Changes in the Situation of the Hungarian Minority in Yugoslavia during the Period of Royal Dictatorship

1929–1941

ENIKŐ A. SAJTI

The assassination of Stjepan Radić and his fellow representatives in the Parliament and the introduction of royal dictatorship are often simply equated, even in scholarly literature. Although it is true that the shot fired by a representative of the radical party made the total failure of cooperation between Serbs and Croats in the Parliament obvious to everyone, the introduction of royal dictatorship was brought about by considerably more complex factors.[1] The Serbi–Croat opposition had begun to paralyze the country in its day-to-day functioning. Before 1929 none of the parliaments had managed to serve its full term: twenty-three governments of different composition had held the rudder of the centralized state.

By the end of the 1920s it had become clear to the royal court and the supporters of centralism that political power-relations were developing in an unfavorable way. A former leading figure and supporter of centralism, the democrat Svetozar Pribičević, allied with the Croatian Peasants Party against Belgrade (creating the Peasant–Democratic Coalition) and thus began the collaboration of Croatian and Serbian anti-centralist forces. This domestic development carried with it the danger of the Croatian Peasants Party's expanding beyond its national boundaries and becoming a collective party of various forces of opposition in the country. Budapest's urging of the Hungarian Party (Magyar Párt. MP) to leave the radical club had only reinforced this process. The Croatian Peasants Party did not even try to conceal its intention to become a collective party of the opposition, and the Peasant–Democratic Coalition openly called for the reform of the state's struc-

[1] The personal fate of the assassin, Puniša Rašić is interesting in itself. He was sentenced to ten years in prison for his crime, but he was released by the Germans after they had occupied the country. In 1944 Rašić was found by one of the partisan divisions which liberated the city of Belgrade, sentenced to death, and executed.

ture. According to their ideas, the unity of the country could be symbolized only by the king, and the structure of the federalist and dualistic South Slav state, which they envisaged, would have to be built on the wide-ranging autonomy of the historical provinces of Serbia and Croatia.

King Alexander considered three courses of action in the face of this crisis. He played with the idea of the "amputation of the country", i.e. the possibility of "releasing" Croatia from the structure of the state, but he abandoned this idea very soon. This suggestion arose essentially at the meeting of Apor and Maček. Alexander also tried a conventional solution and appointed a new government of different composition, which, for the first time in the history of the kingdom, was headed not by a Serb, but by a Slovene, Antun Korošec. In the end – and, interestingly enough with international consent – he decided that "no mediator should stand between the People and the King any more", i.e. he suspended the constitution, dissolved the political parties and the nationally based unions and associations, and even prohibited the use of terms that denoted the names of single nationalities in the country. To Alexander, these measures were necessary because they seemed to offer the only possibility of preserving "the unity of nation and state," because, as he stated it in his proclamation of 6 January 1929, parliamentarism had led to "intellectual depravation and national discord."[2] It was rightly stated in the 1929 annual report of the British Embassy in Belgrade: "Under those difficult circumstances, into which the new Kingdom with three names had been plunged by the conflicts among the political parties, the impatience of the opponents, the excessive striving after power and fortune, the permanent government crises, the murder in the Parliament, and the distrust among the factions, it would have been difficult to think of any other power than that of autocracy which could have created order out of the present chaos."[3]

We interpret the king's step as a further political maneuver, due to the lack of any other means, to try to consolidate the integration of the state, which had been held up largely by political measures anyway. By founding the new state Alexander hoped to forge together the nationalism of the Serbs and the Croats, and thus to achieve the resurrection of the "tribes" of a unified South Slav nation – believed in and hoped for by many – in the name of a supranational polity. The catalyst would have been the Yugoslav "state discipline." Unitarism is usually identified as the basis of his dictatorship, but it is nevertheless necessary to note the following: Alexander's unitarism was based on the idea that the state had to represent a common, unified will, because that was the only way it could become

---

[2] B. Petranović-M. Zečević, *Jugoslavija 1918–1984. Zbirka dokumenata.* [Yugoslavia from 1918 till 1984. A collection of documents] Belgrade 1985, 262. The proclamation has been published in Hungarian in: E. A. Sajti, ed. *Jugoszlávia 1918–1941. Dokumentumok.* [Yugoslavia 1918–1941. Documents] Szeged 1989, 177–178.

[3] Ž. Avramovski, *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji. Godišnji izvaštaji Britanskog poslanstva u Beogradu 1921–1938.* [The British on the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Annual reports of the British mission in Belgrade, 1921–1938] Arhiv Jugoslavije. Vol. 1. (1921–1930), Zagreb 1986, 587.

the basis of a "unified spiritual renewal." He was convinced that if he created "Yugoslavia" (which is what he had changed the name of the country to from the former Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which referred to the existence of the three South Slav nations), he could also create a unified Yugoslav nation. He tried to have a supranational integrating program accepted as the political will of the state, coming from above, which idea was rejected by the majority of even those Serb political forces that supported and symbolized governmental unity. The later death of Alexander was symbolic in the sense that this living legend of Yugoslavism was actually murdered in Marseilles by Macedonian and Croat proponents of "tribal" nationalism.

After the proclamation of the royal dictatorship, the Hungarian government sent the following message to the capital of the Yugoslavian state through Baron Pál Forster: "Regardless of the change of the regime that has occurred in Yugoslavia, [the Hungarian government] wishes to keep up and cultivate the good relations which have developed between the two countries in recent years." This intention of the Hungarian government, the message continues, was based on the hope that the new Yugoslavian government was guided by the same wish. Although Hungary definitely did not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia, "the relation of the two countries does not remain unaffected by the treatment of the Hungarian minorities in Yugoslavia by the Yugoslavian government."[4] In other words, the establishment of the dictatorship itself had no effect on Budapest's general attitude toward Belgrade.

The proclamation of the royal dictatorship meant the prohibition of all political parties in the country, and thus the Hungarian Party was also dissolved. For the approximately half a million Hungarians in Yugoslavia a period had ended in which it seemed possible to advance the interests of the Hungarian minority through political deals, by taking greater or lesser advantage of the conflicts between the Slav political parties, or by holding fast to the rules of the constitution and of parliamentarianism. But it was not only a radical narrowing down of the field of political play. The dictatorship also abrogated the privileges which had been achieved by the Hungarian Party with great difficulty. Not only did it put an end to the possibility of parliamentary politics, but it also destroyed the successes achieved at provincial and community elections. The change of regime brought with it the complete replacement of elected lower- and middle-grade public officials.[5] The provincial assemblies were dissolved, mayors replaced by military officers, elected community committees dissolved, and by the suspension of the right of public meeting the work of cultural groups was made impossible. The establishment of censorship also affected Hungarian newspapers. As is well-known, the dictatorship was proclaimed not out of hatred of minorities, but rather as an attempt to solve the Serbian–Croatian conflict. Oddly enough, in the

[4] Hungarian National Archives (HNA), K-63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1929–16/4–382.

[5] The last Hungarian notary was dismissed in 1931.

beginning it was received with great relief by the majority of the Yugoslavian public and by the leaders of the Hungarian minority among them.

The leaders of the Hungarian Party were forced to live in political exile in the first years of the dictatorship. At first it was because the new political regime, due to the logic of its own system, did not even attempt to enter a political dialogue with the minorities, and later it was because Belgrade was looking for new faces for its politics. Their dream was to establish a unified Yugoslavian nation which they hoped to forge together from the opposing South Slav "tribes" by artificial, exclusively political means. This concept could not tolerate any independent parties of minorities.

