

# Historical snapshot

Columnist: László FEJÉR, honorary associate professor, chairman of the Water History Committee and honorary member of the Hungarian Hydrological Society.

## The “heroic age” of Dégen

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### Abstract

The older generation of water management engineers looks back with nostalgia on the period between 1955 and 1975, associated with Imre Dégen's water management policy, referring to it as the "heroic age" of Hungarian water management. Following the dismissal of his predecessor, Dégen became the head of the General Directorate of Water Management in 1955, and later, as State Secretary, served as the President of the National Water Office. He retired in 1975. The beginning of his water management policy thus dates back to 70 years and its conclusion to 50 years ago. These two anniversaries provide an appropriate opportunity to review the results of Imre Dégen's water management policy and assess the impact of his professional work. This overview of his official career is based on bibliographical sources, archival documents, and personal recollections of his contemporaries.

### Keywords

'Heroic age' of the Dégen era, water management policy, flood control and excess water in the inland, technical and mid-level water management training.

## A dégeni hőskor

### Kivonat

Dégen Imre vízgazdálkodási politikájára, a nevével fémjelzett 1955 és 1975 közötti időszakra az idősebb mérnökgeneráció nosztalgiával tekint vissza, azt a hazai vízgazdálkodás hőskoraként emlegeti. Elődjének menesztése után, 1955-ben lett az Országos Vízügyi Főigazgatóság vezetője, később pedig államtitkárként az Országos Vízügyi Hivatal elnöke. 1975-ben vonult nyugállományba. Vízgazdálkodási politikájának kezdete tehát 70, befejezése 50 évvel ezelőtt történt. E két jubileumi év feljogosíthat minket arra, hogy Dégen Imre vízgazdálkodási politikájának eredményeit áttekintsük, munkásságának hatását mérlegezzük. Hivatali útjának bemutatását könyvészeti szakmunkák, levéltári források és kortársak személyes visszaemlékezéseire támaszkodva összegezzük.

### Kulcsszavak

A dégeni hőskor, vízgazdálkodási politika, árvíz-és belvízvéddelem, műszaki-vízügyi középkezdőképítés.

### THE LIFE PATH, LEADERSHIP QUALITIES, AND CADRE POLICY OF IMRE DÉGEN

Due to the numerous clausus restrictions in Hungary, Imre Dégen began his university studies at the German University in Prague, and in 1934 he earned an engineering degree in Vienna. In 1945, the Minister of Agriculture appointed him as an engineering member of the National Land Consolidation Council. From 1948 onwards, he worked as the director of the Cooperative Credit Institute and later that of the Hungarian National Cooperative Centre. He eventually became Secretary General and, in 1954, President of the National Federation of Cooperatives (SZÖVOSZ) (Fejér 2020, Albert 2024).

It was during these years that he established a working relationship with Rezső Nyers, who later became one of Dégen's main political supporters during the era of the New Economic Mechanism. He also developed an excellent professional rapport with Lajos Fehér, one of the most influential

party functionaries, who served as Deputy Prime Minister between 1962 and 1974, covering most of Dégen's tenure in office. During his time in the cooperative sector, he also became acquainted with his future economic advisor, Lajos Danicska, who had learnt cooperative work in the Hangya Cooperative Alliance (Reich Gyula 2023).

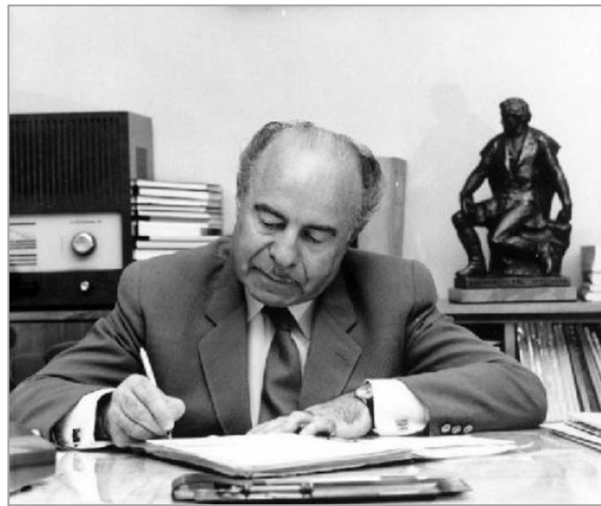
After the dismissal of the former director general Kálmán Rajczi, Dégen was appointed head of the General Directorate of Water Management in 1955. The unified water management service, established in 1953 by merging former flood prevention associations and hydraulic engineering offices, was made operational under his leadership after 1955 (Mt 1.060/1953. 1953, Dr. Béla Hajós 2023). The unified system consisted of the General Directorate of Water Management and, by 1955, eleven, later twelve, regional water directorates. In 1968, following the modernisation of the water sector, the General Directorate of Water Management became the National Water Office.

