

The career and political thoughts of Gusztáv Beksics

The goals of the thesis and the description of the topic

Gusztáv Beksics was a characteristic and a rather prolific publicist and political thinker of the period following the Act of Settlement. His peculiar figure appeared in many works of his contemporaries, and the number of his articles, pamphlets and books can be compared to the works of only a few. Still, his figure, which was widely known in his time, grew dim after his death, and the scientific interpretation of his role was greatly influenced by the trends of history-writing in the previous century. In most cases the picture was further distorted by the fact that only certain elements of his social programme (the middle-class problem – the gentry question, the concept of an empire) were emphasized and projected upon his life's work. Only a few people have ventured to give a full picture of the whole of his life's work. This was the reason why I considered it important to complete these findings with several years' research, to collect and process according to scientific criteria the works of Beksics – not only the better-known books and pamphlets that can be found in libraries, but his shorter works of high literature, his numerous political public writings, his speeches delivered in the House of Representatives, and the documents and correspondence of his state official work – and finally, to reconstruct the career and thoughts of Gusztáv Beksics according to a new set of criteria. All these provide an opportunity to form a more thorough, balanced picture.

Applied methods

I considered the joint application of a chronological and a thematic structure the most suitable for the presentation of his career. The chapters have been arranged on the basis of theme, keeping in mind the importance of chronological development necessary for presenting the course of his career.

Following a brief introduction of the literature on Beksics I present the first years of his career (place of birth, schools and editorial offices) and the early impacts on his way of thinking (the family, studies, mentors, the young generation). The biographical data needed completion and correction at several points.

The chapter examining the career of his adult years deals with 1. his intellectual roles, that are significant not as social class positions but as the means of intellectual activity and of influencing politics. Intellectuals are interpreted as a layer producing ideas – I have relied on Karl Mannheim's term of "freely floating intellectuals". 2. In reconstructing his political

thoughts, I present his approach to the great ideas of the period, his plans and proposals belonging to the terms of liberalism, state and nationalism, and I dedicate a sub-chapter to his social reform endeavours, the special direction of interest of the intellectuals with a positivist education. I find the statements Halász Gábor made of the reform-generations appearing after the revolution (“Hungarian Victorians”) as well as the works of Béla G. Németh of the Hungarian “intellectuals of literary criticism” especially significant in this respect. From among the nationalism theories I turned to John Breuilly’s modernization-interpretation and Anthony D. Smith’s theory on “the myths of the chosen people”.

In my opinion the career of Beksics represents a type of intellectual – it has connections with the careers of intellectuals in Hungary in the 19th century: the unformed state of intellectuals, when an individual career involves a lot of different roles. His reform propositions show a lot of similarities with the modernization ideas appearing in the second half of the century; still, all in all, they represent a specific civilization programme.

The summary of the findings

1. The beginning of his career and the early influences

Beksics was born on March 9 1846 in Gamás, in the county of Somogy into a family of southern Slavic origin – his ancestors had claimed themselves to be Hungarian only since the end of the previous century. His childhood spent in a village of a mixed population and a family history of assimilation surely had a great influence on his personality development, and might have served as background factors in his later views on magyarization. The clerical relations on his mother’s side and the accomplished school-teacher father created an intellectual environment that was rare at the time for the possibilities of a small countryside village. The direct influence of the clerical and secular intellectuals became an important factor of his intellectual development and had a role in making it possible for him to continue his education after elementary school.

During his secondary-school years he received thorough education in the field of the natural sciences (the secondary school of Kaposvár), and later he took the direction of building up a career as a clergyman (the religious schools of Kecskemét and Pécs). In Pécs he showed a talent for learning languages and reciting poetry and this – although he later found the way to self-expression through public writing - had an important role in forming his special voice. His knowledge of languages was also a great help in the course of his career

and served as a basis for his becoming an accomplished man. In 1866 he left the clergy and became a law student.

