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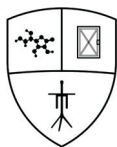
2022

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CLASSIS II, TOM. 9 – SEPARATUM

THE SELECTED POLITICAL
CORRESPONDENCE OF
FERENC FORGÁCH (1586–1615)

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2022

Bibliotheca Historiae Ecclesiasticae Universitatis Catholicae de Petro Pázmány nuncupatae

Series I

Collectanea Vaticana Hungariae

fundavit ac moderatur

P. TUSOR

Published by the MTA-PPKE Vilmos Fraknói Vatican Historical Research Institute

Classis II, tom. 9

Forgách Ferenc Okmánytár. Levelek és iratok (1586–1615)

SEPARATUM

The Selected Political Correspondence of Ferenc Forgách (1586–1615)

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ISSN 1787-2758

ISBN (pdf) 978-615-6448-02-6

Prepared for publication
the “Gondolat” Publishing House

THE SELECTED POLITICAL CORRESPONDENCE OF FERENC FORGÁCH (1586–1615)

I. THE FACES OF FERENC FORGÁCH: THE ARISTOCRATIC CONVERT, THE BISHOP AND THE CHANCELLOR

Such a *curriculum vitae* evolves from the documents under publication, in which every stage has its own role; that is why there is no title or rank listed after the name of Ferenc Forgách in the title of the volume. His short career attracted the attention of the historians early on. There were many among his first biographers¹ that described Forgách as an impulsive person with the characteristics of a true leader, who was often reserved at the same time.

The biographies particularly focus on the relation of Forgách and the Jesuits, which was extremely close due to the fact they were the ones to convert him.

Consequently, the cartulary shows a controversial character that had few support in the political battlefield against the Protestant orders and Archduke Matthias. According to certain historians his radical views even alienated some Catholics; and certain members of the clergy sought a kind of *modus vivendi*, the possibility of a co-operation rather than confronted the royal and feudal authority.

¹ PONGRÁCZ SÖRÖS, *Forgách Ferencz a bíboros*, Századok 35 (1901) 577–608. 690–729. 774–818 [Ferenc Forgách, the Cardinal]; KÁLMÁN ACKERMANN, *Forgách Ferenc bíboros, esztergomi érsek*, Budapest 1918 [Ferenc Forgách, Cardinal and the Archbishop of Esztergom].

The letter of István Báthory to Emperor Rudolf – in which the young, convert Forgách was introduced and recommended to the emperor – was chosen as the first document of the cartulary with a symbolic intention. The entry and rise of Forgách in the church hierarchy was not difficult since every door opened to him as being a member of a prestigious aristocratic family of Upper-Hungary. Yet, we barely know the first events of his career as an ecclesiastical leader and bishop. For instance, there is not enough evidence of his views about the actions of counter-reformation in the first years of 1600s, about the seized churches in Upper-Hungary, or about the trials against the aristocrats, like the one against István Illésházy – one of the richest noblemen of the country –, which provoked the biggest reaction. However, these steps initiated and supported by the Habsburg government led to the Bocskai uprising.

Based on the published and unpublished documents survived from the period before the Bocskai uprising, it appears that Forgách – as a church leader as well as a state official – represented the interest of his dioceses and church order as usual. He appointed nominees to the vacant church prebends, or he made recommendation to a youth heading to Rome to study.² Do not forget that in the meantime, the Kingdom of Hungary was being war-scarred by the Ottomans: the estates of his diocese of Veszprém, then Nyitra (Nitra) was continuously being destroyed by the proximity of the frontline. Moreover, his diocese – that had few revenues due to Reformation and the war – had to take part in supplying the soldiers serving in the border fortresses within his diocese. Later the wage of the garrisons of Érsekújvár (Nové Zámky) became his problem that lasted for years and was put on the agenda of the diets many times.³ As the *supremus comes* of Nyitra County he was charged to summon the army of the county and the nobility. The documents depict an average churchman struggling with everyday problems. He was litigating, making provision for absolution from excommunication

² ÖStA HHStA Hung., Allg. Akt., fasc. 129, 1596. Jan.–Dez., fol. 33r + 34v. n. 7.

