



# Aspects of the Identity of Hungarians in Vojvodina: Past and Present

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## ABSTRACT

The Hungarian identity in Vojvodina is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, social, political, and geographical factors. Originating in the late 19th century, it was strongly connected to Hungarian nationalism and culture, supported by social organizations rooted in the Enlightenment ideals. The Treaty of Trianon disrupted this, causing loss of Hungarian citizenship and forcing a shift toward a regional identity rooted in Vojvodina while retaining Hungarian cultural elements. During Yugoslav rule, political pressures and assimilation weakened Hungarian cultural identity, although regional identity among Hungarians strengthened. Post-1990s regime changes and the breakup of Yugoslavia saw the Hungarian minority regain cultural autonomy, reinforced by religious revival, support from Hungary, and policies favoring simplified naturalization. Despite ongoing challenges such as economic difficulties, population decline, and migration, Hungarian identity in Vojvodina remains dynamic, characterized by a layered sense of belonging that balances national, regional, and transnational influences amid broader European integration processes. This evolution reflects how ethnic identity adapts to shifting political landscapes and cultural contexts over time.

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## Introduction

National identities are among the most significant social identities. The Hungarian identity in Vojvodina is a relatively rapidly fluctuating category with changing internal content, which is historically, socially, and politically defined (Čudić, 2017, p. 33). In addition, we can add that it also refers to the multifaceted complexity of life there (Bakos, 2017, p. 15). Part of this complexity is due to local conditions and geographical factors, since the “living space of ‘Hungarians in Vojvodina’ is divided into various microcosms of varying sizes, and the cultural, political, and linguistic microclimates of these microcosms are far from uniform” (Čudić, 2017, p. 39). In the following, we will first briefly discuss certain historical aspects of all this, and then we will review the recent past.

## The Era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire

The origins of Hungarian identity in Vojvodina date back to the end of the 19th century. By this time, a certain level of Délvidék (Lower Hungary)-consciousness had formed among specific social groups in the region. The late arrival of Hungarians in the area (during the reign of Maria Theresa) was the main reasons why they were unable to develop a regional identity similar to that observed in Transylvania, or to create a significant bourgeoisie like the one which characterized the region referred to as Felvidék (Upper Hungary) in Hungarian usage after 1918.

Social organizations that played a role in the development of national institutions, such as reading circles, civic casinos, theater groups, farmers’ circles, literary and local history societies, contributed greatly to the creation of a Délvidék-consciousness. The precursors of the first civic associations in what is now Vojvodina date back to the 19th century, when a strong peasant middle class and rural industry enabled the emergence of associations with thousands of members in the “large villages” characteristic of the region (Bethke, 2009, p. 307).

The period following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867 was an era of bourgeois transformation, during which associations played a certain homogenizing role, manifested in the elimination of class isolation (Fejős, 2020, p. 105). The process of bourgeoisification also had counterproductive effects, as it led to the creation of communities segregated on the basis of social and economic status (Pejin, 2000, p. 346).

The growing bourgeois society played a major role in the operation of social associations, in whose self-image cultural mission and cultural work became central. This was strongly influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, namely the belief in the need to improve society, and in this context, they were responsible for promoting and cultivating “high culture” at the local level (Glässer–Zima, 2013, p. 263, 269–270). Furthermore, charitable activity, as an attribute befitting a respectable citizen, was seen as a duty not only by contemporary associations founded for “humanistic” purposes, but also by social associations (Pejin, p. 2000, 360). Charity was also linked to the values of the bourgeoisie.

In the Délvidék, social associations considered public education to be their primary goal, and literary events served as one of the means to achieve this (Pejin, 2000, p. 360). The Bács-Bodrog County Literary Society (Bács-Bodrog Vármegyei Irodalmi Társaság), founded in 1906, which held readings and traveling meetings, contributed to the strengthening of “délvidéki” Hungarian consciousness in the following way. It sought to be a cultural institution by developing the intellectual life of the county and its towns (Sombor, Novi Sad, Subotica, Senta, Baja), promoting national public education, enlivening Hungarian social life, and cultivating and supporting Hungarian literature. It was headed by Károly Vértesi. The members sought to catch up in terms of cultural conditions (Mák, 2020, p. 607, 609, 612).

The cultural role and influence of social associations can be seen in the cultivation of regional values and the preservation of identity. In addition, they passed on traditions and behavioral patterns, encouraged civil society self-organization, and mediated culture. Last but not least, their value-creating work provided a firm foundation for future generations, from which strength could be drawn even after 1920 (Fejős, 2015, p. 22–33).

At the same time, there was no ethnocultural organisation of the Hungarian community. The Hungarian school, press and various social associations were already established institutions for them. During this period, the cultural and historical identity of the Hungarians in the region strengthened, with the community’s language, cultural relations, and traditions playing a decisive role.