Imre Dégen's leadership qualities were respected even by the older generation of engineers. He had excellent situational awareness and a strong ability to capitalise on opportunities. He consistently identified ways in which the water sector could benefit from the historical context. Recognising the potential of the 1961 education reform and its legislative framework, he succeeded in establishing a Higher-level Water Management Technical School in Baja. In 1974, during his honorary university professorship, he managed - together with the Minister of Transport and Post - to secure funding for constructing the renowned UV (Road-Lab) building at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (*Dr. Mészáros Csaba 2023*).

The older generation of engineers affirms that Dégen represented professional interests within the party. His technically-orientated secretariat was organised on a rotational basis. His emphasis on professional qualifications and personal conduct in cadre selection, as well as his conscious delegation of responsibilities, demonstrate his strong leadership skills.

Imre Dégen often relied on professionals who, although not deemed the most politically reliable cadres, were outstanding in their fields. These included the renowned hydrologist and former civil engineer Woldemár Lászlóffy and his close colleague László Dávid. Zoltán Bényei, the head of the Codification Department within the Administrative Directorate, also belonged to this group (*Dr. Szanati Henrik 2023*).

At the same time, Dégen also recognised leaders who, despite lacking higher education, significantly supported the water management sector through strong organisational skills and professional experience. Sándor Vezse, who had a basic education as a *watermaster*, owed his decades-long career in water management leadership to such qualities. Thus, Dégen valued experts who had been socialised in the previous regime (e.g., civil engineers, *watermasters*) while also ensuring professional succession and training (*Dr. Hajós Béla 2023*). However, he was less tolerant of servile leaders in his immediate environment (*Dr. Gerencsér Árpád 2023*).



1. image. Imre DÉGEN, State Secretary, in his office  
(DM Water Management Photo Archive\_4760. Photographer: László Körtvélyesi 1975.)  
1. kép. Dégen Imre, államtitkár az irodájában in his office.  
(DM Vízgazdálkodási Fotóarchívum\_4760. Fotós: Körtvélyesi László 1975.)

He consistently sought out and always found the people who were the most outstanding experts in their respective fields. He could always rely on his general deputy, Miklós Breinich, and on Iván Wisnovszky in matters of technical education. In organisational issues and reorganization, his legal advisors, Zoltán Bényei and Henrik Szanati, provided assistance, while in economic matters he was supported by the previously mentioned Lajos Danicska. Regarding irrigation issues, Kurt Budavári offered his expertise, and in scientific matters, Ödön Starosolszky served as his advisor. In the area of large-scale infrastructure and macro-regional water management systems, he was assisted by Ede Kertai (*Reich Gyula 2023*). Woldemár Lászlóffy, among others, drew Dégen's attention to the importance of hydrodiplomacy (*Lászlóffy 1959*). He managed to recruit Sándor Katona - former world champion in powered aerobatic aircraft - as the chief pilot of the Water Management Air Service (*Reich Gyula 2023*). During times of flooding, the regional water directorates supported his work. His closest advisors included György Kiss the water

directors of Baja (later of Pécs), Kálmán Karászi of Székesfehérvár, and Lajos Takács of Gyula (*Dr. Rudolf Halász 2023*).

#### IMRE DÉGEN'S WATER MANAGEMENT POLICY

In 2010, the historian and the president of the Academy, Ferenc Glatz emphasised Imre Dégen's role in the advancement of European water management culture: "*The European tradition of water management, represented in Hungary's water affairs by figures such as Vásárhelyi, Kvassay and Sajó, was continued in the work of Dégen.*" (*Glatz 2010*). László Fejér summarised Dégen's water management policy as follows: "*His name is associated with the establishment of effective flood and inland water protection, the water construction industry, modern water management, the launch of a new association movement, and the development of professional training for water management specialists.*" (*Fejér 2019*). In his 2019 volume, István Ijjas identified Dégen's most significant contribution as his role in developing water management as a

professional and scientific field (*Ijjas 2019, Dr. Ijjas István 2023*).

During major floods – most notably in 1965 and 1970 – Dégen served as Government Commissioner for Flood Protection. Given the gravity of this responsibility, he approached the task with due diligence and was able to make prompt, responsible decisions after on-site assessments. This was the case during the 1970 Tisza River flood, when he made the decision to evacuate the town of Makó. On 17 May 1970, after learning of the unexpected flooding of the Mureş River near Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár), he ordered the highest level of flood alert by telephone. On 19 May, he conducted a site inspection of the dike of the Mureş River and met with local leaders in Makó. He then held discussions with László Forgó, Director of the Szeged Regional Water Directorate, along with the flood defence leadership team. Following this meeting, he ordered the evacuation of the town (*Vágás 2010*).

