

**KÖZÉP-EURÓPAI KÖZLEMÉNYEK**  
A történelemtudomány, a regionális tudomány,  
a földrajztudomány, és a gazdálkodás-  
és szervezéstudományok művelőinek referált folyóirata

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## TARTALOMJEGYZÉK

### GAZDASÁGTÖRTÉNET ROVAT

- Kaposi Zoltán:** Gróf Zichy Béla hitbizományi uradalmának fejlődése (1887–1914).. . . . . 9
- Domonkos Endre:** Gazdasági átalakulás tapasztalatai Csehországban, Szlovákiában, Lengyelországban és az egykori Német Demokratikus Köztársaságban (1990–2000) . . . . . 29
- Wilhelm Réka:** A balatoni turizmus változásai az elmúlt három évtizedben.. . . . 45

### REGIONÁLIS TUDOMÁNY ROVAT

- Horváth Anna:** A magyar-román-szlovák-ukrán határmenti kapcsolatok az Európai Unió határtérségeinek fényében. . . . . 67
- Feketéné Benkó Kata:** Értéktéremtés a közlekedésben a határmenti közlekedési közszolgáltatások fejlesztésével . . . . . 85
- Bali Lóránt:** Changes in the self-determination and cultural and social life of the Croatian, Slovenian and Serbian nationalities in Hungary until 2019 in the light of the legislative changes. . . . . 105

### OSZTRÁK-MAGYAR MONARCHIA ROVAT

- Pelles Márton:** A Bartha József vezette üzleti körök szerepe a magyar kereskedelmi tengerészet történetében (1929–1949).. . . . 117
- Leba József:** Budapesti zsidó lakosság gazdasági szerepe 1873–1918 között. . . . 137

### A HORTHY-KORSZAK ROVAT

- Orosz László:** Jól jártak-e a magyarországi svábok 1944 tavaszán a német megszállással? . . . . . 155
- Olasz Lajos:** Politikai viták a Muraköz és a Muravidék visszacsatolásáról. . . . 169

### A „RÖVID MAGYAR 20. SZÁZAD” TÖRTÉNETE ROVAT

- Gulyás László:** Vezérfonal a szintézisíráshoz 4. A Rákosi-diktatúra kora, 1948–1956. Első rész: A két munkáspárt egyesülésétől a desztalinizáció kezdetéig, 1948. június 12.–1953. július 18. . . . . 191
- Gulyás László:** Historiográfia a szintézisíráshoz 4. Rákosi Mátyás 1945 utáni politikai pályafutásával kapcsolatos könyvek.. . . . 215

### RECENZIO

- Deák-Sárosi László (2022):** A jel újbóli helyreállítása. Film, hagyomány és innováció. Magyar Napló Kiadó – Írott Szó Alapítvány. Budapest. Ismerteti: Kása Csaba . . . . . 227

## LÓRÁNT BALI

egyetemi docens, habil

Magyar Agrár és Élettudományi Egyetem Vidékfejlesztés és Fenntartható  
Gazdaság Intézet, Keszthely

*associate professor, habil, Hungarian University Agriculture and Life  
Sciences Institute of Rural Development and Sustainable Economy  
Keszthely, Hungary*

**ORCID:** 0009-0002-3611-3042

**email:** balilori@freemail.hu

### CHANGES IN THE SELF-DETERMINATION AND CULTURAL AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE CROATIAN, SLOVENIAN AND SERBIAN NATIONALITIES IN HUNGARY UNTIL 2019 IN THE LIGHT OF THE LEGISLATIVE CHANGES<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to show how the socio-economic conditions of the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs have evolved over the last thirty years. In the thirty-year period after the regime change, the system of relations of self-determination of nationalities has undergone continuous change and development. The study also deals in depth with the nationality policy of state-socialist Hungary. Without this background, it would not be possible to evaluate the first thirty years correctly. The self-organization and cultural life of the nationalities under study is significantly influenced by the fact that the majority of them live in rural areas in underdeveloped regions of the country. The cultural elite of each nationality was late in coming into being or had to completely reorganise itself after state socialism. In this study, I focus primarily on legislative changes and local elections. I also present the specificities of national cultural civil society organisations.

