

## **Freedom and competition: Tibor Liska's socialist entrepreneurship and the economic experiments in Kádár's Hungary**

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# Freedom and competition: Tibor Liska's socialist entrepreneurship and the economic experiments in Kádár's Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the body of literature on the economic history of the Soviet bloc by shifting the focus from theoretical debates to the practical efforts made to overcome the 'classic' model. It addresses the knowledge gap by examining the grass-roots experiments that took place in late socialist Hungary under the leadership of Tibor Liska, an economist who sought to develop an alternative market system based on socialism and social justice. Liska rejected both private property and state-directed economics as anti-competitive and ultimately unjust. Distancing himself from the contemporary debate centred on managerial socialism, Liska developed the concept of universal entrepreneurship, which he believed would enable the socialist system to compete with Western capitalism in terms of economic productivity and profit. From the late 1970s onwards, Liska was permitted to conduct limited economic experiments based on his theories. However, their success raised political concerns, resulting in the experiments being abruptly terminated. While this did not spell the end of Liska's career, interrupting his experiments amid the deep economic and financial crisis of the early 1980s signalled the demise of a socialist solution to the final crisis of the Soviet system. Drawing on a wide range of unpublished primary sources, this article describes how Liska has repeatedly managed to convince politicians and economists of his ideas and secure funding for his experiments. It also emphasizes that the boundaries of political and academic tolerance towards visionary, rational reform projects such as Liska's were tightly controlled until the collapse of the entire Soviet bloc. Liska was not a utopian or a neoliberal, but rather a pragmatically sophisticated thinker who was willing to take risks in order to test economic alternatives to bureaucratic planning.

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## Education and early career: a free socialist

'Tibor Liska was a Renaissance spirit. A multifaceted genius who didn't mince his words,' recalls Valéria Matyasovszki, a Hungarian-trained economist and, from the 1980s, one of the driving forces behind the reception of Liska's rational utopia as a researcher at the Institute for Eastern European Studies and Documentation in Trieste.<sup>1</sup> An Italian

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Q2



admirer of Liska, the economist Edwin Morley-Fletcher, who was close to the reformist Left, wrote in 1984 that his apparent ‘madness’ was based on a ‘compelling logic’.<sup>2</sup> As strange as it may seem, the only entrepreneurial experiments in Hungary – a country where scholarly debate on reforming Soviet-style socialism was much more open and radical than anywhere else in the Soviet bloc – were launched on the initiative of this almost forgotten economist. My research suggests that his pivotal role in developing alternatives to monopolistic state socialism and capitalism deserves to be studied and properly acknowledged. 45

Tibor Liska was born in 1925 in Békéscsaba, a middle-size town in south-eastern Hungary, into a Protestant family of the local bourgeoisie. After attending high school in his hometown, he enrolled at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Debrecen, where he studied from 1943 to 1947. During this time, he was influenced by the vibrant personality of Professor Sándor Karácsony, one of the most original Hungarian thinkers of the last century.<sup>3</sup> Karácsony’s teachings on the morality of public action would influence Liska’s entire work, even though he always considered himself a proud socialist, unlike his mentor. 50 55

Amidst the political changes taking place in Eastern Europe, the young left-winger Liska interrupted his pedagogical and literary studies right on the eve of his final exam and he moved to Budapest at the recommendation of the communist youth movement, to which he had turned following his involvement in the National Peasant Party. There, he enrolled at the Faculty of Economics of the newly established Karl Marx University, a training ground for the planners of the socialist system, where he graduated in 1952. Over the next few years, he became an assistant and then a researcher at the newly established technical university in Miskolc, specialized in heavy industry.<sup>4</sup> 60 65

After the death of Stalin, the first wave of reform brought about by the Imre Nagy government inspired the young economist. In the socialist outpost of Miskolc, he could see the structural dysfunctions of the system firsthand. This led him to put his innovative calculations on the price system into a scientific article published for academic reasons together with his colleague, the economist Antal Máriás. The novelty of the research was the indicator, later named *Liska-Máriás*, of the productivity of an economic system. Although written in the bland style of a scientific communication, the paper called for the adjustment of domestic prices to world market prices and highlighted the lack of competitiveness of the planned economies due to the gap between the virtual prices of the domestic market and the global prices imposed by the market.<sup>5</sup> The 1956 revolution found him as a newly appointed official at the Ministry of Finance. At the end of October, he was elected to the Revolutionary Committee set up in the Ministry and for a few days he joined the reformed Communist Party, which had finally embraced the idea of freedom. The consequences were harsh. He was dismissed, briefly arrested and then released without trial, but his career in the apparatus was forever interrupted. 70 75 80

Between 1957 and 1969, when he was finally hired as a research associate at the Karl Marx University of Economics in Budapest, Liska had, according to his employment records, more than a dozen temporary positions or external cooperation contracts in as many companies or research centres.<sup>6</sup> His contact with the most diverse working environments – from the packaging industry to urban planning, from fruit export to the economic section of the Central Committee, which used him as a consultant on 85

several occasions – gave him a unique practical knowledge of how economics (did not) really work in the system in which he lived.<sup>7</sup>

In the early 1960s, the fundamental problem facing reformist economists in the Soviet Bloc was how to increase the efficiency of the system. Following the political consolidation of János Kádár's regime, economic reform plans were drawn up in Hungary to improve the planning system, the inefficiency of which had already been detailed in János Kornai's doctoral thesis, which was published in 1957 and shortly later also in English.<sup>8</sup> The further consolidation of the Kádár regime was threatened by growing economic difficulties caused by the extensive exploitation of natural resources. By 1963, foreign debt to non-Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) countries accounted for more than half the total value of exports.<sup>9</sup> After much hesitation and amidst stagnation affecting the entire Soviet bloc, the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party decided to study improvements in the system of economic planning in order to prevent the kind of discontent that had led to the 1956 uprising.<sup>10</sup>

### From *Ökonosztát* to a new theory on property

Although he was marginalized academically after 1956, Liska forced his way into the Hungarian conversation on reforms. Unlike reform economists such as János Kornai and Márton Tardos, who exposed the flaws in the design of the planned economic system and sought to correct its most obvious distortions, Liska did not follow the same path. Instead, he proposed abandoning the state's role in production and distribution of social services. At the height of Kádár's consolidation of power, and encouraged by admirers such as the economist Miklós Turánszki and Rezső Nyers, head of the CC party's economic department, Liska began to develop his critique into a comprehensive economic and social theory. In 1963 he finally succeeded in publishing an article entitled 'Criticism and Concept. Some Theses on the Reform of the Economic Mechanism'.<sup>11</sup> He criticized the command economy for being cut off from the world economy and descending into waste, autarky and debt. Ignored by Soviet economic practice since Stalin's industrialist turn, capital, the market and prices were to be reclaimed for socialism through 'personal social property' (*személyes társadalmi tulajdon*), a seemingly strange concept introduced into the debate with this essay and later developed by Liska to illustrate the country's project of social and economic transformation.<sup>12</sup>

The argument was so disruptive that the journal's editors took pains to ask fellow economists Tamás Nagy and Béla Nagy-Csikós for counter-opinions to appear alongside his own. As Liska explained, it was the party conservatives who had forced him out into the open, but

their only aim was to make a big fuss. They had my theses published together with two critical articles commissioned by the mildest reformists, who defended an ambiguous reform policy; they envisaged a market subject to regulation or planning by the bureaucracy.<sup>13</sup>

Liska responded in 1964–65 with a larger essay entitled 'Econostat: In Preparation for Economic Reform', which was unfortunately not to be published until a quarter of a century later. *Ökonosztát* described the foundations and operating mechanisms of a state with reduced economic dimensions and competences, which would allow

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social actors to function in a regime of competitiveness and widespread entrepreneurship, limiting itself to the role of *thermostat*, i.e. regulator of the agreed mechanisms.<sup>14</sup> 130

For an economist educated in a Soviet-bloc country, it may come as a surprise that there is no textual reference, or at least no intellectual debt, to Soviet (from Eugen Varga to Evsei Liberman) and Central European (from Oskar Lange to Ota Šik) reformism, and even references to Yugoslav self-management were rare and uncomplimentary. The point is that Liska's perspective looked beyond the experiment of centralized planning and its corrections, which, as a whole, was judged unsuccessful and unreformable. The book-sized manuscript was reproduced in a few dozen copies on the initiative of the Investment Bureau of the State Planning Council and circulated informally among insiders as the forbidden fruit of reformism, not to be quoted, reproduced or discussed in public. 135 140