³ See *Okmánytár*, n. 42. 45B. 81. 106A–B. 135B. 145. 152–153. 160. 162–163. 180–181. 183–184. 186. 203.

and corresponding about cases related to the county and his family.⁴ Consequently, in the documents of the early years of his career, he does not come across as a neophyte, who whole-heartedly hates the Protestants, but as a member of the elite, who by right of his ancestors and irrespective of confessions, above the subjects and vassals confidently keeps his power and authority that is strengthened by close and less close family bonds.

This period also has a notable relation of his; namely that of with the Jesuit order. This relationship goes back to the 1590s according to the data. For instance, one Jesuit said at the time that his house looks more like a Jesuit college than an episcopal residence. He assisted the Society – especially the college in Vágsellye (Šaľa) – during the Turkish war, too; besides, he was the one to assist at the Marian Congregation's establishment, which was the first Hungarian congregation in the early modern period. One year later, he donated a house for them in Nyitra. These acts already show the future school-founder, church-organizer archbishop and cardinal, who in his final year founded a college and settled the order in his archiepiscopal residence, in Nagyszombat (Trnava).

The Bocskai uprising (1604–1606), as it was mentioned before, brought about a radical change in his life. Our available data on his public life and political conduct became rich from this period on. The letters speak volumes about this impulsive activity, which, although was not devoid of conflicts, but was undertaken for the sake of the church properties' defence and the catholic religious practice. From 1606, the cartulary contains numerous documents, which clearly show the gravity of the situation: in the months prior to the Treaty of Vienna, Forgách regularly wrote to Giovanni Stefano Ferreri, the papal nuncio of Prague, and the intensity of the correspondence decreased only little afterwards. The documents reveal that the bishop-chancellor has a heated debate with one of the leaders of the Protestant orders, with István Illésházy, who might have been his biggest political opponent. Moreover, on account of the concessions given to the Protestants, he confronted his biggest

⁴ MNL-OL MKA, Acta Eccl. [E 150], Irreg., 27. t., n. 22.; Fam. Thurzó [E 196], fasc. 81, n. 14. 19. 25.; ASBi Archivio Ferrero, cass. XIII, cart. 11, fasc. 112, n. 1.

political enemy, Archduke Matthias, and his close circle. The striking disproportion in the number of the letters comparing to the previous period cannot be a coincidence. The Bocskai uprising vigorously raised the question of free exercise of religion and its relation to Catholicism. The conflict that subverted the Holy Roman Empire 50 years earlier and the Kingdom of France 25 years earlier, besides that pushed the Low Countries into civil war that lasted for 80 years, also set fire in the Kingdom of Hungary. And to top it all, Hungary was still under Turkish attack, as well. As the other secular and/or church officials, Forgách – like it or not – had to step out of his own “comfort zone.” The church lost hundreds of its properties, the free exercise of religion was granted to the Protestants, the prelates’ right of holding an office was restricted. All these posed a major threat that not only the ecclesiastical order, but also the Catholic religion would fatally get weak, or even disappear.

Partly in view of Forgách’s correspondence, the threatening situation had the Holy See reconsider its relations with the Habsburg court and none the least with the Hungarian clergy. Namely, Forgách was reckoned in Rome as a new actor – although his zeal, especially his unique relations to the Jesuits was long known there – who was treated in the papal court cautiously and with reservations, which must have been caused by the fact that he was a convert and many members of his family remained Protestant.

Forgách sensed that, therefore he went to great lengths to convert his family members; in the case of his brother, Zsigmond he spectacularly succeeded.⁵ Furthermore, he converted his other brother, the remarkably educated Mihály Forgách on his deathbed.⁶ Yet, he had to overcome Rome’s reservations, which was earned by his extremely tense political struggle around the Treaty of Vienna.

⁵ PÉTER TUSOR, *Forgách Zsigmond katolizálása*, *Eruditio, Virtus et Constantia* – Tanulmányok a 70 éves Bitskey István tiszteletére (ed. Fazakas Gergely Tamás et al.), Debrecen 2017, 640–645 [The Catholicisation of Zsigmond Forgách].