In 1868 he continued his studies at the University of Pest. The 22-year-old young boy from the countryside arrived in the city of the young generation and the immigrants – an exciting city which was becoming more and more Hungarian. Beksics's personality was formed in a public life excited by the Act of Settlement, and besides studying he was trying to make a living by writing. This way he got close to journalism through *Pesti Napló*, a Deák-party newspaper - in 1869 he became an assistant of Zsigmond Kemény. Through the editorial work he learned about political stances and currents of ideas, and as the assistant of Kemény he got acquainted with the questions of history and public law of the century, as well as the modernization programmes of the period. Although among the ideas of the first big generation of reform (Széchenyi, Kossuth, Deák, Dessewffy) he found thoughts and patterns that were applicable to his own time, for him the greatest intellectual heritage came from the centralist ideas; he built his own principles on the open acceptance of these ideas and of Deák's directions.

Another important factor in forming his way of thinking was the generation of his own age. There was a close circle of young intellectuals influential in a political and cultural sense, Ágost Pulszky, László Arany, Károly Keleti, János Asbóth, István Toldy. They articulated the undertaking of the legacy of 1848 and its modernization. Their ideas of advance were formed by the great intellectual currents of the period: the opposition, meeting and parallel effects of romanticism and positivism created a peculiar ideological environment. Most of them tried to help the cause of civil advancement by working for the newspaper *Reform* (started in 1869) – Beksics also took part in the work of the editorial office organised by Jenő Rákosi. The special atmosphere created by the editorial staff of the *Pesti Napló* and the *Reform* served as an environment for the first steps of Beksics. He formed relationships that lasted for a lifetime (eg. Rákosi) and became acquainted with intellectual forms of behaviour.

2. In intellectual roles

After graduating as a lawyer in 1872, he started to work for the royal court. He did not give up writing, however. These first years were spent in the realm of literature – he was known for his translations of poetry, short stories and plays from Spanish, and in 1880 a novel of his own came out. His love of the theatre acquainted him with the young actress, Krisztina

Bogdanovich. They got married in 1873, and his wife started a career in writing and in public life, thus becoming not only a colleague to Beksics but a soulmate as well.

The year 1875 meant a turning point to Beksics, who had become well-acquainted with the society of journalists, as the fusion resulted in the restructuring of the market of daily newspapers. He left the *Pesti Napló* and started editing the liberal-party the *Ellenőr*. At first he was the leader of the column on foreign affairs, but later he was trusted with the writing of leading articles; his articles started to appear from April 1879. Following an invitation from one of the most talented public writers of the time, Zsigmond Bródy, from the year 1880 he worked for the *Neues Pester Journal*, an openly independent newspaper. He got involved in passionate fights in writing, but his name became well-known as a result of his thorough studies in the fields of law and history as well. Because of his interest in science and his experience gained in the field of justice, he was preoccupied by the theoretical and practical approaches to criminal law. Between the years 1877 and 1885 he took part in the work of *Magyar Igazságügy*, a journal dealing with actual problems of law. Apart from this, he came up with two works of history in only one and a half years' time, both being the product of the influence of his mentor and the centralists. His manifold interests can be considered the characteristic of a renaissance man, which was not the way of the time, nevertheless, it helped to strengthen his position as an intellectual.

From the year 1881 he wrote leading articles for the *Pesti Hírlap*, the newspaper of the Légrády brothers, and from the following year he started to work for the new government-newspaper, the *Nemzet*, which was formed from the fusion of the *Hon* and the *Ellenőr*. The leading articles he wrote were elements of his system of ideas, and he collected them from time to time in bigger volumes and pamphlets. The years spent at these newspapers meant a milestone in a biographical sense as well: on one hand this was the beginning of a work-relationship with Jókai (who was the chief editor of the *Nemzet* at the time) that lasted a decade and a half, and on the other hand he stepped into the front lines of politics. His good relationship with Kálmán Tisza got him an electoral mandate in the district of Sepsiszentgyörgy in 1884. Beksics saw in "the general" the true heir of Deák; in his opinion the modernization process starting after the Act of Settlement together with Tisza's strong personality made the "first great national concentration". Although he became a representative of Transylvania without a Transylvanian origin – this was common practice at the time – he represented his district with great care, developed a programme of solutions that he published on the pages of the *Székely Nemzet*, a government-party local newspaper. His intensive activity as a public writer showed that in spite of being a member of the House of

Representatives, he considered the press the platform for the preparation and consideration of ideas. This might have been the reason for his not becoming a leading speaker of the House. He paid close attention to the discussion of the reform questions that he considered significant with regard to his ideas, he informed the public in the newspapers and occasionally joined the debate.