His next major manuscript, written in 1969–71, at the request of the Central Committee's Institute of Social Sciences, suffered a similar fate. Here Liska approached a more general subject than economic critique, producing a seminal account of the devastating impact of global capitalism on the political coherence of the Soviet-type power system, whose self-proclaimed internationalism was nothing more than a mask for the triumph of old-style nation-state sovereignty.<sup>15</sup> Once again, the response of the authorities was disappointing. The manuscript was not published until May 1989. 145

One can only guess at the impact his major works might have had on public opinion and on Hungarian political dynamics had they been published in time. 150

In 1981, Jenő Bársony, one of the first exegetes of an author whose main works were still unpublishable in his own country, described Liska's model as inspired by the problematic duality of a social theory based on Marxist humanism, with its criticism of private property and exploitation, but 'too much influenced, although Liska tends to ignore it, by the neoliberal approach that is conquering the West'.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that this interpretation, which was also published in English in a softer version,<sup>17</sup> became a source of inspiration for scholars researching the endogenous force of Hungarian and, more generally, Eastern European neoliberalism (Johanna Bockman) or even linking the Soviet-type 'state capitalism' to the recent neoauthoritarian turn in Hungary (Adam Fabry).<sup>18</sup> 155 160

Upon closer inspection, Bockman's argument is more sophisticated than this summary might suggest. She argues that economists in Hungary, including Liska, continued to work on socialism until the 1980s, and that neoliberals misappropriated and reinterpreted the ideas, institutions and economics of many socialist discussions in order to support capitalism. Liska was neither a neoliberal nor a market fundamentalist. However, outsiders would often interpret words such as 'entrepreneurship', 'markets' and 'neo-classical economics' as infallible *signals of neoliberalism*, despite these words originating from *socialist discussions* that sought to establish the essential institutions for new forms of socialism.<sup>19</sup> 165 170

Writing about Liska shortly after his death in the mid-1990s, the scholar of comparative economic thought János Mátyás Kovács confessed his discomfort with the gigantic but fragmentary and therefore little-known legacy of a man who was never really accepted in academic circles. What struck Kovács at the time was above all the *pars destruens* of Liska's theory: 175

What Liska was doing back then was shock therapy. If we remove the text of the new mechanism from his manuscript *Ökonosztát*, we are left with more than just the principles of the Liska model. The author was aware that the Soviet-style economy would soon collapse if it came under attack from the reformers in terms of prices, the foreign market and property. Free prices, open borders and a semi-convertible currency would have been enough to destroy it.<sup>20</sup> 180

Many years later, Kovács returned to Liska's ideas in a comparative volume on the concept of property in socialist Eastern Europe. Here Liska receives a much more sympathetic and systematic assessment for constructing a 'unique grand design for individual ownership of social goods' called 'personal ownership of social capital'. Kovács claims that Liska proposed a property regime in which the state 'played no role whatsoever'. In other words, he broke with the consensus of the research community, and instead of 'believing in marketisation and accepting some limited (informal) privatisation, he violated the dominant ownership paradigm by proposing a master plan that was at once radically liberal (anti-statist) and radically socialist'.<sup>21</sup> By doing so, Liska found himself in a kind of ideological no man's land: 185 190

While in a certain sense Liska may be regarded a forerunner of the inventors of voucher privatization in Eastern Europe and of basic income schemes in the West, his model remained relatively unpopular in the Hungarian research community. [...] In the eyes of moderate reform economists his liberalism was too pervasive, whereas the radical reformers considered him an unreconstructed socialist dreamer, and both camps called him a faith healer and an illusionist.<sup>22</sup> 195

On the controversial question of the relationship of many East European reformers to (Western) neoliberalism, Kovács suggested that Liska was unaware of the 'subtleties' of the economic and legal literature on property rights. However, the intellectual echo of the conservative revolution reached Liska only when his model was already in place. This rules out the possibility that Western neoliberalism played a major role in his thinking. And the reality in which he and his associates operated was so different from the conditions of a market society that the term neoliberalism can easily lose its explanatory power to describe what Liska was trying to achieve with his economic experiments. 200 205

However, one should not underestimate the impact that the plea for freedom and personal self-determination in the work of Friedrich von Hayek had on an economist born in 1925, who spent his entire life under authoritarian regimes of varying ideological mix, but all with distinct protectionist and corporatist features. In 1982, Liska tried to persuade a contact of his at the Institute for Cultural Relations to invite the standard-bearer of economic freedom, whose works could not be published in Hungary but had been translated into Hungarian and circulated among economists in samizdat, to Hungary. What Liska wanted to discuss with Hayek was not how to introduce market elements into the socialist economy, but how to deal with the intertwined crises of East and West and the parallel decline of two monopolistic concepts. 210 215

Dear Professor Hayek, my colleagues and I have been studying the problems of the economy and looking for new ways out of the crisis. When we discussed our findings so far, your name came up several times because of the many similarities between our recommendations. It is a pity that your works have not yet been translated, so they are not widely known, and only a few people take them seriously. We think it would be very interesting and useful for all of us to discuss the same causes of the crisis in the East and the West. It seems that the 220

way out, which we both recommend, is also very similar. We are trying, through a foundation, to invite you officially to Budapest. Would you be interested in such an exchange of ideas? Could you help us with this? We would be very grateful if you could reply positively to our letter.<sup>23</sup>

225

The supervising body of Hungarian cultural diplomacy under the Kádár regime did not hide its scepticism. Liska was told that such an invitation would have to be ‘carefully prepared’ and could not be made at the expense of a ‘private foundation’ (clearly referring to the Soros Foundation, which was not yet legally recognized in Hungary), but would have to come from a public research centre.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Liska’s scholarly work in a non-free political environment remained trapped in the fundamental misunderstanding of its ideological position.

230

### **From CESES to Macrae through Soros: Liska and the West**

One of the many paradoxes surrounding Liska’s work is that, despite never publishing any of his main essays in English, he received far more scholarly attention in the West than in his native Hungary. And in ideological terms, his reception shifted from centre-right conservatism in the 1960s to a more reform-minded Left in the 1980s.

235

After the 1965 ban on the publication of his most ambitious theoretical work, the *Ökonosztát*, Tibor Liska turned to the critical interpretation of the planned reform of the economic mechanism, and his work received an unexpectedly rich and varied reception in the West, especially in Italy. In 1966 and 1967, when he did not even have an academic position at home, Liska managed to attend two international seminars in Florence (September 1966) and Tremezzo on Lake Como (July 1967), where dozens of world-renowned economists from the West and East gathered to discuss the problems of planned economies.

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How it was possible for an independent scholar from communist Eastern Europe to receive two successive invitations in from liberal-capitalist, ideologically anti-communist think-tanks operating in a NATO member state remains to be explained. The Florence seminar was jointly organized by the Institute of Economics of the Faculty of Law of the University of Florence and the Milan-based Centre for Studies and Research on Economic and Social Problems (CESES), a think-tank headed by the former Communist intellectual Renato Mieli and funded by the Italian business community (Confindustria). The 1967 Tremezzo seminar was organized by the same CESES with the support of the Institute of Political Science of the University of Pavia, headed by the liberal economist Bruno Leoni.<sup>25</sup>

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Johanna Bockman describes CESES as an influential transnational network of right-wing academics and activists who sought to convert the world to neoliberalism. Between 1964 and 1988, CESES sought to create a new managerial class sympathetic to capitalism and critical of communism by demonstrating the failures of socialism and calling for market reforms in Eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, these seminars were attended by senior economists with a fairly broad ideological background. As such, they provided a rare opportunity for the exchange of ideas and knowledge.

