

A HUNGARIAN MAYOR UNDER ATTACK – INTERPRETATION OF THE VÁSÁRY CASE THROUGH THE ARTICLES OF THE DEBRECZEN NEWSPAPER

Zakkar A.

PhD student, Doctoral School of History and Ethnography
University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary
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Abstract

The study analyzes the legal case of István Vásáry, mayor of Debrecen, Hungary's second-largest city, between 1934 and 1935. The research focuses on the political attacks against him, the smear campaigns led by radical right-wing groups, and the investigations related to the property affairs of the Vásáry family. The accusations generated significant press coverage, with *Debreczen*, a conservative daily newspaper, defending Vásáry by emphasizing his integrity as mayor. The study examines the relevant issues of *Debreczen*, offering a chronological overview of the unfolding events in the city and the clash of various political perspectives. Additionally, the research is based on a detailed analysis of the collection of *Debreczen*'s editor-in-chief, József Pálffy. The final section of the study presents the conclusion of István Vásáry's case, outlining the outcome of the disciplinary investigation and legal proceedings.

Keywords: Hungarian politics, political defamation, István Vásáry, Debrecen, Hungary in the 1930s

*"In a world like this, the cruel struggle between man and man, nation and nation, race and race begins. Few people will become rulers, holding power over the world and the masses. The masses will sink into the hell of misery and suffering, where they will be driven only by the savage whipping of life instinct that drives humanness out of humans."*¹⁴

In the 1930s, Debrecen, Hungary's second-largest city, experienced a particularly vibrant and diverse press scene, which became a defining element of its cultural and political life. The *Debreceni Független Újság* [Debrecen Independent Newspaper] was one of the left-wing press organs, while the *Hajdúföld* newspaper supported radical right-wing views. *Debreczen*, owned by Gyula Szigethy and edited by József Pálffy, played a prominent role in the press life of the city.¹⁵ This newspaper was a leading representative of conservative tendencies and was also the most popular political daily in Debrecen. The content of the paper was primarily determined by local political events and their evaluation. The case of István Vásáry stood out among them, generating lively debates in the local press.¹⁶ A study of the relevant issues of the newspaper provides an opportunity to follow step by step the events in the city and the clash of different political and social positions. A more detailed understanding of the events is greatly aided by the collection of the editor-in-chief of *Debreczen*, József Pálffy, which serves as a valuable

source for exploring the local public life of the period in a broader sense. By comparing the articles published in the press with Pálffy's collection, we can get a comprehensive picture of how *Debreczen*'s political position was expressed in relation to political events in the city.¹⁷

The Vásáry family was one of the oldest landowners in Debrecen, Hungary, and their prominent members played an important role in the life of the city for generations. István Vásáry started his career in 1909 at the Debrecen Municipality and continued his work as a councillor from 1914, during which he was actively involved in the management of the city for two decades. Until the end of World War I, Vásáry was responsible for administration, focusing on maintaining the stability of the city, while during the revolution and the subsequent Romanian occupation he was the de facto leader of Debrecen. He paid particular attention to preserving the autonomy of the city, protecting its population and ensuring basic living conditions. His local career culminated in his appointment as deputy mayor in 1925 and mayor in 1928, as an active supporter of István Bethlen's governmental policy.¹⁸

1934 was a year of political struggles in Debrecen. After Gömbös became prime minister, he apparently reconciled with István Bethlen, while at first covertly, then more openly, he tried to oust him and his supporters from their positions of power.¹⁹ This also marked

¹⁴ István Vásáry's speech. Debreczen, 27 August 1935.

¹⁵ József Pálffy's name appears in several spelling variants in the archival documents (*Pálfi*, *Pálfy*, *Pálffy*). In the present study, the latter one will be used.

¹⁶ By the mid-1930s, during the Gömbös government, the newspaper faced increasing difficulties, receiving neither state support nor a neutral stance from official press policies. The editor of *Hajdúföld*, Mihály Kolosváry-Borcsa, who was also the president of the Journalist Association of Debrecen, played a leading role in the struggle against Vásáry. Pálffy, József: *Az első tíz év, a kormánytámogatás időszaka* [Pálffy, József: The first ten years, the period of government support] (hereafter: Pálffy documents – The first ten years), University

and National Library of the University of Debrecen, Manuscript Library of the Kassai Street Campus MS 11/1:8. 70.

¹⁷ The documents of József Pálffy are particularly valuable parts of the press history material of the University of Debrecen, including a description of his professional work and the press life of the city. Pálffy meticulously prepared his works, relying not only on memory, but also on old newspapers, personal notes, and contemporary documents, which he attached as appendices to his manuscripts. His writings thus provide a reliable and accurate picture of the newspapers and people he worked with, as well as a comprehensive insight into the press relations he knew. Korompai 1979. 74. Bényei 2007.

¹⁸ Veress 1999. 15-17.

