszti's argument was that at the beginning of the blockade, Balázs Horváth sent a warning to the protesting taxi drivers. In this proclamation, which was read on the radio on October 26, Horváth said that he would authorize the police to take steps against them, if they did not give up their position by noon. Haraszti also compared Árpád Göncz (President of Hungary in 1990) to István Bibó (Hungarian political thinker who had been a minister in 1956). According to Haraszti, Göncz acted as a real statesman, like Bibó in 1956²⁰, when he (Göncz) ordered to stop the intervention against the taxi drivers. Even though based on the Hungarian constitution, he could not have done this (even as the official head of the Hungarian Army) it was a heroic

¹⁹The journalist of the *Beszélő* made interviews with residents of their own apartment building, where the editorship functioned at that time. "Öreg házunk vasárnap este 9-10 között," *Beszélő Különszám*, October 28, 1990, 7.

²⁰Bibó was the last parliamentarian to remain in the building during the Soviet occupation,

action, which prevented violence between the police and the taxi drivers.²¹ Haraszti was a member of the former democratic opposition whose political thinking was shaped by the articles and books of István Bibó, a political philosopher, which were published after the Second World War. Especially those writings in which the author wrote about 1956 and about the civil society. The opposition emphasized the heritage of the fallen revolution, and they considered the workers council as an important element of the revolution. In the 80s by writing articles about the importance of the civil society they considered the trade unions as a relevant institution for empowerment. In my opinion, it was the reason why he made a parallel between the taxi unions and the workers' council.

Similarly, to Haraszti, Ferenc Kőszeg – who was the main editor of the *Beszélő* at that time – also emphasized the danger of the current situation when he wrote about the responsibility of the Antall government, whose unrightful acts led into fear and uncertainty.²² He had a terrible vision about a policeman who is lying in his own blood, which could be a sign of the author's personal experiences from 1956, too. Ferenc Kőszeg was a sixteen-year-old secondary student during the revolution and as he remembered back to it in his memoir; he saw injured people in the city center and he was near to the Radio where the state security officers shot into the crowd.²³ Here, as I suppose, the blockade reminded him of 1956, the last occasion when such a huge number of people protested against the government.

On that page, there was another article, entitled "Towards Romania." Here, the author expressed his fears about Hungary's international reputation. He pointed out that if the government did not handle the situation properly, foreign investors would turn away from Hungary because it would appear that Hungary is an unstable democracy and an unsafe country, like Romania and Yugoslavia after the revolutions and civil war.²⁴

In addition to this, there were other parallels with 1956, but with different conclusions. György Konrád – who was also a member of the former democratic opposition and the Free Democrats – also compared the protesting unions to the workers' councils of 1956, but he stated²⁵ that the government did not treat the protestors as the Gerő government did in 1956. Instead, the current government lied to its citizens. He stated that the protestors' act was a non-violent civil disobedience to protest poverty and the communication style of the government. However, he emphasized the peaceful way of the dialogue between

²¹ In that time, there was not a state of war or any other exceptional security situation.

²² Ferenc Kőszeg, "Mire megjelenünk," *Beszélő Különszám*. October 28, 1990, 3.

²³ Ferenc Kőszeg, *K történetei*, 2009, 26-30.

²⁴ "Románia felé", *Beszélő Különszám*, October 28, 1990, 3.

²⁵ György Konrád, "A második figyelmeztetés," *Beszélő Különszám*, October 28, 1990, 8.

the protestors and the police which strengthened him to recognize that there are other ways for handling the conflicts beside the government's aggressive demands.²⁶

On October 26, János Kis read out the party's central statement on television.²⁷ He said that the government misled the society with its false communication and now, Hungarian people need a trustworthy government to solve their problems. Because of this interview, the members of the HDF considered that the Free Democrats had joined forces with the taxi unions and, according to Balázs Horváth after many years of the blockade, this statement was the reason why he stopped the police forces on Friday. Throughout the 90s, authors of the right-wing press claimed that the Free Democrats wanted to overthrow the government. However, the Free Democrats later changed their communication and called on every activist not to join the taxi drivers, as János Kis explained in an oral history interview.²⁸

As we have seen from the *Beszélő* articles, all of them emphasized the fear and uncertainty in those days but neither of them – except for Konrád – named the blockade as civil disobedience or something else. They blamed the government for the current situation, and they gave right for the protestors, even respected the way as after almost forty years of Kádárist, could organize themselves, as they had no following examples, since 1956. However, they feared the protestors, too. On the one hand, they expected the first violent step from the government's side, but on the other hand, as Ferenc Kőszeg pointed out in his short opinion article, there could be dead policemen too on the streets. They saw the HDF government as undemocratic, and their members had a rather autocratic behavior. György Konrád was the only author in the special edition who called the events as civil disobedience and emphasized the peaceful way of it.