⁶ MIHÁLY BALÁZS–TAMÁS KRUPPA ET AL. (ed.), *Jezsuita Okmánytár I/1–2. Erdélyt és Magyarországot érintő iratok 1601–1606* (Adattár XVI–XVII. századi szellemi mozgalmaink történetéhez [Adattár] 34), Szeged 1995, 222. 225. 227 [Jesuit Cartulary I/1–2.].



2. FORGÁCH THE CARDINAL-ARCHBISHOP AND CHIEF CHANCELLOR

Rome held high expectations towards him, while he was in a very difficult situation. The degree of the trust was shown by the fact that the Holy See had immediately dropped the favourite candidates for the vacant archiepiscopal see of Esztergom. It was a telltale lack of alternatives that almost immediately after having gained the archdiocese, the *biretum* was granted to him. This quick and almost unprecedented rise, as the latest secondary literature underlines it, had pure political reasons.⁷

Forgách's dilemma after the Treaty of Vienna can be understood as follows. The regime is responsible for the defence of faith and church. What happens if the regime is incapable to do so? In the consulted letters Forgách criticised the emperor on many occasions, at the same time he supported him till the very end; however, historiography has already declared his incompetence as a ruler based on the bulk of contemporary sources. He was obviously aware of this, yet he did not criticise directly the emperor but his counsellors, the court of Vienna and Archduke Matthias. This is clearly demonstrated by his well-documented and well-analysed conflict with Archduke Matthias, which was also dealt with in the Holy Office.⁸ Already KÁROLYI as well as the new literature see the turning-point of the Catholic confessionalization in Hungary in this conflict, which saved and preserved Catholicism for better times.

After 1609 due to his conflict with the new monarch, he was sidelined in the political battlefield. His correspondence accurately reveals the finale of a political career once had its zenith: the current of the abundant number of documents started to shrink and by the end of his life it almost completely ceased. In the information flow,

⁷ PÉTER TUSOR, *Purpura Pannonica. Az esztergomi „bíborosi szék” előzményei a 17. században* (Collectanea Vaticana Hungariae [CVH] I/3), Budapest–Roma 2005, 59–76.

⁸ PÉTER TUSOR, *Az 1608. évi magyar törvények a római inkvizíció előtt: II. Mátyás kiközösítése*, Aetas 15 (2000) 4, 89–105 [The Hungarian Acts of 1608 Before the Roman Inquisition: the Excommunication of Matthias II].

his role was taken by the new, motivated nuncio of Vienna, Placido de Mara, whose reports disclose that Forgách was still active, yet a major part of his energy is consumed somewhere else. However, he was not completely ousted from the political decision-making – due to his office. To reach the Treaty of Nagyszombat he assisted Gábor Bethlen, besides, he had a significant role in the renewal of the Peace of Zsitvatorok. The year of 1609 – apart from the Bocskai uprising – brought about another trauma in Forgách's career.

The highest profile case of the year was undoubtedly when the cardinal reached out for the Sacred Office on account of the ratification of the acts authorizing the free exercise of religion in 1608. The Sacred Office properly conducted the process and condemned the monarch, who received his absolution only after having promised to modify the act that gravely affected the Catholic religion.

The year of 1610 did not bring success either: the successor of Illésházy as a palatine became György Thurzó, one of the relatives of Forgách. Not only did Thurzó succeed in achieving that a Lutheran preacher was placed in Nagyszombat next to a Calvinist one, in the then centre of the archdiocese of Esztergom, the centre of Hungarian Catholicism, but he also supported the synod of the Lutherans in Zsolna (Jászina), against which Forgách and the clergy ardently protested that was also published at the time. Such extent of the Protestant advance, which did not spare the archiepiscopal see either, shows the royal authority's weakness.

Gábor Báthory, the prince of Transylvania – whom he supported – was his other great disappointment. His brother, Zsigmond Forgách wanted to depose the prince; however, the action ended in a failure in 1611, in which the cardinal participated – though only informally – and might have given some political aid.⁹ Although Báthory failed in the end, his successor, Gábor Bethlen was even worse concerning Catholicism. Despite all, the last document of the cartulary, which registers Forgách's political views in bulk, reveals in a surprisingly accurate way that Bethlen was even better than the

⁹ PÉTER VÖRÖS, *Forgách Zsigmond erdélyi expedíciója 1611-ben*, HK 124 (2011) 864–887 [The Expedition of Zsigmond Forgách in Transylvania in 1611].