**Kulcsszavak:** nemzetiség politika, önkormányzatiság, civil szervezetek, választások

**Keywords:** nationality politics, local government, NGOs, elections

#### 1. Introduction

During its nearly 920 years of existence, the Kingdom of Hungary was a multi-ethnic state dominated by Hungarian culture and language.<sup>2</sup> After mutilation, this country of Trianon began to change significantly. Today, nearly ninety-five percent

of the country's population claims to be of Hungarian nationality. There are currently thirteen indigenous nationalities in our country. Their areas of accommodations are scattered, and they are mainly found in larger numbers in villages. Gypsies are the only ones that can be said to be dominant in certain parts of the cities. For our nationalities, living in a city means assimilation. According to the 2011 census data, 6.4% of the population declared themselves to belong to a certain nationality. During the municipal elections, an average of 58% registered themselves in the register. This can be said to be an extremely high rate, considering that the census enumerates every single member of the nationality. The purpose of the study is to present the changes in the operational characteristics of national governments and their main aspects in the three decades following the change of system for the Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian nationalities.

## **2. Some historical backgrounds of state socialism**

After the short democratic period following the Second World War, the Hungarian party leadership followed the Soviet nationality policy.<sup>3</sup> Sensitivity to nationalities depended on world political processes on ad-hoc great power units. The first and perhaps the biggest losers of the period following the Second World War were the native Germans, who suffered the most during the resettlement. Closely related to this were the Hungarians from the highlands settled in our country under the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange agreement. A similar fate befell the Székely people from Bukovina<sup>4</sup>, who had been on their way to the cross for many years.

In the initial period of the process of reconstruction and the communist takeover, the Yugoslav-Hungarian relations had a favorable start. In the domestic press, Tito appeared as a positive person, a successful partisan leader, and an example to be followed. The everyday life of Croats, Serbs and Slovenians in Hungary was not particularly affected by „big politics”. In fact, the development of interstate relations predicted a positive future. On December 23, 1946, a trade and goods circulation agreement was signed, then in December 1947, Josip Broz Tito visited Hungary and a 20-year friendship and cooperation agreement was signed in the IV of 1948. were signed into law in January of the current year, a few months before the deterioration of Soviet-Yugoslav and then Hungarian-Yugoslav relations. Tito's Balkan confederation aspirations were the last straw, causing a complete rejection of the separate-passenger Yugoslav policy from Stalin, who sought to convince and later destroy Josip Broz. Excommunication was announced by the decision of the Cominform on June 21, 1948 in Bucharest. On June 18, 1949, the Hungarian government gave impetus to the condemnation of its southern neighbor by terminating the five-year economic agreements. The appearance of our ultimate opposition in everyday politics became felt from September with the Rajk trial<sup>5</sup>. From the

1950s, tension on the border and in its narrower area became commonplace and the institution of the border strip was established. 15 districts of six counties with 300,000 inhabitants were included in this zone, where the authorities carried out the „Kulak removal”<sup>6</sup> more harshly, the displacements and paid more attention to the control of the South Slavic population along the border and to making their everyday life miserable.<sup>7</sup> The easing began after Stalin’s death, on September 9, 1953, on Hungarian initiative, Yugoslav-Hungarian diplomatic relations were restored, an intergovernmental joint commission began to operate furthermore the communication between border protection agencies became commonplace. Following the policy of appeasement on the part of the Soviet side, on March 8, 1956, according to the decision of the Council of Ministers, the border strip was abolished and the dismantling of the technical lock began. On October 10, 1956, almost the entire party and political leadership took part in the re-consecration of friendly relations between the two countries in Belgrade.<sup>8</sup>

In the years following the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle, relations changed rapidly, in both positive and negative directions. After the consolidation of the Kádár system in the spring of 1957, interstate cultural relations were revived: Lakócsa Népi Együttes was on a Yugoslav tour, Lado Horvát Népi Együttes was on a Hungarian tour at the end of May 1958 (Budapest, Baja, Bácsalmás, Mohács, Pécs), the Yugoslav embassy its employees participated in the Pomáz junial in the same year. However, the execution of Prime Minister Imre Nagy on June 16, 1958 resulted in another estrangement. Although the possibility of a small border traffic crossing was raised by the Hungarian side in 1957, the positive Yugoslav response was nevertheless rejected in 1961<sup>9</sup>.