The question is: why did Kőszeg and Haraszti fear the demonstrations? On the one hand, it was because of the authors' personal experiences with the revolution in 1956 (like Kőszeg), but on the other hand, my view is that the fear was motivated by their former viewpoints before the regime change. In articles, which were published in the samizdat *Beszélő*, they wrote about the possible changes among the society and some of them warned of the growing tension between the HSWP and the Hungarian society.

Some of their articles pointed out possible putsch attempts from the Party's side²⁹ and others speculated about movements from the society.³⁰ As János Kis said in his article in 1988, “everyone is expecting that the demonstrations, strikes and riot between the

²⁶ Konrád, “A második”, *Beszélő Különszám*, 1990.

²⁷ “A kormány hibát követett el amikor erőszakkal fenyegetőzött,” *Népszabadság*, October 27, 1990, 5.

²⁸ János Kis, *Szabadságra ítélez*, Kalligram Kiadó, 2021, 603.

²⁹ Mitől félünk? Kis János, A visszaszámítás megkezdődött, *Beszélő*, 1989, 27. szám

³⁰ *Beszélő*, 1988, 25. szám, Tájkép csata előtt.

mass and the authorities will return". He thought that because of the declining economy the leadership would be questioned and later lose their reliability among the Hungarian citizens who already had started to organize independent clubs and circles. The author expected that with the beginning of the new liberal market in the country tension would just grow among the leadership and the masses and there could be violent riots. It would be most dangerous if the workers started to organize themselves. They even thought that the lower living conditions and the spiritual effect of the change of regime could break down the society's political passivism since 1956 as had happened with the Polish and Czechoslovak citizens. They never wrote down what they actually feared from a civil war in Hungary, but they did not exclude the fact that there could be violence on the streets if the Party leadership would not change their politics. Moreover, they never supported violence as dissidents.

Since the ratification of the Helsinki Act, the democratic opposition expressed their attitude towards non-violent actions against the regime. According to András Bozóki and Tamás Csapody, the activities of the dissident movements in Eastern Europe could not be identified as civil disobedience, nobody could deny their moral right against the Communist regime which is a central element of the civil disobedience as practice for protest. Beyond it, some members from the opposition, like Miklós Haraszti or Ferenc Kőszeg did hunger strikes too, as a form of disobedience in the 70s and 80s when they claimed rights which, based on the Hungarian Constitution, were guaranteed for them.³¹

This approach was close to other Eastern European dissident movements' strategy. Since Adam Michnik wrote his famous essay "New Evolutionism," the Polish dissidents and later the Czechoslovak Charta 77 movement, emphasized their basic human rights for free speech and they carried out peaceful activities and nonviolent acts to demonstrate their rights. These were crucial elements of the Eastern European dissident activities. Due to these acts, the Hungarian opposition never supported violence against the Communist regimes, instead, they called attention to avoid it as some members of the opposition did.³² Moreover, in another samizdat journal, the *Hírmondó* (Newsspeaker), Miklós Haraszti denied the possibility of a revolution in the Eastern bloc. As he stated "it would be luxurious if we have a revolution". Instead, we only have the peaceful methods to stand against the Soviet regime."³³ Later in 1988, Miklós Szabó, lecturer of the Free University sessions,

³¹ Miklós Haraszti did a hunger strike when he was imprisoned because of his book, *Piece-Rates in Hungary* and Ferenc Kőszeg did a hunger strike when he protested against the passport laws in 1988.

³² For example, Miklós Gáspár Tamás.

³³ Haraszti, Miklós. "Jogvédő rögeszmetár", 1988, In: *Bába Iván: Szamizdat 81-89*, Budapest: AB-Beszélő Kft, 1990, 147.

organized by the opposition from the mid-70s, strengthened their central opinion about it, reflecting on those critics in the Party which said that they, the opposition, are too radical and because of their activism the ongoing reforms could be in danger.

