

## AMBASSADOR COUNT NIKOLAUS ESTERHÁZY AND EMPRESS ELIZABETH PETROVNA: FROM AVERSION TO COMPASSION

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The reign of Charles VI (Hungarian king Charles III, 1711–1740) was the period of reconsideration of the age-old confrontation between the Hungarian estates and the Habsburgs; it witnessed decades of steady economic growth, social peace and the active incorporation of the Hungarian aristocracy into the Viennese court.<sup>1</sup> Even though Maria Theresa (1740–1780) is known for her efforts aimed at forging a new, loyal aristocracy out of ambitious lesser nobles (the *Festeticses*, *Grassalkoviches*, or *Splénys*), a number of outstanding statesmen emerged from the aristocratic milieu, who, having been socialised within the imperial capital from their early days, were connected by familial, friendly or professional ties with the aristocracies of other lands ruled by the House of Austria. One of them was the imperial and Austrian ambassador Count Nikolaus Esterházy (1711–1764)—the first Hungarian magnate who pursued a professional diplomatic career as a minister or ambassador of the Viennese court in Dresden, Madrid and St. Petersburg.<sup>2</sup> The article deals with one episode of his twenty-year long diplomatic career, including his stay at the court of St. Petersburg, and pays special attention to the evolution of his relations with Empress Elizabeth Petrovna (1741–1761/1762<sup>3</sup>).

Nikolaus Esterházy was born to the family of Count Francis Esterházy and Countess Maria Sidonia Pálffy and thus was related to the two glorious and mighty aristocratic families of the Kingdom of Hungary tightly incorporated into the Viennese court. His father, the royal treasurer, was favoured by Emperor Charles VI and later by his daughter Empress-Queen Maria Theresa. The young Nikolaus received the chamberlain's key at the age of nineteen,<sup>4</sup> and two years later—accompanied by his younger brother Francis,

<sup>1</sup>János KALMÁR: III. Károly és Magyarország [Charles III and Hungary]. In: *Vigilia* 67/1 (2012), 5–8.

<sup>2</sup>Olga KHAVANOVA: Madridtól Szentpétervárig. Gróf Esterházy Miklós, Mária Terézia első magyar karrierdiplomátája [From Madrid to St Petersburg: Count Miklós Esterházy, Maria Theresa's First Hungarian Career Diplomat]. In: *Századok* 153/1–2 (2019), 1123–1139.

<sup>3</sup>Empress Elizabeth died on 25 December 1761 Old Style (otherwise the Julian calendar) which corresponds to 5 January 1762 New Style (otherwise Gregorian calendar).

<sup>4</sup>Zsolt KÖKÉNYESI: *A magyar arisztokráciák integrációja a bécsi udvarba 1711 és 1765 között* [The Integration of the Hungarian Aristocracy into the Viennese Court between 1711 and 1765]. Budapest 2016 (PhD dissertation manuscript), 347. Cf.: László BERÉNYI: Galántai és fraknoi Esterházy Miklós

the future Hungarian chancellor—went to study at the old and prestigious Knight Academy in Lunéville.<sup>5</sup> Having spent half a year there, he learned French, was instructed in arts and sciences, and acquired skills in noble exercises. The brothers continued their education in the course of a grand tour across Europe, visiting the Netherlands, Great Britain, France and Italy in 1733 and 1734. On arrival back to Vienna, they continued the lifestyle of jolly courtiers in the company of Prince Francis of Lorraine, the future emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Francis Stephan I (1745–1765).

In 1739, Count Nikolaus Esterházy obtained half a position of a councillor at the Hungarian Royal Lieutenancy Council. Two years later, however, in March 1741, the birth of Archduke Joseph, the future Emperor Joseph II (1765/1780–1790), drastically changed his destiny. To inform the allied courts of the birth of the male heir in the House of Austria, Francis of Lorraine sent out four young chamberlains to Rome (Count Venzel Anton Kaunitz, the future Privy and State Chancellor), to Versailles (Count Joseph Chotek, the future Bohemian Chancellor), to St. Petersburg via Dresden (Count Johann Balthasar Wilczek), and, finally, to London and Lisbon (Count Nikolaus Esterházy).<sup>6</sup> The young Hungarian Count enjoyed the exquisite entourage of foreign courts greatly and acquired the conviction that the dignity and splendour of the ambassador was inseparable from that of his sovereign. His stay in Dresden (1742–1747) as a minister of Emperor Francis and Empress-Queen Maria Theresa was interrupted by the scandal provoked by Esterházy around the ceremonial routine of the double wedding of the Saxonian Chur-Prince Friedrich Christian with the Bavarian Princess Maria Antonia.<sup>7</sup> His next mission to Madrid (1751–1752)—to sign a treaty putting an end to the hostilities of the previous decade, when the courts were fighting against one another in the War of Austrian Succession—tragically ended when the diplomat found himself on the verge of death, due to severe stomach cramps presumably caused by the quality of the local water.<sup>8</sup>