In the 1960s, interstate relations were volatile, still showing considerable dependence on the world political situation. Although visits between political elites have become regular, little progress has been made on issues affecting nationalities<sup>10</sup>. The small border traffic regulations implemented in 1965, which allowed crossing and staying at a depth of twenty kilometers in the territory of the neighboring country eight times a year, for a maximum of ten days per visit, can be considered an indirect positive change in the life of the Hungarian nationalities in Hungary and Yugoslavia.<sup>11</sup>

Hungary’s entry into Czechoslovakia in 1968 had a negative effect on relations, but the 1970s already brought positives to national relations. Radio broadcasts in ethnic languages started, also several settlements inhabited by South Slavic nationalities entered into sister settlement cooperation. In the 1970s and 1980s, relations between cultural institutions were mostly organized from below. The authorities did not strictly observe the twenty-kilometer distance for small border traffic on either side<sup>12</sup>.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the political pressure on Hungarian „South Slavs” gradually ceased. It became possible for them to learn their mother tongue at the basic, middle and higher levels, and through the university language training,

a layer of intellectuals that did not exist before was formed. This social group made possible the organization of the Slovenian, but especially the Serbian and Croatian communities (municipalities) in the 1990s and their successful operation to this day.

### **3. The legal foundations of nationality policy in state socialism**

The Hungarian Socialist Workers Party wanted to build the socialist political institutional system on three pillars: „one party” (HSWP), state, social organizations. He wanted to deal with the nationality issue within the framework of the latter. He did not want to make them a factor influencing state and national politics. He forced them under the „protective umbrella” of the state and the party and kept their daily operations under control. The Association of the Southern Slavs of Hungary was established in 1945, which operated within the framework of the Patriotic People’s Front, and their leaders were members of its National Council. The Association was actually intended to play the role of a „bridge” between the mother country (Yugoslavia) and Hungary. The XX of 1949 law, paragraph 49(3) of the Constitution of the Hungarian People’s Republic stated that „the Hungarian People’s Republic provides the opportunity for education in its mother tongue and the cultivation of its national culture for all nationalities living in its territory.” In line with this, at the local level, Section 9 (1) of Act I of 1971 enforced the rights of nationalities: the use of the mother language, education on it, and the cultivation of national culture<sup>13</sup>.

Act I of 1972, Act XX of 1949 § 61 (2-3) of the Act on Amendments to the Constitution of the Hungarian People’s Republic stated:

(2) „Citizens are not subject to any disadvantage based on gender, religion or nationality discrimination is strictly punished by law.

(3) The Hungarian People’s Republic provides it for all nationalities living in its territory equality, the use of the mother tongue, education in the mother tongue, own culture the preservation and care of.

The issue of territorial autonomy was not officially on the agenda. First of all, referring to the lack of ethnic blocks and the scattered location of the ethnic population. In 1989, the last state-socialist parliament further expanded their rights, elevated them to state-creating factors and ensured them „the right to use their names in their own language”.<sup>14</sup>

### **4. International regulation**

State socialist Hungary joined the international convention at the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, adopted in New York on December 21, 1965, with Decree No. 8 of 1969.<sup>15</sup> After that, the Presidential Council adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights with Legislative Decree No.

8 of 1976, which should guarantee all citizens direct or indirect participation in the management of public affairs.<sup>16</sup> 47/135 of the United Nations. Declaration of the Rights of National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities in 1992 defined the rights of each of the above-mentioned minorities in national or local decisions affecting their own community. In addition, the 1990 Copenhagen Final Document of the OSCE and the Lund Recommendations, which deal specifically with the public activities of national minorities, should be mentioned.

### **5. The main aspects of changes in domestic regulations after the system change**

The XX of 1949 law, the amendment of the Constitution of September 30, 1990 enabled national and ethnic minorities to participate in local government elections, and considered them to be members of the people's power and state-creating factors. LXXVII of 1993, which also contains precise regulations. however, the law made it possible to hold elections only in the second cycle following the system change. In the fall of 1994, the first minority self-government elections took place, as a result of which 679 local minority self-governments were established.<sup>17</sup> In the 1998 cycle, twice as many organizations were founded. During the 2002 elections, a new phenomenon that had not been known before came to the fore: ethno-business. To eliminate this, the parliament created Act CXIV of 2005. law on the election of minority local government representatives, according to which elections could only be held in settlements where at least thirty people declared themselves to belong to one and the same nationality.<sup>18</sup> The nominated statement was made by a non-governmental organization of a nationality. The number of elected representatives was set at five. In addition, the possibility of entering the local government with a preferential mandate was ended. Regional and national municipalities were elected in an electoral system until the law came into force. The number of national electors was not determined by the number of nationalities, but by the number of local governments. Therefore, from 2006, both regional and national representatives of nationalities were directly elected<sup>19</sup>.

