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**THE RECEPTION OF DOSTOYEVSKY IN HUNGARY AFTER 1945
IN THE CONTEXT OF LITERARY POLITICS
AND PUBLISHING HISTORY**

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Theses

In a direct proportion to the passing of time from a given historical period the need for putting more effort into re-evaluating the intellectual and artistic works of socialist societies also increases, in order to understand the characteristics of the era. In Hungary the time that passed since the change of the political system – which also rearranged the possibilities and conditions of literary discourse – still seems to be too short. It is still very difficult to talk about the Kádár-era in a balanced way because in the course of evaluating this period there are distorted concepts, simplistic, ahistorical ideas opposite each other in many cases. In the international scientific community, however, the era of communism is not seen as a “non-historical” episode, but as the extreme product of social and political modernity which has defined our thinking in many ways until the present day.¹

This dissertation aims to explore the cultural-political framework of the reception-history of Dostoyevsky. We cannot examine the reception-history after 1945 without the need to review thoroughly the cultural policy of the era and the intentions that shaped the politics of literature. After 1945 politics encroached on literature, it intervened in literary processes – true, in varying degrees in different periods. Consequently, in the first part of the dissertation we will describe – with the help of political, literary and publishing history – the publishing-political background which influenced the development of the reception of Dostoyevsky in Hungary after 1945. In the background of this topic we also deal with the changes in the proportion of the published western (Anglo-American) and Soviet (Russian) literary works and their numbers of copies in the Kádár-era.

Following the presentation of the publishing-political background the aim of the second part of the dissertation is to examine the Hungarian reception of Dostoyevsky through a specific method. This method is the interpretation of the forewords and afterwords that were mandatorily written for the published works of the Russian writer. Through this we aim to show the changing perception of the Dostoyevsky image and his works in the Kádár-era. The

¹ Scheibner, Tamás: A magyar irodalomtudomány szovjetizálása – A szocialista realista kritika és intézményei 1945–1953. Ráció Kiadó, Budapest, 2014. 10.

last chapter is also linked to this subject as it presents the changes of possibilities of teaching the works of Dostoyevsky in secondary grammar schools. Finally, the Annex provides an introduction to the world of popular partisan novels in the first half of the 1950s, and the ways of teaching Russian literature in high schools in the '60s and '70s.

The necessity of this dissertation is justified by the fact that no one has yet summarized the reception of Dostoyevsky's works after 1957-58. With regard to the reception of Russian writers in Hungary before 1945 Zsuzsa D. Zöldhelyi and Ágnes Dukkon have edited a four-volume work with the title of "Orosz írók magyar szemmel" (Russian writers as seen in Hungary) which is a very accurate collection of documents of Russian literature in the pre-1945 era. (Concerning the 1945-1980 period a less detailed document compilation is published with a similar title edited by Erzsébet Kámán.) The Hungarian reception history of Dostoyevsky's works before 1945 has been analysed through Ágnes Dukkon's research. In addition to these, the work of István Rejtő, "Az orosz irodalom fogadtatása Magyarországon" (The reception of Russian literature in Hungary), published in 1958, gives a comprehensive overview of the reception-history of Russian writers.

The novelty value of this dissertation is in the chosen method of inquiry: the text is based on the assumption that a specific reception-history of Dostoyevsky's works can be drawn from the examination of the compulsory forewords and afterwords. Through the examination of the emerging image not only the different versions of literary interpretation in the Kádár-era are revealed, but we can also see how a classic author was revived after 100-150 years. An author from whom every era wanted to learn something, whose universality forced the recipient Hungarian literature to face the fundamental questions of human existence. One of the most important features of the reception-history of Dostoyevsky's works appears in the words of Gyula Laziczius following André Gide's book: "Dostoyevsky is the writer in whom everyone finds his own world, but also something else, which he cannot agree with. So he finds not only what he is looking for, but also what he is reluctant to find."²

The reception-history of Dostoyevsky's works can be evaluated as a heterogeneous acquisition process, from which only certain layers can be unravelled in this dissertation. The "borderline nature" of the scientific position of reception-history a priori allows for a multi-

² Laziczius Gyula: Dosztojevskij fejlődése. Nyugat, 1928. II. 717-729. (Újraközlés: Dukkon Ágnes: Orosz Írók Magyar Szemmel. III. Szerk. Dukkon Ágnes. 296-312.) André Gide, Dostoievsky, Paris, 1923-ban megjelent könyvére hivatkozva idézi Dukkon Ágnes: Orosz Írók Magyar Szemmel. III. Szerk. Dukkon Ágnes. 16-17.

