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Quality of Election Debate Worries Budapest Newsmen

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BUDAPEST, Hungary, Oct. 21—In a house near the Danube one evening this week, a group of Hungarian journalists gathered for a private showing of films of the debate between President Ford and Jimmy Carter over foreign policy and defense issues.

When it was over, the reaction among the correspondents, all specialists in foreign affairs and many with experience in New York and Washington, was one of disbelief and disappointment.

Among those in that comfortable living room that evening there seemed little doubt that the reporters questioning Ford and Carter knew more about American foreign policy than did the two candidates.

In the smaller Communist countries of Eastern Europe, whose fate depends largely on good relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, that is not a comforting thought.

The debate, to them, did not seem a display of great political freedom, but a spectacle that forced both men, under the pressure of 100 million viewers, into mistakes and uncompromising public positions on matters that are of critical importance here.

"For those who have either illusions about or high regard for American democracy, the performance was disappointing," one correspondent said, midway through the film. He added that it was a "catastrophe that the choice was between these two. The United States is not a banana republic, you know. Your president affects all of us."

"Even in Hungary," he said, "a provincial politician could not survive at such a level of quality and factualness in debate."

If Hungary and other small and powerless nations in Central Europe are not to get trampled again as they traditionally have been, it is critically important, in their view, that the leaders in Washington and Moscow have clear and consistent foreign policies, hopefully of peaceful cooperation.

"The Hungarians have no options," one Western diplomat said. "They are a small country. All they want is to be left alone. They feel they are best off when Soviet-American relations are good." To an extent greater than many in Washington realize, Hungarians and other Communist East Europeans in countries where Western publications are available follow intensely the efforts to achieve a new strategic nuclear arms pact between the two superpowers.

Perhaps more than anything else, the SALT negotiations have become a bellwether for the state of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. Thus when Ford seems to

bumble his way through complex matters in front of television viewers, while Carter seems to suggest that the United States must be much tougher in all kinds of unspecified dealings with the Russians, it shakes up the Hungarians and a lot of other people in this part of the world.

The Hungarians, who love to analyze almost anything, faulted Carter for "too much moralizing" and also for failing to answer a question about what he would change in American policy other than the Kissinger style of negotiating.

Their biggest disappointment was with Ford. Privately, many Hungarian officials seem to be rooting for Ford to win, in part because they like Kissinger, because they feel the Ford-Kissinger policy of detente will return after the election, and in part for their own self-interest.

The Hungarians would like nothing more than to further expand trade with the United States and get rid of restrictions which now keep them from enjoying most-favored-nation status on tariff matters. With a new president, they reason, it may take two years before he gets down to issues as a minor as trade with Hungary.

When the President made his blunder about the countries of Eastern Europe not being under Soviet domination, one correspondent said, "Of course we know what he meant, but he can't even seem to remember Kissinger's briefing long enough to get things straight."

Hungarians here, who would have

preferred that the matter never came up, now fear that too strong a position on Eastern Europe might be forced upon both candidates so that they return to a Cold War mentality.

"The Hungarians deal in facts," said another Western official. "Soviet domination is a fact. The U.S. cannot and will not do anything to change that and the Hungarians know it."

This country of 10 million people, who have almost 800,000 relatives living in the United States, is among the least restricted and well-informed within the Soviet bloc.

Most informed Hungarians believe that basic American policy has been set for the last several decades and that neither Ford nor Carter mean to, or can, change things very much. Yet that point was never made during the debate, except by the reporters, giving it a charade quality in Hungarian eyes.