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(1711–1764): egy 18. századi magyar diplomata a cárok udvarában [Miklós Esterházy of Galánta and Fraknó (1711–1764): An Eighteenth-Century Hungarian Diplomat at the Court of the Tsars]. In: *Turul* 77/1–2 (2004), 54.

<sup>5</sup>János KALMÁR: Esterházy II. Pál Antal nápolyi követ életéhez [Contributions to the Life of Pál Antal Esterházy II, Ambassador to Naples]. In: *“A magyar múltat kutatni, írni és láttatni – ez által szolgálni a hazát”. Tiszteletgő kötet J. Újváry Zsuzsanna 25. Pázmányos oktatói éve előtt.* (Szerk.): Bence BIRÓ/Péter MISKI/Renáta TÖRTEI. Budapest – Piliscsaba: Szent István Társulat 2020, 357–389, István FAZEKAS: Egy magyar karrier Bécsben: Esterházy Ferenc kancellár pályaképe [A Hungarian carrier in Vienna: the Case of Chancellor Francis Esterházy]. In: *Szélesítv* 1/1 (2014), 4–13.

<sup>6</sup>Olga KHAVANOVA: Rozhdenie ertsgerstsoa Iosifa i simvolicheskaia diplomatiia venskogo dvora v 1741 g. [The birth of Archduke Joseph and Symbolic Communication of the Vienna Court in 1741]. In: *Slavyanovedenie* 5 (2022), 5–17.

<sup>7</sup>Olga KHAVANOVA: The Symbolic Language of a Diplomatic Scandal: Count Nikolaus Esterházy in Dresden in 1747. In: *Hungarian Studies* 2/38 (2024), 312–325.

<sup>8</sup>Khavanova (2019), 1127.

By 1753 Esterházy had gained the reputation of an unflexible negotiator and an extravagant courtier whose adulterous adventures in Dresden were reported to King Friedrich II by his minister Count Heinrich Podewils.<sup>9</sup> When Baron Johann Franz Pretlack begged for his resignation from St. Petersburg, Maria Theresa finally made her choice in favour of the Hungarian aristocrat. The bilateral relations were at their heyday; the two dynasties were flattering each other in the hope of strengthening a strategic partnership against the Ottoman Porta and Prussia. The vain and arrogant Esterházy, much concerned with his personal dignity and magnificence, should be the best fit possible at the court in St. Petersburg, notoriously known in Europe for its brilliance, richness and splendour. Maria Theresa solemnly promised that the mission would last no longer than three years, and that hereinafter Esterházy would obtain an honorary position in Vienna<sup>10</sup>. Having left for St. Petersburg in the autumn of 1753, he was consequently forced to stay there until 1761 due to the outbreak of the Seven Years War on the eve of the prescheduled return in 1756.

On his arrival, Esterházy was the only first-rank diplomat in the Russian capital and represented the principal ally of the St. Petersburg court. From Baron Pretlack he inherited the competent personnel of the mission, rendering a network of informants. The Hungarian count did not bother himself with the regular writing of dispatches, considering his main duty to be the representation at court and building up close relations with Russian statesmen, foreign diplomats and, last but not least, with the Empress Elizabeth.

After a while, his confidential relations with Empress Elizabeth became a source of Ambassador Esterházy's particular pride. Her extravagance, coquetry and capricious temper were well known at European courts. In 1747, the Prussian Minister Axel von Mardefeld wrote: "*A foreign minister who wishes to earn the empress's approval must seize opportunities to subtly and indirectly—refraining from criticism—express his admiration for her charms, intelligence, clothing, adornments, and dancing skills. He should not engage the empress in longer conversations, but wait for her to speak to him or look at him when she is talking to someone else, for this is a sign that she wishes to honour him with conversation*".<sup>11</sup> Esterházy's first impressions of her were predictably

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in: Adam WOLF: Der Wiener Hof in den Jahren 1746, 1747 u. 1748: Diplomatische Relationen des Grafen von Podewils, bevollmächtigten Minister in Wien an Friedrich II., König von Preussen, Cabinetsschreiben des Königs. In: *Sitzungsberichte Philosophisch-Historische Klasse der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 3/2 (1850).