## The Interwar Period

Although a regional Hungarian identity had already formed in the Délvidék before 1920, it was only after the Trianon peace treaty that we can speak of a Vojvodina Hungarian identity; however, at that time, the Hungarians preferred to use the term “délvidéki.” Significant changes took place

in the self-image of the Hungarian middle-class, which had previously been the titular national group but had now become a minority.

After World War I, the Hungarian community in Yugoslavia broke away from the process of building a unified Hungarian nation with a developed sense of identity and institutionalism; the latter became multidimensional. Under the changed conditions, namely within the framework of Serbian Hungarian ethnopolitical organization, it took time for the community, which defined itself as a separate society, to integrate into minority conditions (Herceg, 1979, p. 291). It found it difficult to adapt to the new framework (Димић, 2020, p. 709), which it considered temporary, and this was further hampered by the fact that its thinking continued to be dominated by the mentality characteristic of the majority society.

The central element of their identity was the strengthening and preservation of the national consciousness of the Hungarians in Vojvodina: ethno-cultural self-organization began, which manifested itself in several subsystems of minority society (political, economic, cultural, and civil society/civil organizations). However, these organizations were constantly undermined by the Yugoslav state authorities. Between the two world wars, the vast majority of Hungarian association leaders opposed the Yugoslav ethnopolitical regime, which pursued a hegemonic strategy.

The population living in the northern parts of the Danube Banovina had not shown any particular sensitivity to social movements or daily politics in the preceding decades (Kende, 1940, p. 10). The local writer, Ferenc Kende considered the continued existence of the so-called “county house spirit” after the war to be a heavy legacy, by which he meant the moral and intellectual influence of the former administrative elite. Between the two world wars, the weakened Hungarian middle class became aware of its minority status. During this period, the central problem of minority existence was a question of mindset, as Hungarian society continued to think of itself as the majority society. Kende saw the renewal of the spirit as the only way forward. Integration into minority conditions was difficult. At the same time, the cohesive spirit and desire for unity among the Hungarian population in the villages provided fertile ground for the formation of organizations; the activities of these associations were limited to the local level (Kende, 1940, p. 10–20).

A key part of the institutionalization process during this

period was the growing activism within the minority civil organizations, which was closely linked to the fact that many associations took on an ethnic “counter-public” character (Bethke, 2009, p. 307). The cultivation of Hungarian culture through associations contributed to ensuring ethnic recruitment. The Hungarian middle class and elite had an interest in this, and they continued to play a major role in the operation and leadership of civil organizations. Reading their correspondence and petitions gives us a glimpse into the changed civic self-image of the period.

In a letter written by András Felsőhegyi (August 21, 1925), a lawyer from Senta, to Imre Várady, a prominent Hungarian lawyer, politician, and community leader who represented Hungarian interests within the broader Yugoslav political system, we read the following: “Time ... imperatively compels us to organize ourselves in the cultural sphere, now that political organization has failed.” He wanted to establish a branch of the Hungarian Cultural Association of Banat (Bánáti Magyar Közművelődési Egyesület) in Zenta, and therefore sought advice from Várady. “We would probably never be able to establish a cultural association on our own. It could be done, but there is no one to lead the movement, and it would be difficult to form a board of officials. ... The issue became relevant for us because there is a completely poor boy here who has just graduated from high school, and we would like to send him to the University of Zagreb with the money we have collected.”

Reading the request for assistance (July 24, 1929) which a leading Szabadka lawyer involved in organising Hungarian civic life in Vojvodina, Ödön Nagy, sent to Hungarian government circles, the need to accumulate various nation-preserving functions becomes apparent: “In every sector of public life, I have sought to unite and utilize every ounce of Hungarian strength for our own benefit, so that through purposeful and systematic work [...] to ease the fate of the Hungarian people here, to preserve our national identity, our Hungarian consciousness, our language, our culture, our ancient traditions, our national characteristics, and to secure the future of the Hungarian people.” At the same time, he also stated that “it was difficult to shake the Hungarian people out of their apathetic calm, and even today we do not all live as a minority.”

Public opinion and publicity played a significant role in shaping Hungarian identity in Vojvodina. Kende, a local Hungarian writer, expressed this requirement in his letter to Várady and Strelitzky, a Hungarian lawyer, journalist, and political activist in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (May 16, 1933): “From the perspective of the Hungarian minority, I

consider it very important that every event that serves the Hungarian minority receive adequate press coverage. Our minority press is, so to speak, our only serious means of keeping spirits alive” (Sajti, 2016, p. 293–295).

