

# Literary prizes as indicators of changing concepts of cultural policy. A case study from Socialist Hungary

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

The paper introduces a part of a larger research project, conducted within the frames of a doctoral thesis. The main goal of the thesis is to trace the conceptual developments of Hungarian literary policy during the short 20th century, a period of fundamental political and social changes, by using state awarded literary prizes as indicators. In the following, the significance of literary prizes will first be outlined from a cultural-political and literary-sociological point of view, then one of the prizes analysed in the research, the Kossuth-Prize, as well as some sample results will be presented in detail.

## KEYWORDS

Hungary, literary policy, literary awards, Kossuth prize, cultural policy research

Within the last 30 years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the reappraisal of Hungary's socialist past. In the course of that period, several works have been published discussing specific aspects or periods of Hungarian cultural policy during the socialist era. Their focus mostly lies on the exposure of the state's exertion of influence on members of the

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cultural field via the former state security service.<sup>1</sup> However, less attention has been paid to a comparative and/or interdisciplinary approach to the historiography of cultural policy in Hungary. As a result, hardly any research is available that either compares different periods of Hungarian cultural policy<sup>2</sup> or investigates the interrelation between cultural policy and other research fields such as, for example, nation and community building or literary analysis.

The research conducted within the frames of the doctoral thesis by the present author describes the development of the cultural policy strategies and their shifting priorities according to the changing political reality by comparing the main characteristics, practices and ideological principals of four different periods of Hungarian cultural policy during the *short 20th century* (Hobsbawm, 1998). Those four different periods are the Interwar period (1920–1939), the period of the so-called Rákosi-regime (1948/49–1956), the period of the so-called Kádár-regime (1956–1989) and the first years of democracy (1989–1999). However, due to the immensity of the cultural policy research field the analysis focusses principally on literary policy. The reason for choosing this particular focus lies in the fact that the literary field presents itself as a fruitful research area thanks to its mostly comprehensible structures, the great amount of written sources – taking into consideration non-fictional and fictional texts alike – and, most importantly, to its outstanding significance for those in power during the entire observation period.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, there had been debates about numerous aspects of literature on several levels and in several forms that allow for thorough analysis with regard to a number of specific research questions.

As the timespan of the research is very long, comprising altogether 70 years, a reliable indicator for significant changes in the course of literary policy was needed to function as a guideline for in-depth analysis. Not every cultural minister was a defining person for policy-making and vice versa, not every party resolution or programmatic change in cultural policy that was documented on paper had an actual effect on the literary field. Consequently, the literary prizes awarded by the state during the observation period were chosen as indicators for the following reasons. Firstly, literary prizes were among the most important institutions within the literary field that had great impact on the working and living conditions of the authors who were awarded one of the official prizes. Secondly, the founding of well-endowed literary prizes proves the importance of literature in the eyes of the respective powers. Thirdly, an analysis of the awarding system and the list of the awardees shows how much the literary field was (and still is) subject to political reasoning. For purposes of research 9 literary prizes have been analysed that were regularly awarded between 1920 and 1999: the Baumgarten Prize and Baumgarten Reward,

<sup>1</sup>Gervai (2004, 2011) and Bolvári-Takács (1998, 2008) have examined the Hungarian film business, Lengyel (2011) and Imre (2010) analysed the theatre sphere and Standeisky (1987, 1990, 1996, 2005) has published several works on the way in which the cultural policy of the MKP affected Hungarian writers and the role they played in the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

<sup>2</sup>In 2002, T.Kiss published a book that offers a quick overview of the most important changes within Hungarian cultural policy between 1867 and 2000. However, in spite of the rather long time span it covers, the book consists of only 187 pages, including the professional biographies of the heads of the cultural ministries.

<sup>3</sup>Pierre Bourdieu (1999: 341–353) underlines the importance of the literary field for the field of power, which is one of the reasons why this research operates mostly with Bourdieu's field theory to offer a theoretical framework for the understanding of the shifting (inter-)dependencies within the changing Hungarian literary field during the observation period.



the Corvin Collar and the Corvin Chain, the Kossuth Prize, the József Attila Prize, the Állami [State] Prize, the SZOT Prize and the Széchenyi Prize. None of the prizes was awarded during the whole timespan and not all of the prizes were technically “prizes”, but their function and social, political and financial importance were on a comparable level. Due to the limitations of this paper, it focuses on outlining the meaning of literary prizes from a political and literary sociological perspective, thus providing a basis for contextualising some exemplary findings of the research work presented below.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LITERARY PRIZES

The practice of awarding prizes to artists has a long history that can be traced back to antiquity. Literary prize-giving as we know it today developed from the Enlightenment onwards in the field of reference of patronage, the literary market and cultural policy. Indeed, both patronage and sponsorship are phenomena that continue to be important factors in the promotion of art and culture today. Thus, the institution of literary prizes can also be seen as a manifestation of patronage under the conditions of a developed literary market. Literary prizes have an economic, as well as a literary-aesthetic and, through this, an ideological function. However, the impact of literary prizes is not limited to the literary industry per se, which gives them an important social and political significance. Prizes are widespread in all areas of high and popular culture. According to Huizinga, art – like sport – is a manifestation of play, which is the origin of all cultural activity. The concept of winning is most closely connected with play, which also brings the concepts of prize, stake or profit into focus:

“One fights or plays ‘for’ something. In the first and last instance, it is the victory itself for which one fights and plays; but this victory is linked to all kinds of ways in which it is enjoyed: first of all, as a victory brag, as a triumph that is celebrated by the group with cheers and praises. As a lasting consequence, honour, reputation, and prestige spring from it. As a rule, however, even when the game is staked out, something more is connected with winning than honour alone. The game has a stake. This can be symbolic or of material value, but it can also have exclusively ideal value. [...] [The] prize may be a laurel wreath, a sum of money, or some other material value.” (Huizinga, 2011: 62)

And yet, especially in the field of art and culture, prizes should be considered as an imposition or an external burden, especially since the competitive character in which a definite winner must emerge – in contrast to sport – does not correspond to the nature of art and culture. While sporting performances can be enhanced through training, artistic or creative output eludes such mechanisms. And yet, prizes play a prominent role in the field of art and culture, as they are a phenomenon charged with meanings on several levels and they have their functions and tasks in different areas. According to English, prizes basically function along three axes: the social, the institutional and the ideological.

