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# Hungarian Associations along the Tisa River from the Perspective of the Yugoslav Authorities (1929–1935)

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## ABSTRACT

The study will examine the Yugoslav authorities' attitude towards ethnic Hungarian association life in the Vojvodina through three local case studies (Stara Kanjiža, Senta, Stari Bečej) in the period 1929–1935. It will be also discussed how the authorities judged the behaviour and political loyalty of the leaders of these associations. In addition, the activities of civil societies in the three territorial units will also be touched upon. Conclusions are based on an analysis of the above aspects and on a comparison of the local levels according to these aspects.

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## Introduction

The study will examine the Yugoslav authorities' attitude towards ethnic Hungarian association life in Vojvodina in the period 1929–1935 through three local case studies. The regional characteristics and similarities in the three municipalities/districts of the Tisa river basin, which formed a predominantly ethnically homogeneous unit, namely Stara Kanjiža, Senta and Stari Bečej will be pointed out. Finally, the activities of the associations will be evaluated. The first half of the twentieth century is one of the most vivid and varied periods in the history of civil society.<sup>1</sup> Davies highlights that this area requires much more attention than hitherto, especially in relation to the relationship between civil society and power. (Davies, 2010, p. 365.)

For the analysis, Egrý's concept of the *irredenta* is an useful theoretical scheme. Egrý likens the concept to flowers of speech (*szóvirág*), which contains ethnic charge and social actions. The fact that the concept and its associated terms are not homogeneous and fixed makes research in this direction difficult. (Egrý, 2015, p. 298., 300., 327.) Egrý argues that the Romanian authorities' use of terms to assess the life of the Hungarian minority there was not uniform, and it depended to a large extent on the administrative organisations. (Egrý, 2015, p. 301.) This also applies to the terminology used by the authorities under the Yugoslav royal dictatorship. Egrý defines the concept of *irredenta* as a social category used by the authorities to designate individuals who they consider to be a threat to the state. He distinguishes two sub-categories, namely 'soft' and 'hard' *irredenta*. 'Soft' *irredenta* refers to those people for whom the authorities have defined *irredenta* or revisionist category, which are synonymous concepts. (Egrý, 2015, p. 313.) When examining the latter, it is useful to consider chauvinistic, anti-state or anti-national behaviour as belonging to the 'hard' category. (Egrý, 2015, 301.) In addition to discussing the specific aspects of the relationship between the leaders of the ethnic Hungarian associations and the Yugoslav authorities, it will also be examined in which category the ethnic Hungarian association leaders along the Tisa river were categorized by the regional authorities.

The introduction of the royal dictatorship on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1929 created a caesura in the history of Hungarian minority and defined the framework and scope of future ethnic Hungarian association life. The appointment of Milan Stojadinović as prime minister in 1935 meant a marked improvement in the functioning of Hungarian minority associations. The period between the two dates, which provides the chronological framework for the writing of this paper, can be considered the most restrictive period of the Yugoslav royal dictatorship.

The successor states all faced serious ethno-political challenges, especially in the border areas. The minority Hungarian communities, which saw themselves as a separate society that rejected assimilation and broke away from Hungarian nation-building with a developed Hungarian consciousness, posed a security risk in the eyes of the authorities.<sup>2</sup> In Yugoslavia, the hegemonic strategy of managing ethnic conflicts under the royal dictatorship was used. (Salat, 2001, p. 72.) Under this strategy, the leading positions were held by members of the South Slavic nations, in this case the Serbs, and they relied on the organisations of violence. (Dévavári, 2022, p. 187–188.) Although the imposed constitution (1931) eased the extreme mistrust of the state security organs towards minorities, there was still a climate of mistrust between the minorities and the ethno-political regime. These have been in opposition throughout the period under study. The roots of this go back to the period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when the authorities considered the aspirations of nationalities as a threat to the integrity of the state. (Egrý, 2015, p. 298.) The fact that the banovina offices were in reality executive bodies also had an inhibiting effect,<sup>3</sup> (Dévavári, 2022, p. 189.) and the desire to meet central expectations played a significant role in this. The harsh measures taken by the authorities to restrict the scope for manoeuvre of the ethnic Hungarian civil sphere remained in place in the first half of the 1930s. The paper will, however, nuance the claim that the state security organisations had discovered irredentist movements in all manifestations of ethnic Hungarian association cultural life. (Janjetović, 2005, p. 294.)

The earliest civil associations in the territory of present-day Vojvodina date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A strong peasant middle-class and rural industry made it possible to several thousand people join the associations in "large villages".

