

The Congo crisis through a Hungarian prism

RÓBERT BARACS
UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED

Introduction

In my study, I undertake to examine the role of the Hungarian People's Republic during the Congo crisis. The reason I have chosen this topic is partly thanks to my Belgian and Congolese colleagues, who asked me often about my country, about Hungary's eventual participation in the Congo crisis. They had a preconception that since Hungary was at the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, it necessarily served the Soviet Union's interests. After these questions, I felt obliged to seek the answer, the sources, and be able to give an appropriate response.

During my study, I use the appellation of Hungary and Hungarian People's Republic, similar to the Congo and the Republic of Congo or Léopoldville-Congo or Congo-Kinshasa as synonyms. My research is chronologically limited between 30 June, 1960, when Congo gained its independence from the former colonizer, Belgium, until 24 November, 1965, when Joseph Désiré Mobutu seized power and transformed the country into a 32-year-lasting dictatorship. This period is called in the historiography equally the *Congo crisis* or the *First Republic*.

The so-called Congo crisis (1960-1965) was one of the hottest conflicts between the super powers and also between the former colonizer (Belgium) and the newly independent state, called Léopoldville-Congo, with the participation of the United Nations Organization with its operation, called ONUC¹.

The main sources of my research consist of declassified archival sources of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Hungarian newspapers from this period.

In my study, I seek the answers to the following questions: How did Hungary get involved in this primarily African issue? What did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs know about the Congo crisis? In which way was the public society of Hungary informed about the main events of the Congo crisis?

¹ Opération des Nations Unies au Congo / United Nations Operation in the Congo.

The Independence Day Speeches

The Independence Day (June 30, 1960) and the speeches by the King Baudouin, President Joseph Kasavubu and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba – seen through a Hungarian prism. The Hungarian People's Republic received an invitation for 1 person to attend the ceremony. As representative of the country, Lajos Szijártó, extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador of Hungary to Cairo, Egypt, represented Hungary during the independence ceremonies. In his report, he wrote the following:

“The speech of the King Baudouin highlighted the constructive role of Belgium, the efforts they made to make the Congo a flourishing country; the speech of Kasavubu was colourless and unremarkable, accepting all proposals of the king; Lumumba spoke in a completely different tone, his speech underlined the Congolese wish for real freedom, both political and economical.”²

Szijártó had the possibility to talk with some Congolese ministers and state secretaries, and also with Lumumba. Lumumba told him, that the Congo will be a republic, based on the positive neutrality, establishing friendly relations with every country, accepting every unselfish aid.

Already at 28 June 1960, the Hungarian government proposed to recognize the Republic of Congo as an independent state.³

Shortly after the Congo gained its independence, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Trade proposed to invite the Congolese external trade delegation to Hungary.⁴ Until the independence, the external trade between the two countries were managed through Belgium, exchanging mainly cocoa and palm-oil from the Congo with textile and foot-wear products from Hungary. The newly independent Congo initiated to broaden its bilateral contacts with socialist countries, Hungary saw a perspective to help the country's economic independency and improve the bilateral relations.

This vision dramatically changed, as we can read from a top secret note⁵ that Hungary proposed to send medicaments, health care and consumer goods to the Congo and considered to send medical experts, if it was needed. The note refers on the fact that the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria had already acted by sending food and medicaments to the Congo.

² Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár / National Archives of Hungary. Papers of the Foreign Office. MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Henceforward MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Subject: The course of the Independence Day Festivity.

³ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Subject: Proposal. 28 June 1960.

⁴ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Subject: Invitation of the Congolese Foreign Trade Delegation to Hungary. 12 July 1960.

⁵ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Subject: Aid to the Congo. 13 August 1960.

Hungarian reaction of the dismissal of Lumumba and Kasavubu and the expulsion of the Soviet and Czechoslovakian Embassies

It seems that the Hungarian diplomacy was up to date with these events. On 14 September, 1960 both embassies got an ultimatum to leave the Congo within 48 hours.⁶ Moreover, a press article was released, so that the readers of the *Népszabadság* got to know about this event already on 16 September, 1960. This news appeared in Hungary through the TASS⁷ news agency, based on a witness' report.⁸

Reports on the situation in the Congo, during the crisis period by Hungarian observers, such as politicians, journalist who have been there on the spot

A certain Tibor Köves, journalist who had spent approximately 4 weeks in the Congo, returned back from his journey on 18 September, 1960. He came back together with the staff of the expelled Soviet and Czechoslovakian Embassies. He estimated Lumumba's situation very isolated, because "he didn't pursue a definite politics, neither with the external nor with the internal reaction".

