The Languages of Village Governments in the Eastern Stretches of Dualist Hungary: Rights and Practices

Author(s): Ágoston Berecz

Source: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, January 2021, Vol. 99, No. 1 (January 2021), pp. 1-30

Published by: the Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.99.1.0001

The Languages of Village Governments in the Eastern Stretches of Dualist Hungary: Rights and Practices

ÁGOSTON BERECZ

In 1908, after receiving a Romanian transcript of a local council meeting from Transylvania's Szeben County, a Magyar village secretary asked the public administration expert Miklós Boncza for advice in a tone as if a flying saucer had landed in his backyard. Genuinely flummoxed, he wondered whether there was a valid law that allowed local authorities to keep their records 'in whatever language'.[1] He echoed the popular belief fed by decades of state nationalist propaganda that Hungarian was the only legitimate language for conducting public business in Hungary. He was certainly not unaware of the 1868 Nationalities Act, passed right after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise as one in a series of laws laying out the foundations of the constitutional system, but his professional training must have left him with the impression that it was an obsolete leftover from a bygone age, whose provisions had been possibly overridden and were at any rate not to be taken too seriously. Other laws that regulated his work tended to ignore Hungary's linguistic diversity, increasingly taking it for granted that administration took place in Hungarian.

The language policies of autonomous Austrian (Cisleithanian) local governments, especially in a few notoriously conflict-ridden zones, were in the public limelight at the time and have received decent coverage in historiography. The 1869 *Reichsgemeindegesetz*, which gave communes the freedom to select their working language, was not enforced equally across the various provinces. The legislation was only adopted in the

Ágoston Berecz is a Research Fellow at the Central European University, and In-Residence Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study, Sofia.

[1] *Magyar Közigazgatás*, 12 April 1908, p. 7.

Slavonic and East European Review, 99, 1, 2021

Adriatic provinces in 1882 and in Silesia in 1907, whereas most Ruthenian settlements in Galicia transacted their business in Polish until the very last years of the era.[2] Moreover, while the overall picture had become diverse by the 1880s, it was far from peaceful. Even under a plural regime, autonomous bodies at various levels often fought tooth and nail to defend their linguistic exclusivism. Provincial authorities would refuse to handle documents that local governments lodged in their own language; so did local governments with the claims of private citizens, either because they were unable or unwilling to attend to them.[3] Legal battles also often arose from claims that local decrees or measures infringed constitutional rights, and by regulating the language of gravestones, the linguistic tyranny of some municipalities easily surpassed the most oppressive states of the time.[4] The Moravian Compromise of 1905 and a Galician law of 1907 guaranteed individual language rights by requiring all local authorities to accept submissions in any *landesüblich* (provincially widespread) language.[5]

In contrast to Cisleithania, written multilingualism at majority Romanian local governments of Dualist Hungary remained hidden to outsiders and is a complete blank spot for today's historians. Of course, discussions of Dualist Hungary's language policies are hopelessly mired in a memory war, but there is more to it than that. Two world wars, regime changes and the multiple shifting of borders have wrought a heavy toll on primary sources, and the rate of loss has been utterly devastating in the case of village archives. From among local governments without an urban status at the time, only the archives of Năsăud/Naszód, a market town and former border-guard headquarters in northeastern Transylvania, have survived in their entirety and are open for research in a public collection.

[2] Alfred Manussi Montesole, 'Die Adrialänder', in Karl Gottfried Hugelmann (ed.), *Das Nationalitätenrecht des altes Österreich,* Vienna, 1934, pp. 569–684 (p. 614); Tomasz Kamusella, *Silesia and Central European Nationalism: The Emergence of National and Ethnic Groups in Prussian Silesia and Austrian Silesia, 1848–1918*, West-Lafayette, IN, 2007, p. 218; Jan Fellerer, *Mehrsprachigkeit im galizischen Verwaltungswesen, 1772–1914: Eine historisch-soziolinguistische Studie zum Polnischen und Ruthenischen (Ukrainischen)*, Cologne, 2005, pp. 135 and 150–51; Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs: 1848–1918*, Vienna, 1985, p. 116.

[3] Ibid., pp. 70–74; Theodor Veiter, 'Die Sudetenländer', in Karl Gottfried Hugelmann (ed.), *Das Nationalitätenrecht des altes Österreich*, Vienna, 1934, pp. 289–428 (p. 330); Montesole, 'Die Adrialänder', p. 614.

[4] Michaela Wolf, *Die vielsprachige Seele Kakaniens: Übersetzen und Dolmetschen in der Habsburgermonarchie 1848 bis 1918*, Vienna, 2012, p. 125; Montesole, 'Die Adrialänder', p. 629; Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten*, p. 115.

[5] Ibid., pp. 122–23.

Cities and towns have been luckier in this respect, and I have outlined their contemporary language regimes elsewhere.[6] But city archives give an inaccurate view of the overall picture, not only because the region was little urbanized but also because cities were disproportionately Hungarian-speaking. (Around 20–25 per cent of ethnic Germans, but below 5 per cent of Romanians lived in urban settlements.) To grasp the experiences of peasants, who made up the vast majority of the population, it is necessary to piece together the surviving chunks of village archives and complete their testimony with the bits of correspondence preserved in government files, the press and autobiographical sources.

Irrespective of the designs of central government, the covert multilingualism at work in local self-governance is hardly surprising, bearing in mind that even according to the probably inflated figures of the 1910 census, knowledge of Hungarian fell between just 5 and 15 per cent in most counties among Romanians and between 20 and 30 per cent among Transylvanian Saxons. Local governments retained significant responsibilities and engaged local people in participation, so had to find a *modus vivendi* with locals who did not speak Hungarian and could not deliberate in the language. Literacy was near-universal among Transylvanian Saxons, while Romanian-language schooling travelled an impressive distance during the era, registering mother-tongue literacy rates of around 50 per cent in several counties in 1910, ahead of independent Romania. The disparity between literacy in the mother tongue and a poor knowledge of Hungarian goes some way towards explaining how locally spoken languages found their way into written administration.

Not only this, but the Nationalities Act of 1868, never formally repealed, also allowed local governments the greatest latitude in linguistic matters. In and of itself, this did not guarantee a respect for linguistic pluralism, given the widely shared consensus among historians that the law was poorly enforced. Later legislation, by omission, severely circumscribed linguistic rights that the Nationalities Act had recognized, most ominously in the judiciary.[7] The judgment about its non-enforcement, however, has been rarely supported by source-based research in other domains. One of my goals here is to set the practices against the relevant passages of the

[6] Ágoston Berecz, 'German and Romanian in Town Governments of Dualist Transylvania and the Banat', in Markian Prokopovych, Tamara Scheer and Carl Bethke (eds), *Language Diversity in the Late Habsburg Empire*, Leiden, 2019, pp. 135–59.

[7] Ágoston Berecz, 'Linguistic Diversity and the Court System in Dualist Hungary', *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 39, 2020 (forthcoming). Available ahead of print at <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2020-0044>.

Nationalities Act to find out how the various rights spelt out in it fared in ground-level administration. The game was many-sided. Much depended on whether local leaders were willing to assert these rights in the first place — not so much against the central power, but against the mounting pressure on the side of autonomous county authorities, which oversaw the dealings of local governments and often embraced the monolingual agenda more enthusiastically than government actors.

The unequal competition of languages for public recognition had symbolic as well as practical consequences in Dualist Hungary. The material at hand does not allow generalizations about the linguistic loyalty of the village communities investigated here, let alone an assessment of how far they interiorized the discourse that framed this competition as a struggle for national survival. It does afford a view, however, of the balance between competing linguistic standards in the public sphere from the perspective of those respectable peasants (*fruntași* in Romanian) sitting on local councils who set the social tone in the villages and had some familiarity with the Romanian written standard but knew little or no Hungarian. Patterns of language choice at the lowest level of public administration, which went to people's doorsteps, help estimate how much the onslaught of Hungarian impacted them with a potentially antagonizing effect, as well as the space left for mother-tongue literacy as more and more people grew up literate.