¹⁹ For background information, see Vonyó 2018.

the beginning of the advance of the radical right movement in Debrecen, one of the key moments of which was the appointment of Mihály Kolosváry-Borcsa as local secretary general of the Party of National Unity, who also retained his post as editor-in-chief of *Hajdúföld*, which played a decisive role in the local dissemination of racist ideas. Kolosváry-Borcsa and his circle were the first to launch smear campaigns against István Vásáry. They encouraged Gyula Bíró, a printer, to produce slanderous pamphlets, which they intended to use as blackmail against Vásáry. Vásáry, however, did not give in to the threats and immediately reported the matter to the Minister of Interior, accusing them of libel. Gyula Bíró soon admitted that he had financed the production of the leaflets in question with the financial support of members of the National League. Bíró was sentenced to one month in prison for defamation and a fine of 150 pengos for extortion. Kolosváry-Borcsa and his associates launched their actions primarily to retaliate for perceived or real grievances, but many of their followers were motivated by political and social ambitions.²⁰ The local branch of the National-Christian Defense League, whose main supporter was Lord-Lieutenant László Vay, also played a key role in the unfolding political struggle.²¹ Since the government had no power to directly replace the officials of the provincial jurisdictions, it used a variety of methods to gradually remove those it considered undesirable.²² It was these changes that launched the campaign against István Vásáry, the mayor of Debrecen. The events quickly attracted considerable coverage, with the result that not only the city press but also the national press covered the case on a daily basis.

On 12 April, the Minister of Interior, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer, ordered a disciplinary inquiry into a rent rebate of an estate in Ohat, whose tenants were István Vásáry's mother and siblings. The Vásáry family justified their application for a rent rebate by claiming that the tenants had not previously received any rent rebates, but the minister called this a deliberate misrepresentation. An important factor, however, is that the lease was signed when István Vásáry was not yet a mayor, although he was already a member of the city council. Before his election as mayor, the leading figures of the city carefully checked whether the fact that his siblings and mother were tenants of certain areas of the city would be an obstacle to Vásáry's candidacy,

but the then Minister of Interior replied that older contracts could not be an obstacle in such a case.²³

The disciplinary investigation was initially launched against Town Clerk József Zöld, whose signature appeared on a document allowing the Vásáry siblings to repay their debt of more than 115,000 pengos in equal, interest-free installments in wheat, over five years, starting on 26 July 1933.²⁴ It soon became evident that the proceedings against the Vásáry family were initiated by a fictitious person named József Kovács, whose address was never provided and who was never interrogated throughout the entire process. According to Pálffy, it is possible that the individual in question was, in fact, an economic employee of Baron Vay.²⁵ On 23 April, the Minister of Interior, referring to recent abuses, described the actions of the municipal administration as *"rightly objectionable and worrying in terms of the consequences of careful foresight and targeted management."*²⁶ Debreczen, however, stood firmly by Vásáry, publishing statements in his defense: *"István Vásáry's puritanism, his absolute honesty, his official correctness, his unquestionability in the management of his assets are well-known and irrefutable facts, but no defence could be found against the whispered accusations and rumours until the recently ordered official investigation will convince the higher forums that István Vásáry, mayor of the city, and his valuable staff... are in all respects at the top of their profession, they run the affairs of the city with a clean hand, and not even the shadow of selfish financial interest can be connected to them."*²⁷ On behalf of the city, Debreczen called on the Minister of Interior to conduct a detailed investigation as quickly as possible. The newspaper's staff, in addition to standing by Vásáry's side, launched a separate investigation into some of the allegations of the legal proceedings, refuting them with detailed and substantiated arguments.²⁸ It was admitted that the family members had received concessions to settle the arrears, but the mayor said he had not attended any of the committee meetings at which the case was discussed. The city did not suffer any financial loss due to the concessions, and it is not uncommon for tenants to seek support from the city administration.²⁹ Debreczen published the transcript of Minister Keresztes-Fischer's statement, along with the opinion of József Vásáry³⁰, one of the managers of the Ohat estate: *"...we did receive apparent concessions,*

²⁰ Veress 1999. 63-68. Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 44.

²¹ László Vay was appointed lord-lieutenant by the Károlyi government in February 1932, but he soon allied with local supporters of Gömbös, choosing to oppose István Vásáry in the Bethlen-Gömbös political conflict. In the autumn of 1933, Vay began to prepare attacks against Vásáry by means of anonymous letters and denunciations, which were the basis for the subsequent proceedings. Vay not only provided the details of the proceedings, but also prepared briefings for the ministerial investigators, in which he portrayed the Vásáry family's rent affairs as unfair and unlawful special rebates, deliberately distorting the facts. Veress 1999. 68-70.

²² Püski 2006. 197.

²³ Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 65.

²⁴ During these years, many farmers and tenants faced financial ruin due to low production prices and poor harvests. Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 65.

²⁵ Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 46.

²⁶ The procedure was based on Article 48 of Act V of 1927. Debreczen, 24 April 1934. 1-3.

²⁷ Debreczen, 24 April 1934. 1-3.