In his opinion, Lumumba had 3 powers to struggle with:

1. tribal division;
2. the United Nation's Organization; and
3. the missionaries.

Reflecting at the Katanga secession and Thsombe's situation, he estimated that Thsombe⁹ doesn't have the necessary support from the Katangan people.

According to the role Hungary might have played, he wrote that after the exodus of the Belgians, the Congo was in a desperate need of experts, and Hungary might have distributed scholarships for Congolese students. The richness of Congo in natural resources might allow the bilateral relations between the two countries.

Based on his field experiences in the Congo, he published a book with the following title: *Feketék és fehérek Kongóban* [Black and white in the Congo].¹⁰

Congo in need of experts

During the crisis, through the United Nations Organization, Hungary received a request to send experts to the Congo.¹¹ It's not surprising, as it is well known, that the Congo was

⁶ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Subject: Report of Tibor Köves, journalist. 5 October 1960.

⁷ TASS stands for: Telegraphic Agency of the Soviet Union; Telegrafnoye Agentstvo Sovyetskogo Soyuzu.

⁸ *Népszabadság*, 16 September, 1960.

⁹ Founder and president of the CONAKAT party. He was elected President of Katanga Province, and declared Katanga's independence in July 1960. He fled Katanga in January 1963 and returned in July 1964, to become Prime Minister.

¹⁰ Köves, Tibor: *Feketék és fehérek Kongóban*. Kossuth, Budapest, 1962. 217. p.

not prepared for independence, especially not in terms of experts. They needed experts at the following fields: statistic experts with French knowledge, shipping experts, railway experts.

At that time, Hungary was not able to send well equipped experts, especially not within a short delay.

The assassination of the Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba (17 January, 1961) through Hungarian historical sources

About the death/assassination/murder of Lumumba several monographs have appeared. Nowadays it is clear, that he has been murdered on 17 January, 1961, this news was kept in secret for almost a month. In the world press, the first time they wrote about his murder was on 13 February, 1961. One day later, the Hungarian newspaper, *Népszabadság*, also published a very detailed article.¹² The Hungarian standpoint assigned the assassination of Lumumba to the Tshombe-led secessionist government, stating, that

“Tshombe and his authorities announced, that two days ago Lumumba and his two comrades, namely Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito, escaped from the prison and a reward was put over their heads. Munongo, Minister of the Interior¹³ said, that indigenous people of a village killed these three person on the run. There was no doubt about the identity of the victims and they were burried in a secret place.”¹⁴

The readers of the newspaper could see some photos, taken from Lumumba’s life.¹⁵ In the next few weeks this issue remained very popular and the newspaper followed the events and published detailed articles.

Hungary’s attitude towards the Gizenga-led Legal Government

Let’s take a look at Hungary’s attitude towards the Antoine Gizenga-led pro-Lumumbist (counter) government after the elimination of Lumumba. Hungary was among those African, Asian, Latin-American and Soviet bloc countries, totally 18, who recognised the government of Antoine Gizenga¹⁶ in Stanleyville (Kisangani) as the legitimate one of the

¹¹ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Note 48/H 1960. Subject: Sending Hungarian experts to the Congo.

¹² http://index.hu/belfold/tegnapiujsg/2011/02/13/1961_meggyilkoltak_lumumbat/ Downloaded at: 5 May, 2011.

¹³ Godefroid Munongo, Minister of Interior for Katanga between June 1960–1965.

¹⁴ *Népszabadság*. February 14, 1961.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ President of the Parti Solidaire Africain. Elected deputy Prime Minister of the Congo between June–September 1960. He led the pro-Lumumba government in Stanleyville between November 1960 – August 1961. He became vice Prime Minister in the Adoula government. In January 1962 he was arrested.

Congo on 19 February, 1961, based on the Hungarian sources. Evidence is the 143/1961. Declaration of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic.¹⁷

It is clear, according to the archival sources, that Hungary wanted to strengthen the Gizenga government's position through the recognition and help them to "resist the imperialist manoeuvres". At this time the Gizenga government controlled the whole Eastern Province and its approximately 4 million inhabitants. Although the government started to retrain the units of the National Army it counted only 5000 soldiers, mainly infantry, with few munitions. Their advantage was that they could count on the local population who provided them with food. From the socialist countries Gizenga asked weapons, munitions, clothes for the soldiers, and for the population of the Eastern Province food and medicine. The Hungarian diplomacy was well aware of Gizenga's request to the head of states of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, People's Republic of China, the United Arab Republic, Ghana and Yugoslavia, to sell him airplanes in order to provide connection between their capitals and Stanleyville.