In his leading articles, from the year 1892 he urged the provision of the personal and institutional conditions necessary for the realization of his ideas. He advised the Wekerle-administration to include members of “science and information” in the administration. His ideas were accepted in 1894, so much so, that a new status of ministerial counsellor was set up especially for him. Beksics’s goal was to throw light upon the different aspects of public law, his call was to set up “an enlightening service” helping ministers. After Wekerle’s resignation one of his old friends, Dezső Bánffy became president of the government, and most of Beksics’s work aimed at calming the political battles both at home and abroad. Beksics believed in the necessity of showing a picture of a consolidated Hungary abroad, and he published several studies in foreign languages as well – his books were published in Paris. The year of the millennium gave an opportunity for him to write about improving the prestige of the monarchy in Europe.

His ideas later conflicted with Bánffy’s methods of government more and more, and in 1896 he returned to the House of Representatives and to daily public writing. He started to propagate his system of reforms again: he wrote for more than a year for the *Budapesti Napló*, and in 1897 he published several leading articles in Ambrus Neményi’s the *Pesti Napló*, a newspaper sympathetic with Apponyi. He was still working as an official when he joined the most representative scientific endeavour of the millennium with his historical research. In *The History of the Hungarian Nation*, a series of volumes, he wrote volume 10: the decades following the revolution. At the beginning of 1899 it seemed that his ideas of reform were not completely hopeless, a new government was set up with Kálmán Széll, with whom Beksics had a very good relationship. Soon the new prime minister appointed him chief editor of the *Magyar Nemzet* (the other editor was Mór Jókai). Beksics found (after Kálmán Tisza) a new “leader” in Széll, he talked about “a second national concentration” in connection with him. He was full of hope; it seemed that several elements of his political ideas would be included in the government-programme.

In the political public life of the turn of the century, however, Beksics’s thoughts could not be rooted. In 1903 his wife’s death put him into a long-lasting depression, and the resignation of Széll meant the end of a politically productive career. He could not identify

himself with the politics of the new generation represented by István Tisza, and at the beginning of 1904 he resigned from the position of chief editor of the Magyar Nemzet. The change in his attitude towards politics was shown by the fact that he turned to drama again. In 1905 he lost the elections to the nominee of the Újpart. His disappointment must have played a part in his accepting the chief editorial position of the newspaper the Budapesti Közlöny, which was considered a periphery of journalism. Seeing the foundations of the system in danger was an even greater shock for him than his own personal failures. He objected to the illegal orders of the “darabont-government” by writing a series of unanimous articles in the Budapesti Hírlap, the main platform of the “national opposition”. In 1906 he thought it was time to look back and re-evaluate the political processes following the Act of Settlement, this, however, remained incomplete because of his death on May 7 1906.

3. Ideas and his political programme

Beksics’s political career developed in the environment of a country developing its constitutional system of institutions after the Act of Settlement in 1867. He and his colleagues examined what possibilities the modern ideas had in the framework of dualism.

His study into the field of law theory turned his attention very early to the right to freedom but the fact that the study of the relationship between freedom and democracy had never been so much in the focus of political thinking as in the second thirds of the nineteenth century - in the decades following the revolution -, also played an important role. In Europe the work of J. S. Mill made a stir and several works of analysis came out in Hungary as well. Beksics joined the ones who elaborated on their ideas of freedom in an argumentative way (József Eötvös, Béni Kállay, János Asbóth, Ágost Greguss), and he dedicated two works to this issue at the beginning of his career as public writer. Analysing the development of law in Hungary, he considered the privileges of the nobility stated in the Tripartitum a source of freedom peculiar to Hungary, because as a result of the expansion of rights the whole population of Hungary benefited from it. However, he liked to research into the realization of individual freedom in the legal system of the time: in 1879 – before the code of Csemegi came into effect -, he recognised that the right of personal freedom was damaged due to the inconsistencies originating from the lack of a standard regulation. He was the most critical of the unregulated nature of the work of judges and policemen in carrying out arrests and searches of premises. The statistics convinced him of the urgent necessity of building up warranties of freedom. In his plans of reform concerning justice he examined the results and deficiencies of the western patterns and marked the necessary changes in the preparatory