The dictatorship found its man among the Hungarians in the person of Dr Gábor Szántó, a physician from Subotica (Szabadka), whose task was to gather the Hungarians under the banner of Yugoslavism in the Yugoslav National Party (Jugoslovenska nacionalna stranka – JNS), while at the same time making frequent statements of loyalty. This party was founded in December 1931, after the proclamation of the so-called forced constitution. This constitution prohibited the foundation of associations and parties on an ethnic or religious basis. In the period of pseudo-parliamentarianism the minority politics of the regime was based on the idea that ethnic minorities would be given minor, but highly touted privileges, as a special favor of the regime, by way of a centrally chosen and appointed leader of that minority. This policy was meant to demonstrate the stability of the regime and the integrity of the country. After the dissolution of the Parliament, cronyism, which had always played an important part in the political life of the country, could flourish without any constitutional restrictions. The government, headed by General Petar Živković, was appointed by the king from among his closest supporters, and middle-grade state positions were given to people belonging to these circles on the basis of their loyalty, services, friendship, or political reliability. It was widely known that Szántó, for example, was a personal friend of the future prime minister, the radical Dragiša Cvetković, and that he had rendered him a great service by resigning from the Hungarian Party in 1927 to take a prominent part in the organization of the Hungarian section of the Radical Party. In exchange for his political services Szántó was given a seat in the Parliament at the first parliamentary elections held on 1 November 1931, and he thus managed to get into the two-chamber *skupština* (parliament) as the only Hungarian representative.[6] The new Parliament was marked by considerable changes: out of its 305 members only 98 had been representatives earlier.

Fulfilling the promise he had made to his French supporters, and in order to consolidate the internal basis for his dictatorship, Alexander proclaimed a new, so-called 'forced' or 'imposed' constitution on 3 September 1931. According to this constitution, half the members of the Upper House were to be appointed by the king for six years, while the other half were to be elected by the committees

[6] Arhiv Vojvodine (AV) F 126, Banska uprava Dunavske banovine. Kabinet bana, poverljivi broj (The Archives of Vojvodine [AV] F 126. The office of the ban of the Banate. The cabinet of ban, confidential number) 163, 199, 223/1933.

and officers of the banates. (The Senate had ninety-six members.) The Lower House was elected directly, but by open ballot, for a four-year term. The Parliament was not allowed to enact laws without royal consent, and the executive power was concentrated in the hands of the monarch, but royal decrees had to be signed by the ministers. The party that won the majority of the votes at the open ballot received two-thirds of the seats, and also got a proportional share of the remaining votes. According to the officially published data, which were rightly declared by the opposition to have been falsified, the Yugoslav National Party (Jugoslovenska Nacionalna Stranka), the only party taking part in the parliamentary elections, won 65% of the votes.[7]

As part of the national crisis-solving strategy during the period of the great economic depression, the government of the dictatorship granted a moratorium on the debts of the Hungarian peasantry. They also held out the prospect of extending the agrarian reform to the Hungarians, and promised to establish a Hungarian teacher training college in Belgrade. Soon after his election, Szántó got permission to speak in the Parliament, something that the representatives of the Hungarian Party had never managed to achieve, and he promoted the cause of the teacher training college and the agrarian reform. The "loyalty movement" of the Hungarians was rewarded in Belgrade by new appointments of middle and lower ranking officials in the administration of the banates.[8]

Gábor Szántó, who was considered a traitor both in Budapest and in the circles of the former Hungarian Party, worked hard to earn the confidence of the official circles. He organized "the healthy Hungarian forces," which was given great publicity by the press. It seems that Szántó's activity met with little appreciation even in certain Slav circles. When Szántó engaged himself in organizational work in Senta (Zenta) for a newly christened governmental party, the Yugoslavian Radical Peasants' Democracy (Jugoslovenska Radikalna Seljačka Demokratska Stranka), he came into serious conflict with Milan L. Popović, who was also working on organizing the same party, and who was a former Hungarian parliamentary representative and later became a representative of the Serbs in the Hungarian parliament after the re-annexation of the territory. In his report of June 1933 to the ban (provincial governor) of the Danubian Banate, the county official of Senta (Zenta) considered Szántó's group "a disciplined, cold-blooded, compact" assembly, but on the other hand he called Popović and his followers turncoats engaged in harmful activities with respect to "both national and party interests," because they hindered the "already deeply rooted process" of spreading the idea of Yugoslavia among members of the Hungarian minority.[9] Of the

[7] Petranović–Zečević, op. cit., 273; Avramovski, op. cit., Vol. 2. (1931–1938), 38–39.

[8] In May 1929, the country was divided into nine banates (major administrative units). Voivodina became part of the Danubian Banate, with Novi Sad (Újvidék) as its center. Belgrade was not designated as the center of any banate. At the same time, the former 33 counties of the country were abolished, and the name of the country was changed from the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to Yugoslavia.

[9] AV F 126, Banska uprava Dunavske banovine. Kabinet bana, poverljivi broj 223/1933.

former leaders of the Hungarian Party it was only Ödön Nagy who lent his name to Szántó's activities. According to contemporary sources, he wished thereby to improve his "hopeless" financial situation.

In the meantime, the old politicians of the Hungarian Party, who were forced to draw back from politics, but still had contacts with Budapest, continued their work in sometimes legal, sometimes illegal cultural associations in the face of frequent house searches and harassment by the police.

Soon after the proclamation of the dictatorship a top-secret decree was issued which prohibited leaders of the Hungarian Party from holding passports. In cases where one was still issued, the holder's movements were monitored "with special attention" by the authorities. In the spring of 1930, for example, house searches were carried out at Leo Deák's and Ödön Palásthy's homes, because "they organized a campaign to expose the cultural situation of the Hungarians." Not only political activity, but also the officially permitted cultural activities of clubs and associations was made impossible. For example, the leaders of associations had to give three days notice to the police about their planned visits to the provinces, and they had to pay the daily allowance of the officials who supervised their gatherings. Printers were instructed verbally by the police not to bring out any books, handbills, invitations, and the like for some time.[10] The refusal to issue passports was considered so grave by the Hungarian government that they repeatedly emphasized it during the negotiations in the second wave of the Hungarian–Yugoslavian rapprochement in the late 1930s, and they held out the prospect that "if the situation does not change, we will be forced to subject Hungarian tourists going to Dalmatia to similar restrictions."[11]

The charge of the almost ritualized acts of sedition and irredentism became stronger in the period after the assassination in Marseilles, and a great number of Hungarians of Hungarian citizenship (2,700 persons) were expelled from Yugoslavia, primarily during the proceedings instituted by the League of Nations against Hungary in connection with the assassination, i.e. October to December

[10] AV F 126 I. 69676/1930. F 126 II. 3526/1929. HNA, K–63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1929–16/4–3146. According to the report by Ambassador Forster, there were 83 Hungarian cultural, economic, and religious associations at the time of the proclamation of the dictatorship, including reading groups, women's societies, smallholders' associations, and firefighters' associations, as well as religious groups of the Reformed Church. HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1929-16-351.

[11] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1938-16-664; 1939-16-758. According to the statistics made by Baron György Bakach–Bessenyei, the ambassador of Hungary in Belgrade, 687 were passports issued by the Yugoslavian authorities to members of the Hungarian minority of more than half a million people in the year 1936, 809 passports in 1937, and 440 in 1938. These statistics do not reflect the number of trips without visa, e.g. those with simplified travel documents who attended to the Eucharistic Congress in Budapest or to the Open Air Festival in Szeged. HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1939-16-150.

1934.[12] According to Yugoslavian sources, there were still 21,316 people in the country who had opted for Hungarian citizenship.[13]

Along with the relaxing of the dictatorship, but in a gradually tightening situation in domestic and foreign affairs, and with the Hungarian–Yugoslav rapprochement of the late 1930s, it became more and more obvious to the Yugoslav government that Szántó belonged to a "lightweight group in public life." It was also clear to them that Szántó's activity was viewed with disdain by the Hungarian government. Further, Szántó was not acknowledged as the leader of the Hungarian minority, especially not by the Hungarians themselves. The government was forced to contact the former leaders of the Hungarian Party again.