As state secretary and flood defence commissioner during these major events, Dégen not only coordinated damage mitigation and defence operations, but also drew conclusions and initiated necessary organisational reforms and equipment acquisitions. One such example was the procurement of the Swiss-made Pilatus Porter rescue aircraft, which was later first deployed during the 1973 flood events along the Zagyva and Tarna rivers (*Reich Gyula 2023*).

In the latter half of the 1960s, Dégen was a supporter of the 'New Economic Mechanism', an economic reform initiative. Within the socialist framework, he endorsed the adoption of entrepreneurial thinking. He played a key role in the creation of Hungary's domestic water construction industry, overseeing the development of a full state and corporate system that included planning, investment coordination, construction and operation (*Albert 2024*).

He was also instrumental in the implementation of the large-scale water management system of the Great Hungarian Plain, most notably the construction of the Kisköre Dam and Reservoir (now known as Lake Tisza). The project enabled the resolution of long-standing water supply and irrigation issues in the middle Tisza and Körös regions (*Albert 2024*).

Dégen also played a leading role in the security of residential and industrial drinking water supplies. To this end, he revitalised the pre-1948 waterworks associations during the 1960s. Recognising the growing demand for potable water and sewage infrastructure, he understood that the state alone could not finance all regional water projects. Therefore, he supported the formation of self-organising local waterworks associations and the inclusion of residents' financial contributions. The state, in turn, supported legally operating associations through favourable loans provided by the National Savings Bank (*Albert 2024*).

#### IMRE DÉGEN AS A UNIVERSITY LECTURER

Imre Dégen joined the Budapest University of Technology and Economics in the late 1960s and was granted the title of honorary university professor in 1970. He taught in the Department of Institute of Water Management and Hydraulic Engineering, headed by Imre V. Nagy. Although he had excellent memory, recollections from students and colleagues

suggest that he was not particularly gifted as a lecturer. Unlike Emil Mosonyi, who, according to former students, 'captivated his audience with his brilliant lectures and presented otherwise dry and 'watery' topics in an exciting way' (*Fejér 2020, Fejér László 2023*) -Dégen's style was more reserved.

However, it should be noted – as Professor István Ijjas emphasised it – that Dégen's greatest contribution to the development of water management was the acknowledgement of this issue as a professional and scientific discipline. Dégen's vision for the BME Civil Engineering faculty was to replace traditional hydraulic engineering with an Integrated Water Engineering Course. He believed that water-related professions must encompass not only engineering tasks, but also economic and ecological aspects. To advance this multidisciplinary approach, he founded the Departmental Group of Hydro-Economics and Water Resource Management (*Dr. Madarassy László 2023*). His university lecture notes, created with the help of colleagues, especially László Dávid and József Csuka, also reflected this integrative perspective. His university textbook on water resources management and the specialised engineering textbook *Hydro-Economics* were received with high respect by the scientific community. The Environmental and Water Archives preserve valuable materials from Dégen's legacy, including correspondence and recommendations related to his teaching materials. Among them are the appreciative words of Woldemar Lászlóffy regarding the *Hydro-Economics* textbook for technical engineers: “*Due to the infrastructural nature of water-related tasks, economic considerations were pushed into the background for a long time. When cost-effectiveness analyses were conducted in relation to certain facilities, they were limited to the specific project itself and did not account for broader community interests. At that time, water was still regarded as a commodity (goods) free of charge. In planned economies - an approach that is gaining ground even in the capitalist world - a new mindset is required, one that all your writings advocate.*” (*Lászlóffy undated*) Imre Dégen did not become a scientist. Although he aspired to earn a doctoral degree in engineering, he was ultimately unsuccessful in doing so (*Fejér 2020*).

#### HISTORICAL CONTINUITY AND EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING

For Imre Dégen, the preservation of the past and the honour of the legacy of the water management profession were of great importance. His commitment to historical remembrance is demonstrated by the founding of the Water Management Museum (today Danube Museum) and the Water Archives (today Environmental and Water Archives), as well as his support for historical research in the field. He deeply respected the profession's great predecessors. The erection of the statue of József Beszédes in Siófok, the memorial of Pál Vásárhelyi in Tiszadob, and the honorary grave of the reform-era engineer in the Kerepesi Cemetery all attest to his appreciation of historical figures. Even before the establishment of the Historical Committee of the Hungarian Hydrological Society in 1973 (*Lászlóffy 1973*), Hungarian hydrologists had shown an interest in the study of water management history. Zsigmond P. Károlyi, one of Dégen's favourite water history writers, regularly contrib-