<sup>10</sup> Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára [Hungarian National Archives, National Archives of Hungary] (MNL OL). Magánlevéltárak. Családi fondok, levéltárak. Családi levéltárak. Esterházy család tatar levéltára. Familiaria [Private Archives. Family Fonds and Collections. Esterházy Family Archive of Tata. Familiaria]. (P 197) 20. cs. Fasc. 67. Nr. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in: Francine-Dominique LIECHTENHAN: Rossiia vkhodit v Evropu. Imperatrítsa Elizaveta Petrovna i Voina za avstriiskoe nasledstvo, 1740–1750 [Russia Enters Europe. Empress Elizabeth Petrovna and the War of Austrian Succession, 1740–1750]. Moscow: OGI 2000, 270–271.

negative, although we do not know to what extent the diplomat had been influenced by his predecessor Ambassador Franz Johann Pretlack, the secretary of the Austrian mission in St. Petersburg Johann Philipp von Eichenfeld, or by the secretary of the Saxon mission Ferdinand August von Funck.

Throughout his comprehensive dispatch from 10 July 1754, Esterházy shared with Maria Theresa his opinions and reflections on the Russian empress, her ministers and the court: Elizabeth did not bother herself with state affairs, while everything was under the control of Chancellor Mikhail Bestuzhev-Riumin.<sup>12</sup> In his letter to Count Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz of the same date, the diplomat was more eloquent and straightforward, describing her way of life as “*exhausting and reprehensible*”. He drew a psychological portrait of a woman who, in her youth, in order to distract her from thoughts about the throne, had been encouraged in her vices: laziness, vanity, and sensuality. “[Elizabeth] goes to bed before dawn, sleeps in the morning and most of the day, spends the rest of the time primping, and devotes the night entirely to games, luxury, and entertainment. [...] She expresses a surprising aversion to business and anything that requires the slightest perseverance. [...] This debauchery is encouraged in every way by the insolent and vile flatterers in her entourage, who constantly tell her about the power of the empire, which supposedly exists on its own, without foreign subsidies, and that others preserve and manage it, so that the sovereign can calmly indulge in her pleasures.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, things soon changed. In St. Petersburg, it was no secret that Count Esterházy suffered from a severe stomach disease and regularly experienced terrible pains. Of a compassionate nature, the Russian empress placed the professor of medicine Abraham Kaau Boerhaave and the court-physician Pavlos Kondoidis at the diplomat’s disposal. On 29 June 1754<sup>14</sup> the diplomat wrote to Chancellor Kaunitz: “Yesterday, I was treated with Spanish flies to try to relieve and remove severe pain, [...] only time will tell whether this new medicine will have any effect.”<sup>15</sup> To compensate for the impossibility of the Hungarian count travelling to Karlsbad, Elizabeth invited him to spend the summer months of 1754 and the following years in her countryside house in Strel’na, where healing mineral springs flowed nearby. Informal relations with the doctors kept him well-informed about the health conditions of the Russian monarch, so that the sojourn in Strel’na evoked the jealousy of his fellow diplomats.

It was the forthcoming “diplomatic revolution of 1756”, with its reversal of the longstanding alliances in Europe, that paradoxically offered Esterházy a unique chance of cultivating an even more cordial, warm, and personal relationship with Elizabeth

<sup>12</sup> *Preussische und Österreichische Akten zur Vorgeschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*. (Hg.): Gustav Berthold VOLZ/Georg KÜNZEL. Leipzig: Verlag von S. Herzl 1899, 673–677.

<sup>13</sup> Österreichisches Staatarchiv (ÖStA), Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (HHStA), Staatenabteilungen (StAbt), Russland II. Kt. 36. Fol. 6v.

<sup>14</sup> All dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar (the new style),

<sup>15</sup> ÖStA HHStA StAbt. Russland II. Kt. 36. Fol. 200v–201r.