²⁸ The indictment also includes charges of abuses in connection with taxes of consumption and entertainment. In both cases, the charges against the mayor were disproven, who had been denying all accusations of tax fraud from the first minute. Thus, according to the newspaper, Vásáry is merely the victim of a smear campaign, which he is forced to tolerate in the absence of a law on defamation.

²⁹ Debreczen, 24 April 1934. 1-3.

³⁰ József Vásáry was the brother of István Vásáry, who owned the Ohat estate.

but always with the approval of the Minister. However, these concessions were only apparent... The ordered investigation will clarify everything.”³¹ In the meantime, investigations of nearly 30 companies and institutions have been launched by various external experts, Interior Ministry under-secretaries and officials from other high authorities. The investigation was led by State Secretary Árkád Tatich and Minister Counsellor Béla Janda, with Sándor Hódy and István Cserzy reviewing the books under the supervision of the department head.³² The leases were checked by a member of staff from the Ministry of Land Reclamation, who arrived later.

The title of the 24 April issue of *Debreczen* was “Public opinion in Debrecen in favour of Mayor Vásáry”, in which not only the paper as a whole stood up for Vásáry, but also reported that the city was standing as one man behind the mayor. Baron László Vay, lord-lieutenant of Debrecen, assured that the accusations against the mayor would not turn into a personal vendetta, but would serve only to clarify the city’s administrative matters. At the ruling party meeting on 26 April, the majority group of the committee declared confidence in Mayor Vásáry, and the lord-lieutenant repeatedly hinted that no one in the city’s leadership was being accused.³³ A large segment of the city’s population closely followed the case, with details becoming widely known through leaked information and verbatim quotes from official transcripts.³⁴ Despite the promises made, the public likely suspected from the beginning that this was far from a routine investigation. While *Debreczen* campaigned in favour of Vásáry, articles attacking the city’s leadership was published in *Hajdúföld*. In addition, the left-wing opposition paper *Debreceni Független Újság* [Debrecen Independent Newspaper] questioned the motives of the Minister of Interior, asking what had triggered the big turnaround, with previously ordinary affairs now considered dangerous.

A few days later, a general assembly was convened, which the *Debreczen* reported under the headline “Great excitement, renewed storms at the city assembly.” Quoting the ominous article, Baron Vay, lord-lieutenant of Debrecen, made a ceremonial opening speech in which he said the following: “There is no question of an action against Debrecen... On the contrary, it is a question of defending the city of Debrecen in all its aspects... Hungarian people must have confidence in other Hungarians, and this cannot be withdrawn from them until they are convinced otherwise.”³⁵ The first speaker of the assembly, György Magoss, said

that although he was investigated several times during his previous mayoral career, the present case was much more complicated. According to him, the entire city – not just its administration – had fallen victim to a smear campaign: “It has been presented to the public opinion of the country as if everything here was in moral decay, in moral decline... We cannot change this state of affairs without protests and we must strive to... remove this misconception from the moral public life of the city of Debrecen.”³⁶ Pál Hegymegi Kiss³⁷ criticized Vásáry’s opponents, who did not openly confront the mayor, but hid and did not take responsibility for themselves. He admitted that he himself had had many clashes with the mayor in the past, but that these conflicts had always been settled fairly. Bishop Baltazár³⁸ warned that the investigation threatened the peace of Debrecen, stating that “True government can only be over the free, because to rule over slaves is not pride but mockery.”³⁹ The assembly concluded with the adoption of the small assembly’s proposal, acknowledging the provisions of the Minister of Interior, but voicing concerns over the aggressive ambitions of radical right-wing groups. Although Vásáry retained his position, the city became divided into two opposing camps. The biased actions of the lord-lieutenant led to demonstrations in several areas, while at the same time, representatives from various city districts personally visited him, expressing their confidence and support: “The districts, one by one, have the utmost confidence and affection for the lord-lieutenant, Baron László Vay.”⁴⁰

In defense of Vásáry, the Debrecen Municipal Association was established on 30 April in the town hall’s council chamber at the initiative of Baltazár, with an estimated membership of 40 to 50 people.⁴¹ Their primary goal remained to preserve the autonomy of the city. According to Bishop Baltazár, “The association welcomes individuals from any political party who are looking after the interests of the city.” The other key initiator was Pál Hegymegi Kiss, who emphasized the importance of freedom of belief and expression in connection with the case. According to lawyer Dr. Jenő Fényes, “István Vásáry, who is worthy of trust and worthy to manage the affairs of the city, should soar with his God-given talent.”⁴² The membership of the association was growing by the day, despite the fact that many had been voicing their support only quietly because of their dependence on the state.⁴³ *Debreczen* wrote that “Disintegration can only be avoided if national unity here in Debrecen becomes true national unity, and the monopoly of far-right elements in the life

³¹ Debreczen, 24 April 1934. 1-3.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Debreczen, 25 April 1934. 1.