Analysis of articles between November and December 1990 and until 1994

Beside Haraszti, another *Beszélő* columnist, Tamás Bauer emphasized the country's international reputation (which was in danger in these days). In his view, the HDF government wanted to reassure the Western governments about the Hungarian situation, but according to Bauer, the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, interfered into the Hungarian sovereignty. He referred to the election campaign in spring, when Kohl's party, the CDU supported HDF. According to him, the HDF government acted in the same way as the Hungarian Communist Party during the revolution, whose leaders turned to the Soviets for advice. The phrase "Kohl's favorite pupils" refers to Mátyás Rákosi, who described himself as Stalin's favorite pupil. With this word, Bauer expressed his fear about the HDF government which would follow CDU's discipline as the Communists did in 1956. However, despite his fears, he believes that the government could learn from the past because otherwise the Hungarian people would lose their trust in them.³⁴

However, the image of riots and civil war disappeared from their articles, and they began to discuss the reasons behind the blockade and its consequences. Interestingly, they still saw it as a spontaneous event, but instead of calling it a demonstration, they called it civil disobedience. Gábor F. Havas³⁵ described the taxi blockade as a kind of movement and many people supported it, mostly those who had financial problems after the change of regime. Moreover, society was not prepared for economic changes and, according to him, there were opinions among the protestors who demanded financial equality too. Though, as he emphasized, they had different motivations. People could have not just financial but social and political reasons too to demonstrate. According to Havas, since the elections, the quality of life had declined, and citizens had lost their trust in the new political system. However, the "people of the barricades" did not react to the government's threat, showing their peaceful demonstrational habit. Havas emphasized their debating skills too in the meetings which he evaluated in great detail. He said that the blockade (which he called an "underground movement") spread across the country within a day and the government's

³⁴ Tamás Bauer, "Gazdaváltás," *Beszélő*, November 10, 1990, 4.

³⁵ Gábor F. Havas, "Négy-öt iFA összehajol- elcsábítva elhagyatva," *Beszélő*, November 3, 1990, 4.

only reaction to it was threatening them with the police forces. He only appreciated the activities of the trade unions that could agree with the government which practice should be used in the future. But for achieving it they need to find reliable figures like János Palotás, or Pál Forgách.

Similar to Havas, Iván Pető, whose speech in parliament on Monday, October 29 was published in the next edition of the *Beszélő*, emphasized the peaceful way of the demonstration and the role of the trade unions, too. According to him, the society had lost its trust in the new political system, and he described the blockade as a political demonstration and civil disobedience. He emphasized again the government's responsibility for the outcomes of their misleading and later aggressive communication. He considered it is a valued reason to set up a blockade all around the country, which was supported by many sections of society. Here he argued the government's former accusations (many HDF member said that the Free Democrats were behind the whole event) and stated that they – the government – did not stand against a “dwarf minority”. The phrase here is idiomatic, referring to János Kis's articles in the samizdat *Beszélő*, when the philosopher said that two minor groups are standing against each other above the head of the Hungarian citizens in 1981; The Party and the Democratic Opposition. By this phrase Pető wanted to highlight that it is not true in this particular situation, instead, the whole society is dissatisfied with them.³⁶

Like Havas, the historian Miklós Szabó – former member of the Democratic Opposition and regular speaker on the Free University lectures in the 80s³⁷ – used the term civil disobedience to describe the taxi blockade. He wrote an article after the parliamentary session in November when – by the proposal of Árpád Göncz – the Parliament granted amnesty to everyone who took part in the blockade. He referred to a letter written by György Szabad (President of Parliament) to the Constitutional Court, in which he explained the limits of civil obedience emphasizing that it did not endanger the security of society.³⁸

Miklós Szabó mentioned several historical examples about practicing civil disobedience from the Middle Ages until the 20th century. He referred directly to the taxi blockade as a form of civil obedience which, in contrast to the HDF and its supporters (referring to the 28th of October demonstration), was the “road” for leaving “the Balkan path”, not the road up to it.³⁹

Finally, in December, the Free Democratic Party held a congress in Szombathely, where the party leader, János Kis, summarized their activities in the first half of the parliamentary year and the party's responsibility in the blockade. The speech appeared in the *Beszélő*, in

³⁶ Parliamentary speech of Iván Pető, Iván Pető, „Erős érdekvédelmi szervezeteket,” *Beszélő*, November 3, 1990, 14.