dimensional approach.³ In addition, the uncertainties of the multifactorial process are increased by the fact that the political ideology of the Kádár-era did not have a permanent nature, which we could lean on as an immovable reference system. The political expectations changed vertically and in time, but they were not always uniform even horizontally. This was the result of the different attitudes and approaches of politicians and also of the fact that not providing clear guidelines was in the interest of the political leadership in order to keep their scope for interpretation sufficiently wide. (Moreover, even though clarity was emphasized in theory, leaving the possibility of ambiguity in some cases could function as a “safety valve”.) Accordingly, in every decade of the Hungarian Dostoyevsky reception-history it can be observed that certain features of Dostoyevsky's image inherited from the 19th century appeared in the schemes used in respect of the writer and his most important works, depending on how the political and ideological aspects of the power changed the emphasis of interpretations.

The admiration for Dostoyevsky's works was the most intense in the 1920s and '30s in Hungary, and the writer was in the focus of attention until the mid-1940s. In the first half of the 20th century, beside the influence of the generations of “Nyugat” (an important Hungarian literary journal of the time), the reception-history of Dostoyevsky is significantly influenced by the appearance of existential philosophy, which touched every aspect of contemporary Europe (and Hungary, too). This philosophy (see the works of Gyula Laziczius, Ervin Sinkó, Kálmán Újszászi, Béla Varga and László Vatai) regarded Dostoyevsky as a literary paragon.⁴ The intellectual background and the Western European character of this influence are connected to the question of why the impact of Russian literature and culture reached Hungarian culture from the west, which has culturally (and also politically) mostly been western-oriented from the era of St. Stephen.

Compared to the significant change that can be observed in the intensity and awareness of the interest in Russian literature and culture between the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century the difference between the reception-histories of the pre-1945 and the post-1945 era is much more radical as an effect of the caesura after the Second World War. After the war Hungary was under the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, and one of the consequences of this fact was the complete ideological and political subordination to

³ Dionýz Ďurišin: Összehasonlító irodalomkutatás. Gondolat, Budapest, 1977.

⁴ Erről részletesen ld. Dukkon Ágnes: A két világháború közötti magyar Dosztojevszkij-kultusz szellemi háttere. In: Protestáns Szemle 1992/4. 258-270. és uő: Рецепция Достоевского в Венгрии в 1920-1940-е годы в ключе экзистенциальной философии. In: Studia Slavica Hung. 52/1-2 (2007) 87-94.

the Stalinist literary policy. The greatest difference between the attitudes in the first and second half of the 20th century can be seen from the following: in the first half of the century the relationship between “active” and “inclusive” art was spontaneous and organic in nature, namely the thoughts sparked by the external impact knocked on, influenced and inspired each other, or even provoked contradictions, so they had fertilizing power. After the Second World War however, the external effect became directed in nature (in variable intensity), the interaction was forced to be bipolar so its natural development was entirely altered. The role of literature was revalued and subordinated to the mind-altering goals of Stalinist ideology, a consequence of which the possibility of dialogue in art began to become manipulated consciously by the political power. A direct result of the progressive alignment with the Soviet policy was the restriction of Dostoyevsky's literary presence between 1945 and 1948, then a total ban of his works between 1948 and 1956. As the classic Russian writer was an undesirable author in the Soviet Union so his works could not be published in Hungary either.

After Stalin's death Khrushchev came to power in the Soviet Union and a detente began in foreign and domestic policy which influenced all Soviet-dependent, Socialist countries. One of the evidences of the paradigm shift in literary life is that following the 1955 release of Dostoyevsky's works in Moscow more and more of his writings were slowly made available in Hungary starting from 1956, or rather from 1957. However, Dostoyevsky was still a “difficult” author for the official cultural policy of the era, so his works could only be published with explanations and comments attached. Marxist literary criticism basically contrasted the ideals of the Socialist literature with Dostoyevsky's art, however in various periods the interpretations of Dostoyevsky's works were used for supporting ideas that contradict each other. Topics that could be approached from different angles, for example, were Dostoyevsky's attitude toward revolution, his anti-capitalism, or his faith in God, which official critics tried to reduce to humanism and link to the idea of Socialist brotherhood.