The above sources also highlight the factors that the middle class considered necessary for maintaining Hungarian identity. Parallel to the intellectual, political, and economic erosion of the Hungarian middle class between 1918 and 1927, public leaders built up a network of contacts and information. They sought to ensure the survival of Hungarian consciousness through education, culture, and ethnic recruitment. They considered it most expedient to gain a foothold in as many social subsystems as possible, since they attributed a nation-building vocation to these (cultural, charitable, economic, and other activities). In this context, when the institutional political representation of minority interests became impossible (January 1929), former Hungarian Party politicians became dominant players in the cultural sphere in order to remain in contact with the Hungarian masses and maintain their influence over them. The dictatorship of January 6, after significantly restricting minority cultural life in particular, also shook it up (Janjetović, 2005, p. 298–299). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the press and strong public opinion played a significant role in shaping and preserving identity.

The Yugoslav authorities assessed the situation in the mid-1930s as one in which the intellectual defense strategy of the Hungarian community to avoid assimilation had strengthened considerably. In fact, the central government believed that a significant portion of the Hungarian population did not consider it necessary to learn the official language at that time (Димић, 2020, p. 726).

### Changes in the Late 1930'-s

By the second half of the 1930s, profound changes were unfolding within the Hungarian community's organizational efforts in Yugoslavia, culminating in the first steps toward establishing the Hungarian literature in Vojvodina. This was very important because previously the region's literary attention had been focused mainly on Budapest or Szeged, and there was

little mention of *local colors* (Bori, 1999, p. 69). The initiative is linked to the name of Kornél Szenteleky, one of the most influential literary and cultural figures of the Hungarian minority in interwar Vojvodina and the cultural-intellectual pole of Hungarian minority leadership, who set himself the goal of creating a typical lyrical representation of the landscape of Vojvodina and establishing the region as a literary theme, which also had an impact on Hungarian identity. He also launched a magazine called *Kalangya*. His death in 1933 stopped him from continuing his work, but his colleagues established the first Hungarian literary society in Yugoslavia. This was banned by the Yugoslav authorities in 1934, (Pastyik, 2012, p. 50–60) but at the end of 1937 the Szenteleky Literary and Artistic Society (Szenteleky Irodalmi és Művészeti Társaság) was founded in Novi Sad, which aimed to bring enlightenment to the Hungarian masses. *Kalangya* became the centre of the search for Hungarian identity in Vojvodina, where it sought to incorporate regional values and local colours (*couleur locale*) into the Hungarian self-interpretation of Vojvodina. Despite all their idealism, their concepts proved to be more realistic than the idea that the historical Hungarian state would be restored through peaceful revision with the help of the great powers. Therefore, it was very important to renew the positions of the local Hungarian identity politics (Szarka, 2010, p. 64).

In 1934 the Hungarian Cultural Association in Petrovgrad<sup>1</sup> with all its branches was banned, which had previously played a leading role (Németh-Várady, 2022). In 1936 series of newly established and legally independent Hungarian cultural associations established. The organizational centre was no longer located in Petrovgrad, but shifted to Novi Sad, where Ferenc Kende carried out extensive organizational work through the newspaper *Reggeli Újság*, using of the widespread Hungarian press in Yugoslavia,<sup>2</sup> while also providing support to *Kalangya* (Bárdi, 2012). The other centre was Sombor, where the activities of Leó Deák and his nephew, Imre Deák, both key civic organisers of the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, contributed to the establishment of twenty-five Hungarian associations across Western Bačka, Srem, and Baranya (Csőke, 2025). These associations not only played a role in the preservation of Hungarian cultural values but also served as important public forums. Moreover, since the Hungarian Party had been banned in 1929, they functioned as instruments of electoral mobilization. By contrast, in that time the long-established *Népkör* in Subotica was

<sup>1</sup> Today: Zrenjanin. In Hungarian: Nagybecskerek. In Serbian, it was known as Veliki Bečkerek until 1935, Petrovgrad between 1935 and 1941, and Zrenjanin after 1946.

<sup>2</sup> At the end of the 1930's, the Hungarian community in Vojvodina had four daily newspapers: *Reggeli Újság* in Novi Sad, *Napló* in Subotica, *Friss Hírek* in Sombor, and *Híradó* Petrovgrad, with a total circulation of 42,000 copies per day.

hindered by internal tensions.

In addition to their educational mission, these associations ensured the minimum necessary conditions for the preservation of Hungarian identity and traditions. Nevertheless, their activities remained confined to the local level and did not allow for broader social or political planning. At the centre of these organizational efforts stood the local bourgeoisie, which is why their activities proved more effective in towns than in the villages. But István Tóth-Bagi summarised: “Every association is nothing more than a gathering of a few more or less energetic individuals, around whom others assemble with indifference. They support the association, so to speak, out of a sense of official duty –because, after all, they are Hungarians – yet they are not animated by any particular enthusiasm or zeal. Therefore, we may say that the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia lives in a state of complete disorganization and fragmentation” (Tóth-Bagi, 1994, p. 490).