<sup>1</sup> One possible definition of civil society is a network of institutions and associations (Fox Gotham, 2005, p. 98–102.) The research is therefore inextricably linked to the subject of civil society. The main key concept of the work is the association, by which is meant an organisation with a legal personality, registered by the authorities, with a self-

governing body, with a registered membership and a specific purpose laid down in its statutes.

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: Bárdi, 2013, p. 208–223.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Yugoslav state and institutional cultural policy in general, see: Димић, 2020, p. 115–127.

(Bethke, 2009, p. 307.) Their content, political and social profile was varied, and only after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire did they take on an ethnic 'counter-public' character in some places. (Bethke, 2009, p. 307.) This was particularly true in the case of the ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina. In the 1920s, the number of associations in this community is likely to be

between 170 and 190, but the exact number is impossible to state due to the discrepancies in the data.<sup>4</sup> This community had a richly structured social life. (Csurka, 2009, p. 6.) A South Slavic statistic from 1929 lists 189 ethnic Hungarian associations with a total of 23 424 members ([illustration 1](#)).<sup>5</sup>

Illustration 1

Hungarian associations along the Tisa in the South Slavic state (April 1929)			
Name of the settlement or district	Population according to the 1921 census	Number of associations listed as Hungarian cultural associations	Number of members
Senta district <sup>6</sup>	The population of the district was 40468 people, including the population of the city of Senta (26626).	14 associations	minimum 1650 members
Stari Bečej district <sup>7</sup>	27801 persons	23 associations	3208 members in total
Stara Kanjiža city	17123 persons	15 associations	minimum 1421 members

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The aggregated data show that a significant proportion of the association's members, more than a quarter of them, were active along the river Tisa. The 1929 census listed all ethnic Hungarian associations as cultural in nature, including firemen's associations, women's associations, farmers' clubs, craftsmen's and trade associations, song societies (dalárda), reading clubs, sports clubs, casinos and hunting clubs. In this respect, the adjective 'cultural' is relevant for us because the cultivation of culture by minorities was an inherently irredentist activity, as in neighbouring Romania. (Egry, 2015, p. 325.) Furthermore the religious character of the association life of certain villages was characteristic.<sup>8</sup>

The Hungarian community in Vojvodina, and especially the middle-class were over-represented in the association life. Individuals belonging to this stratum were considered unreliable by state security. Among the ranks of irredentists considered by the authorities to be the most dangerous to the integrity of the state, middle-class people were clearly the most represented in the documents reviewed.<sup>9</sup> Associations that cultivated Hungarian culture and language played a central role in minority institutionalisation and parallel nation-building. Therefore, state security organizations paid special attention to their activities, as the categorisations in the statistics also show ([illustration 2](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Cf.: Janjetović, 2005, p. 288.; Bethke, 2009, p. 307.; Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ) F. 398., 1. d.; For more on the different statistics, see: Janjetović, 2005, p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> AJ F. 398., 1. d.

<sup>6</sup> It covered the following settlements in the relevant statistics: Ada, Mol, Martonoš, Horgoš. Senta city is listed separately.

<sup>7</sup> It included the following settlements in the relevant statistics: Stari Bečej, Srbobran, Bačko Gradište, Bačko Petrovo Selo.

<sup>8</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 398., 1. d.

<sup>9</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 38., 71/195. National, social, minority and other associations in the districts of the Danube Banovina; AJ F. 14, 251/871. List of minority associations in the districts of the Danube Banovina.

Illustration 2

Hungarian associations along the Tisa in the South Slavic state (January 1935)				
Name of the settlement or district	Population according to the 1931 census	Number of associations	Number of associations listed as minority associations	Political reliability of minority associations
Senta district <sup>10</sup>	The population of the district (without the city of Senta) was 31315, of which 22223 were native Hungarians; the population of the city of Senta was 31969, of which 26461 were native Hungarians.	66 (of which 36 in the district centre)	18 (of which 14 in the district centre)	Mostly unreliable
Stari Bečej district <sup>11</sup>	57974 persons, of which 28629 were native Hungarian	83	24	Mostly reliable
Stara Kanjiža city	19108 persons, of which 16772 were native Hungarian	18	7	Mostly under state control

© Domonkos Ádám, 2024, Szeged. Own compilation based on the following sources: AJ, F. 14, 251/271. AJ, F. 38, 71/195. Report of the police chief of Senta (22<sup>nd</sup> Jan. 1935); AJ, F. 38, 71/195. National, cultural, civic, humanitarian and other associations in the district of Stari Bečej. Report of the Stari Bečej district chief (22<sup>nd</sup> Jan. 1935.); Kepecs, 1998, p. 85., 91., 93.