Before 1867: A burst of diversity

Shortly after the overthrow of the 1848–49 revolutions, the Romanian Orthodox and Greek Catholic clergies kickstarted a movement to introduce Romanian into the written administration of villages in Hungary and Transylvania, exhorting village leaderships to employ Romanian village secretaries.[8] A circular by the future Greek Catholic metropolitan, Alexandru Sterca-Șuluțiu, notified the archpriests under his jurisdiction that the 'octroyed' March 1849 Constitution allowed local governments to adopt Romanian as their official language.[9] The monarch soon revoked the March Constitution, however, and German was instituted as the language of internal administration for local governments across Hungary and Transylvania. Short of fulfilling the hopes of educated young Romanians, this German regime nevertheless gave an unprecedented number the

[8] Simion Retegan (ed.), *Mișcarea națională a românilor din Transilvania între 1849–1918: documente*, 6 vols, Cluj-Napoca, 1996–2007, 1, passim.

[9] Ibid., 1, pp. 126–27.

Fig. 1. *The eastern third of Dualist Hungary (today mostly in Romania)*

opportunity to take public office by professionalizing the job of village secretaries.

The 1860 October Diploma ushered in a wave of declarations from largely illiterate village leaderships to introduce Romanian into their official business. The initiative once again came from the intelligentsia. Indeed, the movement can be regarded as a bid on the part of Romanian village secretaries and aspiring village secretaries to gain an advantage over their non-Romanian colleagues by endowing the new, Latinate Romanian standard with public recognition and prestige, an idea warmly embraced and popularized by Romanian priests.[10]

A few village leaderships had made such declarations earlier, but the solemn decision of Zârnești/Zernescht/Zernest in the 8 November 1860 issue of the weekly *Foaie pentru Minte, Inimă și Literatură* set the true

[10] Viorel Faur, 'Viața politică a românilor din Beiuș și localitățile din sudul Bihorului în perioada 1849–1919', in Ioan Degău and Nicolae Brânda (eds), *Beiușul și lumea lui: studiu monografic*, 2, Oradea, 2008, pp. 86–283 (pp. 114–30).

precedent. The text was likely the work of editor George Bariț, a landowner in Zârnești who frequented the local church.[11] Hundreds of Transylvanian and Hungarian local councils followed suit in the following two years, sometimes with identical printed declarations, likely commissioned by the intelligentsia.[12] Many local councils overstepped the provisions of the October Diploma and hastened to extend the language clause to their communication with the central government.[13] Their insistence to address higher authorities and to receive letters from them in Romanian, however, effectively played into the hands of Magyar county officials, as it created legal grounds for investigations and punitive transfers.[14] County authorities investigated and penalized language activists on even flimsier pretexts. A case in point is Bihar County, where the leadership successfully sabotaged the introduction of Romanian into the local administration, except for the county's Borod district, an area with Romanian petty-noble communities.[15]

The returns to Frigyes Pesty's toponymic survey from 1864 offer a broad hint at the language choices of local governments in the Provisorium period.[16] Pesty's goal was to collect the whole micro-toponymy of Hungary and Transylvania, and remarkably for a project steeped in Hungarian nationalism, he managed to obtain logistical assistance from the central authorities, who forwarded his questionnaires to village secretaries and urged them to reply. In complying with the avowed official multilingualism of the time, Pesty produced Hungarian, German, Romanian and other versions of his questionnaires, according to local demands or supposed local preferences.[17]

Figure 2 indicates the villages and towns that drafted their responses in Romanian or German. Hatched in a darker shade of grey are the Saxon Land, where localities with very few exceptions replied in German, and the Banat Military Frontier, not covered by the survey, but with German as its

[11] Simion Retegan, *Dieta românească a Transilvaniei (1863–1864)*, Cluj-Napoca, 1979, p. 134.

[12] Retegan, *Mișcarea națională a românilor*, 5, pp. 466–67 and 665–66.

[13] Retegan, *Dieta românească a Transilvaniei*, pp. 134–40; Vasile Căpîlnean, Ioan Sabău and Valeriu Achim (eds), *Maramureșenii în lupta pentru libertate și unitate națională: documente 1848—1918*, Bucharest, 1981, pp. 135–36, 139 and 141; Retegan, *Mișcarea națională a românilor*, 5, pp. 16, 53–55, 359, 376–77 and 411–12.

[14] Ibid., 4, pp. 55–56, 381, 505–06 and 666–69; ibid., 5, pp. 35–37 and 85–84; ibid., 6, pp. 121, 233–34 and 475.

[15] Faur, 'Viața politică', pp. 115–26.

[16] Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Manuscript Collection, FM1 3814/A.

[17] Attila Szabó T., 'A magyar helynévkutatás a XIX. században', in *Az Erdélyi Tudományos Intézet évkönyve 1943*, Kolozsvár, 1944, 1, pp. 181–264 (pp. 216–20).

language of administration. While a minority of villages could afford their own village secretaries, dense clusters of three to six dots on average tend to originate from joint circle secretaries. A few empty spaces on the map stand for groups of villages that did not answer the questionnaire, among them two entire districts of Transylvania.

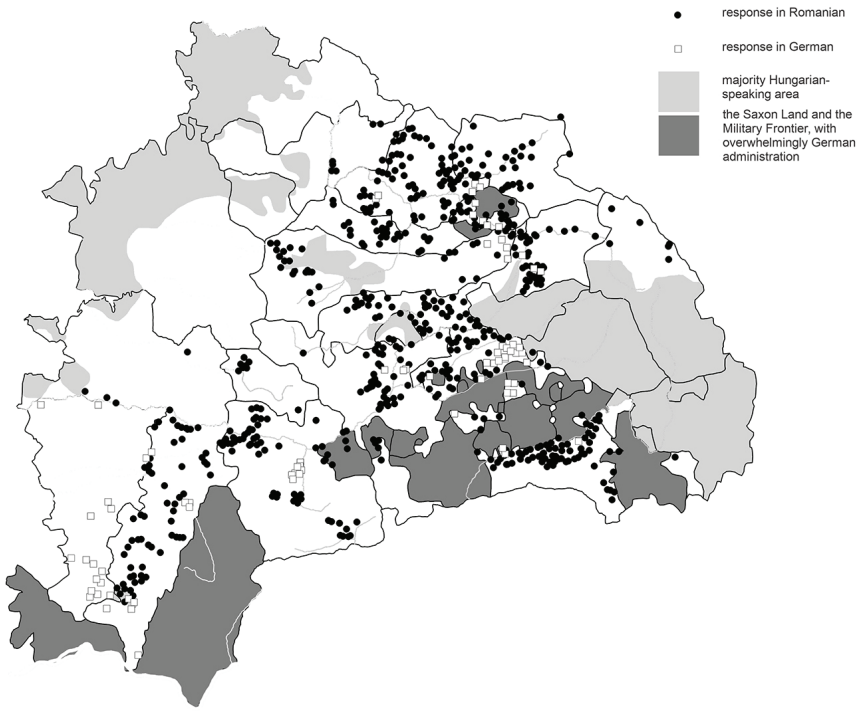

Fig. 2. *Non-Hungarian responses to Frigyes Pesty's toponymic survey, 1864–66*

No evidence has been preserved as to the grounds on which county authorities chose the language of the copies they sent out. The distribution of languages in the returns suggest that they tried to accommodate village secretaries' preferences in Transylvania, but not in Hungary proper, which prompted village secretaries to respond in Hungarian. Pesty's Hungarian name may have also elicited Hungarian responses. But quite often, respondents did not receive the printed sheet in any version and started by copying out the questions. All this suggests caution in inferring the language of official business from the responses. At a minimum, however, Romanian responses demonstrate that their authors were able and willing to carry out written administration in Romanian.

Just a few years after the compulsion of German had been lifted, Hungarian had apparently made a massive return to village chancelleries. All but one response from villages with Magyar majorities were composed in Hungarian, as were most responses from (German-speaking) Swabian villages on the plains and the likely majority from Romanian-majority areas. Around twenty Romanian villages, but only two with Magyar majorities replied in German. This signals not only the robust Hungarian nationalism of office-holding notables but also the well-established use of Hungarian in this domain, which recovered with ease after a break of a decade. Among the several administrative regions that otherwise favoured Romanian, only the Land of Făgăraș sent no response in Hungarian.