³⁷ Miklós Szabó, “A jogszertéshoz való jog,” *Beszélő*, November 3, 1990, 13.

³⁸ Szabó, A jogszertéshoz, *Beszélő*, 1990.

³⁹ Szabó, „A jogszertéhez” *Beszélő*, 1990.

which Kis directly described the blockade as a peaceful act of civil disobedience. At the beginning of the events, he considered the situation dangerous, because of the government's communication style. According to him, it was the Free Democrats who were able to stop the violence by demonstrating their solidarity with the taxi drivers, but in the future, as he called attention to it, they should act differently. As he said, Hungarian society and they – the politicians – should not handle such political crises differently than with disobedience.⁴⁰

According to Kis, radicalism was acceptable during the Kádár regime but now, as a parliamentary party, they would have to follow different rules and behave like elected representatives as they are living in a parliamentary democracy. After the party congress the word civil disobedience became more and more used in the *Beszélő* throughout the 90s. As we can see from the articles the authors of the *Beszélő* started to discuss not just the responsibility of the government but the future of the civil society and trade unions which could be a third social force beside the press and the oppositional parties to control the government's actions. We can state that the *Beszélő* started to interpret the blockade as a civil disobedience, even without naming it. After the successful meetings between the government and the trade unions they emphasized the nonviolent way of it, and they – opposite to the governmental party accusations – accepted the people's disappointment as a moral reason for the civil disobedience. Most of the authors did not discuss the blockade's illegal acts (they did not report it to the police station before the event). Instead, they expressed their hope (but at the same time their dilemma) about the future of their empowering power as trade unions. By publishing György Kondrád's article they wanted to strengthen this former viewpoint. Beyond it, by publishing János Kis's speech about the party's new challenges, they strengthened their attitude towards it.

The columnists and journalists of the *Beszélő* referred to the taxi blockade as a civil disobedience rather than revolution after 1990 but its similarities with 1956 and the blockade's uncertainty returned in some articles. When they commemorated or discussed the political heritage of it, they often emphasized the revolutionary atmosphere in those days. Throughout the 90s when they wrote about the acts of Árpád Göncz they (mostly Ferenc Kőszeg) used the 1956 parallels, but in other cases, when the blockade was only mentioned during a discussion of a current political case they referred to it as civil disobedience.

In 1991, Ferenc Kőszeg and Ottília Solt wrote a common article about Árpád Göncz's strengths.⁴¹ Kőszeg and Solt said: "By stopping the police, Árpád Göncz saved Hungary from a possible civil war". Like Miklós Haraszti, they drew comparisons between Göncz

⁴⁰ János Kis, "A magyar demokrácia válsága nem végzet," *Beszélő*, December 8, 1990, 4.

⁴¹ Ferenc Kőszeg- Ottília Solt, "Az elnök védelmében," *Beszélő*, March 2, 1991, 4.

and István Bibó and Imre Nagy, and the situation with the revolution of 1956. According to them, Göncz, like Bibó, was an example of how a political situation should be treated politically and not by using the armed forces. Here they commemorated the acts of Göncz. However, at the end of 1992, there was a new political scandal linked with the taxi blockade. Mátyás Eörsi, parliamentary representative of the Free Democrats, lost his case against the government in the court. He stated in an interview in television that had evidence against Balázs Horváth, who – according to Eörsi – wanted to use the army against the taxi drivers during the taxi blockade.⁴² To reflect on it, Kőszeg, the author, described the blockade as civil disobedience and discussed the legal aspects of the case. He mentioned that Eörsi had every legal right to call Balázs Horváth a tyrant (it was another aspect of the case: the tolerance level of politicians and the limits of free speech) and he also described the taxi blockade as a political crisis.⁴³

Kőszeg returned to the 1956 narrative in 1992 when HDF sympathizers called for action over the change of radio directors. He mentioned, ironically, that those who considered the blockade as an obstruction now wanted to organize civil disobedience.⁴⁴

Later in 1994 the editors did not use the term revolution but emphasized the chaotic atmosphere of the blockade which was the result of the government's misleading communication. On January 20, 1994, they published a telephone conversation between Balázs Horváth and Győző Szabó, who was the head of the National Police Headquarters in 1990. In this conversation, Horváth instructed Szabó to call Antal Annus, state secretary to the Minister of Defense, and ask him to send some vehicles to remove taxis from the roads and bridges on October 26 1990.⁴⁵

The reason could be Balázs Horváth's speech in Canada in 1991, which appeared in the press in 1993.⁴⁶

All the recordings were published under the title "Found Objective". This frame was later explained by the journalist who did not sign the article. Incidentally, in the 1990s it was common practice for journalists to sign their articles only with their monogram, which was also missing here. The journalist simply stated that he had received this record by post from an unknown person, and that his aim might be to manipulate the forthcoming elections.