The statistics, which were centrally compiled in 1935 and also show the minority associations of the Danube Banovina by district, already contain the authorities' assessment of political reliability, which was marked with various categories.<sup>12</sup> From this document, conclusions can be drawn about the attitude of the authorities towards minority association life in the region, the Tisa river basin. At this point, it is worth drawing attention to the importance of the territorial dimension and local conditions, namely "a certain, more significant number of ethnic Hungarians were needed to keep a relatively large number of dangerous irredentists", (Egry, 2015, p. 303.) as exemplified by the region under study.

It is also important to note that, in addition to the

associations registered as ethnic Hungarian, there were also a number of associations with a predominantly ethnic Hungarian membership, which appear in the lists of "humanitarian, national, cultural, patriotic, etc. associations". In the following, the associations officially defined as minorities or ethnic Hungarians will be used as a basis for the analysis.

In particular, I will analyse the perceptions of political loyalty of the authorities. Furthermore, the situation and behaviour of the ethnic Hungarian middle-class population and the activity of association work in the three municipalities/districts will be discussed.

<sup>10</sup> It included the following settlements in the relevant statistics: Ada, Mol. In addition, Senta city and Martonoš and Horgoš are listed separately.

<sup>11</sup> In the relevant statistics it included the following settlements: Stari Bečej, Srbobran, Bačko Gradište, Bačko Petrovo Selo. (Cf.: AJ F. 38, 71/195. List of minority cultural and sports associations in the district of Stari Bečej.)

<sup>12</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 38, 71/195. List of minority cultural and sports associations in the territory of the district of Stari Bečej.; AJ F. 38, 71/195. List of minority associations in the territory of the city of Senta; AJ F. 14, 251/271. List of associations and societies in the territory of the city of Stara Kanjiža. Report of the police magistrate of the city.

## Results

### Municipality of Stara Kanjiža

Belgrade considered the majority of the minority association leaders in Stara Kanjiža to be politically unreliable in the mid-1930s. There was a strong ethnic factor in the leadership of minority associations and the authorities considered most of these people as 'soft' irredentists.

In 1935, to justify inappropriate political behaviour, the Yugoslav authorities used arguments such as the ethnic Hungarian character of the leadership, the perceived 'Hungarian-chauvinist' nature of the society, the role they played in the community, and the indifference to Yugoslav identity. He categorised the local ethnic Hungarian association leaders as 'politically disloyal' and the ethnic factor was emphasised: 'the management is Hungarian', 'the whole association is Hungarian-Chauvinist, pays no attention to our national issues', 'the persons listed are reliable, except for Péter Batta, who is on the suspect list', 'reliable, state control plays a role in this', 'inappropriate from a national point of view'. Consequently, the authorities saw most of these people as 'soft' irredentists. Two of the seven Hungarian cultural, social or humanitarian associations were considered unreliable (the Catholic Circle [Katolikus Kör] and the Scout Association [Felderítők és Hegymászók Egyesülete]) and another four associations were represented at their meetings by political commissioners from the state and were therefore kept under close supervision. Nevertheless, they were assessed as politically loyal in the census.<sup>13</sup>

It can be observed throughout Vojvodina that some of the former members of the Hungarian Party (Magyar Párt)<sup>14</sup> were actively involved in the organisation of the association life.<sup>15</sup> Of particular note is the work of Péter Batta, a lawyer, himself a former member of the Hungarian Party, who was closely monitored by the

internal security services. He was a member of the board of several associations, such as the Casino, Farmers' Association [Gazdakör] and Scout Association. He was rated in the reports as a 'big Hungarian' ['magyarón']<sup>16</sup> and it was also noted that he was on the suspect list.<sup>17</sup> In the light of this, it is likely that he was mainly targeted by the authorities because of his consistent behaviour, general attitude and prominent role in the community.

The official assessment of loyalty was basically made in the light of the political and cultural involvement during the previous system or after 1918. Even good connections with Hungarian Party politicians were enough to be labelled 'politically unreliable'.<sup>18</sup> The authorities were suspicious of minority associations that showed no interest or attention to Yugoslav national events, and the Catholic Circle was considered to be one of them. The Scout Association was considered unreliable because its members had badges bearing the Hungarian crown, and a criminal investigation was being carried out in this case.<sup>19</sup> However, it is important to take into account that parties and associations representing Hungarian interests can be considered as significant actors in the institutionalisation of minorities.