The returns to Pesty's survey also attest to the quick diffusion of the new, Romanized (so-called 'etymological') orthography and Latinate written standard of Romanian. Romanian village leaderships, it seems, did not content themselves with symbolic declarations to adopt Romanian. On their own or jointly with other, neighbouring villages, most of them hired clerks able to write if not always consistent but perfectly serviceable Romanian. The vast majority of these were Romanians and a few presumably Magyars, although far more Romanian village secretaries replied in Hungarian than the other way around. Eight villages with non-Romanian majorities also reported in Romanian.[18]

Yet several factors militated against the official use of Romanian, driving even many Romanian-born clerks to rely on Hungarian or German in their daily tasks. Chief among these in this early stage was the still-nascent official style and legal-administrative terminology. Short of legal training in Romanian, those wishing to conduct their practice in that language had to go the extra mile and learn the necessary terms *in addition* to the Hungarian or the German ones, ultimately from the two authoritative sources of Romanian official terminology in the Habsburg lands, the Romanian editions of the legal corpus and the official bulletin.[19] In 1865, as the Romanian prefect (royal commissioner) of Arad County imposed the use of Romanian actively on village governments, the future writer Ioan Slavici and his colleagues (all Romanians) made a show of complying with this measure, but felt more at ease writing Hungarian.[20]

[18] Five of them (Ebendorf/Csukás/Știuca, Kallesdorf/Arcalia, Münzdorf/Herina, Neupaulisch/Păulișu Nou and Peschendorf/Bența) had German and one each Magyar (Betlenszentmiklós/Sânmiclăuș/Klosdorf), Jewish (Tradam/Entrádám) and Karaševak (Torlakian-speaking Catholic) majorities (Rávnik/Rafnic).

[19] Retegan, *Dieta românească a Transilvaniei*, p. 136.

[20] Ioan Slavici, *Opere,* 13 vols, Bucharest, 1967–84, 9, pp. 212–13 and 233; Alexandru Roz, *Aradul: cetatea Marii Unirii*, Timișoara, 1993, p. 47.

Far from creating a break in this sphere, the Nationalities Act of 1868 largely sanctioned the existing practice. It affirmed the right of local governments to choose the language of their internal administration and the minutes of their council meetings, a right first granted in the October Diploma. It directed communal officials to use the citizens' language in interacting with them and set guidelines on the exchange between local governments and central or county authorities, which had been the main source of discord.[21] It only established, however, that local governments could address submissions to the ministries and counties in the language of their minutes without stating that they were entitled to a response in the same language.

Mayors

The system of local governance in Dualist Hungary rested on partly plutocratic, partly democratic representation. Half of the council members were virilists (the biggest taxpayers) in all local governments, and only the other half were elected, but with a broad franchise. Each adult male resident and corporate entity paying property tax locally had the right to cast a vote on an equal basis, and as a rule of thumb, every hundred voters delegated one council member. Every three years, half of the elected members came up for election, each serving a six-year term. The village community also elected their office-holders for three years, usually by acclamation.

Virilists were usually able to carry through their will and get their candidates elected to leadership positions. Wherever there were powerful landlords or other employers, it became difficult for peasant communities to assert their will. In Cuzdrioara/Kozárvár, candidates for offices needed the backing of the baron, who himself served as mayor for some time.[22] In Cătina/Katona, a mid-sized, majority Romanian village in Central Transylvania, it was always the clique of the largest landowners, including the Jewish grocer and the Roman Catholic priest, that decided upon the person of the mayor.[23] In Arad County around the turn of the century, the county apparatus regularly meddled in local elections, trying to fill up councils with its candidates.[24] Virilists, however, rarely formed a nationally homogeneous bloc.

[21] See the English translation by Scotus Viator (pseudonym of Robert William Seton-Watson), *Racial Problems in Hungary*, London, 1908, pp. 430–32.

[22] Simion Retegan, *Drumul greu al modernizării: un veac din istoria unui sat transilvănean; Cuzdrioara, 1820–1920*, Cluj-Napoca, 2011, pp. 119–21.

[23] Károly Kós, *A Mezőség néprajza*, 2 vols, Marosvásárhely, 2000, 1, pp. 156–57.

[24] Lucian Petraș, *Mihai Veliciu (1846–1921): studiu și documente*, Arad, 2011, p. 66.

Transylvanian Saxons could to some extent offset their numerical weakness and secure a majority in local councils by extorting the votes of the Romanians and Roma who depended upon them for day labour. This was notably the case in Râșnov/Rosenau/Rozsnyó on the eve of the Great War, according to the prominent Romanian historian Xenopol.[25] In Ighișul Săsesc/Sächsisch Eibesdorf, with roughly equal numbers of Romanians and Saxons at around 1880, the Romanian priest on one side and affluent Saxon farmers on the other carried on an acrimonious fight for the votes of the local Roma, the former with the threat of withholding the sacraments and the latter by menacing them with no advance payment for their work.[26] In other mixed localities with a long history of coexistence between Saxons and Romanians, the two ethnic groups divided up offices on a parity basis or according to quotas and alternated the office of the mayor between them.[27]

The office of village mayor was not one that richer peasants necessarily yearned for since it took away time from farming and could bring the incumbent into conflict with local public opinion.[28] In Cătina, members of the relatively well-off Calvinist minority did not even consider running for the post, leaving it to Romanian candidates.[29] In a village in southern Bihar County, the school inspector alleged that the Magyar majority always elected Romanians because they could not become too powerful.[30] It is also indicative that in the market town of Lipova/Lippa in 1908, the indigenous Swabian elite spoke some Hungarian, but the mayor did not.[31]

Mayors ignorant of the Hungarian state language were the rule rather than the exception in Romanian-speaking areas; the interlinear Romanian translations and summaries that the village secretary provided for incoming official letters suggest that the mayor of Năsăud around 1896 was one of them.[32] These mayors and council members regularly

[25] A. D. Xenopol, 'Rîșnovul pe lîngă Brașov: satul Rîșnovul', *Viața Romînească*, 7, 1912, 5–6, pp. 192–236 (pp. 200–01).

[26] The *Gedenkbuch* of the Saxon Lutheran parish by Gottlieb Brandsch, quoted in Stefan Weingärtner, jun., *Heimatbuch Sächsisch-Eibesdorf,* Kaufering, 1998, pp. 147–49.

[27] 'Șașii calcă vechea bunăînțelegere', *Libertatea* (Orăștie), 8/21 December 1911, p. 2; Ioan Georgescu, *Satul meu: Un sat din Ardeal*, Sibiu, 1920, pp. 8–9. On the early modern antecedents of local ethnic power sharing in Transylvania, cf. Pál Binder, *Közös múltunk*, Bucharest, 1982.

[28] Retegan, *Drumul greu al modernizării*, pp. 104–07 and 208.

[29] Kós, *A Mezőség néprajza*, 1, pp. 156–57.

[30] Orbán Sipos, *Biharvármegye a népesedési, vallási, nemzetiségi és közoktatási statisztika szempontjából*, Nagyvárad, 1903, p. 80.

[31] Róbert Braun, *Lippa és Sansepolcro*, Budapest, 1908, p. 29.

[32] Bistrița, Direcția Județeană a Arhivelor Naționale ale României (hereafter, ANR),

countersigned and authenticated documents, the content of which they could not check.[33] In fact, mayors who did not know the official language were also common in other parts of Europe; in the French *Midi*, Brittany and Alsace-Lorraine during the Second Empire and in Habsburg Galicia in the 1860s and 1870s.[34] Moreover, in Romanian-inhabited areas plagued by poor schooling conditions, most mayors could not write in any language until as late as the 1900s. Then again, such a thing was also not unheard of in other parts of Europe. An inquiry conducted in Habsburg Galicia in 1887 found a full 86 per cent of village council members to be illiterate.[35]

Village secretaries

Thanks to their specialized training in bureaucratic procedures, the lion's share of the administration of communes fell on village secretaries (*községi jegyzők*), rather than on mayors. Only the so-called large communes (*nagyközségek*) employed their own village secretaries, while small communes (*kisközségek*) were organized into circles (*körjegyzőségek*), each administered by a circle secretary (*körjegyző*). On average, four small communes composed one such circle in 1875 and three in 1910.[36] In practice, Transylvanian Saxon and Banat Swabian villages tended to constitute large communes and Romanian villages remained small communes irrespective of their size since few of the latter could afford a resident village secretary. Many circle secretaries also employed assistant secretaries, who would sometimes live in another village of the same circle.

The vocational training of village secretaries was regulated in 1872, still on the principles of multilingual local administration. The qualifying exam was to give pride of place to the Nationalities Act and test candidates' knowledge of the language of the minutes at their post and of another

Fond Primăria orașului Năsăud, II. Proprietate, 46/1890–1900, 11–12 and 53–57; ANR, Fond Primăria orașului Năsăud, IV. Financiar, 15/1890–1900, 134. Cf. Heinrich Bohland, *Mramorak: Gemeinde an der Banater Sandwüste*, Waiblingen, 1978, p. 85.