The strict regulations aimed at suppressing ethno-business did not have a demobilizing effect. In 2006, nearly 200,000 people registered as members of a national community. This number increased to more than 314 thousand people by 2019.<sup>20</sup>

XXIX of the Basic Law of Hungary created in 2011. also states that nationalities have the right to use their mother language, as well as to freely assume their identity and exercise their self-government. CLXXIX of 2011 on the rights of nationalities. Act, instead of the terminology of national and ethnic minority, § 1 uses the more nuanced term nationality.<sup>21 22</sup>

In order to suppress ethno-business, several electoral law measures have been taken, participation in the election is tied to registration, the conditions of which

are as follows for candidates and voters: they must have the right to vote in the local government election, they have not run as a candidate of another nationality in the previous two general elections, the candidate's declaration of knowledge of the language, traditions and culture of the nationality. Local government and national elections take place on the same day.

## 6. Regulation of our days

In 2018, ethnic self-governments operated in 2,023 settlements, almost half of which, 1,097, were provided by the Roma. Germans (401) and Croats (112) had the second largest representation in settlements. During the 2019 local government elections, the minimum number of people who claimed to belong to one nationality during the last census was set at thirty people, which was changed as of July 16, 2020 with an amendment to the law. If 25 people declare themselves to belong to the given nationality community and there is already a nationality self-government in the settlement, the election must be called. If a new entrant applies, in that case the national self-government must examine the fulfillment of the prerequisites of citizenship and self-organization in the settlement. Does it work – is it, for example, a national foundation or association, does it receive state support? In addition, the president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences also comments on the fulfillment of the citizenship condition.<sup>23</sup>

At the local level, the candidate statement is subject to the collection of recommendations. The signatures of at least five percent of those on the name list, at least five people, are required. Votes are cast for individual candidates. In the case of less than one hundred registrations, the ethnic self-government of the settlement consists of three, and in the case of more than one hundred, five people. The representative seats are divided between the candidates who received the most votes. The head of the municipality is elected from among themselves.

The procedure system for the election of local governments differs from that at the settlement level. The prerequisite for putting up a list is that at the regional (county/capital district) level, at least ten percent of the settlements are able to nominate an independent candidate and collect at least two percent of the voters' recommendations. Votes for the regional list are cast on a separate ballot paper. Mandates are allocated based on the votes cast for each list. The body of the local ethnic self-government is the general assembly, which consists of seven members. In 2014, the Roma had 20, the Germans 13, the Croats 7, the Slovaks 6, the Romanians 5, the Ruthenians and the Serbs 2 each also the others 1 each in 2014, except for the Slovenians.

The conditions for calling the national election are similar to the regional ones. It is not linked to census data. An organization that runs at least ten percent of independent candidates in local elections and collects at least two percent of voters' recommendations is entitled to be listed. In 2014, the number of members of the



General Assembly ranged from 15 to 47 in relation to the number registered in the register: Roma 47, Germans 39, Croats and Slovaks 23 each, and the others had national self-governments of 15 people.

### **7. Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes in the 2019 national elections<sup>24</sup>**

All three nationalities are equally indigenous to the Carpathian basin and the territory of today's Hungary. Most of their accommodation is located in Transdanubia, in some cases in the Southern Great Plains. Their number is negligible compared to the country's population. According to the 2011 census data, 26,774 people declared themselves Croatian, in the 2019 election, 11,593 people registered in the voter register and 7,799 valid votes were cast. In the national government, the Association of Hungarian Croats has 23 mandates, and the Hrvati - Croatian Association - Sopron „Cakav Katedra” Association has 8 mandates.

At the regional level, there are seven Croatian municipalities: Zala county (Hungarian Croatian Association has 5 seats, and the Hrvati – Croatian Association – Sopron „Cakav Katedra” Association has 2 mandates), Vas county (Hungarian Grádistyei Croatian Association has 7 seats), Győr-Moson-Sopron county: (Hungarian Grádistyei Croatian Association 4, and Sopron „Cakav Katedra” Egyesület 3 mandates), in the counties of Somogy, Baranya, Bács - Kiskun, the Association of Hungarian Croats won all the mandates on each regional list, as in Budapest. In addition, 117 settlements in Hungary have local Croat self-governments. Most of them are located in the counties of Baranya, Bács-Kiskun, Somogy, Zala and Vas.<sup>25</sup> Their occurrence outside the traditional accommodation area, mainly in the big cities (Dunaújváros, Székesfehérvár, etc.) is due to the high level of emigration and marriages with Hungarians.