Despite numerous difficulties, the ethnocultural organization of the Hungarian community in Yugoslavia, the establishment of its institutions, and its national enthusiasm made significant progress during the 1930s, in which the active stance taken by minority leaders played a role, alongside Hungary’s success in revising its borders. The Territorial Command of the First Army in Yugoslavia was well aware of this and attributed a prominent role in this development to Hungarian cultural associations, which it considered to be very agile in terms of Hungarian propaganda and the preservation of national consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

### **1941–1945: The Hungarian Cultural Alliance and the Annexation of Bačka**

From the beginning,<sup>4</sup> the aim of the Hungarian community in Yugoslavia was to establish an umbrella organization that, instead of pursuing political objectives, would direct the cultural and economic organization of the Hungarian community, just as the German Kulturbund. However, this could not be realized until February 1941, as the Yugoslav authorities had consistently rejected such demands. This intransigence had three principal causes.

First, in the Banovina of Croatia, which had already

possessed a degree of autonomy, a Hungarian umbrella organization (Horvátországi Magyar Közművelődési Közösség) was established. This created the risk that the Hungarian elite who traditionally gravitated toward Belgrade might begin to orient themselves toward Zagreb, and thus even the Belgrade government found it necessary to make concessions. The second, and perhaps more significant factor, was the intensifying Yugoslav–Hungarian rapprochement, which reached its culmination in December 1940. The third factor was the threatening shadow of the German Reich, which made it necessary solve the interior problems of the country (Sajti 2004, p. 105–106).

As a result, the authorities finally authorized the establishment of the Hungarian Cultural Alliance of Yugoslavia (Jugoszláviai Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség), which represented the apex of ethnocultural organization among Hungarians in the country. Like the German Kulturbund, the Hungarian association was also totalitarian in the sense that it wanted to incorporate all Hungarians in Yugoslavia. The commitment and mobilization capacity of the Hungarian community is demonstrated by the fact that within two months 148 Hungarian associations joined the new organization, local branches were created in 150 villages, and by the end of March the membership had reached 150,000 (Krámer, 1941 p. 45), meaning that two-fifths of the Hungarian population in Vojvodina became affiliated with the new Alliance. It is important to emphasize that the local Hungarian elite played an active role in organizing the local branches. They regarded this association as a key instrument for strengthening minority identity and for ensuring the long-term cultural cohesion of the community.

However, the events of the Second World War had a profound impact on these organizational efforts, and with the collapse of Yugoslavia in April 1941, the institutionalizing Hungarian community of Vojvodina was divided into three parts. The Hungarians of the Banat remained within Serbia, where German military administration was introduced; the Hungarians of Srem became part of the Independent State of Croatia, whereas Bačka was occupied by the Hungarian army. As a result, the possibilities for organized cultural activity were drastically reduced, and these communities could operate only on a strictly local level.

In contrast to the Hungarians of Banat and Srem, however, the Hungarians of Bačka suddenly found themselves

<sup>3</sup> Vojni Arhiv (VA), Popisnik 17. k. 94. f. 22. The First Army Territorial Command to the Chief of Staff, Intelligence Division. (January 30, 1939)

<sup>4</sup> Especially after the ban of the Hungarian Party in 1929.

transformed from a minority into a majority nation. The cultural alliance changed its name from Yugoslav to “Délvidéki Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség” (DKMSZ, “délvidéki” meaning southern part of Hungary after 1918), symbolizing its commitment to representing the interests not only of the Hungarians of Bačka but also of those who had not been reincorporated into Hungary. Indeed, this was reflected in its activities: the Alliance assumed responsibility for all Hungarians living in the southern regions. It organized the resettlement of the Hungarians living in Bosnia to Bačka; its sister organization, the Banat Hungarian Cultural Alliance (Bánáti Magyar Közművelődési Szövetség) gained the membership of 98% of the local Hungarian population (Várady–Németh, 2023, pp. 135–147) and openly opposed attempts to conscript individuals of Hungarian nationality who were registered as “Germans” into the German army. In addition, the organization cultivated close contacts with, and actively supported, the Hungarian communities living in Croatia.

In connection with the territorial changes, one can initially observe a strengthening of local attachment, although analyzing this phenomenon is difficult, given that we are considering a mere three-and-a-half-year span between April 1941 and October 1944. Nevertheless, the sources clearly reveal the existence of a conflict between the Hungarians of Bačka and people arriving from Hungary, a tension that manifested primarily in matters of employment.