[33] Braun, *Lippa és Sansepolcro*, p. 29, and Károly Jancsó, 'A vármegye és a nemzetiségek', *Nyugat*, 5, 1912, pp. 778–83 (p. 782).

[34] Paul Lévy, *Histoire linguistique d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, 2 vols, Paris, 1929, 1, pp. 205–06 and 226; Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*, Stanford, CA, 1976, p. 318; Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914*, Ithaca, NY and London, 2001, pp. 82–85; John-Paul Himka, *Galician Villagers and the Ukrainian National Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 182–83.

[35] Alison Fleig Frank, *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia*, Cambridge, MA and London, 2007, p. 39.

[36] Budapest, Országos Levéltár (hereafter, MNL-OL), BM, K150, 30,646/1875 (bundle 451); *Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények,* new series, 39, 1913, p. 175.

language spoken in their county. Their certificate would then indicate the languages for which they were qualified. It did not bode well for strict enforcement, however, that the relevant decree entrusted the county apparatus with the examination, since senior county offices were the preserve of the Magyar gentry, who were becoming increasingly impatient with linguistic diversity. The subprefect would chair the exam committee and appoint its members.[37]

Contrary to the rest of local office-holders, village and circle secretaries were elected for life by the adult male population. But the laws made them more dependent upon the county hierarchy than upon the people who paid their salaries. Act XXII of the 1886 legislation gave district administrators the right to nominate three candidates to each vacant post. Once elected, they could feel secure in their positions since only disciplinary action by the district administrator could remove them. Contemporary sources often report on scandalous elections where district administrators pressed their own candidates into office against the will of the locals.[38]

Their linguistic competence gave village secretaries another advantage over mayors and council members. While the latter were often completely ignorant of Hungarian, they needed at least a written knowledge of the state language. Nevertheless, even this written knowledge was often purely contextual and limited to the official register in the early decades. Until the mid-1870s at least, career village secretaries in the Saxon Land and the former Banat Military Frontier were left discharging their duties in German. The subprefect of a neighbouring county estimated in 1874 that just one or two village secretaries knew Hungarian in the latter area.[39]

In his second year in office as the prefect of Beszterce-Naszód County, the later prime minister Dezső Bánffy ordered in September 1884 that all village secretaries should learn Hungarian by May the following year. Some of them resigned of their own accord, like a Saxon circle secretary who passed his office on to his son.[40] In 1886, Bánffy set about suspending from their jobs all those who had failed to achieve such an unlikely feat

[37] *Magyarországi rendeletek tára*, 1872, pp. 462–66.

[38] *Telegrafulu Romanu*, 11/23 March 1873, pp. 78–79; *Tribuna Poporului*, 28 March/9 April 1898, p. 286; Aurèle C. Popovici, *La Question roumaine en Transylvanie et en Hongrie* [1892], Lausanne, 1918, pp. 211–16; Ferenc Nagysolymosi Szabó, *Erdély és a román kérdés*, Marosvásárhely, 1910, p. 3; Ludovic Mărcuș, 'Istoria parohiei greco-catolice române de Madarasu începând de la Anul Domnului 1887', in Viorel Câmpean, Viorel Ciubotă and Mihaela Sălceanu (eds), *Mădăras: Contribuție monografică* [1914], Fersig, 2017, p. 178.

[39] MNL-OL, BM, K150, 21,255/1875 (bundle 451).

[40] Thomas Frühm, *Wetterleuchten über Siebenbürgen: Erinnerungen eines siebenbürgisch-sächsischen Schulmannes*, Munich, 1958, p. 19.

and had not resigned.[41] Unsurprisingly, however, this ruthless course of action did little to improve knowledge of Hungarian, and Bánffy was unable to find replacements. Three years later he complained to the prime minister about having to rely on a bunch of ignoramuses unable to write the language of the state.[42]

In Beszterce-Naszód County as elsewhere, the pressure on village secretaries with poor Hungarian mounted. In *Ion,* Liviu Rebreanu's *roman à clef*, a Romanian village secretary is in fear of losing his job because of this shortcoming, while his Jewish colleague knows just enough of the language to perform routine daily tasks.[43] Rebreanu had worked in two places as an assistant village secretary, although there is no evidence that he drew these characters from real life. The village secretary of Năsăud had already used Hungarian on a daily basis when, in 1895, he placed an ad for an internship in a Hungarian-speaking village, with the aim of improving his written skills in the language, which he claimed to know 'to some extent' (*némileg*).[44] It needs to be emphasized that, like all hopeful village secretaries, he had passed the qualifying exam before getting hired, which was designed to filter out candidates with poor Hungarian. I could not establish whether he succeeded in finding an internship, but the following year he introduced Hungarian into Năsăud as the second language of council minutes. According to the chroniclers of the local schools, he acted upon pressure from the county.[45]

As village secretaries without Hungarian were phased out in favour of Magyars, or else replaced by a younger generation of native Romanians and Germans proficient in written Hungarian, obstacles to a Magyarized administration were gradually cleared away. The provisions of the Nationalities Act that regulated language choice, included as a mandatory part of the qualifying exams in 1872, were left out of most textbooks and compendia for village secretaries. In 1884, the Ministry of the Interior redesigned the exam material, discarding the Nationalities Act from it. Language qualifications nevertheless remained part of the system, although that rubric had already been missing from the certificates

[41] Dorin Dologa, 'Românii din zona Năsăudului și alegerile în funcțiile administrative ale Comitatului Bistrița-Năsăud în perioada dualismului austro-ungar', *Revista Bistriței*, 32, 2017, pp. 55–70 (pp. 61–62); *Magyar Polgár*, 24 February 1886, p. 3.

[42] Dezső Bánffy's letter to Kálmán Tisza, 5 January 1889; MNL-OL, BM, K148-1890-III-16.

[43] Liviu Rebreanu, *Opere*, 23 vols, Bucharest, 1968–2005, 4, pp. 242–43 and 369.

[44] *Magyar Közigazgatás*, 22 December 1895, p. 9.

[45] Virgil Șotropa and Niculae Draganu, *Istoria școalelor năsăudene*, Năsăud-Naszód, 1913, p. 43.

issued by some counties.[46] In a final step towards professionalizing local bureaucracy, a law of 1900 then put the training of village secretaries on a new footing, entrusting it to newly-established administrative courses, and the related decrees dropped the language testing component by omission.[47] In the exam records of the Marosvásárhely administrative course, there is no sign of either language testing or qualifications.[48]

Transylvanian Saxon villages preferred to hire Saxon secretaries who knew enough Hungarian, and Saxon village chancelleries were much larger affairs than their equivalents in poverty-stricken Romanian or Magyar villages. Between 1880 and 1887, even a journal for German-speaking village secretaries was brought out in Transylvania. In Romanian areas, especially in the north, Romanians were increasingly replaced in these jobs by Magyars, many of them Jewish. In 1890, around 30 per cent of circle and village secretaries declared Romanian as their native language in the eastern parts of Hungary, constituting a majority in four counties. These were of course more likely to keep the minutes in Romanian. By 1910, their proportion had fallen to 20 per cent, and were only a majority among the village secretaries of Fogaras and Szeben Counties. A unique oddity is that not a single Magyar village secretary was in office in the latter.[49] The names, birthplaces and educational background of the people enrolled in the Marosvásárhely administrative course confirm the low participation of minorities in this late period.[50]

Village secretaries often earned extra money on the side by preparing documents for villagers: testaments, applications for land registration, tax deferment and alcohol licenses, affidavits for military exemption and for declaration of majority, warrants of payment, etc. Useful as these services made them for Romanian as well as Magyar peasants, lettered or illiterate, they did not make them popular. They bore the brunt of peasants' loathing for the state, which in their eyes they represented.[51] A few Romanian village secretaries were embroiled in the activities of Romanian minority institutions and earned impeccable nationalist credentials.[52] As late as

[46] Decree 58,285/1884 of the minister of interior, in *Magyarországi rendeletek tára*, 1884, pp. 1,783–84; *Magyar Közigazgatás,* 15 April 1886, p. 10.
[47] Act XX of 1900.
[48] MNL-OL, BM, K559/16.
[49] *Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények,* new series, 56, 1915, p. 725.
[50] MNL-OL, BM, K559/16 and 20.
[51] 'A falu jegyzője', *Szászváros*, 5 October 1912, p. 2.
[52] Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, *Memorii*, 4 vols, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, 1, p. 154.