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In September 1966, an official of the Socialist Party wrote to the party’s vice-secretary, Francesco De Martino, to share his enthusiasm for the reformist thrust that had emerged from the discussion at the 1966 Florentine seminar, particularly from the paper presented

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by Tibor Liska. No wonder that the Socialist Party official admired a paper which claimed that 'with the loss of private property, a large part of social capital has also been lost' and which concluded with a prophecy, which proved correct in the years to come, of the strategic failure of economic corrections based on bureaucratic dirigisme, in favour of an entrepreneurial socialism based on free competition between economic actors.<sup>27</sup> 270

In July 1967, Liska returned to Italy to attend the next seminar with scholars he had met the previous year in Florence, such as the Yugoslavian Alexander Bajt of the University of Ljubljana, Oldrich Kyn of the Academy of Sciences in Prague and Andrzej Brzeski of the University of California-Irvine. As has always been in his career on the fringes of academia, his contribution took the form of five dense lectures, which stood out from the others for their lack of graphics and data. Beginning with a philosophical critique of the concepts of mechanism and plan, Liska demolished the ideological foundations of the planned economy, which he accused of perpetuating a feudal social landscape in the Hungarian countryside.<sup>28</sup> 275

Should we conclude that the conservative interest in his ideas in the late 1960s made Liska receptive to neoliberalism? The research on Liska's economic thought seems to suggest that, as Cornel Ban has convincingly argued, the different varieties of 'neoliberalism' that spread across the European semi-peripheries from the 1970s onwards – first in the West and only later in the East – depended on the actual content of locally available competing ideas.<sup>29</sup> 280

The economic model that Liska had been searching for since the 1960s could not have been more distant from the recipes of the Chicago School. Even after attending the CESES seminars, Liska remained true to his entrepreneurial socialism and sketched out the model of individual social property that would later become the focus of economic experiments based on the universal practice of socialist entrepreneurship. The manuscript, entitled '**Property Reform: Sketch of a Socialist System of Entrepreneurship Based on Social Personal Property**', was distributed to many economists for reading and discussed in a public session at the University of Economics on 26 April 1972, just before the conservative political turn that would put an end to the New Economic Mechanism.<sup>30</sup> 285

Liska's project was in danger of becoming an ideological problem because what he was proposing was not an economic theory but, above all, a political statement. 290

What Liska was proposing was the new political economy of another blend of socialism. Referring to what he would call 'the theses of Florence',<sup>31</sup> as if to emphasize their centrality to his own intellectual journey, Liska argued that the 1968 reforms represented an insufficient turning point in the context of a techno-scientific revolution that saw the Soviet-style socialist system unable to compete with progress and the spread of new technologies. His reform aimed to promote a social compromise that could replace the exhausted Kádarian compromise. 295

Liska analysed in detail the concepts of social inheritance and social private property, but also the relationship between the free movement of capital and the exchange rate system, the complex interplay between human and social capital, or the problem of the brain drain, which, in the Wallersteinian sense, was placed on the axis of the economic imbalance between the centre and the semi-periphery. This was a problem that could only be tackled by paying special attention to education and training in the workplace. Liska noted that the socialist countries had not even reached the level of capital concentration of the Western economies at the end of the nineteenth century, while within 300

the CMEA the Soviet-bloc countries continued to work on multilateral agreements without paying attention to the global, or rather ‘anarchic’ economy of the globalized era.

In the early 1980s, a new and exciting phase in the Western reception of Tibor Liska began. It happened in completely random way, like so many things in the eventful life of this unconventional economist. On 18 June 1982, Liska received a phone call from an official at the Institute for Cultural Relations (KKI, Kulturális Kapcsolatok Intézete). He was told that a certain American wanted to meet him.<sup>32</sup> The businessman George Soros had left the country decades earlier and had only been able to obtain Liska’s address through the KKI, the institution that facilitated, but also monitored and secured, cultural and scientific exchanges during the Cold War.<sup>33</sup> The personal contact took place the next day, at a time of deep crisis in the Kádarian system, but also when Liska’s critique of the system’s dysfunctionality had moved beyond the limits of theoretical argumentation and into the field of concrete experimentation. Soros wanted to create a cultural foundation that would give a voice to critical thinking. Liska was the first person he approached, and the two hit it off. 315 320 325

Soros was interested in funding cultural and intellectual alternatives to the regime. As he later told Michael Ignatieff, by 1989, ‘with an investment of just \$3 million’, the foundation would have had ‘more influence on Hungarian culture than the entire Ministry of Culture’.<sup>34</sup> Soros soon realized that Liska was an unwelcome figure in the upper echelons of János Kádár’s regime. Insisting on him would have meant dooming his ambitious project to failure. As a result, historian Iván T. Berend, a prominent figure in the academic and political system of the time, and Miklós Vásárhelyi, the former press secretary to Prime Minister Imre Nagy, became his main referents in Budapest when he officially started its foundation, in 1984.<sup>35</sup> 330 335

However, the businessman had recognized Liska’s genius. He financed the trip of the deputy editor of *The Economist*, Norman Macrae, to Budapest in March 1983, where Macrae met Liska and became one of his most ardent public supporters in the West.<sup>36</sup>

Some time later, Soros provided a scholarship that enabled Liska to spend the 1986–87 academic year in the United States. His American-Hungarian handlers failed to provide him with adequate support for the translation of his writings, and once in the United States he found that he strongly disliked the triumphant US capitalism. By his own admission, he spent the entire period in a frustratingly unproductive state. The only seminar he gave, in his native Hungarian, to an audience of anti-communist emigrants was defiantly entitled ‘I came to bury the USA, not to praise it’. The reception to his lecture on entrepreneurial socialism was frosty to say the least.<sup>37</sup> 340 345

But none of this was Soros’ fault, and Liska returned the favour in 1989, when he put Soros in touch with one of Liska’s Italian supporters, the economist and co-operative movement official Edwin Morley-Fletcher. Soros was trying to set up a project of special economic zones in the Soviet Union, modelled on the Chinese but inspired by the flourishing cooperative third sector in the Left-ruled areas of Italy. Soros once jokingly told Morley-Fletcher that their mutual friend ‘sometimes reinvents the wheel’,<sup>38</sup> but he never ceased to admire the man who, amidst the indifference or envy of academia and the deepest suspicion of the one-party system, had tried to find a solution to the structural shortcomings of socialist economic planning. The intellectual paths of these figures crossed for a long time, although they never managed to work together on the transition to democracy and the free market. 350 355

Thus, Liska's reception in the West radically shifted – through the crucial mediation of Norman Macrae – from the pro-market liberalism of the 1960s to the Left reformism associated with the Italian Communist Party and the League of Cooperatives in the 1980s, which sought a pattern of convergence between the state and the market. 360

After reading Macrae's warm 1983 endorsement in *The Economist*, Edwin Morley-Fletcher arranged for him to give a series of lectures and seminars in various Italian cities in 1984, with the financial support of the cooperative movement and the Centro Studi di Politica Economica (CESPE), the think-tank of the reformist wing of the Communist Party. Liska participated in an international workshop in Ravenna with economists and intellectuals such as Salvatore Veca, Giorgio Ruffolo, Gunnar Adler-Karlsson and Norman Macrae, and was discussed in five of the papers published in a double volume by a leading Italian publishing house.<sup>39</sup> 365

Liska also lectured at CESPE in Rome on the situation of the Hungarian economy in a global perspective. Unsurprisingly, his seminar caused an uproar at the Hungarian Embassy in Rome and stunned some of his Italian colleagues, who were less used to direct criticism of the bureaucracy and party apparatus than their maverick Hungarian colleague.<sup>40</sup> Back in Budapest, Liska wrote an enthusiastic report to his university about the prospects for cooperation with the Italian cooperative movement, which he saw as a virtuous model of fair competition based on solidarity.<sup>41</sup> The linguistic and interpretive mediation of a Hungarian-born researcher, Valéria Matyasovszky, enabled him to reach a wide Italian audience through academic journals and popular magazines, where Liska was praised, somewhat reductively, for having mixed Adam Smith and Karl Marx.<sup>42</sup> 370 375

A few years later, Liska returned to Italy on the initiative of Mario Domenico Nuti, a professor at the European University Institute in Florence with a deep knowledge of the socialist economies of Eastern Europe. Nuti invited him to stay in Florence in the autumn of 1988. Their academic friendship culminated in a fascinating scholarly debate over Liska's plan to create an investment bank, called 'Cassa Nova', to initiate the transformation of the now disarmed planned economy into an entrepreneurial socialism that needed capital to take off. In Liska's proposal, individuals would use the guaranteed income from their share of social capital to bid for the lease of capital goods, acquire the lease if successful, enjoy a commission if unsuccessful, and return all their capital to society upon their death. In Nuti's conception, state and private enterprises bid to acquire the highest possible share of the capital goods, losing everything but the commission if they are unsuccessful. In both models, company managers are kept in a state of constant uncertainty: they are exposed to competition from potentially more successful users of their company's resources. As the Hungarian economist Tibor Tamás noted in his summary of the debate, this managerial uncertainty was at the heart of János Kornai's long-standing criticism of Liska's bidding model. However, although Nuti made several criticisms about the financial feasibility of Liska's plan, he sided with him against Kornai on this point. In fact, no competitive attitude was conceivable without exposing the company's managers to some kind of external pressure.<sup>43</sup> 380 385 390 395