On 28 April 1937, after the community elections in Voivodina, Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović met Imre Várady, Dénes Streliczky, and Leo Deák, former leaders of the banned Hungarian Party. The negotiations centered on the new political role of the former leaders, their cooperation at the elections, and the compensation that would be offered in return. The goal of Várady and his group was to revive the Hungarian Party, but the Prime Minister did not even want to hear of this. In exchange for support at future parliamentary elections, the government party made a promise to end its practice of analyzing family names to establish ethnicity, to authorize new cultural associations, to re-appoint Hungarian teachers in Hungarian regions, and to settle the long-lasting question of the Hungarian teacher training college in Belgrade.[14]

It was an indication of the changing times that in June 1937 the general assembly of the "guilty town" of Subotica (Szabadka) adopted with enthusiastic approval a formerly unimaginable resolution proposed by the president of the Narodna Odbrana (National Defense), a nationalistic organization. According to the resolution, the Lajos Kossuth Foundation, which had been created before 1918 but had later ceased to function, was to support the schooling of Hungarian students, who were to become "the pioneers of the Hungarian–Yugoslav collaboration."[15] What was behind the tolerance shown by the Yugoslav government and public was, on the one hand, the gradual worsening of the international situation of Yugoslavia, and, on the other, some internal political considerations. By 1937, the French system of alliances, and especially the Little Entente, was in ruins, Nazi Germany was preparing for war, England was moving toward a peaceful modification of the system of peace treaties in Europe, and Italy had made an alliance with Germany. The negotiations between the Hungarian government and the Little Entente began in Sinaia, Romania, in May 1937. The subjects of the ne-

[12] AV F 126, ibid. 372, 376/1933; Š. Mesaroš, *Madjari u Vojvodini 1929–1941.* [Hungarians in Voivodina, 1929–1941] Novi Sad 1989, 108–109; V. Vinaver, *Jugoslavija i Madjarska 1933–1941.* [Yugoslavia and Hungary, 1933–1941] Belgrade 1976, 83–91.; M. Ormos, *Merénylet Marseille-ben.* [Assasination in Marseilles] Budapest 1984, 165–200.

[13] Mesaroš, op. cit., 108.

[14] HNA, K–28, Documents of the Department of Minorities of the Prime Minister's Office, 1937-R-15785.

[15] *Pesti Napló* [Pest Journal], 2 June 1937; *Nemzeti Figyelő* [National Observer], 6 June 1937.

gotiations were a non-aggression pact, the recognition of Hungary's equal right to arm itself, and the minority question. However, the treaty initialed in Bled, Yugoslavia, was never brought into effect, because on the closing day of the conference the Hungarian delegation was informed about the acute danger of Czechoslovakia's occupation.[16] In spite of their failure, the negotiations made it possible for the question of the Hungarian minority to become an issue in negotiations between the two governments again, much like it had been in the period of Hungarian–Yugoslavian rapprochement in the second half of the 1920s. There was a further issue that had an effect on the situation, namely Belgrade's growing concern about a new, dynamic organization from Zagreb led by the lawyer Iván Nagy. Nagy openly collaborated with the United Opposition, and it was to be feared that a movement in support of Zagreb – in opposition to the old group ready to seek compromise with Belgrade – would gain popularity among the Hungarians. The Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs first received a report on Iván Nagy from the Hungarian consul in Belgrade at the end of 1926. At this time Nagy, a law student, was the head of a local Catholic students' association called Vojvodina. The consul's attention was drawn to the new student leader by the fact that, as he put it, "this organization is the Hungarian Party at the university, hiding behind a Christian epithet, and it is fighting fairly boldly against the hegemony of Serbian- and Yugoslavian-hearted students' clubs, hand in hand with various Croatian students' associations founded in accordance with the programs of the parliamentary parties." The consul was then instructed by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs "to keep the contacts with them to the minimum."[17] How times had changed was indicated by the fact that in 1937/38 Budapest's main concern was to establish a collaboration between the radical youth in Zagreb and the old Hungarian conservative political group, and how they should be used against Belgrade.

Iván Nagy first tested his strength on the ticket of the United Opposition at the election held in the county of Stari Bečej (Óbecse) on 5 May 1935, but his attempt was unsuccessful. The strength of his political movement came not so much from his own political success, but from the Serbian–Croatian conflicts and the growing internal political importance of Macek's party, as well as from the Hungarian government's time-tested tactics in connection with Yugoslavia, namely "to have several irons in the fire." However, in order for them to be able to count on Iván Nagy seriously in one way or another in the future, it was crucial to establish a dialogue and cooperation between the old politicians of the south and Iván Nagy's group. With respect to the Bačka (Bácska) and Banat regions, Iván Nagy, working in cooperation with the Croatian Peasants Party, seemed dangerous, because not only did he proclaim the slogan of the autonomy

[16] For more about this question see M. Ádám, *Magyarország és a kisantant a harmincas években.* [Hungary and the Little Entente in the Thirties] Budapest 1968.

[17] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1926-16-605. The Zagreb consulate was raised to the level of consulate general in the fall of 1940.

of Voivodina, consistently rejected by the Hungarian Party, but also later, after the Serbian–Croatian compromise, he did his best to have Subotica (Szabadka), Sombor (Zombor) and its neighborhood annexed to the Croatian banate. Leo Deák and his companions rightly considered this a dangerous move, because they were worried that the already limited prospects for promoting the interests of the Hungarian minority, would get even worse if they were split between Belgrade and Zagreb. But they also had to see that by posing the land question in a radical conservative way, Iván Nagy had an impact on segments of the Hungarian minority which the old Hungarian Party politician could not even reach. And while Budapest encouraged Deák and Várady to initiate a dialogue, Belgrade was watching the possible reconciliation of the two groups with growing concern.

They knew that there were negotiations going on between Iván Nagy and Leo Deák about settling their conflicts. As Svetislav Rajić, the Danubian ban, wrote to the prime minister, Milan Stojadinović, in 4 June 1938: a united front of the Hungarians would mean that, following the example of the Croatians, they would immediately "demand maximal minority rights, and then autonomy". "I am following the movement with attention," the ban wrote, "and I have managed with the help of a confidant of Hungarian nationality to ensure that the enterprise would yield no particular results. I did not vigorously oppose the negotiations, because I was convinced that Imre Várady, a lawyer from Pétervárad, could stop the action without any difficulty..." Together with Várady, the ban also summoned Leo Deák, who entered into conciliatory negotiations, and made clear his disapproval of the enterprise. On this occasion Várady promised to achieve a "compromise" between the two groups, according to the ban's letter, in the presence of Deák. "With this move," Ban Svetislav Rajić's report to the prime minister continues, "Várady has repeatedly proven that he is a devoted follower of the idea of Yugoslavia and the royal government can always count on his faithful cooperation. I think that should be taken into consideration especially when establishing a collaboration with the leaders of the Hungarian minority."[18] The ban seems to have kept his word this time, and Várady was soon appointed senator, as will be seen. It is interesting to note about the negotiations between Deák and Iván Nagy that a "Hungarian–Hungarian united front" would have meant a distancing from every Slav party, with the aim of reorganizing the united Hungarian Party. The significance of the event is best indicated by the fact that the ban and Stojadinović were informed about the negotiations also by the chief of the Yugoslav general staff. The by then more than seventy-year-old Várady had learned a lot from his Serb political partners, of course, and he knew the way things were in Belgrade. It was also clear to him that the radical Iván Nagy could not yet be discounted. In return for calming down the unification negotiations, Stojadinović offered to ensure that at the upcoming parliamentary elections it would not necessarily be Szántó who would get a seat in the parliament.

At this time Yugoslavia was watching events in Czechoslovakia and later Hungary's territorial growth with great concern. In this changed international

[18] AV, F 126. Kabinet bana, pov. br. 108/1938.

situation, and parallel with the growing internal opposition to centralism, Belgrade started to show an increasing interest in negotiating with the Hungarians. At the elections held on 11 December 1938, the Yugoslav government decided to give up the idea of Szántó's Yugoslavian "fidelity movement", which irritated both the Hungarian government and both political wings of the Hungarian minority. The Hungarians were given a slot on the ticket of the government party. The candidate was the previously independent Gellért Fodor, community leader of Horgoš (Horgos), and not one of the old politicians of the Hungarian Party. The Hungarian Government raised no objections against Fodor, but they knew very well through the ambassador that Belgrade would definitely be averse to the candidacy of Iván Nagy. Budapest also had reasons not to support Nagy, and so his candidacy was not encouraged. In January 1939 the old, experienced, and always Belgrade-oriented Hungarian politician from the Banat, Imre Várady, was appointed senator. The elections of December 1938 were the last parliamentary elections held in royal Yugoslavia. The results testified to the growing power of the opponents of centralism. The Yugoslav Radical Union (Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica, JRZ), led by Stojadinović, received 54.01%, while the United Opposition, headed by Vladko Maček, obtained 44.9% of the votes. The third party listed was the radical nationalistic Yugoslav National Movement (Zbor), founded by Dimitrije Ljotić, which received only one percent of the votes. Because of the peculiar distribution of votes, however, the composition of the Parliament did not reflect the results of the elections at all: the government party was given 306 seats, while the opposition obtained only 67.[19]

A couple of days after his election, Gellért Fodor, who emerged out of former anonymity, felt the need to visit György Bessenyei, the Hungarian ambassador to Belgrade. At the meeting he made it clear to him that he had accepted candidacy only at the personal instigation of Svetozar Stanković, Minister of Agriculture, who was known to be a supporter of the Hungarians,[20] but he told the minister already at that point that "he should not assume that he would take the role of a second Gábor Szántó, but rather that he wished to work for the good of the Hungarian minority with honesty."[21] Because the Yugoslavian government was so ungenerous in offering seats in the parliament and clearly refused to approve the Hungarian Party, Budapest did not discourage Iván Nagy's activities in Zagreb.