Following the reannexation, a considerable number of workers and officials arrived in Bačka,<sup>5</sup> and they displaced the largely unskilled local Hungarian workforce<sup>6</sup> from administrative and governmental positions. Even among manual labourers, those employed from Hungary often enjoyed a better status than the locals.<sup>7</sup> Yet the local Hungarian Cultural Alliance (DMKSZ) firmly defended the interests of the Bačka Hungarians, emphasizing that they possessed intimate knowledge of the region’s conditions and that the organization of the territory could not be entrusted solely to any institution of the mother country.

The Alliance actively defended its interests and issued evaluations and recommendations concerning

applicants for various positions. In addition, it developed a network of popular education courses, which played a crucial role in shaping local identity. The organization held that the state and its institutions were insufficient to remedy the problems that had emerged during the Yugoslav Kingdom; thus, it assumed responsibility for the nation-building mission. The scale of these efforts is evident from the numbers: in 1941 alone, around thousand popular education lectures were organized, attracting nearly 60,000 participants (Tolnay, 1943). The courses aimed not only at national education but also at teaching Hungarian literacy, supplementing elementary-school knowledge, providing instruction in infant care, and broadening agricultural expertise. In the courses on national culture and civic life, emphasis was placed on the teaching of Hungarian national history, while in the sections devoted to local studies, substantial attention was given to the knowledge of one’s native region. Their goal was the strengthening of Hungarian identity and the cultivation of a purposeful, strong, morally Christian, patriotic, and socially conscious generation (Krámer, 1941).

This meant that the Hungarian Jewish community, who actively participated in minority life between the two World Wars, was not considered subject to enlistment. This applied to those Jews who primarily spoke Hungarian and whose cultural and national identity was closely tied to the Hungarian community (Margittai, 2023, p. 39).

A similar boundary-marking process occurred in the autumn of 1941, when *Kalangya*, which had played such a significant cultural role, faced the threat of closure. In response, a new journal, *Délvidéki Szemle*, was launched from Szeged, promoting a merger of the two periodicals and asserting Szeged’s claim to serve as the cultural centre of the southern territories (Délvidék). In reaction, the writers and poets of Bačka had a meeting in October 1941 and resolved to preserve *Kalangya*. At the meeting, Leó Deák, the head of the Hungarians in Bačka stated that “Bačka belongs to the people of Bačka,”<sup>8</sup> firmly rejecting the overtures from Szeged. Another participant, Tibor Czako, declared that “Szeged’s initiative may be supported from outside, but there is a flame, a fire in Bačka, which cannot be removed from Subotica, Sombor, or Novi Sad. It sprang from this soil, and it belongs here. We, the people

<sup>5</sup> A large part of the workforce consisted mostly of civil servants, but most of the police officers, gendarmes, and teachers also came from Hungary.

<sup>6</sup> Since the Yugoslav authorities disadvantaged the Hungarian officials, there were not enough expert people from Bačka to administer the territory.

<sup>7</sup> According to a police report, at the Verbász sugar factory the newly appointed workers from Hungary earned three times as much as the people from Bačka who had been working there for years (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára K149. Belügyminiszter rezervált iratai, 1941-6. tétel 651 f 2/1941-6-18585

<sup>8</sup> *Délvidéki Magyarság*, 15<sup>th</sup> of October, 1941.

of Bačka, wish to keep for ourselves what we have created, what has sprung from our hearts and souls.”<sup>9</sup> The financially precarious *Kalangya* was ultimately saved through the support of the DMKSZ. The journal’s aim was to promote regionalism, emphasizing the shared destiny of Hungarians and Serbs. It supported leading figures of Serbian literature, and through translations it familiarized its readership with Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian authors as well (Bori, 1999, p. 100).

By contrast, the political elite of Bačka (also Leó Deák) argued that no distinct “Délvidék identity” (soul) existed and that there is no difference between the Hungarians from Bačka and from Hungary.<sup>10</sup> These debates emerged in parallel with broader discussions taking place in other territories returned to Hungary, where scholars and public figures sought to define what distinguished the identities (soul) of Transylvania and Felvidék (Upper Hungary, in the Hungarian usage after 1918). The former was associated with Transylvania’s rich cultural and historical heritage, while the latter was linked to a tradition of social sensitivity—views that gradually lost their force over time.

The national policy in Budapest also aimed to increase the number of Hungarians living in Bačka through offices, as they were only a relative majority in the area. Ányos Balogh, described the Hungarians arriving in Bačka being “the leaven that wants to fill the gaps left by twenty years of division with its body and soul, and breathe new life into the withering body, and to infuse the mother’s blood so that healthy blood circulation flows from the trunk to the revived limbs” (Balogh 1943, p. 358). He stated that the existing conflicts were still fresh, but that time would eventually lead to a balance between the two groups, on the one hand through the acquisition of the necessary professional knowledge and experience, and on the other hand, through immersion in the particular atmosphere. He could have been right. In the summer of 1944, 40% of the leading members of the DMKSZ, which had particular interests, were from Hungary, and 20% of the presidents of the 170 branch associations also came from that area. Moreover, there were significant signs in the press that the intensity of territorial identity was declining and that the effects of 20 years of Yugoslav rule were diminishing. It is interesting to note how often the term “Bácskaiak” (people from Bačka) appears in the two largest Bácska newspapers, the *Reggeli Újság* in Novi Sad and the *Délvidéki Magyarság* in Subotica. In *Reggeli*

*Újság*, it appeared 59 times in 1941, 20 times in 1942, 5 times in 1943, and 3 times in 1944. A similar trend can be observed in *Délvidéki Magyarság*, where the term appeared 25 times in 1941, 39 times in 1942, 4 times in 1943, and 6 times in 1944.