„Socially, the prize functions as a rallying point, a structural device, around which ambitious cultural events and festivities may be organized. It is a form of play [...], a “cultural game” which can be articulated with or overlaid on any of the many games of culture that we call the arts. As such, it introduces special excitements and special opportunities for mass spectacle, opportunities to which the arts in question may not themselves ordinarily give rise.” (English, 2005: 50)



Awards make it possible to create an event out of things that are usually difficult to showcase in such a spectacular manner. Thus, through media coverage of an award ceremony, one reaches a relatively broad mass audience with something that generally eludes a large audience. Prizes also have the ability to make something generally elusive tangible, or at least to appear to be so, to a broad lay audience. In this context, prizes take on the same key functions as, for example, literary criticism – although not necessarily to the same extent (Anz, 2004: 195). They have an informative, orientational function that gives the public an overview of the supposedly unmanageable world of literature; a function of aiding selection and a function of inducing reflection and stimulating communication. As mentioned above, there will be public debate about the literature that has won a prize or has been passed over by the prize jury. Lastly, literary prizes entail an entertainment function. The didactic-mediating function in service of the audience and the didactic-sanctioning function for the writers, which are more the functions of literary criticism, are only relevant to prizes insofar as the awarding of a prize is often accompanied by a justification of the award which explains the specific prize-worthy qualities of the work or the writer.

Prizes therefore contribute to making the supposedly unmanageable world of literature appear orderly and structured, where valuation and ranking are inherent in the structure thus created. Prizes are accepted by the general public as a legitimate measure of the cultural value of a person or a work. Yet prizes say far less about the value of works of literature and their writers than it might appear to the superficial glance. It is worth inquiring instead into the various interests at stake – on the institutional, as well as the individual side – in the awarding of a prize, as well as into the mechanisms and strategies by which these interests are enforced. Against such a background, the ambiguity of literary prizes quickly becomes apparent:

„On the one hand, we tend to think of a prize [...] as a sort of gift. The presenting and receiving of a prize is not [...] an economic transaction in the narrow sense of the term. It involves both the awarders and the recipients in a highly ritualized theater of gestures and counter gestures [...]. [...] While one can maneuver for a prize in various ways, for example, one cannot generally bargain or haggle for one. One cannot demand a bigger prize for one's artistic efforts [...] [n]or can the donor or presenter of the prize insist openly on any economic recompense or return; such arrangements exist [...], but they fatally compromise the prize as prize, deflating its prestige and removing it to the sphere of contractual marketing agreements. [...] Yet on the other hand, "prize" has its etymological roots precisely in money and in exchange. [...] Both the discourse internal to prizes – the discussions that take place among judges and administrators – and the external commentary about them are fairly dominated by rhetorics of calculation, invoking fine points of balance, fairness, obligation, and debt.” (English, 2005: 5)

In fact, while in a narrower sense prizes function as objectified symbolic capital, which in Bourdieu's sense is the equivalent in the cultural field to money in the economic field, in a broader sense – precisely because of their inherent valence – they also function as instruments of exchange and transformation:

“Prizes [...] are the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital – which is to say that they are our most effective institutional agents of capital intraconversion. By means of prizes, not only are particular symbolic fortunes “cashed in” [...] or particular economic fortunes culturally “laundered” [...], but the very barriers and rates of exchange, in terms of which all such transactions must take place, are continually contested and adjusted.” (English, 2005: 10)



Awarding a prize serves to increase prestige and value on both sides: with the prize money that usually accompanies the awarding of a prize, apart from exceptional cases, a monetary prize is assigned to literature or to the writer. At the same time, the awarding of prizes also leads to an increase in the prestige of the awarding institution – the holders of money, political power or social connections can appropriate or share in the cultural prestige of the works they award or of their creators through their investment, while the latter can capitalise on it and thus, in turn, increase their prestige (Ulmer, 2006: 3).

However, this functional dynamic is not limited purely to the level of public image – rather, it concerns the relative positioning of the various forces at play in the field of art or the field of power that is superordinate to it, or the social distribution of power, which also has an effect on art and culture. In addition to the highly ritualised, festive-performative aspect of awarding prizes, there is also an inherent administrative and bureaucratic aspect of control or rigour. This aspect comes into play not only in the determination of the winner per se, but already in the composition of the jury or the board of trustees of the prize – indeed, in the very foundation of the prize itself in the first place. Prizes, as already mentioned, are an institution designed to establish order in a supposedly messy field – and this is precisely what makes them a fundamental tool of the institutional machinery around achieving and maintaining cultural legitimacy and authority (English, 2005: 37). Thus, the awarding of prizes can serve a body to establish and maintain or preserve cultural standards through reward or even rebuke.

“[Award ceremonies] sanction the literature that is representative of the prize-givers, act as a ‘seal of approval’, reflect dominant reception attitudes of social groups in their emphasising function, form guidelines for others and thus also have a share in the constitution of a certain literature in society [...] [They] are to be regarded in terms of reception sociology as processes in which social and literary-aesthetic norms of specific social groups are mediated in the determination of the literature that is representative of them”. (Leitgeb, 1994: 7)

This is also the reason why politics shows an interest in literary prizes, especially since they not only offer the possibility of bureaucratic control over the confusing field of literature, but by rewarding conformist writers or passing over oppositional writers prizes also give politics the power to officially define literary value or at least to have a public say in it.

