

István Balogh's political career

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I. The Significance and Historiography of the Topic

István Balogh's life and political career have not been processed in a monograph yet. The objective of my doctoral dissertation – mainly as a result of my research in the archives – is therefore to present Father Balogh's political career by providing the most details possible about it.

My work focuses on Father Balogh being an active political character, who appeared in the city politics of Szeged from the mid-1920s and in the national "high politics" from 1944. His political career ended in June, 1951, when he had to leave Budapest, and he resigned from his electoral mandate, too. (For this reason, I only briefly discuss Balogh's young age and his life during the Kádár Era.)

Although done quite shortly, Father Balogh's life was first reviewed by György Balázs's volume entitled *Politikuspályák* [Political Careers] (ed. I. Sánta, Budapest 1984, 233–243.). József Ruzsoly wrote about Balogh's political activity in Szeged. The article entitled *Balogh páter szegedi közszerepléséhez* [About the Public Service of Father Balogh in Szeged] was published in the first 1997 issue of the journal *Szeged* (pp. 30–32.). The same writing also came out in Ruzsoly's book entitled *A város és polgára* [The City and its Citizen] (*Szeged*, 1999, 138–143.).

Csilla Klettner presented the Father's career based on her thorough archive research, journalistic sources of the time and Balogh's memoirs (preserved in the Archives of the Institute of Political History). Her study (*Balogh István páter politikai pályája* [Father István Balogh's Political Career]) was published in the year-book of the *Huszadik Század Intézet* [Institute of the 20th Century] entitled *Korrajz, 2002* [Description of a Period, 2002] (Budapest 2004, 96–127.)

For the almanac of the 1947–1949 national assembly (eds.-in-chief: J. M. Kiss and I. Vida, Budapest 2005, 30–31.), József M. Kiss and Róbert Szabó summarized István Balogh's biography by making use of the most important research results available until that time.

György Haas's book (of 180 pages) – bearing the title *Balogh páter. A huszadik század Fráter Györgye* [Father Balogh. Frater Georgius of the Twentieth Century] – was issued in 2010. It can rather be considered as a piece of political journalism than as a scientific study, and it basically repeats Csilla Klettner's findings after six years.

Most recently, in 2011, János Pelle wrote about Father Balogh in the fourth issue of *Valóság* (pp. 92–96.). His work is titled *Balogh páter, a koalíció „szürke eminenciása”* [Father Balogh, the "Grey Eminence" of the Coalition], and it also largely relies on Klettner's earlier excellent research.

II. *The Methodology and Sources of the Research*

The drafting of the dissertation has been preceded by extended research at archives and libraries.

Besides studying the documents of the National Archives of Hungary (the documents of the Political Committee of the Provisory National Assembly, the documents of the Prime Minister's Office and general documents from 1944 and 1945) and those of the *National Széchényi Library* (the documents of the *Magyar Szemle Társaság* [Association] and Nándor Korcsmáros), I also conducted researches at the Archives of Csongrád County (the minutes of the Municipal Committee of Szeged, the documents of the Faculty of Arts of the József Ferenc University, the documents of the *Dugonics Társaság* [Association]), at the Episcopal Archives of Szeged-Csanád (the documents of the Episcopal Office: documents of church administration and those of István Balogh's legacy) and at the Archives of Political History and of Trade Unions (the documents of the Hungarian Communist Party [1944-1948] and those of the Social Democrat Party [1944-1948]).

During my research, I have also made use of several documents preserved at the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (the folder of the István Balogh object, the report of investigation related to the Mindszenty case) and at the Municipal Archives of Bács-Kiskun County (the documents of the *First Newspaper Publishing and Press Plc* of Kecskemét and those of the National Committee of Kecskemét). I consider the manuscript of István Balogh's memoirs as one of my most important sources, which can be found at the Szeged editorial office of the *Society for Encyclopedia of Church History in Hungary* (the manuscript forms part of the church historian József Borovi's [1917-2005] legacy).

Besides the abovementioned documents, I have perused the issues of a number of journals published between 1944 and 1949 (among others those of the following: the *A Holnap*, the *Délmagyarország*, the *Ellenzék*, the *Hazánk*, the *Kis Újság*, the *Magyar Nemzet*, the *Népszava*, the *Szabad Nép*, the *Szegedi Napló*, the *Szegedi Kis Újság*, the *Vásárhely Népe* and the *Világosság*). The data found in the articles and reports of these journals form integral part of my dissertation.