investigation: the appropriate method of prosecution, meaning the accurate nomination of roles (prosecutor – judge- defence lawyer), the principle of contradictorius, publicity and verbalism, and the equal rights to defence. He considered the strict separation of remand and preventive captivity indispensable, and he would have provided the possibility of bail only in cases of more serious offences. Although he regarded individual freedom the basis of liberalism, he knew that restrictions were unavoidable in certain cases. He joined Mill's principle that freedom to act can only be applied to adults according to the law, and because of this he proposed culpability only for children over the age of twelve. In his views it was not permissible for the individual to cause a stir in the legitimate operation of the state, so he opposed resistance to legal administrative action. He examined the practice of press-procedures concerning the freedom of speech not from the perspective of political freedom-rights, but from the perspective of individual freedom. In slander committed in newspapers he saw damage to individual privacy, and as a result he wished to renew the structure of the press-jury set up in 1867. He recognised the benefits of the institution of a criminal jury in theory, but since they would have operated in one language only he worried about such influential platforms not being Hungarian in areas of national minority or vice versa: Hungarian having made compulsory in certain areas would have aroused anger.

He consistently applied his system of arguments based on the interests of the nation with regard to political rights of freedom. Here too, he emphasized the specific nature of Hungarian development, that is, the influence of the nobility over a weak layer of civilians. In his opinion this originated from the laws of inheritance and the conveyance of property. He looked upon the institution of entail as a system of regulations aristocratic in its goals and democratic in its achievements, as it contributed to the impoverishment and proliferation of the nobility and thus made it receptive to the ideas of equality. The examples of history proved for him that democracy – unlike individual freedom – was not a desire inherent in people but the consequence of specific social and economic reasons. The peculiar nature of Beksics's idea of democracy derives from his ideas regarding the borderlines of political freedom. He mainly referred to the role of the “conservation of race” that sprung from the protection of the constitution and was applied against the social-political changes that gave too much ground to foreign elements. He pointed out, however, that this restriction did not mean a turning away from freedom, because it did not have an interrelationship with the idea of equality. From his characteristic historical perspective he explained the political system of the time (“royal democracy”) on one hand, and on the other, he provided a background for his theories. His liberalism and his national politics rested on such grounds. This policy –

referring to the specific nature of ethnic minorities in Hungary - tamed democracy into an equality dissolving in the system of individual freedom.

In working out his modernization programme, he missed the support of a “strong public spirit”. He tried to dislodge the legally and politically indifferent society from its stationary position by providing a comprehensive national goal. Eventually he awoke the public spirit with the policy of magyarization – in the beginning, he expected participation from the society in the long-term task of creating a “grammatical unity”. He was satisfied with the assimilation of Germans and Jews in Hungary, and he was optimistic concerning the assimilation of minor ethnic groups – he saw obstacles in the way of conquering Slovakian and Romanian territories. He put the culture- and language-spreading effect of the towns into the first place, he urged the magyarization of main regional centres, and he considered the work of the associations of public education favourable to the speeding up of this process and the increase of social participation. This was the reason why he took part in the work of EMKE, and the Association of Transdanubian Public Education was founded in 1890 upon his urging.