“Institutionally, the prize functions as a claim to authority and an assertion of that authority – the authority, at bottom, to produce cultural value. It provides an institutional basis for exercising, or attempting to exercise, control over the cultural economy, over the distribution of esteem and reward on a particular cultural field – over what may be recognized as worthy of special notice. [...] The prize places a certain power [...] in the hands of cultural functionaries – those who organize and administer it behind the scenes, oversee the selection of members or judges, attract sponsors or patrons, make rules and exceptions to rules.” (English, 2005: 53)

In addition, literature is not only regarded as something independent of time – outstanding cultural assets retain their significance and greatness over decades and centuries, their value may outlast several epochs, while successes in the fields of politics, economics and to some extent also science are – with a few exceptions – ephemeral. Art and culture in general are also regarded as something sublime, sometimes even impartial. Accordingly, the awarding of literary prizes is sometimes accompanied by the desire to participate in the possible immortality of the prize-winning work and to reinforce and preserve the sublimity of art and literature in general through the socially recognised and effective ritual of awarding prizes (Ulmer, 2006).



“Ideologically, the prize offers particularly rich opportunities to test and affirm the notion of art as a separate and superior domain, a domain of disinterested activity which gives rise to a special, nontemporal, noneconomic, but scarce and thus highly desirable form of value. Precisely because this notion of art and of artistic value requires continual acts of collective make-believe to sustain it, there is a need for events which foster certain kinds of collective cultural (mis)recognition. [...] [A prize] does produce [...] agreement as to the special, nontemporal value of art as such.” (English, 2005: 53)

At the same time, however, literary prizes can also achieve exactly the opposite, namely on the one hand the devaluation of the awarded work or, on the other hand, the development of a counter-current, especially since literary prizes have the effect of forming currents and groups (Kröll, 1982: 145). In this context, English rightly points to the sheer quantity of literary prizes in the 20th century: “So many awards, [...] so little excellence,” and “‘Honors dishonor,’ Flaubert famously said.” (English, 2002: 110) While the first saying is aimed at the problem of qualitative decline in the face of quantitative mass, Flaubert’s *bon mot* refers to the rise of anti-institutional, supposedly independent positions that, in the face of the rise of prestigious official prizes and the prize bureaucracy that accompanies them, are emerging as counter-poles, as it were, and directing themselves against these socially established prizes, creating counter-concepts and thus turning not being awarded one of these prizes into an actual award. But even these oppositional, alternative, and sometimes subversive positions are only supposedly independent – in fact, art, literature and their value are never independent.

“Cultural value cannot emerge in the absence of social debts and obligations, of the (very unequally distributed) credit or respect that certain individuals are granted by others; its production is always a social process. Neither can it emerge in a political vacuum, the participants uncolored by and indifferent to prevailing hierarchies [...]; its production is always politicized. And neither can it emerge in perfect independence of or opposition to the economic marketplace itself.” (English, 2005: 27)

This effect, namely the emergence of such counter-currents, also clearly shows that the institution of literary prizes is in itself important for writers, despite all of its ambiguity, its sometimes dubious political overload depending on the historical context, its partly questionable rituality and the threat of a decline in value. The reason for this lies in the fundamental striving of the actors within the cultural field for autonomy, as already attested by Bourdieu.

“One pursues an interest in autonomy today not by seeking out some ever-narrower margin of the field that remains uncolored by money, by politics, by ethnic or geographic favoritism, but by seizing and managing as advantageously as one can the various and spatially scattered cultural instruments whose primary purpose is the negotiation of capital conversions. [...] Prizes have, to be sure, provided opportunities for the holders of noncultural assets (wealth, social connections, political power) to drive down the value of cultural assets relative to noncultural ones. But they have also provided certain opportunities for those “serious” artists and writers who know how to work with the nonseriousness of the contemporary awards scene to enlarge the scope of their own authority, to leverage their (always dominated) positions on the field of power, and so to achieve greater subversive efficacy.” (English, 2002: 126)

## THE FIRST LITERARY PRIZES IN HUNGARY

The history of modern Hungarian literary awards begins in the 20th century. In Hungary, literary life was traditionally grouped in various centres, which were either formed around a



university or higher educational institution, a publishing house or the place of publication of important periodicals. The financing of literature had primarily been ensured by private patronage; it was not until the middle of the 19th century that various corporations also took over the task of financing literature. This partly functioned by awarding literary prizes – mention should be made in particular of the foundation established after the death of the wealthy nobleman István Marczibányi, which, as a precursor to the later honours of the academies, awarded prizes for scholarly achievements, primarily in Hungarian, between 1815 and 1845 (Gintli, 2010: 320). Ten years after the Hungarian revolution of 1848/49, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences took on the role of the supreme and representative body for art and culture, social and natural sciences, and made a significant contribution to development in these fields through competitions it organised and prizes it awarded. In parallel, or as a supplement to the Academy of Sciences, the Kisfaludy Társaság (Kisfaludy Society), founded in 1836, and the Petőfi Társaság (Petőfi Society), founded in 1876, existed in the non-governmental context and were specifically dedicated to the promotion and cultivation of literature, the latter being primarily dedicated to young, aspiring writers. While there was an abundance of official orders and awards in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, some of which could also be awarded to artists and writers, and while Hungary, when independent, also redefined its state award system in the interwar period, the first official, Hungarian literary state prize was not established until after the Second World War.