³⁴ The Vásáry case attracted nationwide attention, with newspapers across the country covering the unfolding events. *Függetlenség* [Independence], started by Gömbös, called the city a “wild jungle to be cleared.” The issue containing the previously mentioned article was distributed free of charge as an annex to *Hajdúföld*. Veress 1999. 58.

³⁵ Debreczen, 28 April 1934. 1-2.

³⁶ Debreczen, 29 April 1934. 2.

³⁷ Pál Hegymegi Kiss was at that time a prominent member of the local opposition and of the Independent Smallholders

Party. He was the main representative of the National Smallholders Party in the National Assembly. By expressing this opinion, the local left practically sided with Vásáry. Veress 1999. 60.

³⁸ Bishop Baltazár himself was related to the Vásáry family, as the wife of István Vásáry’s brother was the daughter of Baltazár. Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 64.

³⁹ Debreczen, 29 April 1934. 2.

⁴⁰ Debreczen, 5, 9, 10 May 1934.

⁴¹ Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 65.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Veress 1999. 78.

of the party is ended.”⁴⁴ At the initiative of the association, extraordinary general assemblies were scheduled for 25 and 28 May, anticipated to be “stormy sessions.”⁴⁵ After some initial difficulties, the extraordinary city meeting ended in a calmer atmosphere, with Vásáry commenting on the abuses that had occurred and pointing out that when the need arose, he had taken measures to punish and vigorously prosecute abuses.⁴⁶ The mayor emphasized that, due to the ongoing investigation, he was restricted in his ability to comment on all matters.⁴⁷ The assembly finally concluded with the adoption of the ministerial letter ordering the suspension of the mayor and several of his associates.⁴⁸

In the end, István Vásáry was prosecuted on 23 counts including the fact that he had not yet required his family members to deposit an assurance in cash, stocks or mortgages equal to the amount of one year's rent provided for in the lease contract. Furthermore, he provided his tenants with significant property discounts despite knowing the properties were mortgaged, granted his family members various financial concessions and payment deferrals between 1929 and 1932, and allegedly transferred used motor oil from city-owned vehicles to his siblings without compensation. On 29 September, 1933, he claimed that he had never interfered in the rental matters of his siblings and mother in any way, either directly or indirectly. However, the latter statements proved to be untrue: in 1929, for example, he chaired a meeting of the board of directors which granted his relatives a further extension of payment, and his signature was on the application for remission of the debt.⁴⁹ Not only the mayor, but also several city leaders were prosecuted for irregularities and omissions⁵⁰, and Vásáry was immediately suspended on the grounds that “his continued operation would cause irreparable damage to the city.”⁵¹ Vásáry communicated the decision of the Ministry of Interior to his fellow officials on 24 August and handed over his office to Elemér Vargha, who was appointed by the lord-lieutenant.⁵²

Debreczen published the Minister of Interior's decree on 25 August, and while the newspaper continued to support Vásáry, its wording became more cautious: “We find it difficult to take a position on this matter,

because the officials against whom the proceedings have been initiated cannot, by the nature of the case, make a statement... any preliminary position would have the appearance of a certain amount of unilateralism.”⁵³ Later, however, they were more explicit: the mayor had taken legal action to protect the entire agricultural community, including the Vásáry siblings, who were renowned for their diligence and professionalism. They also stressed the decency and individual integrity of city leaders.⁵⁴ The paper then went on to detail which officials were under investigation and which charges were brought up against them. On 28 August, another public assembly was called, the agenda of which included the Interior Minister's document, which was followed with great interest not only by the public in Debrecen but also in the capital.⁵⁵ Rumors circulated that the Minister of Interior was not only suspending Vásáry but also pressuring him to retire.⁵⁶

The next day, the *Debreczen* daily reported on the extraordinary general assembly, including a statement by Baron Vay, the lord-lieutenant, regarding the investigation: “Some of the irregularities that have occurred in connection with property and consumption taxes are subject to judicial proceedings... I intend to act in the most calm manner in all cases, with the aim of achieving the greatest harmony among the public of the city.”⁵⁷ In addition to the lord-lieutenant, other speakers included Bishop Dezső Baltazár, Professor István Rugonfalvi Kiss and Pál Hegymegi Kiss. According to Pálffy, at a given signal, Hegymegi jumped up from his seat, opened the door wide, and the suspended mayor entered. Vásáry was greeted by a huge cheer from the left and they began to sing the national anthem together.⁵⁸ Hegymegi stated that Vásáry was being driven to his death, a sentiment echoed in the press, and warned that if this continued, those responsible would be guilty of manslaughter.⁵⁹ The speeches were followed by voting, where only a slim majority, 73 out of 159 present, voted in favour of the official proposal, thus accepting the ministerial transcript.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, not only the newspapers of Debrecen – especially *Debreczen* – but also major press outlets in the capital voiced their support for Mayor Vásáry. The *Pesti Hírlap* [Daily Journal of Pest], *Az Est* [The Evening]

⁴⁴ Debreczen, 1 May 1934. 2.