Beside *Crime and Punishment* Dostoyevsky's early works (*White Nights*, *Poor Folk*) were published initially in the early Kádár-era as they were easier to interpret based on the official values and literary taste of the Socialist state. The rediscovery and re-interpretation of the works of the Russian writer – similar to the “Dostoyevsky Renaissance” in the 1920s and '30s – began in Hungary in the early 1960s. In addition to the forewords and afterwords (which can be read as thorough studies) written by István Sötér (*The Brothers Karamazov*) and Endre Török (*The Idiot*) the renewed Marxist interpretations of Ferenc Fehér also prove that the re-interpretation of Dostoyevsky's works had an important, fertilizing role in the

change of the literary approach. The fact that the intellectuals rediscovered Dostoyevsky and their passion for the writer's works indicates that Dostoyevsky's art became adequate art again in the '60s.

After the 1920s and '30s all of the works of Dostoyevsky were published again in the 1960-70s in the "Hungarian Helikon" series. (The numbers of copies were much smaller than the average literary proportions. The exact number depended on the category of the given work i.e.: "supported, "tolerated" or "prohibited".) Nonetheless, the character of the emerging "Dostoyevsky Renaissance" changed compared to the previous cult of the '30s: in addition to the existential reading and interpretation of the works, literature discussing academic questions started to appear, so the search for truth in the works was not just a personal matter, but also a research topic, a scientific problem.

However, the reform era which was initially perceived in the cultural and spiritual realm and then manifested in economic and (literary) political changes was interrupted in the early seventies – at first in foreign policy, then in the economy. As a consequence, the cultural reforms that started in the second half of the sixties continued in the field of public education in the coming decades and resulted in educational and promotional approaches to literature. Because of the emphasis on the public educational approach the works of Dostoyevsky were often published with rather short, educational, easy-to-understand afterwords and endnotes (7-8 pages altogether) from the 1970s until the second half of the 1980s, which were written by György Bakcsi, head of Gondolat Publications.

Through the use of promotion-like accompanying texts more people could be reached, however, there was no opportunity (or political demand?) for the serious interpretation of the works even though the literary politics of the 1980s can be called much more permissive than that of the 1960s. The demand for ideological correctness was on the decline, the role of academic disciplines increased, and in interpretations it became easier to discuss thoughts that appeared in the works which the political power regarded problematic. However, the accompanying texts of the interpretation of Dostoyevsky's works were not connected to the spiritually and scientifically innovative literary aspirations of the 1960s (which lived on in university research in the 1970s). This happened despite the fact that due to the gradual process of political détente from the middle of the 1960s the international trends were more and more perceivable in Hungary: the effects of Dostoyevsky's reception-history in Western Europe, of the scientific works of the Russian intellectual elite and of the new cult of Dostoyevsky which appeared with Mikhail Bakhtin. Those effects, in turn, can be perceived

in the Dostoyevsky image portrayed in the new literature book for 3rd-grade students of secondary grammar schools written in the framework of the great syllabus reform in 1978.

Following the 1989 political changes in Hungary the practice of publishing has changed so much compared to the Kádár-era that the problems and concepts detailed earlier are almost impossible to interpret in this context. The texts are accessible to all, but they are very diverse and the works that can be considered to represent some literary value are almost lost in the multitude of published books.

The background described above may help to understand why Dostoyevsky's name could not be found among the first twelve names of the most often published Russian–Soviet writers between 1945 and 1957, then why his works were published again slowly and gradually from 1957, and why the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the Russian writer's works started in Hungary from the early 1960s. As a result of the changing standards of literary politics only some features of the writer's art were highlighted at any time. The obviously unacceptable features for the Kádár-regime were condemned by literary politics in the 1950s, then labelled “permissible errors” in the 1960s and ‘70s, and finally rediscovered in the 1990s as almost prophecies.

The structure of the dissertation is not characterized by a mechanical chronological order, but – as referenced in the document at the necessary places– it examines the texts in the complex process of the changes of politics and culture, taking into account the internal (historical, cultural and literary) divisions of the studied era, that is the period between 1945 and the millennium. The dissertation is built on historical sources, literary texts and documents of literary and education policies.

The way of collecting and processing of the material is based on the gathering and evaluation of archival materials and the related literature, and on the interpretation of the accompanying texts of the publications of Dostoyevsky. Naturally, starting this research does not mean that the questions asked could be considered answered, on the contrary, it opens the possibility to broaden the aspects of further investigation.