In the interwar period two literary prizes existed: the Baumgarten Prize and Baumgarten Reward were founded by Franz Ferdinand Baumgarten on October 17, 1923 as stipulated in his will. The first prizes under this scheme were awarded in 1929, the first rewards in 1932. From the respective year of beginning onwards these prizes were given out each year on January 18 in the headquarters of the Baumgarten Foundation. The Foundation was run by the Baumgarten curatorship whose members were Mihály Babits, a highly respected and renowned Hungarian writer, and by Loránt Basch, a lawyer. After Babits' death, Aladár Schöpflin, a well-known writer, translator, literary critic and crucial figure in the Hungarian literary field, took over his position in the curatorship in 1941. In addition to the curatorship, an advisory board of eight members was consulted during the decision-making process, but the Minister of Religion and Education, who as such was also in charge of cultural questions, could ultimately raise a veto against the decisions of the Baumgarten committee. According to the will, the awardees had to be free of social, religious and racial prejudices and in cases of financial need were entitled to receive the prize or reward more than once. However, the list of awardees clearly shows a favouritism towards rather nationalistically oriented and politically conservative or right-wing oriented writers – a tendency which became even more pronounced as the political situation in Hungary became radicalised before the Second World War.

The Corvin Chain and the Corvin Collar were two prizes founded on October 11, 1930 by Miklós Horthy following the plans of Kunó Klebelsberg, Hungarian Minister of Religion and Education (yet again including culture) from 1922 to 1931 (Tamás T, 1999). The regulation of the Corvin Chain and the Corvin Collar is quite exceptional: the prize could be awarded for outstanding achievements within the fields of science, literature, arts and education by the Hungarian governor. The decision over who was to win a prize was based on the recommendations of the respective Minister of Religion and Education. However, everyone who once was awarded a Corvin Chain or a Corvin Collar became part of an autonomous consultative body that subsequently had to be involved into the decision-making process of the following year's potential



awardees. Murányi (1999) states that Klebelsberg's idea behind that awarding system was to form some sort of an elitist club. According to the statutes of the prizes, only 12 people could be bearers of the Corvin Chain and only 60 people could be bearers of the Corvin Collar at any one time. Hence, this rather closed circle could only be joined by a new member if one of these altogether 72 people died. Taking into consideration Bourdieu's concept of the different forms of capital (1999: 227–282), it is important to point out that these most prestigious prizes came without prize money; both the Corvin Chain and the Corvin Collar were “only” of symbolic value, the actual medals had to be given back to the state after the death of an awardee. They were then handed on to the next awardees – the honoured new members of the “Corvin Order”. Due to the fact that little has survived of the documents of the Ministry of Religion and Education which was in charge of the Corvin awards, the reasons based on which somebody was or was not awarded a Corvin Chain or Collar are not comprehensible today. However, it is striking that the altogether 23 individuals who were awarded the Corvin Chain can be described as rather loyal to the political course of the time. Ferenc Herczeg and Sándor Reményik, two writers who had been awarded the Corvin Chain, both fit this description: Herczeg was the bestselling author of the Horthy-era and editor in chief of the literary magazine *Új idők* (New times) which can be best described as a conservative, “demotic”-nationalist periodical. He also became president of the Hungarian Revisionist League. (Irodalmi Jelen, 2011) Reményik was a Transylvanian author who was well known for his folkloristic poems. He had been awarded the Baumgarten-prize twice (1937, 1941) and received the Corvin Chain in 1940. It was quite common in the case of the Corvin awards and the Baumgarten Prize/Reward to be awarded to Hungarians living outside of Hungarian state borders after the peace treaty of Trianon. This was one way to show support not only to the Hungarians who were forced into a minority position in the neighbouring countries after WWI by including them into the “Hungarian national community”. It also represented the attitude of a political course whose motto was to gain back the lost territories – while that was not possible in concrete geographical and political terms, the cultural sphere could act as an alternative arena. However, Pandula (in Murányi, 1999) argues that the prizes were not only earned by the awardees' political loyalty, but also by their work, which is proven by the fact that 18 authors who had received either a Corvin Chain or a Corvin Collar were also awarded with the Kossuth Prize during the socialist era. Still, the fact that both Kunó Klebelsberg and Bálint Hóman, who served as Minister of Religion and Education between 1932 and 1938 as well as between 1939 and 1942, received the Corvin Chain during their own respective terms as Minister of Religion and Education gives reason to doubt the political objectivity of the awarding system. The last Corvin awards were given out in 1943 before Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán reinstated the Corvin Chain as a Hungarian state prize in 2001.

## KOSSUTH DÍJ (KOSSUTH PRIZE) – THE FIRST OFFICIAL HUNGARIAN LITERARY STATE PRIZE

The Kossuth Prize may be considered as quite an accurate indicator for the political developments during the 20th century in Hungary – its history is reflective not only of the ideological and programmatic changes in Hungarian politics, but also of the relationship between those in power and the literary elite of the country. This was in fact a troubled relationship that was characterized by a forced collaboration between the rulers and the ruled.



The Kossuth Prize was founded by Parliament on the 3rd of March in 1948 within the framework of a law called, "For rewarding Hungarian creative output in order to commemorate the centenary of the revolution of March 15, 1848." (1948, Paragraph XVIII). The founding of the prize was based on a suggestion by the Communist Party, and the same is true of the idea of naming it after Hungarian revolutionist and freedom fighter Lajos Kossuth – a long-standing Hungarian national hero and epitome of Hungarian patriotism and independence. The choice of Kossuth as name giver for the most important state prize founded by the Communist Party seems strange at first sight. However, [Mevis \(2009: 377\)](#) states that "certainly from 1945 onwards, communist parties presented themselves as heirs to national traditions and guardians of national interests." Also, [Bottoni \(2009: 794\)](#) underlines the tactical reasons for choosing a Hungarian national hero as reference point:

"Between 1945 and 1948 Hungarian communists portrayed themselves as advocates of the 'truest' popular traditions. Textbooks and scholarship described Hungarian history as a perpetual struggle between progressive patriots – from the anti-Habsburg Calvinist kuruc fighters of the seventeenth century to the political leaders of the 1848 revolution, Lajos Kossuth and Sándor Petőfi – and reactionary, clerical-minded traitors of the people's interests (the labanc). The exploitation of national symbols in the coalition years was of an evident tactical nature, but it was not simply an ideology adopted to compensate for a lack of popularity. Hungarian communists created a peculiar ideological syncretism in which pro-Soviet internationalism and patriotism could cohabitate."