According to the 2011 census data, 10,038 people declared themselves to be of Serbian nationality, and 2,444 registered themselves in the nationality register. 1668 people appeared in the election. In the national government, the Battonya Serbian Association – Lórévi Egyesület NHKE – Srpski Forum – Serbian Association won 9 mandates, while the „Krug” Art Association won 6 mandates. They have a total of two local governments: Budapest (Srpski Forum 4, Szerb Szövetség 3 mandates) Pest county (Lórévi Egyesület NHKE 7 mandates). Serbian ethnic self-governments were established in a total of 47 settlements.<sup>26</sup> Most of them are located in the traditional accommodation area along the Danube, and in the settlements close to it, as well as in some settlements along the Serbian border. Their self-organization in larger settlements is also due to emigration.

Based on the 2011 census data, 2,820 people declared themselves Slovenes in Hungary. In 2019, 859 registered themselves on the nationality list and 607 went to vote. A single organization, the Association of Hungarian Slovenes, won all the mandates in the national government. Due to the aforementioned legal conditions,

they do not have a regional self-government. They were able to establish ethnic self-government in ten settlements.<sup>27</sup>

### **8. Civil organizations, media, culture**

The Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian nationalities in Hungary can be said to have an organized cultural and church life. In addition to their civil society organizations, which also act as umbrella organizations during municipal elections, their local governments also provide a colorful cultural life at the settlement level, and in many cases they strive to establish active relations with the settlements in the mother country. They also use their opportunities in the field of media and culture.

Hrvatski Glasnik, the weekly newspaper of the Croatians in Hungary, was published for the first time on May 2, 1991, and has been continuously available to readers since then. The Pécs Horvát Theater was presented for the first time in 1992 at the Várszínház in Budapest, since then it has had its own theater, the new building of which was handed over on May 4, 2018.<sup>28</sup> Croatica Internet Radio was founded in 2005, which broadcasts programs on a weekly basis. Thanks to their high level of self-organization and the Croatian-language higher education operating in Budapest, Pécs, Szombathely, and Baja, they have a significant scientific “elite”. It is also thanks to this that the Scientific Institute of Hungarian Croats was established in 2004, which also has research groups in linguistics, ethnography, sociology and social sciences. They have several nationally known cultural associations, the most important of which are: Bácska tambura band, Zabavna industrija, Jasen trio, Slavuj choir, Fáklya Croatian Art Ensemble.<sup>29</sup>

Srpske Nedelne Novine, the weekly newspaper of Hungarian Serbs, has been operating in its current form since 2009. The Serbian Theater named after Joakim Vujić started its official operation in 1995, before that the theater company had been working without an organizational framework since 1991. Based in Pécs, the Serbian-language editorial office operates within the framework of Magyar Rádió and broadcasts programs on a daily basis. Srpski Ekran (Serbian Magazine) is a nearly half-hour weekly Serbian-language program of Hungarian Television. They also have several cultural associations, the most important of which are: Bánát Folk Dance Association, “Veszeli Szantovcsani” Folk Dance Association, “Opanke” Folk Dance Association, “Tabán” Folk Dance Association, “Ruzmarin” Folk Dance Association, Lórévi Serbian Traditional Preservation Association.<sup>30</sup>

Porabje, the weekly newspaper of Slovenes in Hungary, has been published weekly since February 14, 1991. From 2017, instead of the previous eight pages, twelve pages in length are published. In July 2000, Radio Monošter, a Slovenian-language radio station, started operating, and the magazine show “Slovenski utrinki” is produced in the Szombathely studio within the framework of MTV. The engine and central place of the community’s cultural life is the Slovenian

Cultural and Information Center, established and operating in Szentgotthárd in 1998, which also has a conference and exhibition hall, hosting countless meetings and exhibitions. All settlements inhabited by Slovenes have an amateur cultural/artistic group. Their relations with the motherland are close.<sup>31</sup>

### **Summary**

The system of national local government elections has been shaped by continuous legislative changes over the past thirty years. Examining the local and territorial self-determination of the examined Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian nationalities as an example, we can conclude that even a handful of people belonging to the same nationality are provided with extensive self-organization opportunities. The legislator's constant efforts included the suppression of ethno-business and the creation of the possibility of territorial self-government. Their civil organizations are active, and their cultural life is colorful. They also have their own press, media and publishing, scientific and artistic organizations.