In the mid-80s it was mainly the work of Beksics that gave momentum to the middle-class debate looking back on a long history. He considered the civil middle-class significant in the cultural and ethical renewal of the society, but too weak to take on the burden of a political mission on its own. In his opinion the role of the traditional leading class, the gentry, was continuous because of the mass-phenomenon of their taking office-work, and he thought that the complaints regarding the destruction of this class were rightful. He came to the conclusion that none of the classes were mature enough exclusively to realise the requirements of the time. Beksics was fantasizing about “melting”; his elite construed by a biological method was new and national at the same time: it was new because it was characterized by an entrepreneur nature and a love of work that was suitable for the requirements of modernization represented by the civilians and the new proprietary. It was national in the sense that it had a patriotic nature originating from the patriotism of the gentry going back to centuries. The aristocracy and the clergy could not take part in the programme because of their anti-democratic nature. This was reflected in his reform ideas regarding the upper house. In his view, the Hungarian upper house could fulfil the needs of the time only if the king-appointed representatives of wealth, science, administration, justice and the army could have seats as well.

His idea triggered violent reactions, reflecting the fears of the traditional political leading elite and the trend of new conservatism criticizing civil transformation. Beksics felt

the social reconciliation of 1867, the foundation of his liberalism, and the interests of the nation endangered at the same time when he turned against the ideologies representing group-interests. He was concerned about the world-wide phenomenon of ultramontanism and the ethnical aspirations, the “ally” of agrarianism. Protecting the forming middle-class, he condemned the Schulverein and anti-Semitism that became more and more obvious in politics. Socialism appearing in Europe was ‘only’ a theoretical problem for him at the beginning, not a direct threat - nevertheless, he condemned it together with anarchy. He was more closely influenced by the agrarian-socialist movements in the Great Plains, and he made a great effort to learn its causes.

Because of these worrying phenomena, he turned to the reevaluation of the role of the state. In 1889 he came up with a comprehensive national programme: he put the idea of a “national state” next to the idea of a liberal “constitutional state” and he suggested the launching of “national politics”. In his views the most effective means of securing the state and reconciling the ethnic and social conflicts was good administration. His conception was built on the three pillars of state power, autonomy and legal protection, but these were adapted to the goals of the idea of a nation. The securing of the power of the appointed lord lieutenant was accompanied by the restriction of the power of the elected deputy-lieutenant, and the increase of the influence of the administration committee was accompanied by the restriction of the power of the general assembly. These steps – in quite a contradicting manner – meant the strict regulation of both the old county administrative technique and modern autonomy. The court of administration can be considered quite significant; it became an important institution of the constitutional state. On the border of reform created from the western patterns and the Hungarian traditions, there was the point of view of nationality, as it recoiled from every attempt of territorial division that would have resulted in more counties becoming of non-Hungarian majority.

His ideas of administration were influenced by the ethnic relations of the country as well as the liberal idea of freedom. In the name of an individual trying to break out of mediocrity, he requested the improvement of the general standard of the education system, but at the same time he expected the state to preserve and extend the Hungarian nature of secondary and higher education. His reform was grounded in the general idea of language having a role of cultural education and assimilation, and it served the purpose of the grammatical and emotional union of the intellectuals of a national cultural state.

Beksics requested urgent state intervention into church-matters. He encouraged the insurance of the rights of patronage and supervision of the king – practised through the

government – and he spoke of a peculiar Hungarian freedom in Rome. He ruled out the possibility of breaking the historical relationship between the Catholic Church and the state, and thus he considered only a very narrow Catholic autonomy. Supporting a unified law of marriage, he encouraged the introduction of a general state registration and a compulsory registry marriage. He thought that this was a way to win the Jews – playing a significant role in the process of magyarization - for the cause of national endeavours; he wanted to reinforce the structure of the nation with the liberal idea of freedom. The spreading of political Catholicism gained new momentum with jurisdiction – he considered this process harmful from the perspective of both the Hungarian hegemony and the structure of public law.

The nineties brought further concerns to Beksics. Although he earlier suggested – counting with the realities of politics – the restriction of entailed property in the debate around binding property, and he encouraged policies promoting industry and trade by winning foreign capital and expertise for this cause, as a representative of Sepsiszentgyörgy he had to face the serious backwardness of Székelyföld and Transylvania compared to other parts of the country. With the protection of the “eastern bastion” of the national state in mind, he worked out an action plan. In his opinion the most important task was the economic support of the countryside that was outstanding with respect to domestic industrial production but had no large-scale industry. He also requested the development of a usable credit system, the foundation of a financial institution, the setting up of special schools and the development of the railway system. He talked of Russian and Romanian threat, and of the strategic significance of Székelyföld.