[19] E. A. Sajti, ed. *Jugoszlávia 1918–1941* [Yugoslavia 1918–1941], 224.

[20] In the second half of the 1930s, the responsibility within the government for dealing with the affairs of the Hungarian minority was entrusted to an appointed minister who also spoke Hungarian. After the reannexation of the southern regions in 1941, during an extremely tense political situation because of the pacification of the region and the 1942 police-raid, Svetozar Stanković did a great deal as a private person to ease the Hungarian–Serb conflict. The other supporter of Hungarian affairs in Belgrade, besides Stanković, was Nikola Beslić, Minister of Transportation. In 1943 they both took prominent roles in the attempt at Hungarian–Serbian rapprochement. E. A. Sajti, *Délvidék 1941–1944.* [Southern Region 1941–1944] Budapest 1987, 74–76.

[21] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1939-16-41; 83.

Generally they thought that "it would not be advisable to hinder Nagy's listing as a candidate of the opposition, considering the earlier policy of 'having several irons in the fire', regardless of any other aspects."[22] The policy of "having several irons in the fire" was indeed nothing new in the politics of Hungarian governments with respect to Yugoslavia. As we have already seen in addition to their sometimes weaker, sometimes stronger intention to pursue diplomatic talks, they maintained cautious and secret relations from the very beginning with political powers opposing the centralist unity of the country, among others with the Croatian separatists.[23] Iván Nagy's potential political dominance was not considered timely yet. In the summer of 1939, negotiations were resumed between the two parties to clarify disputed matters, and a committee of arbitration was organized. According to this decision, both groups could maintain their political orientations and relations, while the conciliation committee of six members would demonstrate the unity of the Hungarian minority to the outsiders. Iván Nagy, Imre Várady, and Leo Deák were members of the committee, of course. Until the end of Yugoslavia's existence the relationship between the two political groups was determined by this agreement, which was acknowledged by Budapest with joy, and by Belgrade out of necessity.

In connection with this turn of events, the "old man" of the Hungarian minority of the southern regions, the politically very experienced Várady, said the following at a celebration organized by the Hungarian Cultural Society of Zrenjanin (Becskerek) for his seventy-fourth birthday: "I have traveled a lot lately, I heard biting criticism and remarks which also referred to the right wing, but everywhere in the souls the great secret wish of the Hungarians arose: let there be unity among the Hungarians. [...] Today we cannot ponder how weighty the reasons are that separate us, now we can only consider where the meeting point might be. [...] By discussing every public question concerning our Hungarian ethnic group in concert, we mean to serve our race with all our powers and influence in accordance with our laws."[24] The Hungarian ambassador formulated things more carefully, because, as he pointed it out, the original task of the committee of arbitration, the working out of a common party platform, had not been achieved.[25]

From the spring of 1938 onwards Yugoslavia's international situation deteriorated rapidly. From that time on it was surrounded by Germany, which had annexed Austria; by Hungary, since that fall enlarged with the territories of Upper Hungary; and by Italy, with Albania under its control a year later. According to Bessenyei's report of 19 March 1939, the advance of German troops into Prague

---

[22] Ibid. 1939-16-929.

[23] Ormos, op. cit., 50–52, 55–61, 71–85. B. Krizman, *Pavelić i ustaše*. [Pavelic and the Ustashas] Zagreb 1978, 83–107.

[24] J. Csuka, *A délvidéki magyarság története 1918–1941*. [History of the Hungarians of the Southern Region 1918–1941]. Budapest 1995, 484–485.

[25] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1939-16-856.

"elicited immense astonishment and great anxiety in the whole country. [...] A colleague who saw Cvetković on the day of the march into Prague said that the prime minister showed signs of a total collapse." But in his opinion, the Yugoslav government had not decided even in this desperate situation whether to pursue the "policy of compliance or that of the iron hand" in connection with the Hungarian minority.[26]

There are several examples of both, such as the problems of granting passports which has already been mentioned, or the endless obstacles put in the way of cultural and educational associations. Nevertheless, there were a growing number of examples of compliance as well. For example, the decree issued by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Korošec, on 4 July 1938, which ordered that officials working in minority regions had to learn (or rather should have learned) the language of the local ethnic minorities within three years.[27] Although the decree was never enforced, it clearly demonstrated a positive change in governmental policies.

The temporary settlement of the Serbian-Croatian conflicts by the so-called Cvetković–Maček agreement created a favorable atmosphere for the Hungarians as well. The shift of the united centralist system towards "dualism" significantly eased the centralized political pressure of the preceding two decades or more, which granted minority rights as gifts on the basis of current political interests. It should also not be forgotten that when territorial expansion changed the weight of Hungary, the mother-country, in Central Europe, Yugoslavia saw its territorial integrity endangered in the changed political situation in Europe, especially after the outbreak of the war.

Official Yugoslavia, which, in the words of Ambassador Bessenyei, "behaved in a relaxed and appropriate way" at the time of the Czechoslovakian crisis, in contrast to its own people, expected Hungary to make an official statement, which actually would not have meant Hungary's recognition of the Hungarian–Yugoslav border, but which could still have been interpreted like that by the Yugoslav government to the general public.

Until the conclusion of the Hungarian–Yugoslav so-called "pact of eternal friendship," however, Hungary was not willing to make any statements whatsoever concerning state borders. Pál Teleki and Dragiša Cvetkovič, who formed a new government after Stojadinović's fall (6 February 1939) had essentially the same aims in foreign affairs, namely to keep their countries out of war. Neither country managed to achieve this goal, and, although with some time lag and because of different reasons, both governments soon joined Germany and gave up their independence.

Analyzing the effect of the second Viennese decision on Belgrade, the Hungarian ambassador remarked with bitterness: "[...] if in consequence of the Vien-

[26] HNA, K–63, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1939-16/7-1486.

[27] HNA, K–609, Press Archive. Yugoslavia. Minority Affairs 1930–1937. *Nemzeti Újság* [National Newspaper], 5 July 1938.

nese decision we lost any political weight and prestige, then [we surely did so] both in Yugoslavian governmental circles and in the eyes of the general public."[28] Although the Hungarian–Yugoslav rapprochement initiated by Stojadinović came to a standstill in the fall of 1938, the situation was ripe for the question of the Hungarian minority to become an object of constant bargaining between the two governments. The internal political situation after the Serbian–Croatian compromise, the establishment of the Cvetković–Maček government (26 August 1939), and the dissolution of the newly elected parliament together with the promise of new elections offered an excellent opportunity. Although new elections were never called, finding a new position for the ethnic Hungarians in the changed political situation became the object of serious bargaining on the one hand between the two governments, and on the other, between Belgrade and the leaders of the Hungarian minority.

In such a situation the Hungarian government had to decide whether they wished to keep supporting both parties of Hungarians and "continue to exercise our influence exclusively in a way to encourage the two factions to work side by side if possible, instead of working against each other, or should we rather take a firm stand with one or the other group?"[29] asked the Hungarian ambassador to Belgrade of his government.

The difficulty of the decision lay in the fact that exclusive support for Iván Nagy's group would have meant for Belgrade that Hungary had officially pledged itself to the Croatian wing of the coalition. The Hungarian government could not take that upon itself in the circumstances, and it did not even want to do that on a temporary basis. Now they were content with formally demonstrating the political unity of ethnic Hungarians to the outsiders, which was achieved by the conciliation committee of six. The fragility of this unity, however, was very well known in Budapest. Bessenyei had rightly remarked in his report that although this committee could temporarily maintain unity "with much effort," as soon as it came to elections, the unity would necessarily disintegrate.