⁴⁵ Debreczen, 24 May 1934. 3.

⁴⁶ Debreczen, 29 May 1934. 1-2.

⁴⁷ Veress 1999. 80.

⁴⁸ The investigation was based on Article 78, paragraph 1 of Act XXX of 1929, while the suspension of István Vásáry was based on Article 80, paragraph 1 of the same Act. Debreczen, 25 August 1934. 1-6.

⁴⁹ Veress 1999. 82-83.

⁵⁰ The primary accusations against Town Clerk József Zöld included irregularities in the construction of the Homokkert Street tramway and his failure to uphold the city's contractual rights. In the cases brought by Attorney General Dr. Károly Miszt, on behalf of the city, he charged the city a total of approximately 43,000 pengos in costs on about 800 occasions. In addition, Councillor Dr. Géza Veress concealed the fact that the statements showed that there was a capital debt in the account of the accounting office. Veress 1999. 84-85.

⁵¹ Veress 1999. 85.

⁵² “By my decree issued on 23 May 1934 under the number 128.045-1934 B.M. ... I hereby inform the public of the city

about the following: the investigation carried out has revealed a deficit of approximately 3 million pengos in the city's budget management.” Debreczen, 25 August 1934. 1-6.

⁵³ Debreczen, 25 August 1934. 1-6.

⁵⁴ Debreczen, 25 August 1934. 1-6.

⁵⁵ The general assembly attracted significant public interest, with ticket offices overwhelmed by people eager to secure gallery seats. Some of Vásáry's supporters sought to organize a march in his defense, but he personally intervened, insisting that the town hall dispute should not escalate into street demonstrations. Debreczen, 28 August 1934. 1-2.

⁵⁶ Debreczen, 26 August 1934. 1.

⁵⁷ Debreczen, 29 August 1934. 1-4.

⁵⁸ Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 75.

⁵⁹ Debreczen, 29 August 1934. 1-4.

⁶⁰ György Magoss, who would have sacrificed everything for Vásáry in mid-April, now turned against him. In 1938, the administrative court subsequently ruled his decision illegal, since he had been involved as an officer prosecutor general in the contract containing the lease guarantee. Veress 1999. 97.

and *Magyarság* [Hungarianness] also commented on the events in leading articles.⁶¹ In general, they spoke with the highest praise of Mayor Vásáry's outstanding personality and values, and emphasized that many cultural and other achievements of the city were attributed to his name.

At that moment, the true motives of the racist groups became unmistakably clear. Through propaganda leaflets, they denounced the liberal movement that had been gaining traction in Debrecen, arguing that the city must be purged of these so-called "*parasitic groups*" as soon as possible. All this was intended to lay the groundwork for the forthcoming elections to the city council, and not without good reason, since some members of the Debrecen Municipal Association had defected from Vásáry and sided with groups supporting Gömbös and the lord-lieutenant.⁶²

The following months were devoted to the investigation of the accusations, and the *Debreczen* daily paper continuously covered the events of the case. In mid-October, the Debrecen Municipal Association sent an open letter to Baron Vay, whose reply was published in the 16 October issue. The lord-lieutenant claimed that the vociferous opposition group was led by the Independent Smallholders Party and that it was therefore necessary for the authorities to put an end to a system that was causing public harm. Vay said the following: "*(Gömbös determined) to organize the Hungarian society and make it strong, combative and resistant to the tasks and great problems of the future... (the Party of National Unity) has shown that it not only proclaims but really feels the importance of the power of unity and organization and... it is only through a common understanding of the common difficulty, and by subordinating private interests above all to the public interest, that this unhappy, broken country can be put on the road to a better future.*"⁶³ It is also important to note that the lord-lieutenant was now openly opposing Vásáry. However, a month later, Minister of Interior Keresztes-Fischer was still saying that the mayor was only temporarily out of office, and his hearing was held on 15 November before a disciplinary board.⁶⁴ According to the chairman of the board, Deputy-Lieutenant Sándor Virányi, Vásáry's interrogation is still ongoing, it is not known when it will be completed, and this will depend on what the mayor has to say.⁶⁵ Notably, the mayor had

much to say, which led to the interrogation being finished only on 24 November. Meanwhile, on 22 November, the *Debreczen* published a one-page editorial entitled "*Put on Index.*" This decision stemmed from the Party of National Unity's issuance of a circular prohibiting its members from reading the *Debreczen* and forbidding any form of collaboration with the newspaper. According to the paper, the reason is that "*we refuse to write the Debreczen with the pen of Mihály Kolosváry-Borcsa.*" According to István Pálffy, the editor-in-chief, the editors of *Debreczen* had repeatedly refused to publish Kolosváry-Borcsa's reports, leaving this task to *Hajdúföld*, which was already engaged in the propaganda of Gömbös. The leaders of *Debreczen* compared this role to that of the ancient inhabitants who fought against the immigrant foreigners.^{66 67}