Catholic nominee recommended by the Moldovan chancer, Gaspar Graziani, since he would only strengthen the Turkish relations and position in the region. It is obvious that Forgách learnt from the fiasco 4 years earlier.

Two other events should be mentioned for the pragmatism: when one of the relevant demands of the risen orders, the filling of the long vacant office of the palatine, was put on the agenda in that turbulent period, Forgách voted for Illésházy, who was depicted as the biggest enemy of the religion. From one of his letters, it occurs that he supported Illésházy, because he had promised him – in need of his and the ecclesiastical order's vote – that he would support him in the case of the exercise of religion and they had to keep in mind that the monarch was weak, yet his opponent was strong.¹⁰

Our other example is related to the next palatine, to György Thurzó. For the sake of the already mentioned case of Nagyszombat's arrangement, which was also put on the agenda of the diet, Forgách behaved in a pragmatic way: namely, he agreed to the further strengthening of Protestantism in his own town with the condition that they could not have a church, therefore, the services could be held only in private houses and the preacher could not be supported from municipal resources, but from private funds. He acted the way he did only for such reason that he wanted to use the same approach against the Protestants that they had used against him: through this way he wanted to implement the free exercise of Catholic religion in Kassa (Košice). The suggestion of the cardinal is quite similar to the practical political process that the "politicians" whom he often condemned made use of; they subordinated everything to the cause of state. Forgách did the same, yet he did not represent the state by his actions but his faith and the interests of the church. These documents show that under the circumstances, the cardinal could react to the political situation in a surprisingly flexible way, and obviously being under compulsion, he could modify his earlier strategy. Based on the correspondence, it is quite traceable that the cardinal archbishop went to great length to strengthen the

¹⁰ *Okmánytár*, n. 124.

church institutions and the ecclesiastical order. The protest against the Lutheran's synod of Zsolna as well as the synod of Nagyszombat summoned as a reaction to it, which was attended by nuncio de Mara, were all parts of his motion. A synod was an important event, not because it demonstrated their power to the Protestants, but because the implementation of Trient's regulations was decided upon here.

The cardinal often touches upon the "politicians" of Matthias's court of Vienna in his letters. At the time, this term was used for those who valued their actions only in terms of national interests, the *ragione di stato*, and it was cited in a pejorative way irrespective of their denomination. The cardinal knew some of them, for instance Melchior Klesl,¹¹ who was the bishop of Vienna and the right-hand-man of Archduke Matthias; or Johann Sixt Trautschon,¹² who continued his career in the royal court of Vienna after having been out of favour. Yet, nothing was more alien from him than the political Machiavellianism, and, though, there is not any surviving documents reporting on his political views, based on his letters, it is clear that he was very familiar with the Hungarian customary law and Werbőczy's *Tripartitum*, which included the crucial rights of the nobility. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering his list – written by himself – that was prepared for the bookfair of 1613 in Frankfurt. On this list, beside the general, typical and mainstream contemporary Catholic polemics, one can find one of Tacitus's works, with de Justus Lipsius's commentaries.¹³ The work of Lipsius, who was a convert like that of Forgách, in the field of analytical politics cannot be separated from Tacitus's works and the humanist tacitism. He became known in Hungary through Forgách's brother, Mihály Forgách, who was called the Hungarian

¹¹ JOHANN RAINER, *Kardinal Melchior Klesl (1552–1630). Vom „Generalreformer“ zum „Ausgleichspolitiker“*, Römische Quartalschrift für Christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte 59 (1964) 14–35.

¹² *Okmánytár* n. 21. 23. 28. 43. 99–100. 124.

¹³ *Magyarországi magánkönyvtárak I: 1533–1657* (Adattár 13), ed. ANDRÁS VARGA, Budapest–Szeged 1986, 97 (51.item).

Lipsius and who was in correspondence with the illustrious scholar from the Low-Countries. Unfortunately, there is no more data how Lipsius influenced the cardinal's views on politics and authority; yet based on the list of orders it is quite certain that he was interested in the tacitist historiography that along with his brother, Mihály he might have inherited from their family. As the chancellor of Maximilian, king of Hungary, and the bishop of Várad, Ferenc Forgách – their uncle – handed down a very important historical work.