Petrovna. On 10 September 1755, during the ball arranged on the occasion of the feast of the Order of St. Alexander Nevsky, the empress surprised the Austrian diplomat with a question about the state of the Franco-British rivalry on the continent and overseas. A week later he wrote to Kaunitz: *“Since I could not imagine, considering my own experience, that the Russian sovereign would start talking to me about international affairs, I must admit that I was somewhat astonished by this, but, taking advantage of this coincidence and the first opportunity, I immediately found my footing and tried to prolong the conversation so that it would be pleasant for the Russian Empress.”*<sup>16</sup>

The wedding of the empress’ beloved cousin, Lady-in-Waiting Maria Chogloikova (née Gendrikova), a widow, who was getting married for the second time to Alexander Glebov on 18 February 1756, provided a new opportunity for informal communication between the ambassador and the empress. The celebrations lasted two days and Esterházy was honoured with a seat at the table next to Elizabeth, who took the opportunity to ask him in detail about the recently (16 January 1756) signed Convention of Westminster. The music inside the hall was so loud that it interfered with their conversation, but the Russian sovereign persisted and continued their conversation after the banquet. Esterházy knew no more about what had happened than the Empress herself, so until he received instructions from Vienna, he limited himself to general remarks such as that the newly concluded treaty could serve as a factor restraining Prussian aggression. He immediately reported to Kaunitz: *“Before and after the banquet, the Russian Empress, to the keen attention of those present, deigned to engage me in a very confidential and amiable conversation about the state of affairs in the ministry and about her own family. I listened attentively to her words and, where appropriate and to her liking, applauded her.”*<sup>17</sup>

Foreign diplomats soon realised that Esterházy had become one of the empress’ most sought-after conversation partners. The French secret agent Chevalier d’Éon (Charles d’Éon de Beaumont) wrote in his diary: *“She is very comfortable speaking German, but she does not dare to speak much French for fear of making mistakes. She also speaks with ministers, especially the Austrian ambassador, taking him aside to a window niche. Then everyone steps aside and watches the slightest gestures of the Empress and the ambassador. She seems to respect and trust him very much, often conversing with him for hours on end this year.”*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>MNL OL Magánlevéltárak. Családi fondok, levéltárak. Esterházy család tatai levéltára. Esterházy Miklós [Private Archives. Family Fonds and Collections. Esterházy Family Archive of Tata. Miklós Esterházy] (P 218) T. 13. Pag. 201.

<sup>17</sup>MNL OL P 218. T. 13. Pag. 12–13.

<sup>18</sup>Serguei MEZIN: *Neizvestnoe proizvedenie frantsuzskoi rossiki serediny XVIII veka “Sekretnye anekdoty o dvore imperatritsy Vserossiskoi”* [An unknown work of the French Rossica from the mid-eighteenth century. “Secret Anecdotes about the Court of the Empress of All the Russias”]. St. Petersburg: “Evropeiskii Dom” Publishing House 2019, 116.

One of many such conversations took place in the presence of Grand Duchess Ekaterina Alekseyevna (the future Empress Catherine II (1762–1796)), who recorded a chat with Chancellor Mikhail Vorontsov (presumably from 1758) in her “Memoirs”: “*He once said to me at court, seeing that the Empress was talking at great length with the ambassador of the Empress-Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, while he and I and everyone else were tired to death of standing: ‘Would you like to bet that she is just talking nonsense?’ I replied, laughing: ‘My God, what are you saying!’*”<sup>19</sup>

In the summer of 1757, the French ambassador Paul-François de Galluccio Marquis de L’Hôpital arrived in St. Petersburg to negotiate the joining of Russia to the Austrian-French Treaty of Versailles signed a year earlier. Esterházy and L’Hôpital, the only two first-rank diplomats in St. Petersburg, were regularly invited to court balls and masquerades, danced, attended theatre performances, and visited imperial countryside residences. On one occasion, on 4 August 1757, they were invited—on behalf of Elizabeth Petrovna—to the splendid summer residence Tsarskoye Selo. In the absence of the empress, the diplomats were shown around the palace and the church and were served a luncheon in the Hermitage pavilion. In the afternoon, the guests visited the menagerie and were taken by boat to an island in the middle of a large pond to enjoy seine fishing and the immediate release of their catch back into the water. In the evening, the thoroughly exhausted guests were greeted with a cannon salute.<sup>20</sup>

Over the years, Elizabeth’s health deteriorated, and she appeared less and less frequently at court. This made the special signs of attention and trust bestowed upon Esterházy all the more valuable. In October and early November 1758, Colonel Count Karl Pellegrini visited the Russian capital with news of the victory at Hochkirch on 14 October 1758 and a letter from Field Marshal Count Leopold von Daun addressed personally to Elizabeth. The colonel arrived in St. Petersburg late in the evening of 1 November and, as a sign of special favour, Pellegrini and Esterházy were invited to the private chambers of the palace, where the empress spent two hours with them, asking about the details of the glorious battle and the health of the field-marshal, “*not forgetting anything that could exalt the exploits of this great general*”. Elizabeth Petrovna compared the victory over the Prussians to an expensive bouquet presented by Field-Marshal Daun to Maria Theresa on her Saint’s day (15 October was the day of St. Teresa of Avila). Count Esterházy had the impression that she “*derived much more pleasure from this than if the victory had been won by her own troops*”.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Zapiski imperatritsy Ekateriny Vtoroi [Memoires of Empress Catherine II]. St. Petersburg: Typography of A. S. Suvorin 1907, 458.

