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/// *The survival Network*

Report on the Budapest Meeting of the Secret Service Archives

The annual meeting of the European Network of Official Authorities in Charge of the Secret Police Files (Network) was held in Budapest on 29–30 June 2022. The meeting is traditionally organised annually by the country holding the rotating presidency. This year's meeting was hosted by the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL), which has held the presidency since 2021.

In the context of the Network's activities and operations, it is worth briefly recalling the history of this cooperation and its achievements so far. In 2008, seven Central European partner institutions—Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia—decided in Berlin to formalise cooperation between archives with similar responsibilities. It was with this intention and on this occasion that the above-mentioned international cooperation was founded, which was somewhat self-mockingly named Network. (The term 'network' in contemporary state-security parlance refers to a group of civilian collaborators working secretly with the secret services.) The statutes of the cooperation set a threefold objective for the cooperation of the Member States:

– to facilitate individual access to and requests for data on the secret police files of the period,
– scientific research and education on the functioning of the secret services,
– the management of these documents within the framework of the rule of law.

The Foundation Paper made full membership of the organisation conditional on the institution concerned holding ex officio the records of the pre-1990 state security services and being an autonomous collection, independent of other public collections or government institutions. The founding institutions" leaders considered this condition important because in many countries the state security archives

of the communist era were still held by secret services or internal affairs agencies, which did not provide sufficient guarantees for freedom of information. (The independent operation of the institution has caused many problems over the years, which is why the Statutes had to be amended at this formal meeting.)

Albania joined the seven founding members of the Network as a full member in 2020, having met all the above criteria. In addition to full membership, observer status is granted to institutions which do not operate independently (e.g. departments of a national archives) or which have not been able to receive and provide original intelligence material. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia and, most recently, Ukraine currently have such observer status.

The Network's activities are mainly reflected in two areas: annual conferences and various cooperation projects. The member institutions meet annually in the country holding the rotating presidency, where they share their experiences, discuss the past period and decide on joint research or other projects, usually in a conference and formal meeting lasting two days. The Network's joint projects usually involve the production of a publication, an exhibition or a joint website, such as a volume on each institution,[1] a joint travelling exhibition 'By any means' or a website with documents on the meetings of the Warsaw Pact secret service leaders.[2]

The Network has been chaired by the Director General of the ÁBTL since 2021, which is why this event took place in Budapest. This year's meeting was made all the more important by the fact that, having been limited to online contact due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the past two years, the heads of the institutions could finally meet in person again after three years. In the end, not everyone was able to overcome travel difficulties, so the event was held in a hybrid format: representatives from Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Ukraine joined the conference online, while representatives from the Czech Republic sent a written report on the past period, citing their professional commitments.

On the first day of the meeting, each delegation summarised the changes that had taken place in the life of their institution. The most important lesson learned was that the BStU, the former Stasi archives, had been merged into the Bundesarchiv, but that it was still unchanged in terms of staff and responsibilities, with an independent vice-president overseeing its work. At the recent conference, the President of the Bundesarchiv and the Vice-President in charge of the Stasi archives attended in person, promising future cooperation. Other countries are still at an earlier stage of organisation. For example the Albanian archives, founded in 2015, were only really able to start the process of information restitution last year. The Polish Institute of National Remembrance is one of the largest and most active

1 = = The *'European Network of Official Authorities in Charge of the Secret Police Files'.
  A Reader on the Legal Foundations, Structures and Activities.* BStU, Berlin, 2014.

2 = = www.sovietblocksecurity.eu

organisations, which has become a key player in Polish memory policy. The Bulgarian and Romanian colleagues gave details of the work of the governing bodies delegated by the political parties to oversee the archives in their countries. In Ukraine and the Baltic countries, where the former Soviet secret services left behind little archival material, they concentrate on the social and ethnic repression led by the former KGB. The online presentation by the Director of the Institute of the National Remembrance of Ukraine was particularly important for all colleagues, as in addition to the political struggles, archives and staff in Ukraine are currently under direct threat.

Several important decisions were taken on the first day. Above all, the members of the Network adopted a joint declaration of solidarity with the Ukrainian State Security Archives and their colleagues, and expressed their sincere concern about the destruction of cultural assets. The document drew attention to the irreparable damage caused by the war launched by Russia not only to human lives and material goods, but also to cultural heritage, including the former state security archives. In the archives in the town of Chernykhiv, 13,000 documents were destroyed in a fire following a Russian missile attack. The declaration was unanimously adopted by the participants and subsequently published on their websites. The participants then amended the Network's Founding Paper and its Rules of Procedure. They specified the criteria organisations had to meet to become full members. These include the preservation of former secret service files, scientific research and the possibility of information reparation. If these three conditions are met, any institution can retain its membership irrespective of the specific organisational arrangements. The network members have also set the order of the rotating presidency until 2030, so that it is possible to plan exactly which country will hold the presidency and host the meeting in each year.

Gergő Bendegúz Cseh, Head of the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, proposed a joint travelling exhibition. This would present the popular music scene and political reactions of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in the light of state security documents. Tamás Szőnyei, a researcher at the ÁBTL, gave a presentation on the subject. The initiative was supported by all members. Nándor Pócs, editor-in-chief of the official journal of the ÁBTL, *Betekintő,* also gave a short presentation. He introduced the journal and drew attention to the thematic issue in English on the history of social resistance in the 1980s. He asked colleagues to promote the initiative and send abstracts and manuscripts to the editorial office. They also discussed the issue of a joint project to be launched in 2021, a future common website that would provide an overview of the legal status, archives and research results of each institution. Finally, as a final act of the meeting, the Director General of the ÁBTL symbolically handed over the presidency of the Network to Mr Michael Hollmann, Director General of the Bundesarchiv. In a short speech, the new President assured the audience that the international cooperation

within the Network was not only supported by the former BSTU but also by the German Federal Archives.

The second day of the conference was open to the public, so that visitors were able to participate in the virtual space or in person. Those present filled the 50-seat auditorium of the ÁBTL, and many followed the event online, even from outside Hungary. The common theme of the public meeting was the lessons of the Covid-19 epidemic for the life of archives. On this occasion, delegates summarised the solutions that had been put in place to ensure scientific research and freedom of information. The presentation by the Slovak colleagues proved particularly useful, as they discussed in great detail the situation of the archives as a community institution in times of severe restrictions. In general, the process of digitisation had been greatly accelerated by the closures, and online research had been made possible in many places. The most challenging aspect had been the impersonalisation of archival work, as it has not been easy to maintain an audience for public events and to keep interest. Parallel phenomena have been witnessed: research conditions have become easier for many people, even those living in distant countries have been given access to sources, and this has further democratised scientific processing. At the same time, accelerated research processes had not always led to high-quality studies and books based on state security sources. Shorter access to the sources came with shorter time to write these works.

Overall, the 2022 meeting of the Network proved to be very useful, as it was possible to restart the joint work that had been put on hold for two years by the epidemic. Next year, Berlin will host the Network meeting and we hope to be able to present the first results of the initiatives that have just been launched. To return to the title of this report, the Network has survived the pandemic and is expanding its activities with new ideas and new joint projects.