### From theory to practice: securing sponsors for socialist entrepreneurship

For most of his life, Tibor Liska was an unwelcome participant in a system where the state apparatus distributed research funds like a prebend. The Kádár regime in Hungary 400

developed a peculiar culture of patronage that helped individuals advance their own agendas and allowed even former political opponents to be reconverted and play a role in the system.<sup>44</sup> It was all the more necessary for a maverick like Liska, who had been on the fringes of the official sphere without wanting to become an avowed opponent, to find and cultivate friendships or at least cordial working relationships with people in the system. 405

György Péteri illustrates the techniques of political patronage with the case of István Friss. This Communist Party economic policymaker served as a guardian of orthodoxy against the onslaught of ideological revisionism, but at the same time acted as a stimulus or, when necessary, a lightning rod for the brightest minds in Hungarian economics.<sup>45</sup> In March 1957, in the midst of the post-revolutionary repression, Friss encouraged the publication of János Kornai's aforementioned seminal research on the overcentralization of the planning system. 410

Realizing that it was impossible to act at the macroeconomic level, Liska began in the 1970s to develop practical applications of the model he had now refined with the last piece: a system of auctions to allocate production means to those who promised to run the business at the highest profit. The idea of using auctions in socialism had a long history, going back to French economist Léon Walras, though his idea of simultaneous auctions where each agent calculates its demand for the good at every possible price significantly differed from Liska's concept; Abba Lerner's work also was likely known to Hungarian economists, especially as part of the Lange-Lerner model.<sup>46</sup> 415 420

To achieve at least a small part of his goals, Liska needed research funding. And this could only be provided by political supporters within the system. The first informal patron was Antal Máriás, a contemporary of Liska's who had become a full professor at the MKKE's Department of Economic Planning. In the summer of 1969, Máriás was instrumental in persuading the university rector, Kálmán Szabó, a cautious reformist, to give Liska a senior research position. 425

A letter written by Máriás in February 1971 to Miklós Pulai, vice-president of the Hungarian National Bank, who was to become Liska's most important supporter in the system, illustrates the complex mechanisms of the patronage network and the constant precariousness in which Liska had to operate.<sup>47</sup> In 1970, the University had agreed a long-term grant with the National Bank to initiate research on the convertibility of the forint, to be carried out by Liska. However, the consultancy contract with Liska, whose services were also required by the Ministry of Finance, had not yet been fulfilled due to a lack of coordination and uncertainty about the legal framework ('who pays for what'), resulting in serious financial losses for Liska. Máriás reminded the first vice-president of the MNB that Liska had started talking about convertibility in the 1950s, when the issue itself seemed to be out of the question, and that in 1969 Liska had succeeded in convincing the participants of the Party's Economic Theory Working Committee (Közgazdasági Elméleti Munkaközösség) of the need to start research into the convertibility of the Hungarian currency as soon as possible in the interests of economic reform. Máriás' intervention proved successful. Several years later, Liska recalled that Pulai's protection shielded him from Károly Garamvölyi, the first deputy finance minister, who was suspicious of Liska's radicalism and wanted to keep politically sensitive research in the hands of his ministry.<sup>48</sup> 430 435 440

In January 1975 the research contract with the University of Economics expired, with no chance of renewal. The interruption of his university grant was not due to financial 445

problems, as the substantial 2 million forint grant was fully covered by the Hungarian National Bank. The reason was political. In 1972–73 most reform-minded officials, such as the mastermind of the New Economic Mechanism of 1968, Rezső Nyers, had been ousted from top positions in the party and state apparatus. Liska's expertise was no longer needed, and his criticism became dangerous.<sup>49</sup> His old mentor, Antal Máriás, told him that he would not have agreed to keep him on even if the National Bank had supported the continuation of the research. Máriás was tired of 'protecting' him from political attacks and it was time for him to find 'another guardian angel in the system'.<sup>50</sup>

After the termination of his contract at the University of Economics, Liska found a temporary parachute in an obscure research institute, the Építési és Gazdasági Szervezési Intézet (ÉGSZI), whose task was to design industrial parks. But after **only** a year his position there was to be terminated, too. Liska called another acquaintance in the system, József Káplár, the deputy head of the Central Committee's economic department: 'I don't know where to go, please help me.'<sup>51</sup> The plea was heard and in March 1976 Liska returned to the university under a new patron, Professor Tibor Forgács, who was not only head of the Department of Internal Trade, but also a member of the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, and who skilfully combined ideological loyalty with professional openness.

Meanwhile, Liska's welcome was not always cordial. He soon learned that the rector, Iván T. Berend, had only agreed to his reinstatement on the condition that he would not teach because he might 'stir up the youth'. Their mutual obfuscation culminated in a heated public debate in March 1982 in front of a large crowd of students supporting Liska, in which Berend, from his position of power as a former rector and full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, accused his opponent of subversive amateurism:

Arguing with myths is an arduous task. When I compare my ideas with those of Tibor Liska, I inevitably encounter a strange myth in the making: in the person of Liska we have an alchemist of economic theory, a prophet. And it is impossible to argue with prophets. Liska eliminated the 'progressive elements' in the name of a 'utopian and retrograde conservative system' that 'abolished the space of the state and large public enterprises in favour of private initiative'.<sup>52</sup>

Q4



Berend hit the nail on the head. It was much easier to formulate a polite critique of economic inefficiency than to seek concrete alternatives, which led to ideologically risky concepts such as the market and competition.

### Testing the limits of tolerance

At the end of 1976, the first socialist enterprise research was started at the Karl Marx University of Economics under the direction of Tibor Liska and with the approval of the Economic Section of the Central Committee, the State Planning Office and the Ministry of Finance. The three-year grant was again provided by the Hungarian National Bank.<sup>53</sup>

Liska was convinced that socialist entrepreneurship had to grow out of grassroots experience, which over time would be transformed into small and medium-sized enterprises with capital and knowledge. The bureaucratic, inefficient and dehumanizing monopoly of the industrial and service trusts had to be broken, starting with the retail

and service sectors. The original idea took the tourism sector as its starting point, through the creation of a network of Socialist Tourist Communities (**SZÜT**, Szocialista Üdülőtársulások), based on the pilot project of a spa complex in Egerszalók, commissioned in September 1977 by a local administrative body, the Executive Committee of Mátra Eger West-Bükk. Its boss was a clever and flexible civil servant, Imre Domán, who entrusted Liska with the research that became the Egerszalók development experiment.<sup>54</sup> 495

Liska and his colleagues were outraged by the gigantic and wasteful plan for a spa network that the Hungarian government had been implementing since the early 1970s as part of a major project partly funded by the United Nations Development Programme. Modelled on the Adriatic project implemented in Yugoslavia, the plan aimed to turn Hungary into a major spa destination through the coordinated development of no fewer than 84 sites across the country by 1990, at a staggering cost of 35 billion forints (about 1 billion dollars at the official exchange rate of the time).<sup>55</sup> 500

As Liska recalled in his 1987 life interview, a thorough study of the economic and environmental conditions led to the conclusion that many of the new sites had been chosen not because of their favourable geological characteristics, but because of the successful lobbying of local bosses. He denounced the waste of money inherent in the whole concept of calculating the supposed investment/profit ratio in hard currency, since it ignored the fact that the real forint-US dollar exchange rate was not 1/30 as claimed, but closer to 1/100. There was therefore no real profit to be made, as Western tourists would have avoided exchanging their currency for the local currency under the unfavourable conditions imposed in socialist countries, and the project would have fallen under the illusion of obtaining hard currency through public subsidies that actually cost more than they provided.<sup>56</sup> 505