However, everything changed in October 1944. The invading Soviet troops and Yugoslav partisans carried out a bloody massacre among the Hungarian population living in Vojvodina. Many innocent victims were killed, but these attacks mainly targeted individuals involved in the Hungarian administration (Sajti, 2023, pp. 187–201). The entire leadership of the DMKSZ was destroyed or fled. The leaders of local Hungarian organizations were also expelled or executed for collaboration. Thus, more than 20 years of organizing fell victim, as after 1945, the Hungarian bourgeoisie lost its role in shaping identity.

### The Socialist Era 1945 – 1990s

The establishment of socialist Yugoslavia in 1945 resulted in a complex dialectic of repression and cautious inclusion. In the immediate postwar period, Hungarian communities underwent retaliatory purges. However, more favourable times came under the “Yugoslav version of socialism” (Göncz–Vörös, 2005, p. 194), during which the government was determined to maintain a fragile ethnic balance. As Göncz and Vörös (2005, p. 194) point out, “[t]he second Yugoslavia acted as a state unifying different peoples, cultures, and languages, as it was in the ruling party’s interest to maintain the balance through cultural pluralism. At the same time it was the state’s responsibility to recognize and address wrongs committed against ethnic groups, but minorities were forbidden to organize themselves on an ethnic basis. Economic, cultural, and linguistic equality was proclaimed by the Communist Party at congresses, documents declaring equal rights were drawn up to emphasize it.”

During the initial postwar years, the situation appeared relatively reassuring, and by the 1950s a Hungarian network of cultural institutions had taken shape in Vojvodina, often described as being heavily oriented toward literature. The Hungarian Cultural Association of Vojvodina was founded in 1945 and the Communist Party launched a daily paper called *Magyar Szó*. In addition, over 18,000 landless Hungarian families were granted land and sizeable numbers of Hungarians gained political positions (Hornják, 2005, p. 408). Hungarian minority schools were allowed to open but only by the new communist regime, not by minority bodies or support from the parent country

<sup>9</sup> *Délvidéki Magyarság*, 15<sup>th</sup> of October, 1941.

<sup>10</sup> *Új Nép*, 6<sup>th</sup> of June, 1942.

(Fedinec, 2005, p. 382). Unfortunately, by this time, most Hungarian teachers were deported or fled the country, leaving minority education in the hands of untrained substitute teachers. It is unsurprising that this resulted in a serious decline in the number of pupils attending Hungarian-taught primary schools, and even in the middle school system, Hungarian and Serbo-Croat-taught schools were combined into school centres in 1956, under the “fraternity – unity” slogan. As Fedinec (2005, p. 383) stresses, one major development in higher education was the foundation of the Novi Sad University and shortly afterwards, of the Hungarian faculty in 1959 and the Institute for Hungarian Studies in 1968, which in 1980 grew into the Department of Hungarian Language and Literature. A secondary school for teacher-training in Hungarian began operating in 1956 and rose to college level in 1973. But as Hornyák (2005, p. 410) points out, “the most prestigious Hungarian institutions were based in Novi Sad, which isolated Hungarians who worked in them from the main bloc of Hungarian settlement to the far north.”

Despite the benefits of the new “national” policy of Tito’s Yugoslavia that large numbers of individual Hungarians enjoyed, the centralist structure of the communist system precluded any form of collective political organization or interest representation on the part of the Hungarian (or any other) minority. Additionally, the Hungarian elite was by this time virtually non-existent in Vojvodina and so even if the Communist Party had not held a monopoly over political power and activity, it is questionable whether any minority institutions would have been founded. The lack of institutional control over their own lives was further exacerbated by the collectivization policies of the communist regime, which deprived Hungarians of their church property and, consequently, of the means to sustain their social activities (Hornyák, 2005, p. 409). The Hungarian Cultural Association of Vojvodina, established in 1945 in Subotica as an umbrella organization encompassing all spheres of cultural life, was merged in 1948 with the Vojvodina Public Education Association. This merger not only relegated the Hungarian Cultural Association to the status of a mere department within a larger structure but also entailed its relocation from Subotica to Novi Sad, thereby severing its connection with its mass base. A similar trajectory characterized the development of Hungarian drama during this period. Thus, the Yugoslav government’s introduction of a new cultural policy premised on the idea that culture should be developed

collectively rather than in isolation explicitly sought to curb pronounced Hungarian tendencies by merging Hungarian, other minority, and Serbian cultural associations into unified structures intended to promote a shared cultural life. In practice, however, such unification frequently led to the decline of minority associations, as the majority’s cultural perspectives came to dominate under the banner of equality.