The October 1929 report of the captain of the local police force contains useful information for the paper's topic. This document reveals the security services' view of the life of minority civil society. The local police command examined whether there were any anti-state organisations or indexed books in the town, analysed the nature of the press and publishing activities, the presence of foreigners in the town, and the border traffic. They also checked whether there was any civic mobilisation around the Rothermere agitation,<sup>20</sup> whether there was any inflammatory fake news and monitored radio propaganda from Hungary.<sup>21</sup> In my opinion, the authorities considered it important to examine all this in large part because it could be assumed, as the Romanian example shows, (Egry, 2015, p. 314.) that expressing dissatisfaction, criticism or

<sup>13</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 14, 251/271. List of associations and societies in the town of Stara Kanjiža. Report of the police magistrate of the town.

<sup>14</sup> The Hungarian Party (Magyar Párt) was founded on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1922 in Senta, aiming at the institutional political representation of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia. (Dévavári, 2014, p. 136–137.)

<sup>15</sup> Among the best known I would highlight Imre Várady, Leó Deák, Dénes Streliczky and Péter Batta, former leaders of the Hungarian Party.

<sup>16</sup> This is the category used to designate persons considered to be Hungarian friends.

<sup>17</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 14, 251/271. List of associations and societies in the town of Stara Kanjiža. Report of the police magistrate of the town.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this, see the case of one of the members, István Bodor: Arhiv Vojvodine (AV) F. 126. II. odeljenje. K. Pov. Broj 236/1934. Confidential Report of the Senta City Police Magistrate to the Internal Security Department of the Danube Banovina Directorate.

<sup>19</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 14, 251/271. List of associations and societies in the town of Stara Kanjiža. Report of the police magistrate of the town.

<sup>20</sup> On June 21<sup>st</sup> 1927, Harold Sidney Harmsworth, Viscount Rothermere, concluded in his article titled '*Hungary's Place in the Sun*' that the border regions of the successor states, which were predominantly inhabited by Hungarians, should be reattached to Hungary. (Zeidler, 2001, p. 97.)

<sup>21</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Pov. Broj:410/929. Report of the captain of the Stara Kanjiža police force (October 1929.).



grumbling was sufficient to qualify somebody as 'irredenta/revisionist'.

In any case, the administration, which described the mood of the people as 'good' and 'satisfactory', also noted that "the non-national ['anacionalni'] (meaning non-Yugoslav, ethnic Hungarian) population was reticent and refrained from expressing its own mood, which applied especially to intellectuals. The rural population and the industrialists were completely satisfied, because on their account the authorities were carrying out their activities in a rapid and unbiased manner."<sup>22</sup> This attitude was the result of the erosion of the economic, intellectual and cultural life of the ethnic Hungarian middle-class in the period 1918–1927. (Dévavári, 2022, p. 194–195.)

In the sources, the term 'anacionalni' did not only refer to the foreignness of the South Slavic community. The Hungarians were not considered as part of the South Slavic nation. Furthermore, the ethnic Hungarian middle-class, the remaining intelligentsia, as having a developed Hungarian consciousness, rejected assimilation and were interested in restoring ethnic recruitment. Accordingly, they acted as the main promoters of culture.

In the first half of the 1930s, which continued to be marked by many tensions, the impact of the economic crisis on the operation of cultural associations should be highlighted, as the Education Department of the Danube Banovina noted in its summary report of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1931, explaining the low activity of the associations in many cases.<sup>23</sup> It was in this context that official reports on the general situation at local level in the early 1930s generally revealed a relative decline in association life, with the exception of the cultural activities of associations considered to be South Slavic nationalist or certain humanitarian associations.<sup>24</sup>

In mid-1931, the authorities considered that Stara Kanjiža had a "very low level" of public cultural work,

one of the reasons being that the minority associations "do not work at all, because their intellectuals have withdrawn from public life, and our [meaning Serbian – Á. D.] associations are still weak because of the settled population [meaning Serbian colonists from Lika and Herzegovina settled by the government in municipality of Stara Kanjiža – Á. D.], so there are no cultural events."<sup>25</sup> From 1932 onwards, however, there was a brief wave of cultural expansion. An example of this was the establishment of the Industrial Home, which provided a place for the Industrial Reading Club and the Industrial Singing Society, which performed cultural functions.<sup>26</sup> There is also evidence of the emergence of a grouping of ethnic Hungarian intellectual forces.<sup>27</sup>