His alternative plan was a pilot micro-investment of 100 million forints in a naturist complex in Egerszalók, to be developed with a low environmental impact, as had already been experienced in France where cave houses had been built to accommodate tourists. The latter would become investors, forming a business risk management community through an auction system that would allow the highest bidder to beat the competition and ensure the best service at the lowest price.<sup>57</sup> 510

Liska's criticism of the official development plans and the alternative project caused quite a scandal during the closed-door debate on the manuscript with political and academic stakeholders.<sup>58</sup> But times had changed. The economic crisis began to bite, forcing the Kádár regime to introduce austerity measures. A radical reform of the price system in 1979–80 brought domestic prices close to their market value and liberalized the prices of about 70% of consumer goods. The key element of this package was the support for small businesses (which had previously been treated half-heartedly), including services and manufacturing, and allowing new types of enterprise. In February 1980, the Central Committee declared that 'activity in the secondary economy is, in general, useful, plugging gaps as it does'.<sup>59</sup> 520

In early 1979, Liska was proposed to continue his research on entrepreneurship not under the Chair of Internal Trade, but with the newly created Enterprise Research Group (**VKCS**, Vállalkozáskutató Csoport), a research unit co-funded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In March 1979, a five-year contract was signed between the University of Economics and the Academy to fund both research and experiments 'at least until 1981', as the text warned.<sup>60</sup> This allowed Liska to become the first to be 525

Q5



commissioned to carry out entrepreneurial economic experiments outside the legal framework that would be lacking until the reform of the Gazdasági Munkaközösség (GKM, the Economic Work Partnership) at the end of 1981. However, aversion to Liska's activities remained widespread in official circles, as evidenced by the council meeting of the Karl Marx University of Economics on 16 May 1979. Kálmán Szabó, former rector and still an influential player as a member of the Academy of Sciences and the one-party National Assembly, was uneasy about the status of the new Socialist Enterprise Research Group, complained about its 'disorganised activity', and asked rector Berend to clarify Liska's duties and responsibilities as head of unit 'with the Academy or another competent body'.<sup>61</sup>

From 1979 onwards, Liska's working materials allow us to outline the contours of a frenetic scientific and organizational activity. Political support – albeit belated and half-hearted – allowed Liska to start studying the everyday problems of the 'gebinesek', the socialist proto-entrepreneurs. Liska began to plan experiments in the service sector – from catering to cosmetics – which was underdeveloped but more exposed to market forces than heavy industry.

The word *gebin* had spread in Hungary since the 1960s as a linguistic borrowing from German, more precisely from the Bavarian dialect: *Gewinn*, meaning profit or gain. The *gebin* was a state-owned catering unit whose managers were not subject to strict accountability and could essentially run it as if it were their own. This rental construction became the symbol of a rudimentary and largely unregulated 'second economy'. The unregulated status of thousands of *gebinesek* provided them with almost unlimited opportunities to evade taxation, which tended to penalize profit as a fault.

In 1980 a member of the research team prepared in-depth interviews with shop and café owners from several suburban settlements near Budapest (Pilisvörösvár, Piliscsaba, Pilisszentiván), which reveal an interesting cross-section of the self-proclaimed desire for entrepreneurship and the lack of financial resources, entrepreneurial culture and work ethic.<sup>62</sup> The entrepreneurial culture reflected in these interviews, as naive as it was sincere, was based on mistrust of community institutions. The state was nothing more than a repressive mechanism to be circumvented for individual economic gain. In their lexicon, enterprise basically meant making as much money as possible in as short a time as possible. This, and other sobering experiences of approaching people in the service sector, such as hairdressers and car mechanics, made them realize that the state of the local business culture was even more difficult than they had imagined.<sup>63</sup> It was necessary to get business partners interested in honest cooperation, based on mutual benefit and not on the illusion of immediate enrichment through tax evasion.

### 'The brave people of Szentés'

Between 1980 and 1982, Liska's experiments were centred around the agricultural sector.

Recently, Hungary has witnessed a heated academic debate between those who view it as a success (including Zsuzsanna Varga and Tibor Valuch) and those who emphasize the long-term destructive effects of socialist collectivism on rural communities (József Ö. Kovács, Krisztián Gergely Horváth).<sup>64</sup> Liska's documentary collections suggests that, far more than industry or even the third sector, it was modernizing agriculture that responded most positively to the economist's invitation

to participate in entrepreneurial experiments. The Hungarian countryside of the early 1980s was teeming with intellectually curious and politically active agricultural cooperative leaders. They knew how to navigate the political maze of the system and knew when to act and when to stop.

A first experiment, not yet based on Liska's theory but developed on local initiative, was launched in the Ezüstkalász (Silver Ear) factory of Baksa, in the south-western county of Baranya. Its long-serving president was a close associate of the nationally renowned head of the Bábolna State Farm, Róbert Burger, but he was so loyal to the farm he had run for almost 20 years that he even changed his name to Antal Baksai in honour of the local community.<sup>65</sup> A new form of contract management developed by the domestic trading companies in September 1980 inspired Baksa and other clever managers, and shortly afterwards he wrote to 'comrade Liska' to present him with their 23-page business plan:

I am enclosing with this letter the original wording of the Small Group Interest Scheme for the Baksa Cooperative, which was the winning bid for the National Council of Producer Cooperatives. We will be able to send our objections at a later date. The essence of the application is 'Small Group Work Organisation' and 'Interest Group Work Organisation' – a total of about ten small groups in the machine shop, poultry houses, hatcheries, feed mixers and stock management – a total of about one hundred workers involved.<sup>66</sup>

In the Baksa experiment, 30% of the surplus of the realized annual profit was distributed among the workers, while the remaining 70% went to the cooperative. The mechanism of allocating tools by competitive auction was still being worked out, but the involvement of workers in the business experiment was successful and helped to increase the profitability of the cooperative.

Another experiment, this time partially based on Liska's ideas, was started on the outskirts of Kecskemét, where Dr Antal Kósa, the president of the local agricultural cooperative, wrote to Ferenc Havasi, the powerful and ideologically conservative secretary of the party's **Central Committee**, in early 1982, complaining that if Liska's experiments had been continued, the farm could have multiplied the annual profit of 40 million forints already achieved in 1981, thanks in part to the experiments led by the VKCS.<sup>67</sup> As there is no trace of a response from the Central Committee in Liska's archives, it can be assumed that the request was not approved.

At the beginning of 1981, another experiment began at the cattle farm of the Kaposvár Agricultural Training College in Igalpuszta, Somogy County. As the director of the college recalled in an early 1982 report summarizing the year's experience, it all began in the fluid climate created by the new form of contract management of September 1980: 'The legislation on agricultural holdings did not yet allow the creation of an enterprise contract, but we were confident that the enterprise form would be approved by our supervisory bodies as an experiment, by means of an individual decision.'<sup>68</sup> In other words, he relied on his bargaining power.

On 20 December 1980, the following advertisement was placed in the local newspaper *Somogyi Néplap*: 'The Agricultural College of the Kaposvár Agricultural Farm is renting out the 80-place milking parlour in Igalpuszta, together with the cows, in order to continue milk production. Please enquire at ...'<sup>69</sup> The editors of the newspaper did not understand the message and refused to publish the advertisement, but the local managers tried again, this time with a regional newspaper with a larger circulation, where

it finally appeared on 30 January 1981, attracting the interest of a dozen potential bidders.<sup>70</sup>

On the same day, Liska happened to see the ad in the newspaper he had bought while passing through the area, and went to the site to offer his help.<sup>71</sup> Soon after, a national television crew arrived on site to prepare a documentary film on the ongoing experiment.<sup>72</sup> From then on, the role of the press would prove crucial in legitimizing Liska's experiments and spreading his popularity. Quite paradoxically, although his main theoretical works were inaccessible to the public and largely ignored by scholars, the print media and television of the same regime that was censoring him carried his message to millions of Hungarians.

The auction for the three-year concession of the Igalpuszta stable finally took place on the morning of 17 March 1981. With the help of a tape recorder, Liska and his colleagues transformed a small business with only 14 employees into a historic moment, immortalizing an event that can now be read – in the form of minutes of the meeting – as an excellent source for the social history of the late Kádár regime.<sup>73</sup> Simple, barely literate people showed a desire to enter a world of production inspired by a different logic from the one that had led the newly closed department to make substantial losses. Two months later, through the intercession of his old friend at the National Bank, Miklós Pulai, Liska won the approval of another informal ally in the party, Deputy Finance Minister Miklós Villányi.