uted articles to Journal of Water Management (*Vízgazdálkodás*), the publication of the National Water Office, commemorating key figures and events in the field (Albert 2023). He also edited the *Water Management Historical Booklet* series. László Bendefi was another regular contributor to the historiography of water management. The growing interest in the history related to water was undoubtedly influenced by the supportive institutional environment, which in turn shaped the professional attitudes of the water engineers of the era. Few know that Woldemár Lászlóffy also conducted research in this field. His studies on József Péch, founder of the Hungarian Hydrological Service, and his manuscript on Roman navigation on the Tisza River are noteworthy contributions (Albert and Farkas 2022). The mining engineer Eligius Róbert Schmidt also published a history of thermal water research in Hungary (Lászlóffy 1973). There is little doubt that under Imre Dégen's leadership, the historiography of the water sector gained a central role, one that continued to thrive for decades after his tenure. Dégen frequently referenced historical examples in his speeches, writings, and ceremonial addresses. In his speech at the First Watermaster Meeting held in Debrecen on June 11, 1960, he emphasised the symbolic significance of the venue, noting: *'This is the place from which many pioneering decisions in Hungary's water management originated. Here, the first general assembly of a Hungarian flood prevention association was held, which led, in 1846, to the initiation of Tisza River regulation by István Széchenyi, based on plans by the great Hungarian water engineer Pál Vásárhelyi, thereby launching flood control efforts.'* (Dégen 1960).

In the same address, Dégen also highlighted the work of Jenő Kvassay, who founded the first civil engineering institution with only four engineers, as well as the historical roots of Hungarian Royal Watermaster School in Košice, initiated by Kvassay. This historical knowledge informed Dégen's concept of training middle-level technical staff, which he saw as a modern continuation of the old expertise of the profession that used to be called watermaster. For him, the newly established technical secondary schools of water management were the institutional means to preserve and transmit that legacy of practical skills (Dégen 1960).

In 1973, Dégen honoured Hugó Lampl on his 90th birthday, as recorded in the Journal of Water Management (*Vízgazdálkodás* 1973), issue 4 of that year. In his speech, he praised Lampl's remarkable contributions to water management and hydraulic engineering all over from his career beginning in 1903, covering several historical eras. He mentioned, among other things, Lampl's joint work with Elemér Sajó on the Tass Barrage, the initiation of irrigation in the Tisza Valley, and his role in leading the National Royal Irrigation Office (*Vízgazdálkodás* 1973). Upon Lampl's death at the age of 93 in June 1976, Dégen authored an obituary in October that year. He sent the manuscript to Zsigmond P. Károlyi for review and even incorporated parts of Károlyi's previous writings into the final version (Dégen 1976).

It is evident that Imre Dégen had a deep knowledge of the determinant eras of Hungarian water management history and held the legacy of pioneers like Vásárhelyi, Kvassay and Sajó in the highest regard.

## ASSESSMENT

The older generation of engineers looks back on Imre Dégen's water management policy with a sense of justified nostalgia. Dégen oversaw the various fields of water management like a careful steward. He was an excellent organiser, possessed a keen sense of timing, and strategic insight. In today's terminology, one could say he had outstanding managerial skills, even if these were sometimes paired with Machiavellian methods.

Within the rigid structures of state socialism, he managed to establish a full-spectrum domestic water construction industry and consistently sought to apply economic and efficiency-orientated principles in the water sector. He demanded effectiveness and entrepreneurial thinking from his colleagues, even under central planning constraints.

In his everyday decision-making, the preservation of historical legacy was also a guiding principle. He attributed special importance to sectoral memory and historical awareness, and his commitment to institutional remembrance was manifested in both symbolic and practical ways. Historian Ferenc Glatz's claim is hardly an exaggeration. Dégen was indeed a successor to Vásárhelyi, Kvassay, and Sajó, continuing the tradition of European water management culture.

At the same time, idealising his role may hinder a clear and objective historical positioning of his period in office. He had an excellent eye for choosing collaborators, who in turn provided consistent and loyal support. However, his inner circle did more than just assist the head of the water administration: They played a role in shaping Dégen's leadership character and personal style. He was the kind of leader who could be persuaded by professional arguments (Pesthy Imre 2023).

As an honorary professor at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Dégen was actively involved in education, although recollections suggest that he was not a particularly engaging lecturer. However, this does not diminish his achievements. Even though he never became a scientist, it was largely due to him that the water management sector evolved, using the terminology of the time, into a full-fledged national economic sector.

This article is based in part on the 2023 Dégen Research Project supported by the General Directorate of Water Management as well as additional archival investigations conducted at the Environmental and Water Archives. The author also integrates the findings of this research into higher education, regularly delivering elective lectures titled 'Water Management in the Era of Imre Dégen' at the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Szeged.

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