The Hungarian Communist Party presented itself as the liberating force that finally accomplished what the Hungarian revolutionaries had failed to accomplish in the previous decade – bringing the revolution to a successful ending. By tying it in with former concepts of the enemy and decontextualizing the latter sufficiently so as to blur them into their own concepts of the enemy, the Communists' rise to power was staged as the completion of the traditional Hungarian freedom fight of 1948.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Founding Resolution of the Kossuth Prize, it could be given to scholars, artists, to intellectual and physical workers dedicated to post-war reconstruction, as well as to soldiers. Originally, 25 prizes with a prize money of 20.000 Forint and 50 prizes with a prize money of 10.000 Forint could be awarded per year. A single prize could be divided and awarded to two people, also entailing the division of the prize money. In the beginning, the founders distinguished 6 groups of awardees, of which the third group comprised the literary prizes, together with those for achievements in the field of music, painting, sculpting, architecture, acting, film, folk art and journalism. There was a fixed number of prizes per group that could be awarded per year ([Bolváry-Takács, 1998: 38](#)). Obviously, these general conditions changed over the years. In 1950, there were no more fixed numbers of prizes that could be awarded per group and a new prize category, the so-called "accentuated grade", was established, which came with a prize money of 50.000 Forint. In 1952, the prize categories, called "grades", were yet again changed and renamed: "accentuated" (50.000 Ft), "gold" (30.000 Ft), "silver" (20.000 Ft) and "bronze" (10.000 Ft). In 1955, the grades were changed for the last time during the Rákosi-era: the "accentuated grade" became the "Grand Prize", while the gold, silver and bronze grades were

<sup>4</sup>The success of these efforts is proved by a remarkable number of poems written in the late 1940s and early 1950s which are consistent with the Communist Party's own narrative. E.g.: [Endre Darázs's „Rólad beszélünk”](#) (We talk about you) and [Tamás Aczél's „Honvédeskü”](#) (Soldier's oath)



renamed into Ist, IInd and IIIrd grade. All of these changes were of little relevance to the significance or intention of the Kossuth Prize. In 1963 however, a new law (1963, Paragraph 36) changed the character of the Kossuth Prize (Kiss, 2002: 32). With the *Állami Díj* (Állami Prize) a new prize was founded for achievements in science and technology. Consequently, the Kossuth Prize became a prize for artistic achievements only. The reason for this division was, according to Gyula Kállai's<sup>5</sup> speech given in parliament in December 1963, the proportional imbalance of the awardees in the preceding years. While the decision-makers of the Kossuth Prize committee always had a great number of potential awardees to choose from in the fields of science and scholarship or physical work and the like, they struggled every year to find a worthy artist or writer to award the prize to.<sup>6</sup> Although Kállai underlines that it is a question of numbers in the first place – there are just not as many artists and writers as scientists, scholars or workers – he also says that the “results [in the artistic field, E.R.] don't show *that* much” (in Kiss, 2002: 33). This is quite a remarkable statement that fits very well with the political course of reconciliation characteristic of the Kádár-regime. During the Rákosi-regime, writers, for example, were considered as workers who had to serve the socialist cause and produce their literature according to plan. On the first Writers Congress in Moscow in 1934, Zhdanov, who became the leading cultural politician of the Soviet Union in 1946, quoted Stalin saying that writers were the engineers of the human soul (Ždanov, 1951: 9). This became a motto for Hungarian literary policy, too, and the leading cultural politician of the time, József Révai fought fiercely to establish a new literary elite that produced literature according to the expectations of the Party. Hence, the awarding of the Kossuth Prize became a kind of inauguration ceremony for the new members of the Rákosi-regime's “intellectual court”. Non-conformist writers were silenced and edged out of the literary field. Legal requirements for such a move were secured during the 1950s by the regulations concerning the Kossuth Prize Committee. According to Act XVIII of 1948, the cabinet council had decided who should be awarded a prize which was then handed out by the President of the Republic on the 15th of March.<sup>7</sup> From February 1948 on, however, a “nomination committee” in charge of the nominations of candidates functioned within the Ministry for Religion and Education. The president of this committee was the respective Minister of Religion and Education, first Gyula Ortutay (1948/2/17–1950/2/25), then József Darvas (1950/2/25–1951/1/20). From January 1951 on, József Révai took over the position as president of the committee during his term as Cultural Minister until January 1953. In this period the committee was subject to the Ministry of Culture. In July 1953 József Darvas became Cultural Minister of Hungary again and as such took over the post of the president of the committee. During his term, the committee first was integrated into the bureau of the Cabinet Council, until it was reorganised as the independent Kossuth Prize Committee in February 1955

<sup>5</sup>Gyula Kállai was the first cultural minister after the revolution of 1956. His term lasted from 9th of May 1957 until 28th of January 1958. In addition, Kállai was also the president of the Kossuth Prize Committee from 5th of February 1957 until 11th of July 1965. (Bolváry-Takács, 1998: 39)

<sup>6</sup>Let us take a closer look at the numbers: from 1948 to 1963 the average number of Kossuth Prizes awarded per year was 65. The average number of Kossuth Prizes awarded for literary achievements during these years was 4.4. After the resolutions of 1963 these numbers changed – the average number of Kossuth Prizes sank to only 15.5 and the ones for literary achievements to 3.4. However, this change boosted the average percentage of literary prizes per year from 6.8% before the redefinition of the Kossuth Prize to 21.9% after 1963.