Meanwhile, a far more ambitious experiment was about to begin in the Felszabadulás (Liberation) agricultural cooperative in Szentes, in south-eastern Csongrád county. Unlike its predecessors, this experiment was organically based on Liska's business plans and it proved even too successful, arousing local envy and national concern about ideological coherence to such an extent that party's supervisory bodies intervened in 1982. Szentes exposed the limits of a system that did not tolerate free enterprise, even though it claimed to legalize it.<sup>74</sup>

As in the case of Egerszalók and Baksa, Liska was able to count on a solid local ally: the young, capable and ambitious president of the agricultural cooperative, Pál Szarvas, who had attended one of Liska's many lectures around the country was so impressed that he decided to turn his farm into a small economic laboratory, auctioning off a number of tools made according to Liska's recipes. In May 1981, Szarvas invited Liska and his colleagues to Szentes.<sup>75</sup> This visit was followed by many others throughout the year, and Szarvas made it clear in a report to the VKCS that his expectations were threefold: to increase the profitability of production, to develop a system of stakeholder involvement by eliminating non-recoverable or avoidable expenses, and to increase labour efficiency. For his part, Liska ensured that local officials and an old friend, István Síklaky, a leading computer scientist, were involved in the process.<sup>76</sup>

In mid-October 1981, after months of econometric work and theoretical preparation on the part of the cooperative's executives, all the interested parties gathered in Szentes and the auction took place on the farm premises. Although the Szentes experiment was much larger than the previous ones, it involved only a fraction of the total workforce and 2% of the capital of one of the largest agricultural cooperatives in the area. But it was a breakthrough. Szentes fitted Liska's model almost perfectly, as the 11 work units put out to public auction – tractors and chicken coops – were not simply a rental of tools, but resulted legit entrepreneurial ownership.<sup>77</sup>

Liska was so much aware of the significance of this achievement that he used the weapon of publicity as a shield against possible criticism. The reformist weekly *Heti Világgazdaság* (HVG) published a lengthy report detailing the public auction mechanism and the economic benefit to be expected from the change in attitude to work.<sup>78</sup> An illustrated weekly celebrated ‘the brave people of Szentés’, who had agreed to the entrepreneurial experiment.<sup>79</sup> Even the orthodox communist newspaper *Magyar Ifjúság* (Communist Youth) wondered whether the time had come to ‘let the entrepreneurial genie out of the bottle’.<sup>80</sup> 675

Tibor Liska’s work schedule of these years shows the frenetic activity of his research group. After the successful launch of the Szentés experiment, they no longer had to look for potential partners, but they came to them to be chosen. Although most of these meetings did not lead to formal agreements, they gave Liska the opportunity to interact with an active, mobile and promising part of Hungarian society. In the first half of the 1980s, a small research group like the VKCS played a driving role in the elaboration of a systemic alternative to Kádárism in terminal crisis but still within the ideological driver of socialism. 680 685

Moreover, the VKCS gave temporary protection and livelihoods to a number of intellectuals close to opposition networks by offering short-term employment contracts or paying for translations. Its members monitored international literature and provided limited access to authors inaccessible on the Hungarian market. The VKCS not only helped Liska initiate and monitor the economic experiments, but also carried out an enormous amount of work documenting the Hungarian economic and social reality of the time. 690

In the summer of 1982, the VKCS organized a 10-day summer camp in the village of Felsőtárkány for 160 high-school students – typically not from Budapest’s elite and selected through an application process – in which the young people were introduced to the principles of entrepreneurship and individual responsibility for time and money.<sup>81</sup> On the first day, the participants were given a seed capital (in the camp’s virtual currency, called ÖKI), with the task of using and increasing it through economic activities – from running a kitchen to organizing workshops, film clubs or printing a newspaper. Born in the mid-1960s, these young people were the children of the Kádarian regime’s social factory. On the one hand, they had never imagined an alternative to it; on the other, the system’s crisis of political and social legitimacy made them open to experimentation. 695 700 705

## Triumph and downfall

Liska’s popularity in intellectual and student circles peaked at the same time as the local experiments began, thanks to the regular debates he organized at his university from the 1980/81 academic year, which came to attract up to 1000 participants who were able to witness the unfiltered criticism of a system that seemed to be in disarray. János Kornai recalls in his memoirs that during the debate on 28 January 1982, his objections to Liska’s experimentalism, expressed with academic aplomb, were met with a fulminating response: ‘Shit is shit, and the point is not to measure its level, but to get rid of it as quickly as possible.’<sup>82</sup> Kornai saw in him an anti-academic maverick genius. Discussing Liska in Hungary’s leading economic journal, Kornai made it clear that his 710 715

methodological doubts about a self-contained normative model did not call into question the social validity of the experiments:

The Liska proposal, in my opinion, does not stand the test of being scientifically founded. Social changes are, however, usually prepared not by 'scientific' thoughts but by ideas of mobilising power. The conception of Liska has a stimulating effect – and I think it is mobilising in a basically right direction.<sup>83</sup> 720

When George Soros first approached him in June 1982, Tibor Liska had already become a point of reference at home and abroad, not because of his academic achievement – even in those years he was praised or criticized without his work being properly published – but because he was seen as the lone avant-garde of change. The aforementioned study of Jenő Bársony, published for an international audience in 1982 wrongly identified him as close to Western neoliberals, but it nevertheless helped boost his international reputation and also inspired intellectual spillovers. In the late 1980s, Milica Uvalic could compare Liska's entrepreneurial socialism with the Yugoslav economist Milić Milovanović's studies on the relationship between social and market capital.<sup>84</sup> 725 730

By early 1982, however, ideological concerns started to prevail both in the central party apparatus and on the ground in Csongrád province, where the Szentes experiment was taking place. With 30 years of experience in the system, Liska had no illusions about the fate of his experiment. In May 1982, the chair of political economy at the Attila József University in Szeged was commissioned by the county party committee to initiate a 'control' of the results of the experiment that had been running on the agricultural cooperative in Szentes. The investigation focused on the significant income disparities that voluntary participation in the economic experiment was causing on the farm. According to the internal investigation, this inequality was the subject of negative comments among the locals and 'undermined the cohesion of the collective'. 735 740

It was clear from the start that the ultimate goal was to create a vacuum around Liska, forcing the cooperative's president, Szarvas, to water down the experiment. Although the main opposition came from the Central Committee and the Ministry of Agriculture, they were careful not to directly interfere and left the task of delegitimizing the experiment and discouraging its continuation to the 'experts', i.e. the university professors in charge of the Szentes investigation.<sup>85</sup> 745

Liska's private diaries document the state of depression the economist fell into after the experiment was stopped. He knew that this was not because they had failed, but for the opposite reason: because its success was perceived as a political challenge. In early 1983, Liska summed up the results so far. Although the far-reaching entrepreneurial experiments had been forcibly stopped, the *gebin* system, which he had helped to perfect through his research group, had grown to include nationwide no less than 3000 commercial units (restaurants, bars, taverns), and numerous shops. But it was only a partial success. Liska had proposed to stimulate productivity and competition in the productive sectors by selecting socialist entrepreneurs, but the decrees issued by the Ministry of Trade reduced the possibility of making a legal profit through administrative measures. After two years, this profit exceeded half a billion forints, a far cry from the billion Liska had imagined under ideal conditions, but still a very encouraging figure. 750 755

The problem, Liska noted in early 1983, was that even these glimmers of entrepreneurial initiative were viewed with suspicion by the economic apparatus and the political 760

leadership. In a televised debate, one of the main supporters of the experiment, the first vice-president of the National Bank, Miklós Pulai, defended the experiment against criticism but failed to use the most effective weapon: that the economic success would have been even more striking if the new entrepreneurs had not had to contend with the punitive rigidity of the bureaucratic apparatus and the tax authorities. While the large industrial consortia had spent decades developing strategies to circumvent bans and restrictions, the new micro-entrepreneurs were faced with difficulties for which they were unprepared.<sup>86</sup> 765

Liska then thought he could overcome the internal impasse by opening up his ideas and experiments to the international economic debate. As we have seen, he tried to engage in a scholarly conversation with Hayek, but after the authorities refused to invite the great liberal economist, the small research group led by Liska scaled back its ambitions to a letter approaching Hayek to send him some materials from the VKCS economic experiments. They received a polite but slightly evasive reply from Hayek, who was 'so overburdened' that he asked for 'some time' before he could 'really pay attention' to them.<sup>87</sup> 770 775