Immediately after the establishment of the new government, the ambassador began to bargain for future representative and senatorial positions, and the starting point was to get three seats for representatives and three for senators, following Budapest's directions. According to Bessenyei, Várady's senatorial seat seemed to be guaranteed, but as far as parliamentary seats were concerned, they would have to reckon with Belgrade's opposition, because three seats would be seen as too many. Since the regent and the government still insisted on the idea of "Yugoslavism", the only chance for the Hungarians to gain or bargain for seats was to join the ballots either of the Yugoslav Radical Union (JRZ) or Maček's opposition. Presenting the Hungarians as an independent political power was absolutely impossible. This was clearly recognized in Budapest, but the government

[28] HNA, K–63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Szentiványi manuscript, 1943, 70.

[29] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1939-16-902.

there tried to set a high price for its support of the JRZ ticket. According to their calculations, Iván Nagy should not be hindered from entering the elections on the ballot of the opposition in Stari Bečej (Óbecse), where he had strong support among poor Hungarian peasants. Therefore they were reluctant to support a Hungarian candidate against him on the radical ticket in that electoral district. However, expected Iván Nagy to unconditionally renounce his claim to take over the political leadership from the old politicians of the Hungarian Party. The Hungarian government emphatically told Iván Nagy that they would not support his claim. The instructions sent to Bessenyei by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 26 October 1939 contained the following main points.[30] Hungarians should not become politically passive in case the treaty fails. In addition to Várady's seemingly assured senatorial position, they should be given at least one more seat in the parliament, and the Yugoslav government should not interfere with the appointment of that representative. If Gábor Szántó's candidacy were forced again, it could only be accepted if an additional two seats would be guaranteed for Hungarian representatives. In connection with Iván Nagy the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the position that no other Hungarian candidate should be put up against him, not even if the Yugoslav government were raedy to permit it. In exchange, it should be arranged that Iván Nagy and his followers would put up no candidate in the electoral district designated for the candidate of the old Hungarian Party. Finally, the ethnic Hungarians of the southern regions were reminded to refrain absolutely from proclaiming the slogan of autonomy during the elections.

Budapest's position was transmitted to the Yugoslav government through Imre Várady, who presented it to the Minister of Transportation, Beslić, who was responsible for Hungarian affairs. During the meeting Beslić repeated the position of his government: "not even" the Germans were allowed to set up a separate minority party ballot, not to mention the Hungarians. As always, Beslić avoided naming any concrete privileges to be offered in exchange for the Hungarians' support of the government slate. All he said was that they would be "given a place" on the central committee of the government party as well as on the notaries board. Concerning the number of parliamentary positions, Beslić pointed out in an almost lamenting tone that if in Voivodina the Germans wanted to have five seats, the Hungarians three, and the Romanians two, the Serbs would be left with none. Both the Hungarians and the Germans should count on one senatorial seat and one parliamentary representative position each, and the Romanians would only be given one or the other. Thus they were ready to support the minimal demands of the Hungarians, but beyond that, the minister emphasized, a maximum of one deputy representative position would be considered. He claimed he had no objection to either Leo Deák's or Gellért Fodor's candidacy, and if it were only a question of his decision, he would not push Szántó's candidacy either. Várady was surprised at his statement concerning Deák, because it was well known that Deák, who was considered forceful – or, "what's more a bit

[30] Ibid. 1939-16-1019.

aggressive" – even by Bessenyei, was "absolutely repulsive" in the eyes of Belgrade.

Reflecting on the most urgent problem mentioned by Várady, Beslić emphatically declared that he could do nothing in the "present state of war" about the property restrictions in force in the border zone, which afflicted the Hungarian population most. On the other hand, he showed readiness to put those Hungarian teachers who had been removed to Serbo-Croatian schools back into Hungarian schools. Nor was he completely averse to the most important Hungarian demand, the establishment of a united Hungarian cultural association. He asked Várady to work out the bylaws of such an association, and he promised to have them accepted. The new aspect of these negotiations was not so much the standpoint of the Yugoslav government, which contained no new elements, but rather the fact that Beslić presented it "in the most fluent Hungarian language".[31] In the event, the new elections were swept away by the tide of history, but nevertheless at the very least the negotiations resulted in Várady's re-appointment as a senator in March 1940.[32]

Thus the situation of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia had not substantially changed by the end of 1939: Belgrade still considered the affairs of the Hungarian minority a bargaining chip, which could be made use of in exchange for political services. Nevertheless, Budapest could communicate its views to Yugoslav governmental circles more directly and could openly keep contact with the Hungarian leaders. For their part, when Belgrade refused to allow the reestablishment of a Hungarian political party and made promises that were never kept, they did so in a more cordial way, and even in Hungarian. However, the increasingly self-confident Hungary did not yet wish to put great pressure on the Yugoslav government concerning the case of the Hungarian minority.

The first Vienna award made it clear to Hungary that further territorial expansion could only be achieved with the support of Germany. Understanding of this point was demonstrated by a series of political steps. For example, Béla Imrédy's government authorized the founding of a Nazi-like organization among the German minority, the Volksbund, and later the Teleki government resigned from the League of Nations and joined the Anti-Comintern Pact. With German consent, and as a result of the dismemberment of the Czechoslovakian state, the Hungarian army marched into Sub-Carpathia (or Ruthenia, now in the Ukraine). On 30 August 1940, after the outbreak of war, the decision of the German and Italian judges was proclaimed in Vienna: Székelyföld and the northern part of Transylvania were given back to Hungary. While Hungarian society experienced these further changes with indescribable euphoria, the international reception of the second Vienna award was significantly different from that of the previous one. Both Great Britain and the United States regarded the decision as having been forced upon Romania. By the fall of 1940, Hungary gave up its neutrality

[31] Ibid. 1939-16-900.

[32] HNA, K–28, Documents of the Department of Minorities of the Prime Minister's Office, 1940-R-16838.

and non-alignment, which was the basis of Pál Teleki's foreign policy, and on 20 November 1940 joined the German–Italian–Japanese three-power pact. The freedom of action for Hungarian foreign policy was reduced to a minimum. Along the Hungarian border there was only one country which had yet not pledged itself to Germany, and that was Yugoslavia. This way Yugoslavia managed to keep out of the war in Europe for a while and to preserve its neutral position in spite of the fact that German victories on the western front pushed Belgrade into an increasingly difficult situation. Apart from the politicians, only the British, German, and Soviet intelligence services were fighting their invisible wars in Yugoslavia at that time, and it still remained undecided which side the country would eventually join.[33]

In the meantime Yugoslavia's external political situation was gradually worsening. Hungary's joining the three-power pact, the dissolution of the Balkans alliance by Romania (3 October 1940), the presence of German forces in Romania, the Italian–Greek war and the military presence of the Italians in Albania, the summer victories of the German forces on the western front, the capitulation of France, a former ally, and the air raids on Britain nearly plunged the country into a hopeless situation, but at the same time these events also increased the importance of Yugoslavia in the eyes of the Germans, the Italians, and the British. In addition to all this, in the fall of 1940 a new actor appeared on the battlefield to establish its power in the Balkans: the Soviet Union. At the meeting of Hitler and Molotov on 12–13 November, the Soviet Union quoted an increase of its influence in the Balkans as one of the its conditions for joining the three-power pact. As is well known, however, Hitler would not tolerate any further territorial claims by his ally, and independently of the outcome of the negotiations, he gave orders already on the first day, November 12, to continue preparations against the Soviet Union and to work out strategic principles.[34]

From the fall of 1940 onwards Germany's main endeavor in the "in-between" territories between the Soviet Union and Germany, including the Balkans, was to create a clear field for a military campaign against the Soviet Union. The small countries in the Balkans had only two options left to choose from: either become an ally of Germany, or become victims of the occupation. Regent Paul chose the first option. On 25 March 1941, Yugoslavia joined the three-power pact, which

---

[33] The Germans had built up their most important positions among the ethnic Germans in Banat, while the center of the British secret service was in the mine of Trepča. That is where Stanley William Baily, later head of the British SOE (Special Operations Executive) in Yugoslavia and future military consultant to the *chetnik* (Serbian right-wing) opposition worked as an engineer. One of the most successful centers of German intelligence in Novi Sad (Újvidék) was the radio station called Nora, operated by Janko Sep, a German ethnic group leader. Tito, the leader of the Yugoslavian communists, organized a radio station in Zagreb for the Soviet intelligence service with the help of Moscow and Istanbul. Enikő A. Sajti, "Josip Broz Tito." In P. Polonyi, *Mao* – E. A. Sajti, *Tito*. Budapest 2000, 227–228.