The official crackdown reached its peak in 1935. The head of the Stara Kanjiža police force informed the internal affairs department of the banovina's office that he had banned *csárdás* at the Farmer's Association. The background to this was that the local Hungarians had begun to group their intellectual forces in order to avoid assimilation. Within a short time, the *csárdás* became a favourite [dance] even among the Serbian population in some places. " (...) Today, for the local Hungarians, the *csárdás* is no longer just a dance. Among them, regardless of any distinction, whether educated or uneducated, worker or industrialist, it is seen as the embodiment of their national cause."<sup>28</sup> After the death of King Alexander, the intellectual work of the ethnic Hungarians intensified, and clashes and quarrels developed at certain Hungarian events with the Serbian population. These were cited by the police in Stara Kanjiža when it banned the *csárdás* in the area under its jurisdiction. The police captain called on the banovina's office to no longer allow *csárdás* at farmers' events in Stara Kanjiža "in the interest of our general national cause."<sup>29</sup>

## District of Senta

In 1935, the Yugoslav authorities considered the minority

<sup>22</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Pov. Broj: 410/929. Report of the captain of the Stara Kanjiža police force (October 1929.).

<sup>23</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. IV. Broj: 9530. Summary report of the Education Department of the Danube Banovina (3<sup>rd</sup> March 1931.)

<sup>24</sup> Cf.: AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 8903/930. Bimonthly (Jan-Feb 1931.) report of the city police magistrate to the Danube Banovina Directorate (3<sup>rd</sup> March 1931.); AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 5217. Bimonthly report of the municipal police magistrate (July–August 1931.) to the director of the Danube Banovina district (1<sup>st</sup> September 1931.); AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. The three-monthly (January–March 1932.) report of the city police magistrate to the Danube Banovina

Directorate (1<sup>st</sup> April 1932.); For more information on the social life of Stara Kanjiža, see: Kávai, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> F. 126. IV. 30143/931. Report on cultural events in May and June 1931.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the self-organisation of craftsmen, see for example: *Reggeli Ujság*: Az iparosság nagy ünnepe Sztárakanizsán. 9<sup>th</sup> October 1932.

<sup>27</sup> F. 126. II. 56128/1935. Broj: 4394/935. Report of the City Police Chief to the Internal Affairs Department of the Danube County (7<sup>th</sup> December 1935.).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Hungarian association board members of the Senta district centre as rather disloyal. The main reasons mentioned were the ethnic Hungarian origin of the respective leaderships, their dissatisfaction with the existing regime and their nationalist orientation. The following categories were used to classify the disloyal: 'the members are from the Hungarian minority', 'big Hungarians [magyarón] and chauvinists and thus unreliable and suspicious in all respects', 'totally unreliable and disloyal as they are not satisfied with the system currently in place in the state', 'all of them are of Hungarian origin and clearly display their chauvinism', 'big Hungarians [magyarón] and propagators of "Magyarism"', 'totally unreliable and suspicious, highly chauvinistic and Hungarian-oriented [magyarón], politically suspect.', 'totally unreliable and disloyal, politically incorrect', 'big chauvinists, totally Hungarian-oriented', 'big Hungarians [magyarón], so their chauvinism is clear, otherwise they are outwardly loyal and politically correct', 'the bearers of Hungarian culture and propagators of Hungarianism, ostensibly displaying loyalty'.<sup>30</sup>

Among those who were not considered loyal, the leaders of cultural, artistic and professional associations were the most prominent, together with the leaders of humanitarian associations.<sup>31</sup> Mainly congruent terms of 'soft' irredentism appear (e.g. 'big Hungarian' [magyarón], 'suspicious', 'not satisfied', 'politically suspicious', 'carriers of Hungarian culture'), but there are more definitions in the 'hard' category (e.g. 'clearly displaying their chauvinism', 'big chauvinists') than in the case of Stara Kanjiža. Origin and loyalty were the main criteria for determining the political loyalty of association leaders in the case of Senta, too. However, the overall picture is that the ethnic Hungarian

associations of Ada and Mol, which belonged to the district, were considered to be adequate in terms of political reliability.<sup>32</sup>

In many cases, however, the real ideas and intentions of the people under surveillance were hidden from the authorities. Indeed, a report written by the local magistrate at the end of 1929 shows that minorities had not shown any interest in the public until then, which is linked to the withdrawal of the middle-class from public life in the 1920s, as the case of Stara Kanjiža shows. While the village population was not considered irredentist or anti-state at all, the "direction of the emotions of the intelligentsia" were considered difficult to define. Intellectuals were wary of associating with people who were perceived by the authorities to be more seriously expressing their irredentist nature or anti-state activities, the report said.<sup>33</sup>

The reports of the police chiefs from the second half of 1931 illustrate that associations of a non-national (meaning minority) cultural nature were "doing nothing".<sup>34</sup> By this was meant that the associations did not organise cultural events at that time.