1918, after official purges in 1916, eight village secretaries participated at the Gyulafehérvár/Alba Iulia/Karlsburg rally, where representatives of the Romanians of Hungary declared their wish to join the Kingdom of Romania.[53] In most places and most of the time, however, village secretaries were at a bare minimum expected not to support Romanian nationalist causes.[54] They were often caught up between their superiors in the county administration, who counted on them as agents of state nationalism and sometimes as a network of informants, and local peasants who pressured them to resolve their conflicts with higher powers.[55] On the other hand, their monopoly of knowledge over half-literate peasants ignorant of the law and the state language, combined with the indulgence of their betters, created the perfect conditions for village secretaries to stray, encouraging attempts to swindle the locals or else commit acts of outright embezzlement.[56]

Magyar professionals freshly elected to the Romanian countryside often had a hard time communicating with the people. Complaints about village secretaries being unable to speak to communities without a Magyar middle class should, however, be considered in respect of the relative commitment of these secretaries to their terms in office. In counties with Romanian majorities, the statistics show barely a handful of self-declared Hungarian monolinguals among village secretaries, significantly less than elsewhere.[57] The fledgling assistant village secretary of Soroștin/Schorstein (Alsó-Fehér County) complained to his former classmate in 1900 that 'all these people here need to be talked to, the one in German, the other in Saxon, the third in Wallachian'.[58] The village secretary of historian David

[53] Vlad Popovici, 'Funcționarii din administrație și justiție delegați la Marea Adunare Națională de la Alba Iulia (1 decembrie 1918)', *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei*, 116, 2018, 4, pp. 73–86 (p. 77).

[54] 'Campania noastră electorală: Un tablou statistic', *Tribuna*, 6/19 August 1910, pp. 1–4.

[55] Braun, *Lippa és Sansepolcro*, p. 29.

[56] Friedrich Lachmann's report on the district administrator Kálmán Herszényi, 1881, in Ernst R. Rutkowski, 'Österreich-Ungarn und Rumänien 1880–1883, die Proklamierung des Königreiches und die rumänische Irredenta', *Südostforschungen*, 25, 1966, pp. 150–284 (p. 266); Béla Vas, 'A végekről', *Huszadik Század*, 13, 1906, pp. 208–25 (p. 224); 'A falu jegyzője', *Világ*, 28 September 1913, p. 19; Aradi Viktor, 'Széljegyzetek a románkérdéshez', *Huszadik Század*, 13, 1912, pp. 271–78 (p. 272); Albert Gáspár's letters to Lajos Kelemen, on 8 February 1900 and 2 March 1901, in *Kelemen Lajos levelezése: 1889–1909*, ed. Péter Sas, Budapest, 2016, pp. 276 and 331; Braun, *Lippa és Sansepolcro*, p. 29; Péter Ágoston, *A vármegye*, Budapest, 1912, p. 19.

[57] *Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények,* new series, 56, 1915, pp. 678–79.

[58] Albert Gáspár to Lajos Kelemen, on 27 March 1900, in *Kelemen Lajos levelezése: 1889–1909*, p. 289.

Prodan's native village had occupied office without speaking a word of Romanian, which he subsequently felt compelled to learn.[59] But no matter their level of Romanian, non-Romanian village secretaries were excluded from the social and economic life of Romanian communities.[60]

Village secretary vacancies were announced by district administrators, who preferred to skirt the question of language knowledge. As their workload grew, however, the majority of village and circle secretaries employed assistants and scribes, sometimes more than one. They also looked for employees of this type in advertisements. Figure 3 shows the linguistic requirements specified in advertisements for assistant secretaries and scribes wanted for non-Magyar majority places, from the years 1894 and 1895 of the main professional forum, *Magyar Közigazgatás*.

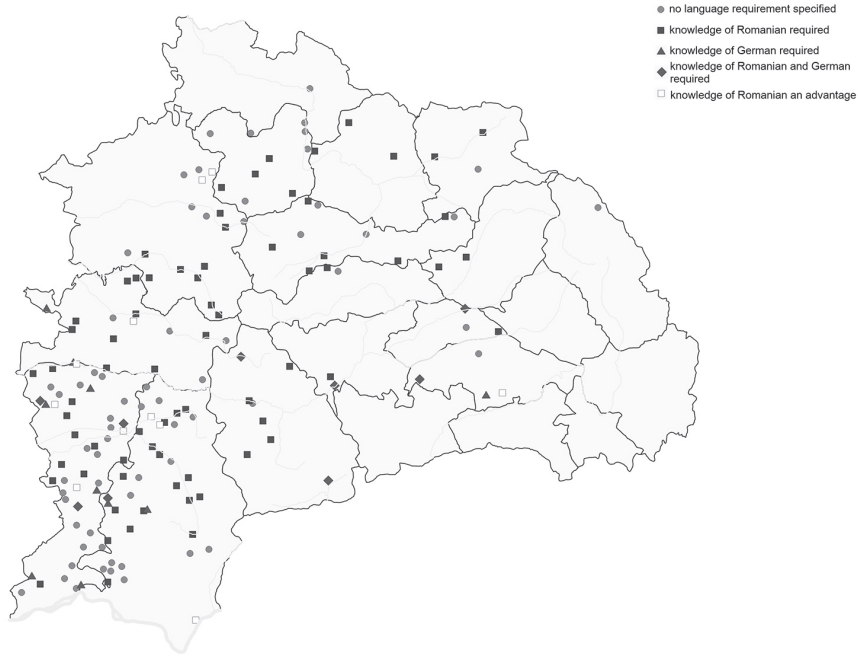

Fig. 3. *Language requirements of prospective assistant village secretaries and scribes in majority non-Magyar villages, in the years 1895 and 1896, recorded in 'Magyar Közigazgatás'*

[59] David Prodan, *Memorii*, Bucharest, 1993, p. 30. Cf. Mathias Egler et al., *Heimatbuch Giseladorf und Panjowa*, Munich, 1990, p. 171.
[60] Róbert Braun, *A falu lélektana*, Budapest, 1913, p. 38.

Some form of linguistic criterion was made explicit in roughly half the advertisements,[61] which sometimes asked for 'all-round' proficiency in a language (i.e. strong writing skills); in others, merely an oral ability. Job seekers also advertised in *Magyar Közigazgatás*. In 1895, forty-five prospective assistant village secretaries and scribes claimed knowledge of Romanian, only a minority of whom had Romanian family names. This snapshot, however, should in no way be perceived as a panorama of linguistic practices in local governments, whether in the language of the minutes or in written contact with the public. Because of the massive loss of local archives, such an all-encompassing picture may never be recovered. The map only helps assess the advantage of knowing a minority language in the contemporary clerical job market. Since assistant village secretaries were typically a rapidly fluctuating workforce, their employers could not count on them to learn local languages on the hoof.

Minutes of council meetings

The minutes of council meetings were the domain in which minority languages had the firmest basis, first because council members did not need to know Hungarian, and secondly because use of these languages in the minutes gave them public recognition under the Nationalities Act. While there was a technical distinction between the administrative language (*ügykezelési nyelv*) and the language of the minutes (*jegyzőkönyvi nyelv*), in most places the two collapsed into one, so that the minutes tended to exist in only one language.[62] This meant that this language could be used for local administrative tasks not falling under state competency and — at least in theory — for addressing county and central government authorities. Minutes continued to be taken in the local language even after village secretaries had largely shifted to Hungarian in their other paperwork.[63]

The language of minutes did sometimes switch to include pieces of incoming correspondence in the Hungarian original.[64] Hungarian

[61] The advertisers sometimes lowered their expectations if time passed and no suitable candidate appeared. I classified such cases according to the requirements originally formulated.

[62] Géza Ferdinandy, *Magyarország közjoga: alkotmányjog*, Budapest, 1902, pp. 285–87.

[63] Caransebeș, ANR, Inventory 1404 (Primăria orașului Oravița); Timișoara, ANR, Inventory 1,704 (Primăria comunei Nițchidorf). In Orawitz, the internal administration of the town hall shifted from German to Hungarian between 1885 and 1900, but the minutes of the council were kept in German until 1902.