[34] For the latest material on this topic in Hungarian see M. Ormos and I. Majoros, *Európa a nemzetközi küzdőtéren*. [Europe in the international arena] Budapest 1998, 423–423.

did not seem to be a bad compromise at that time. Under the arrangement Yugoslavia would have no military obligations, and what is more, they were promised the long-sought harbor of Thessaloniki by the Germans. German diplomacy also promised them protection against Bulgarian, Hungarian, and Italian territorial demands.

Until its joining of the three-power pact Yugoslavia remained, in Hungary's eyes, the gap in the German–Italian ring surrounding the country. Count István Csáky, Minister of Foreign Affairs, formulated this view as follows at his nearly hour-long meeting with the director of the Avala Yugoslavian news agency on 11 November 1940: "Our only contact with foreign countries is the Budapest–Belgrade–Sofia–Istanbul line. If this line is broken, we also fall into the pit."[35] From October 1940 Hungarian diplomacy started to inquire into Yugoslavia's intentions concerning a closer pact with Hungary. It was clear both to Belgrade and to Hungary that Berlin would have no objection to a rapprochement of the two countries.

On the contrary, because Hitler's own interest required that Yugoslavia should feel safe with Hungary as a neighbor, he played a role in Hungary's abandonment of its territorial demands in Yugoslavia in a Hungarian–Yugoslavian treaty signed less than two months later, on 12 December 1940. During the negotiations preceding the signing of the treaty, there was the possibility of re-annexing certain territories inhabited mostly by Hungarians, namely the counties of Senta (Zenta) and Bačka Topola (Topolya). According to a report of July 2, 1940 by the Hungarian military attaché in Berlin, his Yugoslav counterpart indicated that "the chief of the Yugoslav general staff declared that he would have no objections from a military point of view to the re-annexation of the Baranya triangle as well as Subotica (Szabadka) and its surroundings, for the sake of a compromise with Hungary."[36]

The question of possible territorial compensation was also addressed in Bessenyei's meetings with certain members of the Yugoslav government. However, Bessenyei clearly saw that if Yugoslavia gave any territorial concessions to Hungary, they would have to do the same to their Bulgarian "brothers", and soon the Albanians and the Italians would present their demands too, that is to say "with this concession they themselves would initiate the process of the disintegration of the country." In spite of this fact, Bessenyei made an attempt to find out the standpoint of his Yugoslav counterpart following the instructions of his own government. In early October 1940 he first visited Miloje Smiljanić, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, with whom, as he wrote, "I have such an intimate and confidential personal relationship that it makes it possible to discuss any topic." Smiljanić told him that after Czechoslovakia's disintegration and Romania's dismemberment Yugoslav official circles also began to deal with the thought that

[35] *Aprilski rat 1941. Zbornik dokumenata.* [The April War of 1941. A miscellany of documents] Belgrade 1971. Br. 303, 902.

[36] HNA, K–63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1940-16/7-3700.

"sooner or later Yugoslavia would also fall victim to the [territorial] re-arrangements, [...] and that unsettled problems could be solved with less detriment if their settlement were initiated by Belgrade itself." He was also asked from many sides what were the minimum territorial demands "on the basis of which final concord could be achieved in Hungarian–Yugoslav relations." He answered these non-official inquiries, considered more like "private actions of political climbers and busybodies," each time in compliance with the official standpoint of his government. According to this, "the Hungarian government, although it would certainly welcome a spontaneous gesture from Yugoslavia which would cede territories with a primarily Hungarian population to the mother country, is so busy with the Transylvanian question for the time being that it does not wish to initiate any action to settle the Hungarian–Yugoslav conflict." It was not the question of territorial re-annexation that Smiljanić addressed in accordance with the standpoint of his government, but the possibility of solving the minority problem through a population exchange. This was, however, refused by the Hungarian ambassador with the following words: "I was thinking a lot about what you told me about the population exchange, but unfortunately I came to the conclusion that this solution was absolutely impracticable. Permanent good relations between Hungary and Yugoslavia could only be achieved in two ways: either by the re-annexation of the territories inhabited by Hungarians, or by improving their conditions to such an extent that ethnic Hungarians would feel the same here as they would in the mother country and could move around just as freely." But, he added immediately, since the "spiritualization" of the borders is now a fully utopian thought, only the first option could be taken into consideration. Since Smiljanić had obviously raised the issue of population exchange on a sudden impulse, Bessenyei interpreted his colleague's understanding of the exchange as follows: "The majority of the Hungarians would be given back to us together with the territories in which they are settled," and the classic form of population exchange seemed to be a feasible arrangement only for scattered Hungarians. He indicated that Budapest would agree with this solution.

Smiljanić wished to compensate for the considerable difference in the number of ethnic Hungarians and South Slavs living in the territory of the two countries by also involving the Ruthenians of Sub-Carpathia in the population exchange, because, he explained to Bessenyei, it would be better for Hungary if there were Hungarians living alongside those borders and not Ruthenians, because of the threat of the Russians. The Hungarian ambassador suspected that it was Vladimir Radić, the orthodox bishop of Munkács and an early friend of the deputy minister, who was behind Smiljanić's idea of removing the Ruthenians. At the end of his report Bessenyei noted that Smiljanić had suggested the population exchange only to save face, and "he had already realized the necessity of territorial concessions."[37]

[37] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1940-16-722.

A few days later, on October 11, he visited the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cincar-Marković, to discuss the matter. The Minister confirmed Bessenyei's former suspicion that the Yugoslav government would most like to solve the problem with a radical population exchange, also including the Ruthenians, because, as Bessenyei interpreted his words, this way "they would get rid of all the Hungarians." But because his Hungarian counterpart was not willing to agree, they "acquiesced" in the idea of territorial concessions. They knew the territorial demands of the Hungarian government, i.e. the Bačka (Bácska) to the Ferenc Channel, the Baranya Triangle, and the Mura region, but they were only willing to negotiate about the counties of Senta (Zenta) and Bačka Topola (Topolya). However, they did not dare take the initiative in a solution to the conflict, because they were afraid that "if they gave in to the Hungarians, they would start an avalanche that could endanger the very existence of the country." Therefore, Bessenyei noted, "no concrete results should be expected [in this question] in the near future." Nevertheless, he would still continue the negotiations about these matters with the double purpose of making his Yugoslav counterparts as "familiar" with the idea of territorial compensation as possible. On the other hand they would also be prepared for the highly unlikely event that if "as a result of some unexpected external or internal affair [the Yugoslavs] could still decide on action, the soil should be prepared at least in theory, also with respect to the details, if possible." Coming to the point at issue in the negotiations with Cincar-Marković, Bessenyei pointed out that the foreign minister set out from the fact that, considering the great number of ethnic Hungarians, "either just or unjust" complaints could easily lead to a worsening of the relations between the two countries. He admitted that the Hungarian suggestion, a combination of the population exchange and the re-annexation of territories, could result in a "final settlement" of the conflict between the two countries. As a response, Bessenyei repeated Budapest's position: population exchange as the exclusive solution was unacceptable, ethnic Hungarian communities should be handed over together with their territories, and population exchange would only be acceptable in the case of scattered ethnic Hungarians. Cincar-Marković concluded the talks by saying that they considered a solution to this problem "neither timely nor urgent." Bessenyei remarked at the end of his report – with exaggerated optimism as later events showed – that the initiative should be left to the government in Belgrade in the hope that "they would not let a good opportunity slip."[38] As far as the treaty was concerned, this "good opportunity" came in December 1940, but the friendship treaty did not touch upon either the minority or the territorial questions. Yugoslavia was obviously afraid of starting the avalanche endangering the integrity of the state, while Budapest did not want to risk its only open access to the West for

[38] Ibid. 1940-16-754. At the conference of the government party in Novi Sad (Újvidék) in October 8, Cvetković emphasized that although the minority problem had to be settled "in any case," it should "by no means be considered business or an issue of trading people." HNA, K–28, Documents of the Department of Minorities of the Prime Minister's Office, 1940-L-20867.

the time being. According to the second paragraph of the Yugoslavian–Hungarian treaty of "eternal friendship", it was decided that the two countries "would negotiate on all those questions which were considered to have a possible influence on their mutual relations." That meant acceptance of the former Yugoslav position that minority conflicts should also be settled by "friendly conversations" in a friendly environment. It would not be wrong to say that Hungarian minority rights remained a matter for bargaining after the treaty, but that the bargaining grew beyond the bounds of internal politics. The two "business partners" were no longer the leaders of the Hungarian minority, with their feeble bargaining position, and the current government, but the Hungarian state, part of the Middle Powers, as a new partner in the bargain, which lent more weight to the claims of the southern Hungarians. The bounds of these claims were now determined by Hungary's foreign political interests to a much greater degree than before.