Meanwhile, Vásáry's support was diminishing on a daily basis – not due to a lack of sympathy or compassion, but because of fear and intimidation. Those who expressed support for Vásáry faced fines imposed by the tax authorities a few days later.⁶⁸ *Debreczen* was also not spared by the inquisition. The publishing company of the newspaper was subjected to an audit by three financial inspectors, who spent two weeks scrutinizing its records. The results were reported every day by telephone, where it was easy to listen in on the conversations, so that it was clear that the instructions had come from the lord-lieutenant. Following the inspections, legal proceedings were initiated against the owner, Gyula Szigethy, and the editor-in-chief, József Pálffy. The true aim was to intimidate and pressure the newspaper's leadership into submission – though ultimately without success.⁶⁹

No progress was made on the case for months, but *Debreczen* wrote about it frequently. In early December, an official reassessment of the Vásáry siblings' debt was conducted. The final conclusion revealed that the siblings had not received any special privileges and, in fact, had been granted proportionally fewer concessions than others. A front-page headline urged voters to "*stick with István Vásáry despite all the deceptions and cunning tricks.*"

At the end of 1934, the municipal elections took place in multiple stages: a limited election on 5 December and a general election on 16 December. Vásáry ran as a representative of District XII, facing fierce opposition from racist groups. *Debreczen* reported the event

⁶¹ *Debreczen*, 31 August 1934. 1.

⁶² Tóth, Gábor: Debrecen a második világháború előtti évtizedben 1931–1941 [Debrecen in the decade before the Second World War 1931–1941]. In: Tokody, Gyula (ed.), *Debrecen története* [The History of Debrecen], 1986. 252.

⁶³ *Debreczen*, 16 October 1934. 6.

⁶⁴ At the same time, Pál Hegymegi Kiss gave a speech in which he said that the Vásáry family had already had their leases when he became mayor. He himself was against Vásáry, but now he thinks that instead of an investigation, there is a manhunt. Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 85.

⁶⁵ *Debreczen*, 16 November 1934. 3.

⁶⁶ Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 85.

⁶⁷ The interrogation of Vásáry's brother, József Vásáry, in Egyek, in the case of the "wormy bacon", took place in parallel with the interrogation of István Vásáry. The accusation was that the brothers had given their workers wormy bacon.

The accusation was soon dropped, as the whistleblower, Péter Kovács, contradicted himself during the first interrogation. A piece of the bacon in question was examined in court and the Vásáry brothers were acquitted. However, the case did not stop there, and the capital's newspapers took advantage of the situation. The case of the bacon was identified with the struggle of social classes, where the poor have to be protected from their attackers. *Debreczen*, 25 November 1934. 13. Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 85.

⁶⁸ The incident was reported by Vásáry himself in an editorial in *Debreczen* on 27 November, as an anonymous writer, under the title "*What is happening in Debrecen?*" Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 87.

⁶⁹ The charges were dropped years later and the imposed tax increase was cancelled. Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 88.

as follows: despite the terror on the day of the municipal elections, Mayor István Vásáry was elected with a large majority, despite the fact that some protest groups tried to intimidate any voter they thought would support Vásáry's victory. They assaulted voters with whips and brass knuckles until police intervened. The protesters were unsuccessful: in district XII, out of 1,225 valid votes cast, Vásáry won 721 votes.⁷⁰ The next day, it was also reported that Vásáry had been unanimously re-elected as the General Superintendent of the Reformed Church in Debrecen: *"The 70,000-strong Reformed society of Debrecen showed yesterday that it continues to cling to its current mayor, István Vásáry, with unbroken trust and love."*⁷¹ On the whole, however, the Municipal Association was defeated in the fight, which gave new strength to the groups of the Party of National Unity, who celebrated the beginning of a new era, replacing the old regime.⁷²

By the end of February 1935, the disciplinary proceedings had concluded, including the interrogation of city officials and witnesses, as well as the collection and review of documents. The case file spanned approximately 1,400 to 1,500 pages, with the indictment drafted by Sándor Virányi. The investigating commissioner deemed Vásáry's claim of non-involvement in his family members' rental property to be false and misleading. The investigators cited Vásáry's managerial conduct, his failure to fulfil his supervisory and control duties, and accused his fellow officials of being influenced by their tension with the mayor. However, several interviewed city leaders, including József Zöld, Károly Miszti, and Géza Veress, dismissed these allegations.