Another precious source is the note about the encounter and conversation held at Ferihegy Airport, Budapest on 16 March, 1961 with Pierre Mulele, representative of the legal government of the Congo to Cairo.¹⁸ He escaped from Léopoldville, together with Patrice Lumumba, to Stanleyville. Although Lumumba had been arrested, he managed to arrive to Stanleyville, and from there to Cairo. According to Mulele, the most difficult issue, Congo was facing with, was the blockade round the territories guarded by the legal government. Despite the campaign of the imperialist countries, the people of Congo stand by the socialist countries and counted on their cultural, economic and military aid.

Further evidence of the Hungarian-Congolese relations in this Cold War context is the correspondence between Pierre Mulele and Endre Sík, Minister of Foreign Affairs.¹⁹ Pierre Mulele refers to a letter, sent by Sík on 19 May, 1961, which he received on 9 August, 1961. In his letter, written in French, dated on 18 August, 1961, sent from Cairo, Mulele asked for weapons, munition and financial assistance. The interesting fact is that Mulele calls their civil war a revolution and refers to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in his letter.

Hungary's attitude towards the Cyrill Adoula-led central government

Cyrill Adoula served the Joseph Ileo-led government as Minister of the Interior until July 1961, when he became Prime Minister in August 1961, until 1964.

It seems from declassified – originally Czechoslovakian sources²⁰ – that Antoine Gizenga and his government didn't have any other option apart from joining the central government. Again, the earlier already mentioned two countries – the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia – possessed with embassies in Stanleyville. Informations about the actual

¹⁷ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. 143/1961. Declaration.

¹⁸ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Note dated at 16 March, 1961. Subject: Conversation with Mulele.

¹⁹ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Letter sent from Cairo by Pierre Mulele to Endre Sík. 18 August 1961.

²⁰ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Prague, 12 August, 1961. Subject: Information about the situation in the Congo.

situation came from Stanleyville – through Prague – to Budapest. At the very moment of the report, the Czechoslovakian source emphasized the uncertainty and the difficulties of the government formation. One of the difficulties was the demand of Gizenga, that the Minister of Defense position should be filled by a member of his party (PSA²¹). All of the archival sources highlighted, that the “national progressive powers” lost their leader, Lumumba, who had enough authority to fight against internal and external obstacles. Gizenga was unable to replace him, and he committed some major mistakes. The most important was that he couldn’t beat the tribal division.

The Congo crisis seen from the Hungarian Embassy in Brussels

An interesting connecting point to the Congo crisis was the Hungarian Embassy at Brussels, led by Tibor Lajti.²² He was the Hungarian ambassador in Brussels between 1960 and 1965. This function gave him the opportunity to follow the events “closer” than from Hungary. During an official dinner he met Jules Chomé,²³ and wrote in a report that they keep in touch with him and will receive informations about the Congo in the future, too.²⁴ Apart from reliable and well informed sources, like Jules Chomé, the Embassy proposed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to subscribe for the review *Remarques Congolaises*. The Embassy of the Hungarian People’s Republic in Brussels continuously followed the events through Belgian newspapers and reviews and reported regularly to Hungary.

Notes and reports from 1962 agreed that U Thant²⁵ had not changed the Congo politics of Hammarskjöld. Hungarian archival sources from the same year underlined the difficulties of the Congo question. They agreed that the problems of the country cannot be solved from the inside, but with the help of the United Nations Organization and the cooperation and pressure of African countries.

The main reason, that the Hungarian diplomacy followed the Congo crisis in 1962 – despite the fact that in that year no breaking events occurred – was the preparation for the 17th session of the United Nations.

Re-establishing the diplomatical relation with the Congo in 1963

As the Hungarian-Congolese diplomatical relations became invalid after the formation of the Cyrill Adoula-led central government, from August 1961, Hungary made some

²¹ Parti Solidaire Africaine / African Solidarity Party.

²² <http://mek.oszk.hu/00300/00355/html/ABC09006/09077.htm>, Downloaded at: 2 June, 2014.