In Zagreb they were reckoning with Hungary and the Hungarian minority in a totally different constellation. Senator Juraj Krnjević, secretary general of the Croatian Peasants' Party, who had just returned from his exile in Switzerland and offered thanks for Hungary's support of him, visited László Bartók, the Hungarian consul in Zagreb, at the end of February 1940, and openly declared to him that he himself found peaceful coexistence with the Serbs hopeless and would, after the war, much rather see the country in a Croatian–Hungarian federation in which Voivodina would enjoy autonomous status. But until then, if the Hungarians in Voivodina would collaborate with the Croatians in the elections, they would guarantee at least ten to fifteen parliamentary seats for them and support of all of their "rightful" minority claims.[39]

When, right after the Serbian–Croatian compromise, Bartók visited Maček, who "spontaneously" brought up the question of the ethnic Hungarians, he made a promise "to do everything he can to improve the situation of the Hungarian minority. Otherwise he wants to attain an autonomous status for Voivodina, and his policy concerning Croatia will assert the cultural and economic rights of the Hungarian minority in any case, because they [i.e. the Hungarians] have always stood by the Croatians both in good and bad times. His ultimate plan is to get the Hungarians in Voivodina back to us by means of an amicable agreement (?)." Maček formulated this very carefully as far as the future was concerned, and only said to Bartók that "he is a supporter of the idea of establishing an intensive trade contact" with Hungary.[40] The ambassador to Belgrade, who, visiting him on the occasion of the compromise, asked him to support the cause of the Hungarian minority, was told essentially the same, but as Bessenyei noted, Macek was not as frank and friendly with him as he was with Bartók, because he considered him pro-Serb.[41]

---

[39] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1940-16-203; 240.

[40] HNA, K–74–I. Incoming cipher telegrams. Belgrade, 1939, no. 2.

[41] HNA, K–63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1939-16/7-4706. The latest research on the autonomy of Voivodina is summarized in

In the course of preparing the Hungarian–Yugoslav agreement, the question of state borders was brought up only formally, and it was not forced by the Hungarian side either.

After the ratification of the agreement, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Pál Teleki, and the Foreign Minister, László Bárdossy, received Cincar-Marković, Yugoslav Foreign Minister, in the palace of the Prime Minister on 27 February 1941. During the conversation Teleki emphasized that in the cases of Czechoslovakia and Romania the Hungarian public would not have tolerated the establishment of friendly relations with them before they had satisfied Hungary's territorial demands. "On he other hand," he continued, "almost everybody understood and accepted that we follow a different path with Yugoslavia, and that in this case we are striving for the re-establishment of mutual trust and amicable relations in order to be able to start solving the unsettled conflicts between us in a newly created positive atmosphere." Among unsettled conflicts he specified the issue of making the Danube navigable between Mohács and Bezdan and matters concerning the Hungarian minority. Passing on to the latter question, he stated with joy that "the atmosphere was generally getting better" and more and more "satisfactory" decrees were being issued, although they were not being enforced by lower-ranking authorities. He handed over to the Yugoslav foreign minister a note containing the most urgent wishes of the Hungarians, which listed the problems of Hungarian education in the first place. Teleki gave further emphasis to this note orally when he pointed out that it would be all the easier to fulfill these wishes since similar demands of the German minority had already been granted in full by Belgrade. The note handed over contained the names of all sixty-four villages where Hungarian sections of primary schools were to be established. Furthermore, fifty-four villages were also listed where, according to the Hungarian government, Hungarian school sections existed only formally, or were they had to be expanded in order to be able to receive every Hungarian pupil. The note also contained a detailed list of names of those Hungarian teachers who were teaching in South Serbia, and of those Slav teachers who spoke no Hungarian, yet who were appointed to Hungarian school sections. Cincar-Marković tried to defend himself by saying that in his opinion the schooling situation of the 150,000 South Slavs in Hungary was not particularly good either. After a short debate, however, Cincar-Marković promised to pass on the demands of the Hungarians, and he suggested that, similarly to the Danube question, the educational needs of the minorities in the two countries should also be discussed at a meeting of experts. Then the list of grievances was continued by Teleki with the real estate restrictions in the border zone, and he also mentioned that the number of Hungarian village notaries and, eventually, chief magistrates should be increased. He referred to a decree which was disadvantageous for Hungarian agricultural co-operatives because it allowed the establishment of an independent supervisory center only over three hundred co-operatives.

R. Končar, *Opozicione partije i autonomija Vojvodine 1929–1941.* [The opposition parties and the autonomy of Voivodina, 1929-1941] Belgrade 1995.

At the end of the negotiations the Yugoslav foreign minister mentioned the necessity of settling the conflict between the Greek Orthodox churches in Hungary and in Yugoslavia, which had already been addressed during the visit of Bálint Hóman, Minister of Religion and Education, in Belgrade. At this meeting they agreed that negotiations would be carried out to settle the conflicts without the direct participation of the two governments, yet with their "kind/positive support." They also agreed to establish scientific and literary institutions mutually in their respective countries.[42] The note did not address the question of re-organizing the independent Hungarian Party, a matter which had been stressed so persistently earlier, and the case of a united Hungarian cultural association was not brought up because its authorization had already been agreed to.

The work of old societies had also been resumed in this new atmosphere which showed more tolerance than ever before, in spite of all the limitations. The renowned Folk Circle (Hungarian Reading Circle) of Subotica (Szabadka) was reopened, together with the nearly sixty-year-old Hungarian Cultural Community of Banat. On 3 February 1940, the Hungarian Cultural Community of Zagreb was founded, the forerunner of which was the Catholic Hungarian students' association known as Voivodina. On 30 January 1941, a long hoped-for dream of the ethnic Hungarians came true: the united cultural organization of the Yugoslav Hungarians, the Yugoslav Hungarian Cultural Association, was authorized. According to Yugoslav accounts, the Hungarians had had eighty-three associations at the end of the 1920s, including Catholic and Reformed church organizations, farmers' and reading circles, charitable institutions, sports clubs, firemen's associations, women's societies, and so on.[43] It should be mentioned here that the Hungarian theatre, banned immediately after the arrival in of the Serbian troops, was replaced primarily by amateur groups working in the institutional frames of the Folk Circle of Subotica (Szabadka) and the Cultural Community of Banat, and later by the Maecenas Circle of Subotica. These amateur groups were supported by theatre directors from Hungary and Transylvania. Two of them deserve to be mentioned here by name, József Nádasdy, director of the National Theatre of Pécs, former director of the theatre in Subotica, and Miklós Ungvári from Transylvania. While in the early 1920s there were three Hungarian theatre companies in Czechoslovakia and eleven in Transylvania,[44] the authorization/legalization of

[42] HNA, K–64, Confidential Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1941-16-85; HNA, K–28, Documents of the Department of Minorities of the Prime Minister's Office, 1940-F-20119.