<sup>20</sup> Zhurnaly kamer-furierskie, 1757 goda. Tseremonial’nyi e banketnyi zhurnaly 1757 goda [The Kammer-Furier Journals of 1757. The Ceremonial and Banquet Journal of 1757]. S. l.: s.n.: s.d. 161–163

<sup>21</sup> OeStA HHStA StAbt. Russland II. K. 41. Fol. 119v.

In December 1760, half a year prior to his recall, Esterházy proudly declared: “[I] often had occasion to speak with this monarch, who honoured me with exceptional favours and special trust, at masquerade balls and other court festivities, not only about affairs of state, but also about matters concerning the prosperity of her state and her own glory.”<sup>22</sup> The diplomat expressed his growing concern, repeating that the success of the anti-Prussian campaign was directly linked to whether the empress would continue to sit on the Russian throne. “May God grant the Russian monarch life and health, at least until the end of the current war,”<sup>23</sup> he wrote in 1759. Esterházy kept regularly resorting to the services of court-physicians and continued to receive reliable information about her condition and mood. In a dispatch from December 1760 he quoted Ivan Schilling: “As the aforementioned doctor informed me, yesterday the Russian empress had blood drawn because she had developed a slight fever, the redness on her leg had not yet disappeared, and other small ulcers had appeared on her body.”<sup>24</sup> The empress’s indisposition and her seclusion inside her countryside residences caused delays in setting a date for the farewell audience in the spring and summer of 1761. It was only in early September that Esterházy, showered with compliments and gifts, left Russia. He must have learned of Elizabeth’s death in Vienna (the exact date of his return to the capital, however, is unknown).

The eight years during which Esterházy represented the House of Austria in St. Petersburg were the period of the overthrow of alliances in Europe, of Austrian-Russian cooperation on the battlefield, of more active, diverse and close contacts between the courts. The ambassador behaved independently and boldly, demanded special attention, allowed himself to dictate terms to the Russian side and to exceed his authority for the sake of achieving his goals. His amiable relations with Elizabeth Petrovna became his asset in the diplomatic milieu of St. Petersburg and in the eyes of the Vienna court. Unfortunately, the empress’ untimely death and the drastic turn in Russia’s foreign policy priorities under Peter III (1762) did not allow Esterházy’s successors to take advantage of this symbolic capital.

<sup>22</sup> OeStA HHStA StAbt. Russland II. Kt. 43. Fol. 122v.

<sup>23</sup> OeStA HHStA StAbt. Russland II. Kt. 41. Fol. 3v.

<sup>24</sup> OeStA HHStA St. Abt. Russland I. Kt. 38. Fol. 25v.

## BOTSCHAFTER NIKOLAUS GRAF VON ESTERHÁZY UND KAISERIN ELISABETH PETROWNA: VON ABNEIGUNG ZU MITGEFÜHL

Der Beitrag widmet sich einem Kapitel der russisch-österreichischen Beziehungen in der Zeit unmittelbar vor sowie während des Siebenjährigen Krieges, als das Heilige Römische Reich sowie das Haus Österreich in St. Petersburg durch Nikolaus Graf von Esterházy vertreten wurde. Während seines achtjährigen Aufenthalts in der russischen Hauptstadt festigte er das bilaterale Bündnis, gewährleistete die diplomatische und militärische Zusammenarbeit zwischen Wien und St. Petersburg im Verlauf des Siebenjährigen Krieges und erreichte 1760 den Beitritt Russlands zur österreichisch-französischen Defensivallianz. Er gehörte zu den einflussreichsten und brillianten Diplomaten am Hof, knüpfte für beide Seiten vorteilhafte Freundschaften mit den Schlüsselpersonen der russischen Regierung und erfreute sich der besonderen Aufmerksamkeit, Gunst und Sympathie von Kaiserin Elisabeth Petrowna. Der Beitrag untersucht, wie sich die Einschätzung des Diplomaten gegenüber der russischen Monarchin von anfänglicher Abneigung zu Mitgefühl wandelte und wie diese Beziehung zum Erreichen sowohl diplomatischer als auch persönlicher Ziele genutzt wurde.