The Hungarian cultural life in Senta began to develop from 1933, but serious initial difficulties had to be overcome.<sup>35</sup> The reasons can be traced back to the features of the royal dictatorship, the restrictive ambitions of the ethno-political regime, the distrust of the security services, the erosion of the ethnic Hungarian middle-class, the attitudes of the local population and the effects of the global economic crisis. In these years, local police and magistrate reports, as well as local press, inform us of a resigned and stagnating minority association cultural life.<sup>36</sup> The low point was 1932, the year of the proliferation of complaints from Hungarian minority elites. "The entire stagnation of associations affected the work of cultural, sporting, militant and

<sup>30</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 38., 71/195. List of minority associations in the town of Senta.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> AJ F. 38., 71/195. List of minority associations in the Senta district (Ada, Mol, Martonoš, Horgoš).

<sup>33</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj POB 530. Report of the magistrate of Stara Kanjiža.

<sup>34</sup> F. 126. IV. 40821/931. Broj: 12577/1930. Report of the Senta police magistrate to the Banovina's Department of Culture (5<sup>th</sup> September 1931.); F. 126. IV. 57970/931. Broj: 12577/1930. Report of the Senta police magistrate's office to the Banovina's Department of Culture (30<sup>th</sup> November 1931.).

<sup>35</sup> This year, there were 10 cultural associations in the city, with a total of around 2000 members. (F. 126. IV. 27439/933. Senta school inspector's report on cultural associations. [9<sup>th</sup> VIII. 1933.])

<sup>36</sup> Cf.: AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 6984 kap. 1929. Monthly report of the chief of police of the city of Senta (1<sup>st</sup> November

1929.); AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 11797/1930. Bimonthly report of the district magistrate of Senta (3<sup>rd</sup> September 1930.); AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 9530. Bimonthly report of the Education Department of the Danube Banovina (3<sup>rd</sup> March 1931.); AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Add. Pol. 2296/930. 3.III.1931. Bimonthly report of the Senta city police headquarters (1931); AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 2646/1932. Three-monthly report of the Senta Municipal Police Headquarters (April–June 1932.); AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 9105/1932. Three monthly reports of the Senta Municipal Police Headquarters (July–September 1932.); *Sentai Friss Ujság*: Kulturválság. 20<sup>th</sup> October 1933.; *Sentai Friss Ujság*: A Jótékony Katholikus Nőegyesület. 6<sup>th</sup> December 1933.; *Sentai Friss Ujság*: A kultur délutánok. 8<sup>th</sup> December 1934.; *Sentai Friss Ujság*: Kitűnően sikerült a Katholikus Nőegylet teadélutánja. 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1935.; *Sentai Friss Ujság*: Fényesen sikerült a Kath. Nőegylet gyermekelőadása. 10<sup>th</sup> July 1935.

national associations. Only Sokol continued its activities, while the other associations were struggling to survive, barely even aware of their existence."<sup>37</sup> The main reason for this decline was what the police chief had also noted, namely that even the leaders of local community were not fully understood by society at large, and therefore outstanding people are lost.<sup>38</sup> The case of Horgoš, then part of the district, was similar.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, local reports sent to authorities regularly make the point that associations do not go beyond the limits of their statutes in their activities, and there is continuous improvement in this respect.<sup>40</sup> This is relevant because, under the 1931 Law on Associations, the authorities could ban associations that carried out activities that was considered anti-national or anti-state and/or went beyond the objectives set out in their statutes.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, there are important lessons to be drawn from the history of the banning of the Hungarian Cultural Association in Senta. The association that started its activities in the spring of 1933 was finally banned in August 1934, the year in which the number of banning of the associations multiplied (e.g. the People's Circle of Subotica and the Hungarian Cultural Association in Veliki Bečkerek). The security services decided not to approve their activities on the basis of three main criteria. First, they hinder the development and strengthening of Yugoslav identity and loyalty through the cultivation of Hungarian culture. On the other hand, according to the authorities, there were Hungarian persons on the board who have never shown any loyalty and were considered 'totally revisionist'.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the specificity of the region played a role, namely that it is already difficult to root the cultivation of national (meaning Yugoslav) culture in an area with a predominantly ethnic Hungarian population. These were the reasons considered by the authorities. In April 1934, the Directorate of Danube Banovina banned the

association and all its further activities on the basis of unfounded accusations.<sup>43</sup> The association appealed, but was rejected by the Minister of the Interior.<sup>44</sup>

This case also illustrates that the Yugoslav ethnopolitical regime systematically restricted the ethnic Hungarian community's room for manoeuvre. In fact, the Yugoslav ethnopolitical regime was a discriminatory one (Mesaroš, 1981, p. 141.) and also sought to prevent the ethnic Hungarian community from minimising its losses by breaking down minority cultural positions..