The editors stated that they did not want to get involved in a political fight, however they commented on the material with their way of editing. They said that the records showed

⁴² "Ki mit (nem) mondott?" *Pesti Hírlap*, June 11, 1992, 3.

⁴³ Ferenc Kőszeg, "Fontolgatta- Felmentés az Eörsi perben," *Beszélő*, December 12, 1992, 15.

⁴⁴ Ferenc Kőszeg, "1946," *Beszélő*, July 11, 1992, 3.

⁴⁵ "Talált tárgy," *Beszélő*, January 20, 1994, 10.

⁴⁶ "Horváth Balázs 'puccsot szimatolt,'" *Magyar Nemzet*, February 2, 1993, 4.

how the government related to reality at the time of the blockade, and they published the whole conversation between Balázs Horváth and Győző Szabó, which was also revealing. The article also included radio correspondence from the time of the taxi blockade, which indirectly suggested a different perspective on the blockade.⁴⁷

The aim of these reports was to show the spontaneous nature of the blockade, with traffic problems throughout the country to remind readers that the reality was different from the HDF's narrative of the blockade. Here they wanted to emphasize that there was not any organization behind the events, as some of the members of the HDF, like István Csurka, suggested. They did not call the blockade neither a revolution nor civil disobedience, but the message of the article was close to both interpretations. It expressed the uncertainty on those days and at the same time the spontaneous way of it, which is generally true for any civil disobedience.

Conclusions

In my paper, I aimed to show the interpretation of the taxi blockade in the *Beszélő* which, before the change of regime, was a samizdat journal and the authors were dissidents. I was interested in how the new democratic system could shape the writing style of the journal, which was partly reassured. However, in the future it is advisable for other researchers to deepen the connection between the *Beszélő* and the Free Democrats to gain more significant and different interpretations between the party and the editorship, which was not controlled by the party. Moreover, it is also advisable to analyze the relationship between them as some members of the editorship – as I have pointed out – were party members and parliamentary representatives at the same time.

As we can see from the analyzed articles, the *Beszélő*'s editorship was shocked during the blockade, which was one of the reasons why they wrote differently into the special edition as Ferenc Kőszeg pointed out. Some of the authors like Haraszti, Kőszeg and Bauer had memories about the days of the revolution in 1956, especially Kőszeg, who was a teenager at that time. These articles had radical rhetoric, and we can experience the authors' fear behind the lines. However, their fear of possible riot control between the taxi drivers and the police related to their memory in 1956. Beside this, in the late 80s the Hungarian Democratic Opposition called attention to the possible unknown reactions of the citizens regarding the changing economic and political situation. They wrote about the

⁴⁷ "Ki mit (nem) mondott?" *Pesti Hírlap*, June 11, 1992, 3.

dangerous outcomes of the possible economic and political changes which they could feel during the taxi blockade come true. The members of the former Democratic Opposition (Haraszti, Kőszeg, Konrád) were devoted to the practice of civil disobedience during the communist area as dissidents but in the new democratic system they did not describe the taxi blockade with this definition, except György Konrád through as András Bozóki and Tamás Csapody pointed out, their protesting actions like denying paying penalties and hunger strikes could not identify exactly as civil disobedience).

In the special edition of the *Beszélő* they emphasized only the possible risks of the event but since November they wrote about the role of the trade unions and the civil society in the new democratic system. Except for Gábor F. Havas, they did not name the blockade as civil disobedience but based on the current concepts in the early 90s about the practice itself, we can suppose that they considered it. They accepted the protestors right in the demonstration and the underground way of it. The usage of 56 metaphors can be related to their experiences from the time of the revolution and the returning fear of violence from the late 80s, which disappeared later from their articles. We can see from their language through in the early 90s that the 56 metaphors were only used by Ferenc Kőszeg, but the rest of the editorship followed the directions of János Kis from December 1990. Even though the *Beszélő* was not a party newspaper at that time, the party's ideology shaped their journal's narrative and the language style of it.

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