²³ Belgian lawyer, advisor of Patrice Lumumba during the Round Table Conference at Brussels. He also published about Congo issues. <http://archives.lesoir.be/un-avocat-et-juriste-democrate-militant-me-jules-chome-t-19920110-Z04VCW.html>

²⁴ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Report on 28 August, 1962. Brussels. Subject: Dinner at the Embassy.

²⁵ He became Burma’s representative at the United Nations in 1953. After the death of Dag Hammarskjöld, he served as UN acting secretary-general, then, between 1962 and 1972 as UN secretary-general.

efforts to re-establish its bilateral agreement with the Congo. These efforts were based on the 3177/1962 government declaration, which ordered to arrange the contacts when time and climate are suitable. Péter Kós, Hungarian ambassador to Accra (Ghana) represented Hungary at the UN African Economical Meeting in Léopoldville, and gathered information about the possibilities. He estimated that the time had come to initiate. It seems – and for not the first time – that the Hungarian diplomacy simply followed the events, and those countries (Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia) who had already worked on the improvements of their relations with the Congo.²⁶

The Congo crisis, neocolonialist ambitions

In a report, sent from Brussels by the Hungarian ambassador Tibor Lajti to János Péter, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Hungarian diplomacy got fresh informations about the so-called CNL²⁷ from Brazzaville²⁸, and the armed uprising or often called rebellion, led by Pierre Mulele and Gaston Emile Soumialot.²⁹ The ambassador used the Congolese newspaper, *Le Courrier d'Afrique* as a source, and described the Mulele rebels as “partisans” applying the guerilla warfare.

From a note at 30 July, 1964 seems that the Hungarian diplomacy found the past 4 years of the Congo crisis very chaotic with unexpected turning points and contradictions. The same report underlined that “despite the efforts of the Adoula-government, the political and economical situation had not improved in the Congo, but became worse.”³⁰

About Thsombe’s rule as “unifier” of the country, Hungary took over and completely agreed with the Soviet Union’s point of view, namely: “his emergence is the result of the compromise between Belgian, British and American colonialists, in the defence of neocolonialism at all costs”.³¹

Later in this year, the Hungarian ambassador from Accra (Ghana) sent a very detailed analysis about the Congo.³² Again, second-handed, or indirect sources were sent to Budapest. This time, Frances Drenovec, reporter of the Tanjug press agency³³ in Accra shared his informations about the Congo and the main actors of the Congolese politics he had met personally. The analysis gives information about the pro-Western politicians (Kasavubu, Thsombe, Adoula, Ileo), the personal conflict of Joseph Kasavubu and Moise

²⁶ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Note dated at 8 July, 1963. Subject: Diplomatical relations with the Congo /Léopoldville.

²⁷ CNL stands for: Conseil National de Libération.

²⁸ Capital of the Republic of Congo, headquarter of the CNL.

²⁹ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Report from Brussels. 1 July, 1964.

³⁰ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Reports nr. 81 and 119. from Brussels. 31 July, 1964.

³¹ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Reports from Brussels. Subject: The Congo crisis, neocolonialist aspirations.

³² MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Subject: About the Congo question. 24 October, 1964.

³³ Yugoslavia’s official news agency; Telegraphic Agency of the New Yugoslavia.

Thsombe, about the state of the Congolese Army, and about the National Unity Front (Gbenye³⁴, Gizenga) too.

Other example of the indirect sources, occurred also in 1964, when Congolese travelling through Hungary or other Eastern Bloc countries, wanted to get in touch with Hungary.³⁵ A certain Étienne Richard Mbaya, leader of the Congolese students in Czechoslovakia, made contacts with the Hungarian Embassy in Prague. He informed the Embassy that a Youth Association was founded in Léopoldville, misusing the name of Lumumba. He expressed his wish to visit the Hungarian Young Communist League, called KISZ. He attached a declaration in french, asking to forward this to the above mentioned organization.

Where history and diplomacy meets

Let's continue with the role of Endre Sik,³⁶ Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, in office between 15 February 1958 and 13 September 1961.³⁷ He received top secret and confidential information during the hottest months of the Congo crisis. While the 15th session of the United Nations Organization took place, he represented Hungary, together with János Kádár³⁸ and János Péter, where one of the main issues was the Congo crisis.³⁹

He was succeeded by János Péter during the rest of this Cold War conflict. The period he spent in office coincided with the secession of Katanga and South-Kasai, the assassination of Lumumba, and he retired when he turned to 70, right before the plane crash of Dag Hammarskjöld,⁴⁰ Secretary-General of the United Nation's Organization. After he had retired he started to work on the History of Black Africa.⁴¹ In the 4th volume, he wrote about the history of the Congo until its independence. No doubt he used the content of these sources, without referring to them, in his socialist committed work. His books reached not only the Hungairan, but the foreigner readers, too, thanks to the English and French translations of his work.