[64] Brașov, ANR, Fond Primăria Ticușul Vechi, 1/1903–8, pp. 52v–55f; Aurel Răduțiu, *Romos (jud. Hunedoara): Protocolul ședințelor reprezentanței comunale 1896–1912*, Cluj-

circulars and requests would then likely have been explained to the council members who would not otherwise have understood them. A local press report about a council meeting in a market town in the Banat describes this process: 'Village secretary Sándor Pintér reads out and interprets in German resolution no. 1519 kgy./23098 ajk.1911 of the county's municipal committee, and after it has been explained in Serbian by the secretary Ljubomir Lackov, he proposes to take note of it.'[65]

Local councils typically convened between ten and twenty times a year.[66] In town halls where minutes were kept in multiple versions, only one authentic version was produced simultaneously with the council meetings, which was then translated into the other languages before the next session. If there was one version only, taking down meetings in a local language as opposed to Hungarian did not duplicate the village secretary's or clerk's workload. Either way, he had to copy them and eventually make transcripts of any important local decision for the benefit of county or government authorities.

At the same time, Romanian minutes allowed council members to verify the content of the minutes, which was essential for trust.[67] Count Viktor Ürmösi Maurer, the rare local landowner who proposed the adoption of Romanian minutes alongside the Hungarian ones in 66-per-cent Romanian-speaking Buia/Bell/Bólya, was certainly right when he claimed it to be in the public interest that 'the council should understand its own decisions as they stand in the minutes, decisions that were taken in Romanian, based on discussions carried out in Romanian and finally signed and authenticated by individuals who only know Romanian'.[68] Indeed, one Magyar observer reported on village secretaries who exploited the Hungarian language of the minutes to deceive monolingual Romanian councillors, putting down the opposite of what they had decided.[69] A Romanian penny paper credibly summarized the threats of this language gap:

> What happens when the language of the minutes is not in Romanian in a Romanian commune? The mayor and all the other communal leaders become mere witnesses at the town hall. You will rarely find one who

Napoca, 2014, pp. 193–95.

[65] *Kevevára*, 22 September 1912, p. 1.

[66] *Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények,* new series, 58, 1916, pp. 9–11.

[67] Mercator, *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die ungarische Reichsidee*, Budapest, 1908, p. 69.

[68] *Medgyesi Ujság*, 31 May 1914.

[69] Nagysolymosi Szabó, *Erdély és a román kérdés*, p. 4.

> has mastered Hungarian so well as to understand deeds written in the language. Hungarian documents have such a roundabout style that even Magyar peasants who have gone to primary school cannot grasp their meaning. Such a situation also has another consequence. Some village secretaries, feeling free from control by the rest of the communal leaders, start doing whatever they like, and some of them like dishonest things, so that one fine morning the mayor or the cashier ends up being nabbed for fraud, or in the best scenario for unjustified expenditures, to which he also gave his approval by signing papers that he did not understand, as they were in a foreign language.[70]

Given that minutes of village councils are the rarest material to be found in state archives, I cannot present a comprehensive picture for any one year. The Ministry of the Interior surveyed local administrative languages at least once, as part of its preparations to bring counties under complete government control around 1890, but it later shredded the survey files. From contemporary job announcements, it is clear that the language of local administration remained relatively free from government interference in the four Saxon counties of Transylvania — Szeben, Brassó, Nagy-Küküllő and Beszterce-Naszód. This is corroborated by the returns that the so-called National Communal Registry Board received from these counties during the 1900s, which regularly contained Hungarian translations of council meetings.[71] Moreover, village secretaries of Fogaras County still transacted business in Romanian throughout 1909 (and likely afterwards), as did their colleagues in the overwhelmingly Romanian Sacu district of Krassó-Szörény County.[72] Around the same time, minute-taking in Romanian was still widespread in Hunyad County and possibly elsewhere.[73]

The overall trend resembled a one-way funnel, with village secretaries continuously whittling away at the use of Romanian, German and Serbian in the minutes in cahoots with district administrators and influential power brokers on communal councils. Thus the pool of local governments that accorded minority languages public recognition dwindled throughout the period, and hardly any commune managed to establish a new language for its minutes that had not already been in use in the early

[70] 'Limba protocolară în comune', *Foaia Poporului*, 17/30 March 1902, p. 1.
[71] MNL-OL, BM K156.
[72] Ioan Șenchea, 'Stările din Făgăraș', *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, 12/25 January 1909, p. 2; Timișoara, ANR, Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 35/1906, 25–33.
[73] *Libertatea* (Orăștie), 13/26 December 1912, p. 4.

1870s. The question of the actual languages spoken at meetings remained uncontroversial since it had no legal consequence and was invisible to outsiders. Indeed, it was due to the low spread of knowledge of Hungarian that Hungarian minutes could do locals very material harm. What broke the news was when councillors tried to reintroduce the local language into the minutes, most of the time in vain.

Local languages were often abandoned on the sly and sometimes in a drawn-out process. The surviving chunks of the Arkeden/Archita/Erked and Ferihaz/Fehéregyháza archives offer a glimpse into the gradual transition away from local languages. The Saxon-majority commune of Arkeden was annexed to the overwhelmingly Hungarian-speaking Udvarhely County in 1876, but the local council still had its meetings minuted in German during the 1890s, and the village secretary was apparently not too well-versed in written Hungarian. His Magyar assistant first made use of Hungarian at two meetings in February 1899, and by that time, a call for a new village secretary had already been put out in the Hungarian press. Three of the original eight applicants withdrew their applications, and the three candidates picked by the district administrator all bore Hungarian family names. The winning candidate started out by minuting council meetings in Hungarian, and after some switching back and forth, he reduced his use of German to the headings and the abstracts of the agenda. At the end of each session, he summed up the content in German for the council. German minute-taking later made a short return while he was away on sick leave, but after he resigned in 1905, his successor carried out his tasks exclusively in Hungarian.[74] In Ferihaz (Nagy-Küküllő County), the actual language of the minutes fluctuated as the Magyar circle secretary produced twenty-four Hungarian and six Romanian minutes between 1878 and 1880. This switch between the two languages was probably made easier by the fact that none of the ten Romanian council members could sign their names.[75]

Once the county had managed to impose a second, Hungarian version of the minutes — which was all the easier as unsuspecting locals usually found it of little consequence — it created extra work for the village secretary and was an incentive to get rid of the local version. In a rare incident from 1893, whose repercussions reached up to the ministry, a circle secretary in Temes County petitioned the county prefect to exempt him

[74] Târgu Mureș, ANR, Fond Sfatul popular al comunei Archita, 9/1890–1901 and 10/1902–07.

[75] Ibid., Fond Colecția de manuscrise, 60/1878–80.

from the obligation of translating the minutes into Serbian. Yet Serb, Czech and German council members filed a complaint against him after they discovered his petition, accusing him of misrepresenting their opinions. As the conflict escalated, the minister urged the prefect to impose moderation, but the prefect clearly condoned the circle secretary's plan. Reminding the district administrator that it was the council's responsibility to choose the language of its minutes, the prefect nevertheless instructed him to 'take steps to ensure that they vote for the state language only and stress that the circle secretary can appeal against keeping the current practice'. Undaunted, council members were shrewd enough to reassure the prefect that their insistence had nothing to do with unpatriotic leanings, and they merely did not know enough Hungarian to authenticate the Hungarian text. This probably helped to reinforce the status quo, although by that time the circle secretary had himself grown sceptical of discarding the Serbian minutes.[76] Not all local communities were as alert or as adroit in handling similar situations, however, and the ministry also rarely intervened.

Surging popular support for the introduction of a local language into the minutes sent shockwaves across county leaderships. On the ideological level, county leaders thundered that trying to pull back the advance of Hungarian from a stage that people had already accepted could only be coming from nefarious political circles. At the same time, they also closed ranks in defence of village secretaries who risked losing their jobs. They most often resorted to the rationale that no official could be required to learn a new language. In the last twenty years of the era, district administrators and county assemblies voided several such decisions on appeal from village secretaries or sent them back to the communes 'for reconsideration'. This happened notably to resolutions passed in Großscham/Nagyzsám/Jamu Mare in 1899, in Segenthau/Şag/Ság and Murani/Murány in 1908 (all three in Temes County), in Conop/Konop (Arad County) in 1906 and in Sâncel/Szancsal (Kis-Küküllő County) in 1912.[77] A Hungarian-language newspaper reported approvingly in 1904 that the district administrator had gone after a public village guardian in Temes County, suspending him from his office for voting in favour of Romanian minutes.[78] When an assembly member of the same county reminded his colleagues that the

[76] MNL-OL, K150, 1893-VI-11-746.