The Yugoslav ideology, which promoted a shared cultural life, a supra-ethnic civic identity at the expense of ethnic particularism, also resulted in many Hungarians reorienting their cultural-historical Hungarian identity toward the broader Yugoslav civic framework (Munta et al., 2022; Nikolić, 2020; Kukić, 2023). Urbanization and demographic change only reinforced these trends. According to census data (Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, 2022), the Hungarian share of Vojvodina’s population declined from 25.6% in 1948 to 23.9% in 1961 and to 18.9% in 1981 due to several factors, the most significant among which were increasing intermarriage, emigration, and a growing tendency to embrace the “Yugoslav” identity, especially in multiethnic urban environments (Palusek, 2024). “There was willingness among most of the Vojvodina Hungarian intellectual elite to sacrifice the traditional Hungarian concept of nation to such Yugoslavism”, Hornyák claims (2005, p. 413). But when its members who held high posts in the province’s political and institutional leadership started criticizing the negative aspects of the society, authorities banned all minority initiatives and institutions. The state’s suppression of overt nationalism and resource constraints on minority-language institutions and minority associations undermined the cultural-historical identity of minorities and accelerated their linguistic and cultural assimilation into the majority society (Göncz-Vörös, 2005).

Nevertheless, the socialist era saw the consolidation of a distinct regional identity among Vojvodinian Hungarians. Residents often identified more strongly with their locale—their town or village, local customs, dialect, and traditions—than with the imagined Hungarian nation-state (Göncz 2000; Roginer, 2016; Kovacs Rac & Halupka-Rešetar, 2018). Community-level cultural memory was perpetuated through folklore, local intellectual legacies, and grassroots institutions, maintaining a measure of continuity despite broader assimilationist and nationalist pressures (Ózer, 2008).

In the period of socialist federalism, the centralized economic authority of Belgrade weakened. Ultimately, with the new constitution adopted in 1974, the federal units, including Vojvodina, were granted a high degree of

autonomy, which created a regional/national pluralism instead of an ideological/political one (Bottoni–Novák, 2011, p. 335) and which also extended to education and culture and permitted minorities to maintain their own educational and cultural institutions (Bjelica, 2020; Tolvaišis, 2012). By the 1974 constitution, minority provincial and local management of education were given greater powers, e.g. through the Vojvodina Education Council. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s, there was mounting turbulence and deep economic crisis in Yugoslavia, as well as a revived Serbian nationalism, which steadily eroded the language and cultural rights this constitution had granted to the minorities. The year 1983 marked the disbanding of the board of *Új Symposion*, a highly influential Hungarian progressive periodical. The “yoghurt revolution”, carried out by Slobodan Milošević’s regime in 1988, put an end to the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina this all led to expressions of regional Hungarian identity evolving into explicit political demands. The founding of the first institution to represent Hungarian minority interests, the Democratic Community of Vojvodinian Hungarians (VMDK) in 1989 marked a watershed, with the organization advocating for territorial and personal autonomy and self-government for Hungarian-majority areas (Petsinis, 2008; Meier, 1995).

### Since the Regime Change (1990)

The 1990s witnessed the political transformation and dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia. The formerly nominal minorities became real ones yet again and this placed the Hungarian minority of Vojvodina in a profoundly altered national context. This period was initially characterized by a marked hostility from the emergent Serbian political elite, mirroring the broader ethnic tensions and exclusions that defined Serbian society in the immediate post-socialist era (Petsinis, 2008; Hagan, 2009). By necessity, ethnic Hungarians in the province assumed citizenship of the successor Serbian state and became participants in its new political and civic framework. Vojvodina’s autonomy was revoked under Slobodan Milošević and the regime proceeded with ‘nationalizing’ policies (Petsinis, 2008, pp. 265-266), depriving minorities of their extensive educational, cultural and linguistic rights (Korhecz, 1998; Roginer, 2016, p. 160). This, coupled with the process of ‘conscious assimilation’ among the minorities themselves and discrepancies between the federal and the republican provisions on national minorities and their right to establish minority educational institutions

with a general teaching profile led to a serious decline in the number of students attending classes in minority languages in Vojvodina (see also Guzina, 2000) and ultimately, to continued demographic decline and significant emigration of the Hungarian minority (Petsinis, 2008). The number of Hungarians in Vojvodina in 1991-2002 fell by 14.5%, reducing the share of Hungarians in Vojvodina from 16.9% to 14.3%.