For my work – so that I can provide a more accurate picture of István Balogh than his earlier biographers –, by making use of the methodology of oral history, I have also interviewed people who knew him and his activity personally.

Szabolcs Ö. Barlay (born in 1919 in Kassa), honorary university professor (Eötvös Loránd University), Catholic priest, former Cistercian monk and László Paskai (born in 1927 in Szeged), cardinal, Primate of Hungary, Archbishop Emeritus of Esztergom-Budapest had contact with him in the 1950s and '60s, while Endre Gyulay (born in 1930 in Battonya), Bishop Emeritus of Szeged-Csanád got to know the professional work of his elder fellow-priest as the priest of the Diocese of Csanád.

János Horváth (born in 1921 in Cece), economist, politician and a *Smallholder Party* member of the national assembly (from November, 1945 until his arrest in January 1947) and Zoltán Kovács K. (born in 1924 in Magyaróvár and died in 2008 in Budapest), agrarian expert, politician and Member of Parliament for the Democratic People's Party (from September, 1947 until his emigration in February, 1949) were members of the Hungarian legislation in the same period as István Balogh was.

III. Major results

In my dissertation, I have attempted to present István Balogh's (born 30 March, 1894 in Anina; died 20 July, 1976 in Budapest) political career based on different types of sources; such as, central governmental documents, documents of church archives, memoirs and press publications of the era. While outlining the biographical frames and details, I always placed focus on Father Balogh's political activity; especially, between December, 1944 and December, 1951, on his role in the government between the end of 1944 and May, 1947 and on his years in Szeged, which served as an antecedent of both his political activity and governmental role.

The work he carried out as a priest and at the politics of Szeged clearly testifies that Father Balogh had obvious political ambitions and played an active role in the public life of the city as early as the Horthy Era. Accordingly, he made a lot of efforts to get into the Municipal Committee of the city, and by publishing different local papers (the *Szegedi Hírlap* and the *Tanyai Újság*), he intended to share his own activity and political views with the public. By doing so, not only did he want to inform the public, but he would also have liked to become a significant and opinion-shaping factor in the political life of the city. Striving to reach his goals, he did not prove to be choosy in terms of his allies: in the middle of the 1930s, he offered his help and his newspaper to the governing party as well as to the Independent Smallholders Party of the opposition.

Earlier in Szeged, as a curate, he made acquaintances with the Jesuit father Béla Bangha and the academician, historian-professor Gyula Szekfű, the two establishers of the Christian national thought (the official ideology of the political system between the two world wars). In 1929, he obtained a doctoral title at the University of Szeged, which very well indicates both his pretension for social prestige and his scientific ambitions. It cannot have been a coincidence that he informed Szekfű about the assaults he had suffered right at the time of writing his doctoral dissertation.

In his thesis, István Balogh translated the reports of Venetian deputies into Hungarian, which he also completed with his own explanatory notes and a prefatory study. The work (*Velencei diplomaták Magyarországról. 1500-1526* [Venetian Diplomats about Hungary. 1500-1526]) has proved to be a lasting one; even today's researchers of the period refer to it with acknowledgement.

In the 1930s and '40s, Father Balogh was the parish priest of Szeged-Lower Centre (that is, the area around Mórahalom). As the priest of the farms of the Homokhátság [Sand Ridge], between the Danube and the Tisza River, he had to face completely different challenges from those ones in the downtown of Szeged. As the documents preserved at the archives testify, he also did his best here – as well as at any other points of his lifetime later on –, and worked by making full use of his potentials and possibilities. The ideal of serving a community and his personal interests motivated him equally. He attempted to solve ministerial problems (from involving young Jesuit fathers into ministerial boarding to the question of the minor churches appearing in the farm world) just as keenly as he took a role in the local campaigns of the parliamentary elections. At the same time, he was also

willing to have public debates with either the mayor or the lord lieutenant for eliminating social injustice.

In 1944, he became part of national politics almost by chance. When in Szeged – as in the first bigger Hungarian city under Soviet occupation –, the reorganization of the political life started, he represented the Independent Smallholders Party at inter-party negotiations, and he also put his former newspaper, the *Délmagyarország* into the service of the forming government coalition. In short, he was in the right place at the right time, and between December, 1944 and April, 1945, he fulfilled the role of president not only at the local organization of the *Smallholders Party*, but also at the National Committee of Szeged and at the Hungarian National Independence Front, too.