[77] *Budapesti Hirlap,* 21 June 1899, p. 9; *Az 1906. évi május hó 19-ére hirdetett országgyülés nyomtatványai: Képviselőház – napló*, 26 vols, Budapest, 1906–10, 16, pp. 281–83; 'Lupta pentru limbă', *Tribuna*, 10/23 October 1906, p. 3; *Libertatea* (Orăştie), 13/26 December 1912, p. 4, and ibid., Christmas 1912, p. 4.

[78] *Délvidék*, 14 August 1904, p. 3.

minister of the interior had exhorted officials to learn the local languages, the prefect cut short the debate admitting that repealing the local decision might be at odds with the Nationalities Act.[79]

State competencies, autonomous competencies

Regarding language choice in written administration, administrative law in Austria distinguished between the autonomous and state functions that municipal officials carried out. While the former derived from local autonomy, the latter represented the lowest level of state administration, where local governments gave assistance to central government agencies.[80] Similarly, in Hungary, as tasks increasingly became realigned under newly instituted lines of administration, village secretaries were required to perform them in Hungarian. They included regularly updating the lists of taxpayers and taxable items, collecting tax returns, drafting lists of conscripts, keeping records on public works and wards of the state, and providing information on diseased animals. After the introduction of the civil registry, records of births, marriages and deaths were also usually kept by village secretaries in Hungarian. These tasks made up the majority of their paperwork — in the judgment of the sociologist Dezső Buday from 1916, financial administration alone consumed three quarters of a village secretary's time.[81]

This language stipulation remained mostly implicit and was partly defined by the monolingual forms and documents that the Budapest government produced and distributed. It was, however, sometimes made explicit, as in 1882 when the government affirmed the ruling that village secretaries should send their reports and dispatches to the tax inspector in Hungarian, against an appeal by the Brassó County assembly.[82] The legal grounds for this distinction remained shaky, however, since it was not spelt out in any law. The Nationalities Act could not make mention of organs that did not exist at the time it was passed, and the laws governing specialized government agencies conveniently eschewed the question. When the editor of *Magyar Közigazgatás* was asked whether the German language of the minutes entitled the village secretary to issue German certificates of local citizenship (*Heimatrecht*), he denied this right on no

[79] *Tribuna*, 18 February 1908, p. 4.

[80] Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs: 1848–1918*, Vienna, 1985, pp. 108–09 and 131–32.

[81] Dezső Buday, 'Magyarország honoratior-osztályai', *Budapesti Szemle*, 470, 1916, pp. 228–49 (p. 233).

[82] Ignácz Weiss, *Az Erdélyi Közművelődési Egylet és a brassói magyarság*, Brassó, 1885, pp. 31–32.

better pretext than a section of the administrative code that warned against the use of foreign words.[83]

With state competencies constantly growing over time, the use of Hungarian also expanded throughout the period. In the case of most Banat Swabian villages, this meant a full transition from German around 1867 to Hungarian on the eve of the Great War. Consider Niczkydorf, where only tax assessment sheets, lists of men of military age and lists of wards of the state were drafted in Hungarian during the first five years of the era. To these were added between 1872 and 1879 the correspondence with county organs, the land registry, sundry other items and finally the inventory of assets and liabilities. By 1888, only the minutes of council meetings remained in German.

Tax schedules were regarded as the most significant of these, but quite apart from their Hungarian language, their structure and complexity rendered them obscure to lay people.[84] Tax booklets had been in Hungarian since 1869.[85] Other identity documents that village secretaries issued varied in their linguistic flexibility, but passports for cattle and horses were the only blank forms that were, just as banknotes in Cisleithania, multilingual, even in Hungarian-speaking areas.[86] Indeed, until 1887, when a uniform system for all livestock was introduced, these passports did not even require Hungarian captions, and until 1890, they did not need to be filled out in Hungarian.[87]

Two factors could influence language choices in handling strictly autonomous functions; the village secretary's skills and the county in which a village lay. Since counties had supervisory powers over the finances of local governments, in practice they could also make them translate their yearly budgets and accounts into Hungarian. From the counties with relatively literate citizenries, all communes of Arad County conducted their internal affairs in Hungarian in 1912 for this reason.[88] The four Saxon counties were again at the other end of the scale, giving communes under their jurisdiction full latitude to submit their records in Romanian or German.

[83] *Magyar Közigazgatás,* 13 November 1910, p. 6.
[84] Scotus Viator, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, p. 246.
[85] *Politikai Ujdonságok*, 14, 1868, p. 407.
[86] Albert Szegedi and Lajos Jamriska, *A községi ügykezelés kézikönyve: vezérfonal községi jegyzők, elöljárók, főleg pedig a községjegyzői szigorlatra készülők számára*, Budapest, 1888, pp. 201–05.
[87] Decree no. 18,314 of the minister of agriculture, on 8 March 1890; *Földmívelési Értesítő*, 1, 1890, p. 179.
[88] László Goldis, *A nemzetiségi kérdésről*, Arad, 1912, p. 46.

Once each year, when the leadership took the inventory of communal assets and a representative of the county checked their books, council meetings were often minuted in Hungarian regardless of the local rules.[89] In the large commune of Romos/Rumes (Hunyad County) in 1905, the need to accommodate the visiting county official obliged the employment of substitute clerks versed in Hungarian.[90] In a host of other villages, however, not even the beginning of the fiscal year triggered a shift to Hungarian in the minutes.[91] Moreover, it seems that the leaders of Beszterce-Naszód County, including Dezső Bánffy's tenure as prefect, made an effort to send Romanian delegates to Romanian communes and Saxons to Saxon ones.[92]

Around 1875, local governments could still enact bylaws and statutes exclusively in a local language.[93] The ministry, however, soon demanded that the texts sent up for approval should be in Hungarian. In 1876, the 190 communes of Kolozs County that transacted their business in Romanian were already required to draw up Hungarian statutes.[94] Under the new circumstances, most village secretaries saved duplicate work and drafted local regulations in Hungarian, explaining their content to the council, and to new council members as they were renewed yearly. More corrosive still of mutual trust was the practice of recycling the same standard texts for each village in a circle, without much asking. Where few inhabitants knew Hungarian, this further enhanced the informal clout of circle secretaries and could easily lead to abuse.

Local magistracies acted as small claims courts and regularly tried cases in Romanian or German.[95] They were chaired by the mayors or by local justices (arbitrators) elected from among councillors. To give some idea of their caseload, the thirty villages belonging to the Dicsőszentmárton district of Kis-Küküllő County passed 684 verdicts in the first half of 1898.[96] Village magistracies could not always accommodate the languages

[89] ANL Caransebeș, Fond Pretura Plasei Sacu, 1/1880–81; Brașov, ANR, Fond Primăria Ticușul Vechi, 1/1903–08.

[90] Răduțiu, *Romos*, pp. 172–73.

[91] In Dejani (Fogaras County), Zgribești, Crivina, Maciova, Peștere, Zorlențu Mic and Ebendorf (Krassó-Szörény County); Brașov, ANR, Fond Primăria Dejani, 1/1903–14; Caransebeș, ANR, Fond Pretura Plasei Sacu, 1/1880–81.

[92] Bistrița, ANR, Fond Prefectura Județului Năsăud, 9/1887, 2–3.

[93] MNL-OL, BM, K150, 39572/1875 (no. 451); ibid., K26, bundle 91, 1400. I.A. 6/44.

[94] *Albina*, 22 July/3 August 1876.

[95] Bistrița, ANR, Fond Judecătoria cercuală Rodna 1/1881 [recte 1891!], 1, 4, 14–15 and 18; ibid., Fond Primăria orașului Năsăud, I. Juridic 15/1901, 1–2, 9, 44 and 54–55; Brașov, ANR, Fond Primăria Șinca Nouă 28/1910, 1; ibid., Fond Primăria Ticușul Vechi 2/1902–14, 17.