Contacting the deputy editor of *The Economist*, Norman Macrae, proved to be far more consequential. Just as he would have liked to do with Hayek, Liska managed to invite Macrae to Budapest. On 7 March 1983 the two intellectuals held a three-hour public debate on the intertwined crises of the Western and Eastern political-economic models. Back in London Macrae published a full-throated endorsement of Liska's experiments in *The Economist*, which made him internationally famous.<sup>88</sup> Following the publication of Macrae's correspondence from Budapest, Liska was inundated with letters of invitation for talks and seminars, acknowledging that his ideas had finally received global recognition. 780 785

But this success came at great cost. During the months preceding Macrae's brief visit to Budapest, Liska had to contend with the ill-concealed hostility of the political and academic authorities. The event was not publicized, and a venue was only made available at the last minute, when the guest had already arrived in Hungary. Shortly after Macrae's departure, Liska suffered two heart attacks within a few weeks. Macrae did not know that the man he enthusiastically described as a 'Friedmanite socialist', seeking a compromise between the utopia of a fairer society and the laws of the market, would be summoned for daring to invite such a distinguished guest on his own initiative. Nor did Macrae know that while economists all over the world were learning about the frenetic activities of a Hungarian maverick named Tibor Liska, the same person was lying in a hospital bed and would fully never recover from that breakdown. 790 795

While Liska's health issues weakened him, the forcible suspension of experiments threatened Liska's small research group, whose purpose was not to participate in a theoretical debate, but to take economic action on the ground. In September 1984, one of his admirers, Tamás Bácskai, the executive director of the National Bank, went so far as to plead his case to György Aczél, the powerful cultural politician of the Kádár regime. Economic experiments centred on the notions of socialist entrepreneurship and what he called *personal social property* radically redefined the relationship between the public and the private, between commodity and ownership. The greater responsibility demanded of the new socialist entrepreneurs was accompanied by a more tolerant view of individual profit. Bácskai claimed that this was a return to the idea of market 800 805

competition, albeit on socialist ideological premises. According to Bácskai, it was in the primary interest of Hungarian socialism to stimulate forms of entrepreneurship that would lead to a new 'socialist economic culture' with international potential. Unfortunately, despite their considerable success, these experiments could only be carried out 'on an extremely small scale' where they had been implemented. Bácskai cited 'administrative difficulties' and 'financial constraints' for the solution of which he sought the political support.<sup>89</sup> 810

A similar letter was sent in October to the president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, János Szentágothai. However, none of these attempts at mediation had any effect. On 31 December 1984, the five-year grant under which the VKCS had been operating since 1979 expired, and the lack of funding forced the research group to cut its staff and drastically reduce its activities. 815

### Studying Liska to rethink 1989 and beyond

When examining Liska's multifaceted work in the context of the Eastern European debate on the reform of the socialist system, we must resist the temptation to view him as a misunderstood guru. For decades, Liska remained an outsider, needed at the top of the party only when an upcoming crisis threatened the stability of the system. However, it would be reductive and misleading to portray him as a lone genius. As I have demonstrated in the article, the issue of reconciling socialism with ideologically unpalatable notions such as property and profit has been part of the international scholarly debate since the 1960s. Fellow economists had largely discussed 'convergence theory' and how modernity was creating similar problems. Liska could read English and German and had an encyclopaedic and versatile knowledge, so he must have been aware of these debates, even if they were not documented in the rare footnotes of his manuscripts and journal papers. 820 825 830

Tibor Liska stands out as **one** of the most original economic thinkers of his era, seeking an answer to the economic dysfunctions of the system that was compatible with the idea of socialism. In the early 1980s, when the economic decline of the Soviet bloc seemed irreversible, Liska sought to counteract it with action, taking advantage of the Kádár system's relative tolerance of unorthodox thinking. But Liska also had another illuminating insight that could become the starting point for further comparative research. He understood that the two models of development, socialist and capitalist, were in a largely intertwined crisis in the 1980s due to the effects of economic and political globalization, which Liska had been studying since the early 1970s, as the splendid manuscript on the toxic illusions of national sovereignty in a global era shows. 835 840

In the following years, from his discussions with Macrae, through his numerous trips to Italy, and to his academically unsuccessful but highly instructive stay in the United States in 1986–87 and the short fellowship at the European University Institute, Liska argued for a holistic approach to the economic and social problems of the globalized world. He drew inspiration from the public-private interpenetration of the Italian cooperative network and the attempt of Scandinavian social democracy to combine economic efficiency, profit and social solidarity. 845

In a seminal article, the sociologist József Böröcz highlighted the connection between the world-systems analysis of Immanuel Wallerstein and his followers and the Liska 850

model of entrepreneurial socialism, which was based on the horizontal cooperation of actors needed to eliminate human exploitation. Böröcz lamented that the world-systems analysis had been used so little and so inappropriately in Hungarian intellectual discourse, leading to unintended consequences such as the misunderstanding of Liska, who was not a 'prophet', nor a 'wonder doctor', as his opponents labelled him, but an intellectual experimenting in real life, with a concrete vision for the future.<sup>90</sup> 855

Liska should also be exonerated from the claim that he was one of the forerunners of neoliberalism in post-communist economic transition. During the final crisis of the Soviet bloc, Tibor Liska rather sought to build a market alternative to the planned economy based on a fundamental allegiance to the notions of socialism and social justice. His grassroots entrepreneurship did not fit into the Eastern European pattern of reform that anticipated global trends after the end of the Cold War.<sup>91</sup> 860

My fieldwork on economic reform attempts from below suggests that the term neoliberalism should be used cautiously in the context of Eastern European transitions, lest it become a ubiquitous phenomenon. Liska abhorred neoliberalism not only because he remained true to his left-wing humanism based on the belief in equal opportunities, but also because he was opposed to the notion of property, both private and public. Liska's conviction that the only way out for socialism was to accept the challenge of economic competitiveness by stimulating entrepreneurship was greeted with scepticism by the Left, while his hostility to private property and what he called capitalist monopolism provoked accusations that he was chasing a socialist utopia. 865 870

After 1989, Liska expressed open criticism of the privatization process. In one of his final public speeches, delivered in November 1991 during a privatization debate organized at the university from which Marx's name had been removed, Liska expressed his disillusionment and dismay at the post-communist transformation: 875

The system change implemented thus far, under the constraints of international circumstances, has been confined to the political realm. In the economic sphere, it has failed to replace the oppressive and outdated system of state monopolies. We have simply exchanged one state bureaucracy for another.<sup>92</sup>

In his work on the idea of socialism in contemporary Hungary, János M. Rainer describes the turn of the late 1970s and early 1980s as the period in which 'socialism' disappeared from the potential outcomes of reforms. This happened first among the liberal opposition 'liberals', then among the reformist communists and finally also among the 'populists', who had long been uncomfortable with Western capitalism.<sup>93</sup> Liska was probably one of the last exceptions to this global intellectual turn, as he never deviated from his attempt to implement a market socialism capable of beating advanced capitalism on the level of entrepreneurial competitiveness. The economic experiments of the early 1980s reflected the anti-utopian, and indeed quite practical, character of their inventor. 880 885

Subsequent in-depth research will have the task of explaining why his ideas, which began to circulate in Hungary as early as 1981–82, were not accepted by any of the new political parties and were soon forgotten among economic experts. Internal correspondence and external assessments of the experiments reveal an astonishing degree of bureaucratic inertia, but also an enduring statism and a deep scepticism towards the ideas of the market and competition. Analysing the fate of Liska's experiments thus becomes a potential litmus test for better understanding the contradictions that 890 895

accompanied Hungary's seemingly successful transition from socialism to market economy and liberal democracy. In other words, studying Liska could help us to understand why Hungary's post-communist transition failed in the long term, and how liberal democracy was replaced by an authoritarian and deeply monopolistic power system.