Hopefully, the documents serve more data to further recognize the career of a significant, excellent prelate of the Kingdom of Hungary in the early modern period by showing his *political* portrait from another angle and by tinting the so far one-sided picture of him that was not devoid of denominational bias. This approach, however based on sources, picked certain elements of Forgách's actions in the church-political sphere that were overly highlighted and interpreted in an overemphasised way. Naturally, this made an impact on receiving his career and his character. Consequently, as we see it, the militant demeanour and attitude, which was ascribed and put down to him by the earlier historiography irrespective of denominations, does not necessarily apply to Forgách. Based on the sources, one can state that he was wedded to the compliance with the law and the respect for the law. As far as we are concerned, this attitude does not solely derive from his defensive position, but from his education, interest, and his mentality. Otherwise, how could we explain his reserved demeanour around the lawsuit of Illésházy,¹⁴ the Article XXII and the church-seizures in Upper Hungary, and his actions between 1601 and 1604, when he accentuated the importance of complying with the Hungarian law and customary law despite of the seemingly certain victory?

Based on the cartulary, the cardinal-archbishop's portrait of a firm character is evolved in a biography-like style with sharp contours, which is owned to the abundance of sources. The letters highlight such details of Forgách's life and career that are important,

¹⁴ ÁRPÁD KÁROLYI, *A buszonkettedik artikulus (Az 1604: XXII. törvénycikk)*, Néhány történelmi tanulmány, 154–226 [Article 22].

though, have not been emphasised enough, yet. As a result, the cartulary primarily endeavours to draw Forgách's portrait as a politician, therefore, the letters of church-political character were selected only if there were related to public history in some manner. The published documents reflect upon the uneasy and troubled period, in which Forgách lived.¹⁵

3. THE ASPECTS OF SELECTION

The volume does not contain all the surviving letters of Forgách, not at all, since the fundamental aim of the publication was to publish the correspondence grouped in line with the cases that were linked to public history. The basis of this volume is consisted of the numerous letters of Forgách that can be found in the fonds of the Vatican Apostolic Archives: the writer of the letter here are Forgách and sometimes Cardinal Nephew Borghese or Pope Paul V, where the addressee is Forgách. In a significant amount of the Vatican sources Forgách is not the writer or the addressee of the letter, but the protagonist of the letters and reports. The publication of theirs is needed, because the number of the letters of Cardinal Forgách became scarce by that time. The reports of Placido de Mara, the nuncio of Vienna, informs about that period. While he did not have to leave the country due to the sessions of the imperial assembly, he quite often reported on the activity of his protégé in details. The State Archives of Biella – which keeps the archive of the Ferrero family as well as dozens of letters of Forgách – is a special place in terms of the reports of the nuncio.¹⁶ A few yet important group of

¹⁵For the process of the Catholic confessionalization in Hungary started by Forgách and continued by his successors during the 17th century see PÉTER TUSOR, *A magyar egyház és Róma a 17. században*, Vigilia 64 (1999) 503–513, particularly 509–513 [The Hungarian Church and Rome in the 17th Century].

¹⁶PÉTER TUSOR, *Magyar történeti kutatások a Vatikánban* (CVH I/1exc.), Budapest–Rome 2004, CXII–CXIII (= CVH I/20, 112–113. [Historical Research in the Vatican].

letters are kept in the *Hungarica* department of the *Haus- Hof und Staatsarchiv in Vienna*, where one can find the data on Forgách's church career in the early period; besides concerning the political career, there are many documents from 1607 that Forgách presented to the monarch, to Archduke Matthias, to the Privy Council, or to Leopold a Strahlendorff for the sake of the Hungarian Catholic church, of preserving the Catholic faith or of the Turkish war.¹⁷ The chamber department of the National Archives of Hungary should be mentioned, whose *Acta Ecclesiastica* and the fonds of the Thurzó family's archives – that is hardly exploited – were conveniently studied.

¹⁷ *Okmánytár* n. 55. 57. 59. 61.