## JEGYZETEK / NOTES

- 1 „This (book, paper, project) was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences”.
- 2 Gulyás László (2012/a): *Küzdelem a Kárpát-medencéért. Regionalizáció és etnoregionalizmus, avagy a nemzeti és nemzetiségi kérdés területi aspektusai Magyarországon 1690-1914. Kárpátia Stúdió. Budapest.*
- 3 Gulyás László (2012/b): *A kommunista hatalomátvétel első fázisa Magyarországon. (1945-1947). Különös tekintettel az agrárgazdaságra. In. Schlett András (szerk): Földindulások-Sorsfordulók. Kollektivizálás, agrárvilág és vidéki változások a XX. század második felében. A Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Jog- és Államtudományi Karának Könyvei. Szent István Társulat az apostoli Szentszék Könyvkiadója. Budapest. 35–46.old.*
- 4 Historical region, which today lies on the territory of Romania and Ukraine.
- 5 A showcase trial “organized” on the Soviet model. László Rajk was sentenced to death in 1949 on trumped-up charges of spying for Yugoslavia. After his rehabilitation, he was reburied on October 6, 1956.
- 6 The word is of Russian origin. A well-to-do, rich peasant who was considered an enemy of the system during the darkest years of the proletarian dictatorship, the 1950s. They saw the rural germs of capitalism in it, so they tried to make it impossible by taking land into community ownership or state ownership.
- 7 Gulyás László (2002) *A magyar-osztrák és a magyar jugoszláv határ szerepe az államszocializmus időszakában 1948-1990. In. VIII. Ifjúsági Tudományos Fórum. Veszprém, Magyarország, 2002.03.28. Veszprém: Veszprémi Egyetem Georgikon Mezőgazdaságtudományi Kar. 8. old.*
- 8 Hajdú Zoltán (2008): *A magyar – jugoszláv kapcsolatok a hidegháború első szakaszában (1948 – 1955). In: (szerk.) Horváth István – Kiss Jenő: A baranyai államhatár a XX. században. HM Hadtörténeti Intézet és Múzeum. 69-79. old.*
- 9 Szesztay Ádám (2022): *Nemzetiségi kérdés a Kárpát – medencében 1956-1962. Az ötvenhatos forradalom hatása a kelet – közép – európai kisebbségpolitikára. Gondolat Kiadói Kör – MTA Kisebbségkutató Intézet. Budapest. 419. old.*
- 10 The term “South Slav” used in the period confused and treated the Croatians, Serbs and Slovenes in Hungary as one nationality. Such a nationality did not exist even then.
- 11 Legislative Decree No. 19 of 1976 of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People’s Republic on the promulgation of the agreement between the Government of the Hungarian People’s Republic and the Government of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the regulation of cross-border traffic, signed in Budapest on November 5, 1975. *Internal Affairs Gazette XVII. year Number 8. p. 173*
- 12 Arday Lajos (2002): *Reformok és kudarcok. Jugoszlávia utolsó évtizedei és ami utána következett. BIP. Budapest. 351. old.*
- 13 Kukorelli István (2018): *A nemzetiségek jogállása a rendszerváltozáséveiben – kísérletek országgyűlési képviselőtük szabályozására. Parlamenti Szemle. 1. szám 3. old*
- 14 XXXI of 1989. Act on Amendments to the Constitution, Section 68 (1-2).



- county: Budakalász, Budaörs, Csobánka, Göd, Lórév, Pomáz, Ráckeve, Százhalombatta, Szentendre, Szigetsép, Tököl. Tolna County: Medina.
- 27 Budapest, Győr – Moson – Sopron county: Mosonmagyaróvár. Vas county: Alsószőlőnk, Apátistvánfalva, Felsőszőlőnk, Kétvölgy, Orfalu, Szakonyfalu, Szentgotthárd, Szombathely.
- 28 It is the only Croatian theater in Europe operating outside of the mother country.
- 29 <http://mhti.hu/rolunk> Viewed: 2021. 10. 26.
- 30 <https://www.szerb.hu> Viewed: 2021. 11. 18.
- 31 <https://www.zveza.hu/hu/bemutatkozás/> Viewed: 2021. 10. 20.

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