[43] Mesaroš, op. cit. 365–367. On the work of the Yugoslavian Hungarian Cultural Association see Gy. Kramer, "A Délvidéki Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség feladatai és munkája," [Goals and Work of the Hungarian Cultural Association of the Southern Region] In Z. Csuka, ed., *A visszatért Délvidék.* (The Southern Region Regained) Budapest 1941, 43–54; A. Kasaš, *Madjari u Vojvodini 1941–1946.* [Hungarians in Voivodina, 1941–1946] Novi Sad 1996, 22–23, 100–105.

[44] *Hírlap*, 8 June 1922. Sándor Földessy, who tried to impart a new impulse into Hungarian theatrical life in the mid-1920s, did not leave very pleasant memories behind, since he had to leave for Hungary quickly because of his debts. Tubán noted the following

an independent Hungarian theatre was rejected for two decades in Yugoslavia, because the authorities saw the danger of irredentism in it.

In an official communication of September 23, 1938, the Department of State Security of the Ministry of the Interior suggested that the Danubian ban, Svetislav Rajić, authorize a professional Hungarian theatre, with a line of argument generally characteristic of the authorities. According to the Department of State Security, the government should authorize the theatre "in its own, easily conceivable interest," because there were two hundred Hungarian amateur companies in Voivodina, and "in these groups a Hungarian democracy is developing, which does not exist in Hungary." "Semi-literate" young people who know only a couple hundred words of Hungarian "learn the Hungarian literary language in these companies," since, the argumentation continues, these companies are "the beams of light of Hungarian culture, existence, and activities, and who knows what happens there after the lay performances." Therefore, "the establishment of a professional theatre should be authorized, but the amateur companies should be banned. [...] This way we can get rid of about two hundred busy Hungarian nationalistic and cultural activists, put out these two hundred beams of light which are all illuminating the Hungarian sky, and we would replace the active youth by an audience that only listens, i.e. by a passive mass of people." Then the argumentation of the Head of the Department of State Security continues in a tone characteristic for the period: "Once that theatre is established, the government can ban the amateur companies in order to protect the Hungarian theatre itself, i.e. to ensure the moral and financial success of the Hungarian theatre in every Hungarian village." Although, he added in an condescending manner, that professional Hungarian theatre would also be amateurish, because there were altogether only three Hungarian professional actors in Voivodina. The ban noted in his answer that he had been urging the authorization of a professional Hungarian theatre for these reasons for ten years already, but the Ministry of the Interior had instead been supporting amateur groups so far. Finally the ban added as an important argument that he had noticed that as soon as the Hungarians had to raise financial support for the theatre, "their enthusiasm started to decline immediately."[45] After a number of unsuccessful attempts, financially supported by the Hungarian government, the first professional Hungarian theatre company was finally founded in Belgrade in January 1940, with a concession granted to a Russian immigrant called Mihajlo Mangler, and it was housed in the Russian Home. The director was Mihály Vincze, who had emigrated to Yugoslavia from Hungary. Among its members there were also amateurs from Voivodina, but the ma-

about him in one of his reports: Földessy and some of his fellow actors "were drinking and partying together with Serbian officers day after day, and they left considerable debts behind upon leaving." According to Tubán, the company "was not first class", but it was still better than the Serbian ones. HNA, K–437, Documents of Center of the Association of Social Societies, 1928-11/10-195, 618.

[45] AV, F 126, Kabinet bana, pov. br. 221/1938.

jority of the actors came from Hungary.[46] The work of the theatre was not untroubled even during its short existence, and the performances were often prohibited. On one occasion, for example, this happened because members of the company were in contact with the Bólyai Farkas Society of Hungarian university students in Belgrade, where, according to the chief police officer of Belgrade, "there appear also persons who do secret intelligence work against the Yugoslav state." The Hungarian government did not seem to have made a particular point of having a Hungarian theatre company in Belgrade either, because, for example, on the prohibition of certain performances (e.g. *John the Valiant*) Bessenyei thought that the Belgrade company "deserve[d] no stronger intervention from our side because of either its program or its performances." On the other hand, he considered it important to warn the Bólyai Farkas Society to refrain from activities which could awaken suspicion in official circles, because, as he put it, "an organization of such intellectual and material importance from the point of view of the ethnic Hungarians here should not suffer any harm whatsoever."[47]

The Hungarian Cultural Community of Zagreb set as its goal the moral and religious education of the Hungarians and the youth in Croatia, the preservation of the Hungarian language, folk customs, and national characteristics, as well as "the observance of civic duties and of obligations towards the Croatian nation." As president they appointed Sándor Molnár, a craftsman from Zagreb.

The Yugoslav (or Southern) Hungarian Cultural Association comprised and co-ordinated all cultural, youth, university, college, agricultural, and other Hungarian societies and associations. Its authorization also meant, as mentioned above, that a united Hungarian organization, which had been missing since the proclamation of the dictatorship, was brought about not in the form of a political party, but as a cultural association, which reflected the compromise between Belgrade and Budapest. The Yugoslavian Hungarian Cultural Association regarded the meeting of 24 November 1940 in Novi Sad (Újvidék) as its statutory founding meeting, but, it was not officially authorized until 30 January 1941 (or February 2, according to other sources), i.e. after the signing of the treaty of eternal friendship. As president they elected Gyula Kramer, a tradesman from Novi Sad (Újvidék), who had kept out of earlier battles of party politics. According to a summary published by him after the re-annexation, in the period of approximately six weeks from the foundation of the association to the marching in of the Hungarian troops the number of their members rose to 150,000, which means practically that every adult Hungarian of the southern region became a member of the Hungarian Cultural Association. There were organizing committees in one hundred and forty-nine towns and villages, and one hundred and fifty-one different societies, organizations, sports clubs, etc. declared their allegiance to the association. In accordance with the spirit of the age, the statutes set as their goal

[46] HNA, K–28, Documents of the Department of Minorities of the Prime Minister's Office, 1940-F-15564.

[47] HNA, K–63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1940-16/7-1237. The Bólyai Farkas Society was founded in 1933.

to preserve the moral, spiritual, social, physical, and cultural characteristics of the Hungarians and to achieve their financial and social welfare on a Christian and national basis, while making the ethnic Hungarians fulfill their duties as citizens of the Yugoslav Kingdom as well. When Leo Deák had outlined the duties of a united Hungarian Cultural Society in an exclusive circle in the difficult years of the early 1930s after the establishment of the royal dictatorship, he had done so to the spirit of membership of a universal Hungarian culture.[48]

The growing tolerance of the authorities from the fall of 1940 onwards was undoubtedly elicited by fear, and was thus confused, desperate, and insincere. There was no trace of a reappraisal of Belgrade's views held since 1918: minorities, thus also the Hungarian minority, were still considered to weaken the state and to be forces of disintegration, and therefore the main goal should be to control them primarily by means of state power. While gradual worsening of the international political situation for Yugoslavia, forced the government to act more positively towards minorities, the old traditions of the administration were still dominant in the territories inhabited by the Hungarians.

In a report from late November 1940, for example, the counselor at the embassy in Belgrade wrote about the detention of more than one hundred Hungarians from Bačka (Bácska), who were arrested for singing a song called "The March of Bačka," which was considered to be irredentist.[49]

European political events influenced not only the international situation and domestic politics of the two countries, of course, but also the disposition of the people. The euphoric effects of the territorial re-annexations are reflected in the number of suicides in Hungary which dropped from 29.3 to 23.6 per 100,000 inhabitants within one year, between 1938 and 1939. Such a decrease had been unprecedented.[50] Although we do not have any comparable statistics from the southern regions, a report by Henrik Werth, Chief of the General Staff, to the foreign minister in mid-October 1940 relates that in the south "there is a strong revisionist tone/atmosphere. Textiles are being purchased for national flags in great quantities, not only in Hungarian stores, but also in Serbian ones. Both men and women are having Hungarian national costumes made. Everybody is acting as if it were only a question of days until the Hungarian Army marches in."[51] And the marching in did, indeed, ensue, not within days, but in a few months.

---

[48] HNA, K–28, Documents of the Department of Minorities of the Prime Minister's Office, 1933-R-11000. Kramer, op. cit., 43–45.

[49] HNA, K–63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1940-16/7-6656.

[50] I. Romsics, *Magyarország története a XX. században.* [The History of Hungary in the Twentieth Century] Budapest 1999, 246–247.

[51] HNA, K–63, Documents of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1940-16/7-5775.