<sup>7</sup>The date of the awarding ceremony was changed to the 4th of April in 1964.



and began to function alongside the Cabinet Council. So, during the first years of its existence, the decision about the nomination of potential awardees, as well as the final decision, basically lay in the hands of the respective Cultural Minister, and he would decide according to the political climate and course of the day.<sup>8</sup> However, going back to Kállai's remark, it now appears in hindsight that the euphorically celebrated young communist writers whose works were meant to function as legitimization of the new power on an intellectual level were not actually able to revolutionise Hungarian literature and at the same time to live up to the quality standards of the times before.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the cases in which the Kossuth Prize was given out for actual literary achievement in the first place, the awarding was first and foremost a political act. Obviously, it might well be an impossible task to find a truly objective evaluation framework for literary works and thus discern which author truly "deserved" the Kossuth Prize. However, when analyzing the list of Kossuth Prize winners in detail and relating the findings to the numerous changes in the legal regulations of the prize outlined above, several anomalies strike the eye that ultimately back up this initial assumption. Due to the limits of the paper only a few of them shall be discussed below.

### Awards for the dead, or: re-evaluating the past(s)

The Kossuth Prizes were only ever awarded posthumously on two occasions. In 1948 six of the 110 Kossuth Prize winners<sup>10</sup> were already dead: two painters, one musician – none other than famous composer Béla Bartók –, one farmworker and two authors. The authors were Imre Somogyi who had been one of the founding members of the National Peasant Party in 1939, and poet Attila József who was, and still is, one of the most important Hungarian authors of the early 20th century. The choice of these two authors had been dictated by political strategy.

In 1948 the Communist Party was about to take over ruling power in Hungary thanks to what became known as the „salami tactics” – a term coined by Mátyás Rákosi to describe the way in which the Hungarian Communist Party eventually destroyed its political enemies by infiltrating the other non-Communist parties with their own people, or discrediting political opponents as fascists or fascist sympathizers. In this manner, with the backing of his own people within the opponent's rows, the regime managed to wear down the opposition step by step. It first lost its right (ist) wing, then the centrists and finally even the left-wingers of sympathising parties – indeed, even a section of their own party that had grown too radical for the Hungarian Communists, who were strictly

<sup>8</sup>An interesting detail in this context is that both Révai and Darvas received a Kossuth Prize during their own term as Cultural Minister. Révai was awarded the prize in 1949a, b, Darvas in 1956 at a time when the awarding of the Cultural Minister appears like a desperate attempt to strengthen the position of those in power, while the Hungarian intellectuals were already laying the intellectual groundwork for the outburst of the revolution in October of the same year.

<sup>9</sup>When comparing the age at which authors received their Kossuth Prize over the years, it is noticeable that during the 1950s and up until the revolution of 1956 the average age of the awardees was 45.2, whereas the average age rose to 61.9 between 1956 and 1963. Then, after the redefinition of the Kossuth Prize, it sank to 52.8 again until the end of the 1970s. From the 1980s on until 1999 the average age rose again due to the steady liberalisation in Hungarian cultural politics towards the end of the socialist era and the system change in 1989 that came with a number of compensational acts like awarding writers who had been denied a prize by the socialist regime for political reasons.

<sup>10</sup>In 1948, only 6 out of the 110 awarded Kossuth prizes were given to writers.



following the Muscovite directives. The result was the Communists' rise to power, which became manifest through the new constitution of 1949 laying the ground for a totalitarian one-party system under the rule of Mátyás Rákosi and the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. However, there had been, as mentioned, sympathising parties during the coalition years that followed WWII until the system change in 1949. One of these was the National Peasant Party (Nemzeti Parasztpárt), which was founded by the so-called "demotic" writers and some politicians with a peasant background. Imre Somogy was one of these founders who – together with other famous "demotic" writers such as Gyula Illyés or László Németh – was numbered among the group of the so-called "fellow travellers" of the Communists, willing to collaborate with the Communists, and thus retained some (symbolic) power for the time being. As already mentioned, the Kossuth Prize itself was founded and awarded for the first time during a period when opposition parties such as the National Peasant Party still existed and were at least ostensibly still involved into Hungarian politics. Hence, the awarding of the prize to Somogyi and Gyula Illyés, a fellow founding member of the National Peasant Party who shall be discussed in detail later, was an allowance made by the Communists to that situation. The awarding of Illyés and especially Somogyi, whose political engagement surmounted his significance within the literary field (quite in contrast to Illyés), was a symbolic act to reward the fellow travellers and to underline the narrative of the Communist Party becoming the sole leader of Hungary rightfully and with the support of the other, opposing parties. With the beginning of the communist dictatorship in 1949 the National Peasant Party ended its activity, but those who had successfully entered the group of the fellow travellers by then were at least spared from losing their social status completely.

The selection of the second author, Attila József, was even more important for the Communist Party in 1948 – the explanation, however, is more complex. József had been born into a poor family and grown up without a father. During his school years, while having to work in order to grant the family's mere survival, he also began to write poems which were published in prestigious literary magazines. His poetry revolves around several core issues of his time, like the hard life of the working class in the countryside and in the cities, the relationship between the individual and society, or politics in general. After spending some time in Vienna and Paris, József joined the illegal Communist Party in Hungary only to grow away from it again, which finally led to his exclusion from the party. While the ideological framework of the still illegal party became too rigid and tight for the him, József as a person was seen as increasingly unstable and undisciplined by party leaders. Attila József committed suicide in 1937, but the wonder child of poetry, who published his first poems at the age of 17, became a veritable star in Hungary and his work also attracted considerable international attention. Awarding one of the first Kossuth Prizes in 1948 to Attila József was therefore more than an important task for the new regime eager for legitimization: First of all, József was the perfect example of one of the poorest of the poor working his way up, fighting for the communist cause with his own means<sup>11</sup> and reaching a

<sup>11</sup>Attila József published two collections of poems in his so-called "socialist phase": *Dönts a tőkét, ne siránkozz* (Overthrow the capital, do not moan) in 1931 when he joined the illegal Communist Party and *Külvárosi éj* (Night in the outskirts) in 1932. One of his most important socialist poems is *A város peremén* (On the edge of the city), which he wrote in early 1933 at a time when he still believed that a proletarian revolution was about to break out. However, only months later he was highly disappointed by the German Communist Party for not being able to prevent Hitler's rise to power by joining forces with the German social-democrats which ultimately led to his alienation from the Communist Party in Hungary (Gintli, 2010: 815ff).



national and even international level of fame. That József had broken with the Communist Party and the party had broken with him was soon forgotten in the official narrative about the poet who came to be represented as an early campaigner for the communist idea.<sup>12</sup> This ideological appropriation of Attila József was sealed by awarding him the first and highest literary award the Hungarian state had to give after WWII.