### District of Stari Bečej

As opposed to the above mentioned two municipalities, the Hungarian minority associations of the district of Stari Bečej (which included Srbobran, Bačko Gradište and Bačko Petrovo Selo) were mostly described by the state security services as politically loyal in the mid-1930s. Seven out of twenty-four association leaders were considered semi-, mostly or totally unreliable or suspicious. These included association leaders not only engaged in cultural activities but also in economic or social work.

Definitions that refer to political reliability include: 'appropriate', 'unreliable', 'considered politically appropriate', 'even if some Serbs members are also, unreliable', 'totally unreliable', 'suspect'.<sup>45</sup> Still, we can observe 'soft' variants of irredentist concepts in the context of the Stari Bečej district centre.

The Catholic associations were the most suspect in the eyes of the authorities. From this point of view, it is likely that the religious nature of the associations in Stari Bečej attracted the attention of the authorities to a considerable extent. The individual priests played a prominent role in the association life of Stari Bečej, alongside the

<sup>37</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Бpoj: 9105/1932. Three monthly reports of the Senta city police (October 1932.); For more information on social life in Senta between the two world wars, see: Tolmácsy, 1980–1981.

<sup>38</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Бpoj: 9105/1932. Three monthly reports of the Senta city police (October 1932.)

<sup>39</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. I. No. 640. 3-III 1931.; AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Pov. No. 566 1. VII. 1932.; AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Pov. Broj. 896./1932.

<sup>40</sup> In this context, see for example: AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. No. 2212. 2/III. 1931.

<sup>41</sup> The essence of the paragraph was as follows: '...[According to] Article 11 of the Law on Associations, Assemblies and Meetings of 1931 (Zakon o udruženjima, zborovima i dogovorima) [...] a ban shall follow, if an association exceeds

its powers or commits an act against the state or society." (Németh – Várady, 2022, p. 96.)

<sup>42</sup> The whole initiating society was considered revisionist in a March 1934 trust report (AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. K. Pov. Broj 236/1934. Confidential report of the City Police Headquarters to the Internal Security Department of the Danube Banovina Directorate.)

<sup>43</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. II/2 Бpoj: 23030. Notification from the Directorate of the Danube Banovina to the Senta municipal police.

<sup>44</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. III. 6p. 25349. Order of the Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior to the Directorate of the Danube Banovina.

<sup>45</sup> Cf.: AJ F. 38, 71/195. List of cultural and sports associations of minorities in the district of Stari Bečej.



intellectuals.<sup>46</sup> A report on internal security along the Tisa river indicates that 'as far as Catholic priests in particular are concerned, this is a difficult and complex issue, because the Catholic Church is a colossal organisation and those in power are the most invincible in this area. Wherever the priests are Hungarian, no speech will drive the people to love or otherwise take an active part in our national cause.'<sup>47</sup> It was highlighted that a large number of them do not speak the official language and that the state should endeavour to appoint only priests who have completed their studies in Yugoslavia.<sup>48</sup>

The October 1929 report of the district administration of Stari Bečej reported that since the ethnic Hungarian institutions' cultural and educational events were perceived to be spreading Hungarian national culture in the Hungarian national spirit, strict controls were carried out and preventive measures were taken to break this "deviation."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the ethnopolitical regime of the royal dictatorship considered as "deviation" those efforts which had significantly hindered the creation of Yugoslav ideals, i.e. a homogeneous nation-state, Yugoslav identity and loyalty over several generations. The authorities considered the cultivation and spreading of minority Hungarian culture through associations to be precisely such an aspect.

In any case, the measures had the desired effect, as a year later the district administration informed the internal affairs department of the directorate of the Banovina that the associations were complying with the regulations and that they had not detected any attempts to violate the state or the regulations.<sup>50</sup> And report to the public security department for the winter of 1931 said that "cultural conditions among the people and the youth are improving, especially from a national ['nacionalni'] (meaning Yugoslav) point of view."<sup>51</sup>

However, it should be pointed out that the effects of the global economic crisis did not generally curb the life of associations here. In both 1931 and 1933, the district's association life was considered to be in good condition and "particularly satisfactory from a national point of view" from the point of view of public safety. In

those years, as in other municipalities in the region, the associations considered to be Yugoslav national in nature were the most active.