Domestic political changes also had a negative impact on the development of the Vásáry case. The political struggle between Bethlen and Gömbös intensified, and the departure of Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer further aggravated Vásáry's position, who had tried to remain objective throughout the investigation. On 11 May, the final day of the disciplinary hearing, István Vásáry delivered his concluding speech, which the *Debrecen* published the following day. A large audience had gathered in the state-room of the county hall, where Vásáry made the following statement: *"For more than a year now I have been silently enduring, reading and listening to the barrage of attacks that have been directed against me... If the (Attorney General) thought that I was lamenting the dead, I am calling on the living... If this city is in disgrace, this disgrace will cease one day and fall on the heads of those who have brought this disgrace upon the city of Debrecen. And rest assured, it will not be on my head... I have the dignity to believe that to hold the post of mayor of Debrecen at a time such as the one when I was destined to be there*

*was not a dignity, not an honour, but a terrible spiritual and even, I would say, physical burden."*⁷³

At the conclusion of the week-long disciplinary hearing, Ödön Mikecz, the lord-lieutenant of Szabolcs County, stated that the verdict would be announced later, requiring a week's delay. Vásáry's memoirs indicate that the Minister of Agriculture had privately informed him that Gömbös had personally reprimanded the lord-lieutenant for postponing the verdict announcement.⁷⁴ In the disciplinary decision, several charges were dropped, but Vásáry was found guilty of some charges that were not sufficiently substantiated. Among other things, he was found guilty of: allowing his family to receive improper benefits; failing to hold accountable officials who acted contrary to the interests of the city or in an improper or negligent manner; and making false reports about his non-interference in disputes between the city and his relatives. In mitigation, the mayor's long-standing commitment to the development of the city and his generally good reputation were assessed. In view of this, the most serious penalty was waived, and a fine was imposed instead. In addition, the salary withheld during his suspension was not paid and he was ordered to pay one third of the costs of the disciplinary proceedings. However, after the decision became final, the important decision was taken to reinstate him.⁷⁵ Vásáry was informed of the decision by telephone. News of the judgment spread quickly, and praise for Vásáry was not confined to the city; numerous public figures and city representatives also extended their congratulations. Dezső Baltazar was pleased to announce that the mayor had been reinstated and hoped that neither side would appeal. His hopes were dashed, as the Steering Committee of the Party of National Unity and Lord-Lieutenant Vay filed an appeal that evening.⁷⁶ *"We waited with faith in justice and we were not disappointed"* was the title of the *Debrecen* newspaper's report on the details of the verdict, celebrating Vásáry's return.⁷⁷

Less than a week later, an assembly consisting solely of the members of the Party of National Unity convened and voted in favor of the appeal. Before the vote, some members of the assembly called for a reconciliation between Vay and Vásáry, saying *"two strong men confronted each other here, and the old Hungarian proverb is definitely true, no castle can have two kings."*⁷⁸ After the vote, Vásáry himself launched an appeal, arguing that the decision contained a number of factual errors and unfair conclusions. He argued that in all his activities he was guided only by the interests of the city. Lord-Lieutenant Vay was disappointed with the first instance decision and could not envisage success at the second instance. Anticipating

⁷⁰ Vásáry won in his own district, but the general election was an absolute victory for the Party of National Unity, with 30 out of 36 seats. Tóth 1986. 254.

⁷¹ *Debrecen*, 12, 15, 18, 19 December 1934.

⁷² Tóth 1986. 254.

⁷³ *Debrecen*, 12 May 1935. 1.

⁷⁴ Veress 1999. 137.

⁷⁵ Károly Miszti, who was also under disciplinary proceedings, was sentenced to loss of his job, while Elemér Vargha, deputy mayor, and József Zöld were fined. Veress 1999. 139.

⁷⁶ Veress 1999. 139.

⁷⁷ Despite its claims of political neutrality, *Debrecen* consistently supported Vásáry, dedicating its columns to his defense and struggle for justice. *"The flower-beds are in white, as if to proclaim that in this ancient city hall, with István Vásáry at its head, worked a group of officers whose souls were pure, bright white, and innocent."* *Debrecen*, 19 May 1935. 1.

⁷⁸ Pálffy documents – The first ten years. 142.

another unfavorable outcome, he simultaneously pursued a separate action against Vásáry on a different front. On 4 June, the Legislative Council considered a motion by Gábor Bakóczy and three other committee members, invoking the so-called 'executioner's paragraph' of Act I of 1934 to order Vásáry's forced retirement. The purpose of the appeal, specifically to find Vásáry guilty and in breach of his duties, was considered so serious that he was found to be unfit to hold the office of mayor, in their opinion lacking the essential requisites for the proper performance of his duties. The decision reached the Minister of Interior, Miklós Kozma, the following day, who informed the committee by his decision of 6 June that István Vásáry had been ordered to retire under the above-mentioned Act. According to the law: *"In addition to the cases provided for in the legislation in force, a person who fails to perform his duties to the required extent, because of lack of the qualifications, diligence or other important requisites necessary for the proper performance of his duties, may be subject to regular treatment. For the purpose of conducting such proceedings... the Minister... shall constitute a standing committee of three members."*⁷⁹ The committee, chaired by László Vay, included members Vásáry could have challenged on grounds of bias, yet he chose not to do so. The following day, Vásáry received the committee's decision ordering his compulsory retirement. The decision outlined reasons that had not been previously communicated to him. In his response on 20 June, he argued that the committee had acted improperly and that he had not been adequately informed of the grounds for the proceedings. The outcome of the committee's hearing finally produced unexpected results: on 9 July, Vásáry's previous fine was halved, while 19 of the original 23 charges were dropped. Although the disciplinary court of the Ministry of Interior officially lifted Vásáry's suspension and reinstated him as mayor, he chose to resign, recognizing that forced retirement was inevitable.⁸⁰ *"I am very happy for the moral satisfaction, which is worth more than anything to me. I am especially glad to be able to pass on to my dear son the honour which I have received in a pure way from my father. This is the one thing that comforts and lifts me up after the mental agonies I have unjustly suffered."*⁸¹ However, a complete exoneration was truly unattainable. On 1 November, he was officially ordered into compulsory retirement, with a preceding period of paid leave. The reasons for the decision were as follows: *"I had to decide this way because higher civil servant ethics require that an official who has been disciplined should not hold a leadership position, where a good example must be set..."*⁸² Although the *Debreczen* paper initially expressed disappointment at the news of Vásáry's retirement, it eventually concluded that the move could