Such re-evaluations of well-known Hungarian authors, we can fairly call them classics, were an essential part of the literary policy of the Communist Party which wanted effectively to alter established versions of cultural memory by foregrounding new literary works, a new aesthetic style – indeed, as a matter of fact, a whole new literary paradigm, by implementing a new literary canon. The current literary canon has a very high social and cultural relevance and acts as a regulatory system for the flow of artistic and cultural evolution. It is the selection of literary works that are to be read and taught in schools, that are to be discussed in (the literary) public and that form a guideline for the production and reception of literature. This makes the literary canon a very influential instrument of literary policy in controlling the literary scene, but also, as mentioned above, in the creation of collective identities according to the agenda of those in power, as well as in legitimizing political and social circumstances and establishing new *value systems*. The development of the socialist literary canon in Hungary was one of the main tasks facing József Révai, the leading cultural politician of the Rákosi regime. The goal was to establish socialist realism as the new and only valid literary style and with it the new literary canon, but at the same time to keep up the semblance of a “natural development”. This latter was highly important for Révai, in order to cover up the caesura which the Communists’ rise to power had caused in the Hungary’s cultural field. Révai could not simply overthrow the existing Hungarian literary canon – he needed to present socialist realism as a natural development from or, even better, the perfection of previous literary traditions existing in Hungary. Consequently, he tried to build an intellectual bridge between the Hungarian classics and the new soon-to-be classics of socialist realist literature in several studies and speeches. Révai (1953: 46) claims:

“[O]ur struggle [...] is strengthened and broadened by the realization that not only do we hate the old inhuman world, but that also the great critical realists – such as József Eötvös, Kálmán Mikszáth and Zsigmond Móricz – have revealed and castigated the squalidness and decay of the ancient world with shattering force.”

Just like the Communist Party propagandists tried to sell the Communist Party and its leader Mátyás Rákosi as the rightful heir to the Hungarian national heroes, Révai set out to make the socialist writers appear to be rightfully stepping into the footsteps of the great Hungarian classics and fulfilling their cause as regards fighting. The implementation of the new canon led not only to a flood of young writers, “new talents”, who happened to be euphoric communists that basically wrote propaganda literature and were rewarded with numerous publication possibilities and lots of institutionalised benefits, but also to the so-called “re-evaluation of the past and the traditions”, which was approached through all kind of means. It meant the banning of

<sup>12</sup>Márton Horváth, a leading cultural politician of the Communist Party, worked on disseminating this interpretation of József as the communist poet *par excellence*. Two of his writings were defining in this context: “A kommunista József Attila” (Attila József, the communist), a newspaper article published in *Szabad Nép* on the 4th of december 1947, and “József Attila”, a speech he held on the same day in the Madách Theatre in Budapest which also appeared in print later (Horváth, 1947a,b: 897–902) .



certain authors/works, the destruction of existing book collections, the rewriting of classics or their supplementation with a rich commentary on the “correct” way of interpretation and contextualisation (Szörényi, 2000) – just as was the case with Attila József’s work.

The second time that posthumous prizes were awarded was in 1990, the first time the Kossuth Prize was awarded after the system change. 16 of the altogether 28 prizes were posthumous prizes, 6 of the 16 prizes were awarded to literary authors.<sup>13</sup> It is no surprise that these authors had all been victims of the socialist regime and the prizes awarded to them now were meant to act as some sort of compensation – reputational compensation for themselves and economic compensation for their bereaved.

Clearly this was the case for example, with Béla Hamvas, who had been silenced by the Communist party in 1948 after starting an aesthetic and ideological discussion with György Lukács. As a consequence, Hamvas lost his job as an editor for several literary magazines and newspapers, as well as at the main library in Budapest, and was not allowed to publish any longer. He ended up working as a warehouse hand in the countryside and was completely excluded from Hungarian literary life. From his dismissal until his death in 1968, he only managed to publish one article in 1963 and a number of high-class literary translations. Nevertheless, he went on to write a number of literary works, mostly essays and novels, which could only be published after his death.<sup>14</sup> The honoring of László Cs. Szabó can also be attributed to the fact that his undoubtedly highly influential and important literary work had been neglected in Hungary after his emigration, due to the communists coming into power in 1948. Cs. Szabó had become one of the leading figures of what was known as Western European Hungarian literature. He wrote numerous essays and studies about Hungarian literature and was a key protagonist in the organization of the Hungarian literary field outside of Hungary and of the Soviet sphere of influence. However, after receiving the Baumgarten Prize in 1936 he never again received any official appreciation of his literary work from his home country until the Kossuth Prize in 1990, which was awarded to him six years after his death.<sup>15</sup> Yet another prominent name among the winners is Sándor Márai, who is one of the best-known Hungarian writers outside of Hungary today. Between 1928 and 1948 he had been one of the most productive and famous writers in Hungary, until finally a devastating critique published by Márton Horváth, a leading communist ideologist back in the day, made it impossible for him to work and survive in the changing, new literary field in Hungary. Márai, considered as one of the prime examples of the bourgeoisie, was forced to leave his country and spend the rest of his days in emigration. He died in 1989 in San Diego, two years before he was finally awarded the highest literary award of Hungary.<sup>16</sup> (Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon 1000–1990).

<sup>13</sup>These writers were Béla Hamvas, Zoltán Jékely, János Kodolányi, Sándor Márai, István Sinka and László Cs. Szabó.