Beksics relied on the data of the Statistical Office from the beginning, and he carried out statistical research and up-to-date comparative studies himself - the fields of ethnography and demography further widened his perspective. He was influenced by the idea of social-darwinism; he believed that a system of the states of development and regression could be built up of peoples (“races”) opposing each other, with the help of positive disciplines. He inserted the irreconcilable Hungarian-Romanian antagonism into the vision of the global battle of races, and he pointed out the reasonable nature of the cultural mission in the eastern part of the monarchy. He was convinced that races could be united by the ideas of religion and nation, and that freedom also played an important role in the life of a nation. Approaching the end of the century his views on assimilation were going through a transformation parallel to the spreading of Spencer’s evolutionist ideas. Seeing the few results of assimilation through language, he thought of a national state that was not kept together by grammatical cohesion.

He expected loyalty to the Hungarian state and the national endeavours irrespective of the command of languages or national status.

He wished to counter-balance the Slavic, especially the Romanian movements with the higher number of Hungarians, and so he paid special attention to the solution of problems of a demographic nature. He was satisfied with the rate of reproduction in Hungary, but he was concerned about the regression of the number of births in the regions of Transdanubia and the Great Plains – he found the reasons for this in the distribution of land. With the aim of reversing these unfavourable processes, he suggested an expansive economic policy: he wanted to provide a possibility for the growth of the agrarian population by parcelling out state and community lands and moving entailed property. He also considered populating the southern parts of Hungary and the region of Transylvania. The growth of the base of the Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin was accompanied by a transformation of the middle-class in Beksics's ideas. He wished to refresh and morally reinforce the middle-class because of the financial ruin of the medium estate-owners and the lack of wealth in the case of the class of intellectuals: for the great work of regeneration he looked to the peasantry.

Beksics was concerned with questions of public law in many of his works. His main political terms were the continuity of rights proven by Pragmatica Sanctio, 1848 and 1867, and a community built on double unity – the essence of which was the binding and conveyance of rights. For him, the Act of Settlement was a defined foundation that was completed with respect to public law – he imagined development only in a national sense, thus opening up new perspectives. He became more and more certain that he was not able to solve the internal problems of Austria, so in the last years of his life he proposed the idea of taking over control of the empire. He did not think it impossible that the country becoming independent economically and commercially could achieve majority of population in the future – he foresaw a country of 20 million Hungarians. It is not surprising that Beksics found a historic example to the new Hungarian endeavours of power in the politics of Matthias, who conquered Vienna. At the dawn of the new century he put Hungary in the position of having to make a choice between the status of world-power or destruction.

4. Typology

Beksics marked his position very early in the public life and the party structure arranged along the fracture-lines of public law. At first he tried himself in the roles of an independent liberal intellectual, but as an intellectual of a creative mind, he soon encountered

the problem of vindicating his ideas – and, like several of his colleagues, he also chose participation and taking on an open political and state role. He never became completely independent, however, his resignations, his debates and his battles in writing (he always considered the press a platform for preparing and considering new lines of ideas) speak of an autonomous personality – it was his love of work, his origin and his constitution that ruined the chances of him getting from his intellectual roles into the front lines of politics.

His intellectual development continued in a current of thought characteristic of the second half of the 19th century. He started his career enchanted by the idea of individual freedom, he was thinking in the framework of institutions of a constitutional state, and he counted on a modern civilized society, but because of its weakness he could not solve the problem of the nation in a liberal way. He thus turned to etatism, which in turn led to a tilting of balance between the society and the state. He was strongly attracted to the historical thinking of the period, although he did not share the conservative views concerning the gentry-question. His middle-class programme falls in line with the social reform ideas typical of the period, just as his daring assimilation-plans growing from the evolution-tenets do. The same way as the majority of the liberals, his modernization programme was going more and more in the direction of nationalism, and his name was mentioned together with the names of Jenő Rákosi and Pál Hoitsy.