In 1944, he was elected to be the member of the Provisory National Assembly first, then he became the head of the prime minister's office. The prime minister of the Provisory National Government was Miklós Béla Dálnoki at the time. Later, Balogh also fulfilled the same position in the cabinets of Zoltán Tildy and Ferenc Nagy. According to his contemporaries, he achieved great political influence on the side of the not too strong-handed prime ministers (Ferenc Nagy was perhaps the only exception), and he also positioned his own supporters in state administration (for example, Béla Bojta, the president of the National Council of the People's Courts or György Pálffy, the lord lieutenant of Szeged).

István Balogh as an under-secretary was in charge of several important fields. From the end of 1944 to April, 1945, he was responsible for press affairs and paper supply, due to which party leaders often turned to him for permissions to journals and for the appropriate amount of press paper for their party organs. Of course, he did not forget about the paper supply of his own journals: the *Magyar Nemzet* and the *Mai Nap*, which were at his disposal all along until the secularization of the 1950s. He was the only one among the politicians of the coalition years who had journals serving his own interests and not those of political parties.

At the very beginning of the coalition years, the *Délmagyarország* (issued in Szeged) also belonged to his sphere of interest. Between November, 1944 and April, 1945, he was the member of its editorial board, too, and before his appointment to under-secretary, several of his political writings (for example, about the principles of the Hungarian National Independence Front or about the conditions and circumstances of peacemaking) were published in it.

Father Balogh was also a member of the Political Committee of Legislation from the end of 1944 up to May, 1949. In 1945, as its secretary, he set those demands related to the execution of the land reform before the Committee in which landowners asked for the retention of their estates (respectively, their exemption from getting used during the execution of the land reform) referring to their political merits (for example, anti-German and anti-fascist activities). In this position, Balogh also had a role in permitting the exemption of the episcopal manors of Veszprém and Székesfehérvár.

As the under-secretary leading the prime minister's office, he certainly interceded with the members of the government for the interests of the Catholic Church: he pleaded for the cause of the clerics having been interned or mired during the prosecutions of the people's courts, and assisted the pontiffs with po-

litical advice. From the end of 1944, he attempted to mediate between the newly formulating state and the Catholic Church. Because of this, he had conflicts with his church superiors, as the Catholic upper clergy did not accept the fact that first he was urging the persecution of the republican form of government on the part of the Church and then the earliest possible consensus between the state and the Church. By the summer of 1948, the conflict between Father Balogh and the leadership of the Catholic Church had deepened so much that his bishop inhibited him from the practice of his clerical service.

In May, 1947, István Balogh resigned from his position of under-secretary at the prime minister's office. Three months later, he left the *Independent Smallholders Party* as well (of which he had been the secretary-general since the beginning of 1947), and established a new political formation: the *Independent Hungarian Democratic Party*, to which the common talk of the time simply referred as Balogh Party (the name even appeared on the official head of the party's letter paper).

The party was a heterogeneous political group, since in its faction, we can find Dezső P. Ábrahám, the former prime minister of the counter-revolutionary government of Szeged as well as Imre Kovács, the former secretary-general of the National Peasants' Party (who, within the parliamentary panel, led the group of independent pro-Peasants' Party representatives made up by a few of his supporters). However, the faction of the Independent Hungarian Democratic Party primarily consisted of Balogh's old political allies (for example, of György Parragi, Gyula Kunszery and Gyula Hegedűs. At the parliamentary elections in August, 1947, the Party obtained a result of a little over five percent, thus it could delegate eighteen representatives into legislation.

Balogh's Party defined itself as a civic party standing on Christian foundations and being the preserver of the values represented by the *Independent Smallholders Party* of 1945. It advocated democratic principles in its program and urged the settling of diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Although these resounding phrases placed the *Independent Hungarian Democratic Party* among the civic opposition parties, from the autumn of 1947, it openly played a "moderate opposition" and a "loyal opposition" role. Thus public opinion soon started to think of István Balogh and his fellow-representatives as the supporters of the government despite the fact that Mátyás Rákosi himself declared it several times that Balogh and his party had no place in the coalition.