<sup>14</sup><http://mek.oszk.hu/00300/00355/html/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup><http://mek.oszk.hu/00300/00355/html/ABC14240/14352.htm>.

<sup>16</sup>In 1992 the Hungarian government founded the Márai Sándor Prize to commemorate and honour the writer. The prize, which was awarded for the first time in 1996 can be given to 3 writers, at least one of whom has to live outside of Hungary at the time of the awarding. The prize is awarded for outstanding literary merit or considerable attention from abroad for a Hungarian writer’s work. (Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum)



## Multiple awarding

During the 1950s it was quite common for writers to be awarded the Kossuth Prize more than once. In some cases, a mere few years elapsed between the first and the second award. After the revolution in 1956, and with the new course the Kádár-regime was following, the practice of multiple awarding came to an end. However, during the 1950s such a manoeuvre afforded a very welcome possibility for those in power to strengthen their “intellectual court”. The requirement for such a move was to keep changing the grounds on which a writer could be awarded a prize. While in 1948 the writer’s life work had to be taken into consideration, in 1949 only his work after the 1st of January 1945 was to be the key factor in deciding whether s/he should be awarded a Kossuth Prize. Between 1950 and 1955 only the works of the legal year prior to the respective year’s awarding should be taken into consideration. In 1955 this one-year timespan was extended to three years. In 1964 the works that could be taken into consideration had to be already published and the Kossuth Prize could only be awarded for a second time if the respective writer had published a new work since the last literary award s/he had won (Darvas et al., 1988: 26–27).

During the whole observation period a total of 99 authors were awarded three or more literary prizes in the course of their career or posthumously. Most of them received several József Attila Prizes and a Kossuth Prize or a SZOT Prize. Also, the number of Baumgarten Rewards is quite high in this group of writers. Of these 99 authors only seven were awarded the Kossuth Prize more than once – six of them received it twice and only one Hungarian author managed to receive it three times. This doubtlessly outstanding figure of the Hungarian literary field was Gyula Illyés, who received the Kossuth Prize in 1948, 1953 and in 1970.<sup>17</sup> What is remarkable about Illyés’ success is that he was not a communist writer and never had been. He was the most popular member of the “demotic” writers’ group who, driven by sociological interest and rather left-wing political beliefs, wanted to call attention to the disadvantageous conditions of the peasants and the working poor in the Hungarian countryside. As a politically engaged intellectual, Illyés became a member of the Hungarian parliament in 1945 as one of the leaders of the left-wing National Peasant Party. As the Communists’ rise to power became more and more obvious, he withdrew from public life in 1947. József Révai, however, considered Illyés as the greatest Hungarian writer alive (Standeisky, 1987: 29). Politically speaking, Illyés was one of those intellectuals who were considered by the communists as “fellow travellers”, as mentioned above. He never got into direct conflict with those in power, and thus managed to remain the spokesman for the oppressed peasant class and, especially from the 1960s on, elaborated political, social and moral issues all through his work.<sup>18</sup>

The authors who were awarded the Kossuth Prize twice were László Benjámín (1950, 1952), József Darvas (1956, 1960), Ferenc Juhász (1951, 1973), Pál Szabó (1951, 1954), István Vas (1962, 1985) and Zoltán Zelk (1949, 1954). Benjámín, Darvas, Szabó and Zelk had been committed communist writers at the time of their awarding; this suggests that the multiple awards given to these authors may not always be a sign of the special literary quality of their works on which the award was based.

<sup>17</sup>Illyés also received the Baumgarten Prize in 1931, 1933, 1934 and 1936, as well as the József Attila Prize in 1950. Apart from these, he was awarded a number of other prizes which are not taken into consideration in my research.

<sup>18</sup>Illyés’ most famous poem of all was published on November 2, 1956 during the Hungarian revolution of 1956. The poem “Egy mondat a zsarnokságról” (One sentence on tyranny) is a brutal and open account on the totalitarian Rákosi-regime. After the abolition of the revolution, it was not allowed to be republished in Hungary until 1986.



## CONCLUSION

Literary prizes have an economic, as well as a literary-aesthetic and, consequently, an ideological function. However, the impact of literary prizes is not limited to the literary industry per se, which gives them an important social and political significance. For this reason, politics – especially in non-democratic systems – often shows great interest in influencing the artistic and literary field, for example by awarding sometimes highly endowed state prizes with the intention to promote and establish regime-conformist currents in art and literature. In Hungary, all of the first literary state prizes established after WWI had significant impact on the literary field of the time and were always under strict government control, as they were not awarded by a politically independent committee. Even the Baumgarten Prize and Baumgarten Reward, both awarded by a private foundation in the interwar period and originally designed to be primarily a financial aid for writers, were dependent on the approval of the respective Minister of Religion and Education, who was also in charge of cultural affairs. The first real state prizes, the Corvin Chain and the Corvin Collar, were both significant only as symbolic gestures of recognition which came without any monetary reward. Only the Kossuth Prize, founded in 1948 thanks to the proposition of the Communist Party, was a combination of the afore mentioned factors, giving the awardees prestige as well as financial support. However, a thorough analysis of the Kossuth Prize winners and the numerous changes in the legal regulations of the prize between 1948 and 1998 show that especially in the 1950s the awarding of the prize was abused for political reasons. While the 1950s bear witness to the often highly questionable efforts of the Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP) to establish their very own loyal intellectual elite, the years after the 1956 revolution were characterized by careful but steady reconciliation efforts between the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) and the Hungarian intellectuals – a process which is also reflected in the list of awardees between 1960 and 1989. The overall goal of the research, of which the content presented in this paper is only a part, is to trace the conceptual developments of Hungarian literary policy during the short 20th century, a period of time that is characterized by a number of fundamental political and also social changes in Hungary, by using literary state prizes awarded during the observation period as indicators.

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