After a decline around the turn of the century, Stari Bečej's association cultural life boomed again between the two world wars. Ede Draskóczy,<sup>52</sup> a lawyer, newspaper editor, politician and organiser of Hungarian intellectual life in Vojvodina, played a prominent role in the management of the local association life. (Mák, 2011, p. 7., 13.)

The most significant local minority association was the Hungarian People's Circle, of which Ede Draskóczy was the president. The opening speech of the association's annual general assembly in March 1929 reveals that the association "not only sought to establish understanding contacts with the local ruling organizations and associations", but also successfully established contacts with the most important Serbian cultural institution in Vojvodina, the Matica srpska (Mák, 2011, 131).

The cultural work of the Hungarian associations continued in the following years, despite the generation gaps and the effects of the economic crisis. This can be inferred from the opening speech of association's annual general meeting in April 1933. For example, the association's library had over 4,000 volumes in that year (Mák, 2011, 142).

## Conclusion

Based on these three local case studies, it can be concluded that the authorities did not consider the ethnic Hungarian association life along the Tisa river to be homogeneous in terms of political reliability and loyalty. It can be reasonably argued that the leaders of the minority associations in the municipalities closer to the Hungarian-Yugoslav border were considered less politically reliable than the ethnic Hungarian civil leaders of the districts further from the border. While in Stari Bečej most of the association leaders were considered loyal, in the district centre of Senta most of their counterparts were considered politically unreliable by the state security. And in Stara Kanjiža, which is located in the immediate vicinity of the border, the leaders of most of the minority associations were forced to accept that their meetings were supervised by political commissars,

<sup>46</sup> Cf.: Barna – Pernye-Klamár, 2013, p. 344–377.; See more about the work of the associations in Stari Bečej: Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj NOB 530. Report of the head of the Senta district on the conditions in the Senta district to the bishop of the Belgrade district (1<sup>st</sup> November 1929.).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 1303/1929 adm. Report of October 1929. from the Stari Bečej district administration to the Chief Bishop of the Belgrade district.

<sup>50</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj 7830/1930. adm. Bimonthly report of the Stari Bečej district magistrate's office on the general situation (September–October 1930.) to the internal affairs department of the Banovina Directorate.

<sup>51</sup> AV F. 126. II. odeljenje. Broj: 1031/1932. Three-monthly report of the Stari Bečej district magistrate's office on the general situation (April–June 1932.) to the Danube Province Public Security Department.

<sup>52</sup> For more on the life story of Ede Draskóczy, see: Mák, 2011.

which was a blatant display of total mistrust of the authorities. It also revealed that in the eyes of the authorities, there was a wide variety of categories of irredentism. It is also clear that there are more 'soft' categories in the districts of Stari Bečej and Stara Kanjiža than in the district of Senta, where, by comparison, there are more 'hard' categories.

Finally, in terms of the activities of ethnic Hungarian associations, the district of Stari Bečej was undoubtedly the most vivid in the 1929–1935 period, where – albeit with systematic obstruction by the authorities – a traditionally strong and religious cultural life continued. The ethnopolitical ambitions of the South Slavic state had already narrowed down the minority civil society. The authorities had the power to classify associations as irredentist nests on the basis of unfounded accusations, as the case of the association in Senta shows. The ethnopolitical measures of the royal dictatorship also had an inhibiting effect on the development of social and cultural life in the Senta district and in Stara Kanjiža, but in the latter two cases it must be taken into account that, according to sources, the ethnic Hungarian middle-class refrained from expressing their opinions publicly during these years. On the basis of public security, police chief and magistrate documents, the ethnic Hungarian intelligentsia in Senta and Stara Kanjiža can be described as having withdrawn from public activity in these years, especially at the beginning of this period. In these areas, a wave of cultural development can be observed from 1932/1933 onwards.

In summary, the case studies from Stara Kanjiža and Senta show the highest degree of similarity in terms of the perceptions of political loyalty of the authorities, the situation and behaviour of the ethnic Hungarian middle-class population and the activity of association work. The district of Stari Bečej, as the authorities considered the majority of the ethnic Hungarian association leaders to be loyal and the traditionally strong local association culture work can be detected, shows marked differences compared to the other two cases.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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