Balogh and his party joined the Hungarian Independence Popular Front in 1949. The Father received a parliamentary mandate again, but became a member of the collective body of the head of state: the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic as well. In 1950, he took part in the organization of the clerical peace movement. His political career ended in June, 1951, when after a short detention, he was relocated from Budapest and removed to Kémence, where he formally served as a deputy parish priest. In June, 1951 he resigned from his parliamentary mandate, and in December, he also renounced his membership in the Presidential Council.

In common knowledge, the figure of Father Balogh has become that of the priest who, lacking any principle, co-operated with the communist state. On the other hand, others agree with Balogh's own opinion of himself; namely, that during

his political career, he tried to balance between the (extending) communist system and the principles and expectations of the Catholic Church with more or less success.

His activity is also controversial in the eyes of his former fellow-politicians.

According to János Horváth – who was a Smallholder member of the national assembly – Balogh sympathized with neither the Soviet invaders, nor the communists, striving to set up a one-party system, but was among the first ones who realized that if Hungarian politicians wanted to keep their positions, they could do nothing, but co-operate with the communists. As János Horváth recalls it, Balogh believed that the interests of Christian Churches and the values of civic politics could be better represented in political positions. In Horváth's opinion, Balogh was devoted to Christianity and his nation; however, as a real politician, he adjusted to the circumstances surrounding him.

Zoltán Kovács K. – who was a Member of Parliament for the Democratic People's Party –; however, saw Balogh's figure completely differently. As a young MP, he was expressly afraid of him, as the representatives of the opposition parties believed that the ones making acquaintances or alliances with him could get into trouble easily. They were convinced that neither the left-wing, nor the opposition parties trusted Balogh and that his party was held together only by the pure protection of personal interests. Zoltán Kovács K. remembered Balogh as an opportunistic politician, willing to do anything for power, and based on this characteristic of his, he compared him to Gyula Ortutay and István Dobi.

Father Balogh is an undoubtedly interesting and notable figure of our twentieth century history. In my dissertation, by reviewing his clerical and political career (that is, the period of his life between the end of the 1920s until 1951), I have intended to refine the (as we have seen, quite schematic) picture so far created of him.

It is a fact that he was a clever and cunning politician with an ability to judge situations well, who could establish equally good relations with the governing party of the Horthy Era, the ideologically differently grounded political powers of the coalition years as well as with the formulators of the system of state socialism. Nevertheless, the leadership of the Hungarian Catholic Church did not approve of its priest's constant adjusting to the changing factors of power and basically did not support Father Balogh's political activity.

A summary of István Balogh's political career:

- In his years spent in Szeged (1926–1944),
 - he pursued an active public and political activity in the city:
 - he published newspapers (the Szegedi Hírlap, the Tanyai Újság and the Délmagyarország);
 - he organized events (the Open-Air Theatre of Szeged, the Week of Szeged);
 - he established political contacts with the local group of the governing party as well as with the Szeged leaders of the oppositionist *Independent Smallholders Party*.
- As an under-secretary (1944–1947),
 - he started to build his national political career in December, 1944 at the prime minister's office of the *Provisory National Government*;
 - between December, 1944 and April, 1945, he controlled press affairs and paper management;
 - by this, he obtained greater political influence;
 - he created his network of contacts with the leaders of the coalition parties at this time;
 - as the secretary of the Political Committee of the National Assembly during the land reform, he was the facilitator of the cases of exemption from indent:
 - he also represented the interests of the estates belonging to the Catholic Church;
 - he dealt with questions of church politics:
 - he wanted to get the Catholic pontiffs to accept and welcome the new political order (the coalition parties and the republic as form of government) as soon as possible;
 - he pleaded the cause of the persecuted clerics, who were interned, tried by the people's courts, etc.
- As president of his party and Member of Parliament (1947–1951),
 - he acted as the loyal opposition of the government and indirectly assisted to the set-up of the communist dictatorship;
 - because of this, he got involved in a conflict with the conservative József Mindszenty, and as a result, he was inhibited from his clerical service between 1948 and 1951 (the same thing happened again between 1956 and '57);
 - he urged the agreement between the Catholic Church and the state:
 - he was the organizer and one of the leaders of the peace movement of the Catholic priests;
 - his political career ended in June, 1951 by his internment.