Under such pressures, religious revival emerged as a core axis for the civic endurance of Vojvodina Hungarians. Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations not only provided frameworks of communal belonging but were instrumental in preserving linguistic continuity and collective memory. As Ilić (2010) demonstrates, these religious institutions enabled ethnic Hungarians to maintain a symbolic “middle ground” between cultural assimilation and social isolation, cultivating Hungarian-language use and transmitting traditions across generational lines (see also Göncz–Vörös, 2005; Máté-Tóth et al., 2020).

A distinct shift occurred from roughly 2014 onward, when a rapprochement between Serbia and Hungary led to unprecedented cross-border governmental cooperation. The Hungarian government launched a series of political, economic, and cultural initiatives aimed at supporting Hungarian communities in the Carpathian Basin, including Vojvodina. Between its launch in 2015 and 2020, it distributed over €248 million in non-refundable subsidies, directly benefiting nearly 14,000 applicants and indirectly impacting an estimated 50,000 people through reinforcing local Hungarian institutions and improving living conditions within the community (Gabrić-Molnar–Kovács, 2020; Palusek, 2024). By this time, Hungary had revised its nationality law and introduced simplified naturalisation for ethnic Hungarians residing abroad, substantially expanding opportunities for Vojvodina’s Hungarians to acquire Hungarian (and thus EU) citizenship. This had profound implications for identity formation in Vojvodina: while some Vojvodinian Hungarians embraced EU citizenship, others emphasized their rootedness in Vojvodina and rejected transborder nationalist discourses (Gabrić-Molnar, 2014; Rácz, 2025; Todorović, 2020). In any case, by December 2019, these policies resulted in approximately 150,000 new Hungarian citizens originated in Vojvodina (Palusek, 2024; see also Gyurkovics, 2025). This naturalisation process strengthened institutional and symbolic ties with Hungary, undergirding community resilience amid persistent demographic pressure. While many recipients-maintained residence in their home communities, EU citizenship and passports considerably enhanced mobility, facilitating temporary and permanent

migration across Europe.

However, this phenomenon has also contributed to a profound demographic contraction. The relationship between dual citizenship, increased mobility, and accelerating emigration is now well-documented and is seen as a major contributor to the marked decline of the Hungarian population in Vojvodina since 2011 (Palusek, 2024; Moró–Reményi, 2024). Contemporary census data further evidence this trend: the Hungarian community has shrunk from over 340,000 in 1991, to 290,000 in 2002, to approximately 182,000 by 2022, now accounting for around 10.5% of the region's population (Census, 2022; Szerbhorváth, 2021). Recent research confirms that outmigration, rather than assimilation or fertility decline, is the principal driver of this demographic erosion (Lendák-Kabók, 2024; Rácz, 2025).

In this context, emergent forms of civic identity, especially among millennials and younger generations, have flourished. Digital culture, expressed in memes and online platforms, serves as a new forum for expressing and negotiating belonging, with rurality, language, foodways, and cross-border themes employed to construct a resilient if pluralized civic self-understanding (Rácz, 2025).

Yet, economic vulnerability remains a persistent structural concern. Despite robust Hungarian governmental support, endemic deprivation, high unemployment, and depopulation continue to challenge the community's future (Petsinis, 2008; Gabrić-Molnar, 2019; Moró–Reményi, 2024; Rácz, 2025). These factors both animate and undermine contemporary community life: while dual citizenship and heritage initiatives provide resources for cultural continuity, ongoing emigration and socioeconomic insecurity threaten demographic and institutional viability.

Cumulatively, these developments have produced a distinct, plural, and continuously renegotiated civic identity among Vojvodina's Hungarians—one that balances state policies, cross-border ties, and communal resilience against persistent demographic and economic headwinds.

## Conclusion

The identity of Hungarians in Vojvodina is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that has evolved from a 19th-century nationalistic framework into a complex, layered sense of belonging shaped by shifting political

borders. This identity transitioned from a majority status within the Austro-Hungarian Empire to a minority position following the Treaty of Trianon, leading to a "multidimensional" struggle to preserve national consciousness through local social and cultural organizations. Throughout the Yugoslav era, this identity was further redefined by the tension between state-mandated "Yugoslavism" and the consolidation of a distinct regional "Vojvodinian" character rooted in local customs and dialects. Following the regime changes of the 1990s, the community regained cultural autonomy and strengthened symbolic ties to Hungary through simplified naturalization and economic support. However, the community now faces a "profound demographic contraction" driven by significant outmigration and economic vulnerability, resulting in a contemporary identity that must balance communal resilience against persistent demographic and institutional pressures.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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