Conclusions

Although the Hungarian People's Republic was not a main actor in the Congo crisis, it seems from declassified archival sources and newspapers that the Hungarian diplomacy and

³⁴ Elected to Chamber in May 1960 and appointed Minister of Interior by Lumumba. Fled to Stanleyville and worked with Gizenga. In 1961 he became Minister of Interior in the Adoula government. He supported Soumialot's CNL, although he rivaled Soumialot for leadership.

³⁵ MNL XIX-J-1-j 1945-1964 Kongó. Subject: Mbaya, representative of the Lumumbist Party. 12 December 1964.

³⁶ For more details in hungarian see: Búr, Gábor: "Sik Endre, Afrika történetirója". In: *Harambee*. Publikon Könyvek, Pécs, 2006. pp. 108-116.

³⁷ <http://mek.niif.hu/00300/00355/html/index.html>, Downloaded at: 4 June, 2014.

³⁸ Secretary-General of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party.

³⁹ *Népszabadság*, September 23, 1960.

⁴⁰ Happened on 18 September, 1961.

⁴¹ Sik, Endre: *The History of Black Africa*. Vol. I-IV. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1964-1973.

public opinion followed the events with its limited access to the conflict. We didn't have neither an embassy nor a consulate in the Congo, but indirectly, through the information of Soviet or Czechoslovakian diplomatical sources, or via other Hungarian embassies from African countries (like Egypt), or from Hungarian persons living or staying in the Congo.

The readers of the *Népszabadság* were well informed about the main events happening in the Congo, sometimes with a little bit of delay. The main sources of this journal were the Reuters (London), AFP,⁴² UPI,⁴³ AP,⁴⁴ AND,⁴⁵ or simply as they often called them: Western Press Agencies, and from the other side of the Iron Curtain: the TASS and the MTI.⁴⁶

They got an Eastern Bloc view of the conflict and civil war. It often seems from *Népszabadság*, that an Afro-Asian and Pan-African solidarity helped and supported Congo during this very complicated period. The readers of the newspaper often received an economical analyse about the Congo, with very detailed statistics. Sometimes maps and/or photos were also published in the newspaper, giving a better picture about the Congo and the events. In some cases, there were some – mainly minor – mistakes, for instance one of the comrades of Lumumba, who also has been executed, Maurice Mpolo was not Minister of Youth and Defence,⁴⁷ but Youth and Sports.⁴⁸

Another impact of the Congo crisis on Hungary was the name changes of streets. In a couple of Hungarian cities and towns, like Budapest (nowadays Róna utca), Szeged (nowadays Apáca utca), Hódmezővásárhely (nowadays Hódi Pál utca), some streets were named after Lumumba as a tribute to the Congolese martyr.⁴⁹

While preparing for my study, I found an interesting link between Hungary and the Congo crisis. The eldest son of Patrice Lumumba, François Lumumba, leader of the MNC-L,⁵⁰ obtained his doctorate at the Economic University of Budapest⁵¹ in political economics in 1992, before he returned back to Zaïre.⁵² All in all, we might conclude that Hungary had a fragmentary access and picture of the Congo crisis, but as this conflict was very important in the Cold War period, it made several efforts to be up-to-date with the main events.

⁴² APF stands for: Agence France Presse (Paris).

⁴³ UPI stands for: United Press International (Washington DC).

⁴⁴ AP stands for: Associated Press (New York).

⁴⁵ ADN stands for: Anchorage Daily News.

⁴⁶ MTI stands for: Magyar Távirati Iroda; Hungarian Telegraph Office (Budapest).

⁴⁷ *Népszabadság*, 14 February 1961.

⁴⁸ Lise Namikas: *Battleground Africa. Cold War in the Congo 1960-1965*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2013. p. 119.

⁴⁹ http://index.hu/belfold/tegnapiujsg/2011/02/13/1961_meggyilkoltak_lumumbat, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Mouvement National Congolais – Lumumba wing.

⁵¹ Nowadays called: Corvinus University of Budapest.

⁵² <http://american-biography.blogspot.hu/2011/02/patrice-lumumba-first-prime-minister-of.html>, Downloaded at 2 June, 2014.