## Notes

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1. Interview with Valéria Matyasovszky, Budapest, 8 December 2022.
2. Morley-Fletcher, "C'è una logica in questa follia," 22.
3. Körösenyi and Türei, "Liberalis hatások," 279.
4. Autobiographical insights in Liska, *Antioroslán*, 171–7.
5. Liska and Máriás, "A gazdaságosság," 75–4. This seminal article became a source of inspiration for reform-minded economists in the run-up to the 1956 revolution. Kornai, *A gondolat*, 87.
6. Personal papers of T. Liska. List of job positions from workbook, 1952–94.
7. Liska, *Antioroslán*, 178–6. In his 1985 interview, Liska recounted with amused pride how he had used grants from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to interview the protagonists of the underground economy and learn the shady techniques they used to evade bureaucratic controls.
8. Kornai, *A gazdasági vezetés*; and Kornai, *Overcentralization*.
9. Berend, *Reforms*, 114.
10. *Ibid.*, 131.
11. B. Büky, *Tibor Liska's Challenge to Hungarian Economic Orthodoxy*, 4 March 1982. HU OSA, fond 300-8-3-3940; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: Background Reports.
12. Liska, "Kritika és koncepció," 1058–6.
13. Morley-Fletcher, *Cooperare e competere*, 86.
14. Liska, *Ökonosztát*, 33.
15. Liska, *Szent barmunk*, 105–6.
16. Bársony, "Liska Tibor," 22.
17. Bársony, "Tibor Liska."
18. Bockman, *Markets*; and Fabry, *The Political Economy*.
19. Bockman, *Markets*, 162–3.
20. Kovács, "Liska-torzó," 16.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Kovács, *Populating No Man's Land*, 154.
23. MTA-MKKE Vállalkozáskutató Csoport iratai, Budapest (Documentary collection of the joint enterprise research group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the K. Marx University of Economics, founded in 1979 and operative until 1994), file 6/1297/82. T. Liska to F. von Hayek, 28 July 1982, Translation from German. The author is grateful to L. Pólya for granting access to Liska's personal papers and to the non-inventoried materials I will call from now on VKCS files.
24. VKCS files, Budapest. KKI Head of Section Endre Polgár to Tibor Liska, 2 August 1982, file 6/1297/82.
25. Proceedings of the 1966 Florence seminar in Marczewski, *Il sistema*; proceedings of the 1967 Tremezzo summer school in Scaramozzino, "Problemi attuali."
26. Bockman, *Markets*, 133–6.
27. Archivio Storico del Senato della Repubblica, fond Francesco De Martino, 1.3.2, unit 508 (Giornali per socialismo, nuove ricerche). Note from Pino Crea to De Martino, 19 September 1966, and Tibor Liska's paper attached to the report: *A New Hypothesis on the Mechanism of the Socialist Economy*, 131–4.
28. Liska, "Problemi," 208.


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29. Ban, *Ruling Ideas*.
30. HU OSA, fond 361-0-8, Box 16. Personal papers of Hegedüs András, Writings by others. Liska Tibor, *Tulajon-reform. A személyes társadalmi tulajdonon alapuló szocialista vállalkozási rendszer vázlatja*, 1972.
- Q19  31. Liska, *Antioroslán*, 129. 950
32. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Work agenda. Meeting with G. Soros, 19 June 1982.
33. Somlai, “Ösztöndíjjal Nyugatra”; László, “Az új kalandozások”; and László, *Transcending*.
34. Osnos, *Soros*, 168.
35. Nové, *Tény/Soros*, 1999.
36. VKCS files, Budapest, 1982–83, file 6/1520/83. 955
37. Documentation of the American stay of Liska in Open Society Archives, Budapest (HU OSA), fond 435-0-3:1/2, Atlantic Research and Publications, file Grant Related Documents: T. Liska, 1986/87.
- Q20 38. Interview with E. Morley-Fletcher, Rome, 27 September 2024. 960
39. Morley-Fletcher, *Cooperare e competere*, 78–100 and 133–0.
40. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (Hungarian National Archives), Budapest, fond XIX-J-1-k-1984-IV, box 82. From Rome Embassy to Foreign Ministry. Lecture of Tibor Liska at CESPE in Rome, 27 March 1984.
41. VKCS files, Budapest. Rapporto sul viaggio compiuto in Italia nel marzo 1984. Folder *Fordítások*, 1984. 965
42. Morley-Fletcher, “C’è una logica”; Matyasovszky, “Il modello liskiano”; and Renzoni, “Marx e Smith.”
43. Tamás, “Restricted Development,” 546.
44. Rainer, *Századosok*.
45. Péteri, *By Force*. 970
46. I would like to thank János Mátyás Kovács for clarifying this crucial issue.
47. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Unregistered files. A. Máriás to M. Pulai, 16 February 1971.
48. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Forgács, “Life Interview,” 155.
49. *Ibid.*, 153. 975
50. *Ibid.*, 161.
51. *Ibid.*, 162.
52. Berend’s unpublished talk at the debate on 17 March 1982 at Karl Marx University of Economics in HU OSA, fond 356-2-6, Personal papers of Schiffer Pál, Box 2, *Mások tanulmányai*. Vita Liska Tibor vállalkozói szocializmus koncepciójáról, 1982. 980
53. Liska, *Üdülőtársulás*, 17–18.
54. The role of local sponsors is underlined in Forgács, “Life Interview,” 166.
55. Liska, *Üdülőtársulás*, 29–5.
56. Liska, *Üdülőtársulás*, 100–8.
- Q21 57. Liska, *Üdülőtársulás*, 202–0. 985
58. Forgács, “Life interview,” 166–7.
59. Romsics, *Economic reforms*, 76.
60. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Unregistered files. Contract of engagement between VKCS and Hungarian National Bank, 15, 4 March 1979.
61. Council meetings of Karl Marx University of Economics, Budapest, 1978–1979. Minutes of meeting of 16 May 1979, 342–3. 990
62. Personal papers of Tibor Liska. VKCS, unregistered files. Report for the Ministry of Internal Commerce and interviews with small entrepreneurs, 1980.
63. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Work agenda. Meeting with Research Institute for Service Provid, Budapest, 29 Nov 1979. 995
64. Varga, “Vitacikk,” 791–8; and Horváth, “Egy elmaradt vita,” 799–6.
65. Vargha, “A termelészövetkezeti csoportoktól,” 378–9.
66. VKCS files, Budapest. Unregistered correspondence, 1982–83. A. Baksai to T. Liska. Baksa, 8 October 1980.

67. VKCS files, Budapest. Unregistered correspondence, 1982–83. A. Kósa to F. Havasi. 1000 Kecskemét, 1 February 1982.
68. VKCS files, Budapest. Unregistered correspondence, 1982–83. Összefoglaló a Kaposvári Mezőgazdasági Főiskolai Tangazdaság Igal-pusztai tehenészetének vállalkozásba adásáról. Györfi Pál igazgató, 1982. február 10.
69. Ibid 1005
70. *Dunántúli Napló*, 30 January 1981.
71. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Work agenda. Trip to Baksa-Kaposvár, 30 January 1981.
72. *Jeli, A nyertesek! - nyertesek?*
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74. In May 1982, a sociologist on contract research with VKCS produced a detailed account of the Szentes experiment. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Unregistered files. E. Törzsök, 'A szentesi "Felszabadulás" mgtsz szocialista vállalkozási kísérlete'.
75. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Work agenda. Visit to Szentes, 15 May 1981. 1015
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77. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Forgács, "Life Interview," 180. See also Varga, "The Experiment." 1020
78. Tibor "Kísérlet."
79. Székely, "A szentesi bátor emberek."
80. Gázsó, "Kijön-e."
81. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Unregistered files. Summer camp of Felsőtárkány, 25 July-4 August 1982. Minutes of activities and interviews with 52 participants. 1025
82. Kornai, *A gondolat erejével*, 289.
83. Kornai, "Comments," 460.
84. Uvalic, "Shareholding Schemes," 116.
85. Törzsök, "A szentesi," 37–8.
86. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Unregistered manuscripts. T. Liska, "Fordulat 1030 a vállalkozáskutatásban 1982/1983," 26 January 1983.
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88. Macrae, *Into Entrepreneurial Socialism*, 23–9.
89. Personal papers of T. Liska, Budapest. Unregistered files. T. Bácskai to G. Aczél, 17 Sep 1984. 1035
90. Böröcz, "Világrendszer."
91. Bockman and Eyal, "Eastern Europe"; See also Antal, *Chicago*, 155–2.
92. Liska, "Jog nincs," 35.
93. Rainer, *Újratervezés*, 209–2.

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