have positive long-term effects. According to the newspaper, Vásáry had long since *"outgrown Debrecen"*, and his talents should not be confined to serving just one city. Instead, he should fight with all his strength and stand up for the interests of the whole country. *"We do not therefore bid farewell to István Vásáry, whom we believe we shall soon see at the forum where he will be free to work for the economic reconstruction of the country and the resurrection of Great Hungary, free from all constraints."*⁸³ This is how Vásáry himself bid farewell to the city of Debrecen: *"In my mayoral seat, I felt that I was among my fellow citizens, not above them, and I will remain among them."*⁸⁴

Summary

The retirement of Vásáry marked the end of an era in Debrecen that his successors could not surpass. During his tenure as mayor, he allocated between 2.5 and 3 million forints to public health and social services, and 4.5 million forints to cultural activities. He focused on unemployment and improved the gas and electricity networks, the tramway and the industrial railway. Other significant achievements of the period included the construction of the National Defence Cemetery Mausoleum and the new National Bank building. Additionally, in May 1932, the central building of the University of Debrecen was completed and inaugurated, where Vásáry was awarded an honoris causa doctorate degree in March 1933.⁸⁵ The *Debreczen* newspaper, a key player in Debrecen's press scene during the 1930s, was an outspoken supporter and defender of Mayor István Vásáry. The paper used every means at its disposal to preserve Vásáry's reputation and to refute the political attacks launched against him. *Debreczen* consistently emphasized the personal and professional integrity of Vásáry, as well as his dedication to the city, while methodically refuting accusations against him. *Debreczen's* stance became symbolic not only of Vásáry's character but also of the city's autonomy and moral values. Despite its cautious approach to open conflict, the paper actively confronted radical right-wing groups and their supporters, who led the charge against Vásáry.

Vásáry frequently voiced his opinions on economic, social, and political issues, often initiating reforms. In his view, the growing social inequalities were a pressing problem: while a few people had enormous wealth, poverty and misery were on the increase. However, it was his loyalty to István Bethlen that played a decisive role in sealing his fate when Gyula Gömbös came to power. Vásáry's political loyalty also stood out: he was always on the side of István Bethlen, yet Bethlen never directly intervened in his litigation, although he followed the events closely and exchanged several letters with Vásáry during this period.⁸⁶ In his speech on 5 November, 1935, he reflected on the forced retirement of Vásáry, stating: *"When they tried to find*

⁷⁹ <https://net.jogtar.hu/ezer-ev-torvenyei> (Accessed: 02.01.2025).

⁸⁰ Veress 1999. 150-152.

⁸¹ *Debreczen*, 10 July 1935. 1-3.

⁸² Statement by Miklós Kozma. *Debreczen*, 13 July 1935. 3.

⁸³ *Debreczen*, 13 July 1935. 3.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Veress 1999. 40-45.

⁸⁶ István Bethlen and István Vásáry met several times, one of these memorable occasions was when Bethlen attended a luncheon in Debrecen with György Magoss, and Vásáry was present. From Vásáry's memoirs we know that during the lunch the disciplinary investigation was discussed. Another such incident was reported in *Debreczen*: Bethlen had a meeting with the Minister of Interior, where, according to leaked

him guilty of disciplinary offences under all kinds of titles, and when they could not find any other way of convicting him... they immediately resorted to this law (Act I of 1934) and sent him into retirement, although he was such a mayor of the town of Debrecen that today Americans come to Debrecen to admire the progress he has made in the last few years.”⁸⁷

Vásáry was ultimately defeated in a fight the outcome of which seemed almost inevitable, but his political career was not broken. Thanks to the unity of his supporters, he was elected to the Legislative Committee in 1934 and then to the Parliament in 1939, albeit with an opposition programme, as a member of the Independent Smallholders Party. Thus, while his mayoralty – and, to some extent, his career in Debrecen – fell victim to political power struggles, the influence of Vásáry endured. He continued to be an active and prominent figure in public life.

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⁸⁷ Cited by Veress 1999. 158.