[96] Târgu Mureș, ANR, Fond Prefectura jud. Târnava Mică (inv. 335), Vicecomite

of the parties, which explains the Romanian verdict issued in Rodna/Óradna in a case between one litigant with a German and another with a Hungarian surname.[97] However, time was working in favour of Hungarian in this sphere as well. In the Rodna district, while most cases were still conducted in Romanian on the local level in 1909, a growing number of local magistracies were sending the files of appealed cases to the district court in Hungarian.[98]

Outer communication

Contact with the public did not leave a long paper trail, apart from the trilingual delivery receipts of Romanian-speaking Șinca Nouă from 1897 and invitations to council meetings, usually aligned with the language of the minutes.[99] Village secretaries would rather send for local people or go to their homes and talk to them in person. While lithographed and printed forms sped up the handling of routine requests from the public, many large communes could afford typewriters by the turn of the century. Indeed, Năsăud and the nearby market town of Sângeorgiu Român acquired such machines with Romanian characters.[100]

Public orders reached people through what was called 'drumming'; drummers passed through the village, beating their drums and crying out rulings and advertisements of general interest. Short of a drummer, the mayor or the village secretary would gather the people after the Sunday mass to make public announcements. Even the ever-vigilant concerned

94/1888, 3 and 7.

[97] Ferenc Blum and Ferenc Mezei. Bistrița, ANR, Fond Judecătoria cercuală Rodna, 1/1881 [*recte* 1891!], 18.

[98] Ibid., 170/1910, 2–3.

[99] Brașov, ANR, Fond Primăria Șinca Nouă, 11/1897, 32. Invitations to council meetings in Romanian: Caransebeș, ANR, Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 2/1896, 164; ibid., Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 2/1899, 26–27; ibid., Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 442/1906, 18; ibid., Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 35/1906, 74 and 244; Timișoara, ANR, Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 35/1906, 64; MNL-OL, BM, K156, box 64, 19, 135 and 167; ibid., BM, K156, box 65, 826, 826, 979, 2,041; Brașov, ANR, Primăria Șinca Nouă, 47/1912, 15; Bistrița, ANR, Primăria orașului Năsăud, III. Administrație, 89/1903–04, 2; in German: MNL-OL, BM, K156, box 65, 1,118; Brașov, ANR, Fond Primăria Ticușul Vechi, 2/1902–14, 19 and 23; MNL-OL, BM, K156, box 66, 3946; in Serbian: Timișoara, ANR, Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 35/1906, 70; ibid., Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 170/1906; MNL-OL, BM, K156, box 65, 2,393, 2,544, 2,555, 2,565, 2,583, 2,594, and Romanian–Hungarian bilingual ones: Caransebeș, ANR, Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 2/1896, 10; ibid., Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 2/1899, 8 and 14; ibid., Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 170/1906; ibid., Fond Prefectura Județului Severin, 442/1906, 81.

[100] Bistrița, ANR, Fond Primăria orașului Năsăud, XVII. Personal 2/1910–15, 13; ibid., Fond Societatea Acționară Hebe Sângeorz-Băi, folder 4.

citizen who could be provoked by any perceived assault on Magyar supremacy would feel relaxed about the language of drumming because it was destined mainly for the lower reaches of society.[101] The drummer of Cătina discharged his duties in Romanian around 1906, although one-quarter of the locals were native Hungarian speakers, and Magyar notables held sway over local politics.[102] Drumming took place in Romanian and Hungarian in Vinţu de Jos/Alvinc in 1869 (around 49 per cent Romanians and 44 per cent Magyars) and in the market town and former county seat of Körösbánya/Baia de Criș during the war.[103] In 1908, a Romanian correspondent from Brad/Brád, a mining town with a fast-growing Hungarian-speaking minority, lamented in the paper *Libertatea* that the local council had hired a Magyar drummer. He was the first to carry out his duty in two languages — in Hungarian first and only then in an allegedly faulty Romanian.[104]

As a rule, local governments corresponded in Hungarian with the various specialized state agencies. Sometimes, more often in the first two decades of the era, they sent letters to the state authorities or even received letters from them in their local tongue. The village secretary of Năsăud corresponded in Romanian with the finance directorate in 1879, and in 1883 he still received a German translation alongside the original Hungarian letter from the tax inspector, who probably knew about his deficient Hungarian.[105]

Section 22 of the Nationalities Act expressly gave local governments the right to address the central government in their administrative language. Communes could successfully assert this right until the 1880s. In 1885, a village council in Fogaras County sent a Romanian petition to the Hungarian Ministry of Defence. Since they asked for a favour, it is unlikely that they intended this as a show of defiance. The ministry attended to their request, although none of its officials understood Romanian and first had to get it translated from its stationary allowance.[106] Unsurprisingly, other instances make it clear that it already frowned at correspondence in a minority language.

[101] *Ellenzék*, 13 May 1881, p. 2; *Magyar Polgár*, 11 March 1881, p. 3.

[102] 3y, 'Harcz az "is" ellen', *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, 29 July 1886; Szikulus, 'Mezőségi állapotok', *Ellenzék* 3 March 1906, p. 3.

[103] *Magyar Polgár*, 30 June 1869, p. 3; László Bányai, *Kitárul a világ: önéletrajzi jegyzetek*, Bucharest, 1978, p. 53.

[104] *Libertatea* (Orăștie), 14 June/27 July 1911, p. 4.

[105] Bistrița, ANR, Fond Primăria orașului Năsăud, XV. Cultura, 1/1875–97, 20–21; ibid., III. Administrație, 15/1880–94, 27.

[106] MNL-OL, K26, bundle 213, 346.I.A.18/67.

Conclusions

Local councils could determine the language of their minutes at least during the first decade of the era, although they probably needed a clear majority to achieve it, rather than the one-fifth of council members specified in Section 20 of the Nationalities Act. Although village secretaries could not avoid extra work by keeping the minutes in Hungarian, the situation later took a turn for the worse in most counties. Councils often had to face off against county officials, with their vested interests and ideological opposition, just to maintain the status quo, let alone to reintroduce a local language once discarded. District administrators wielded the argument that village secretaries could not be required to learn an additional language. This argument became ever more spurious as the government gradually dismantled the system of language qualifications and district administrators began to nominate and press into office candidates unversed in, or unwilling to use, the locally recognized written standards. While German remained the written language of choice in the autonomous domain of Transylvanian Saxon village governments, my rough estimate is that around half of ethnic Romanians lived in villages that kept Romanian minutes around 1870, and their share went down to probably one quarter by 1910.

Literacy rates varied widely among Romanians in Hungary, from 16 per cent in Bihar County to 51 per cent in Szeben County in 1910. Areas with relatively high literacy tended to have a higher proportion of Romanian village secretaries and so public recognition was more often bestowed on Romanian. This was partly because some counties were more tolerant — counties with Saxon leaderships were home to the most literate Romanian citizenries — but it also highlights local agency. Village secretaries who were in league with district administrators found it easier to drop the Romanian version where council members could not read it, and for this reason did not even bother to check it, except for where locals had already realized its worth as a memory prop and as proof of their actions.

For literate Romanian village notables, communal duties provided an outlet for practising writing skills wherever Romanian was a public language, and even where it was not. Rather than just sign their name, they would issue their own daily invoices, receipts, verdicts and fine notices, and would draw up reports, promissory notes and so on while in office. This practice takes on its full significance when one considers how rarely even a literate peasant put pen to paper. Letter-writing was limited to young men doing military service in remote garrisons, as even migrant

workers would rather relay a message home through a co-villager. Together with parish congregations, local self-governance endowed Romanian writing with an institutional platform in Hungary and afforded continuity to the distinctive Latinate legal-administrative vocabulary, which survived into the interwar years northwest of the Carpathians. At the same time, Hungarian documents increasingly made up the bulk of the official correspondence that Romanian peasants received, which they could not understand without help from the village secretary, the priest or the Jewish tavern-keeper, if there was one. This and the withdrawal of Romanian from the functions it had once performed in village chancelleries could not fail to breed resentment among the literate against the Magyarizing regime. Illiteracy, on the other hand, could act as a protective shield which kept people ignorant of changing language regimes.

Sections 22 and 25 of the 1868 Nationalities Act granted communes the right to use their language vis-à-vis state and county authorities. State agencies attended to submissions in non-dominant languages at least until the 1880s, but they actively discouraged this practice and responded to them in Hungarian. Counties proceeded similarly whenever they were confidently in Magyar hands. Since local governments were interested in getting their problems solved quickly and without complication, village secretaries, who conducted the correspondence with higher authorities, did not insist on using the local tongue once they had acquired a good knowledge of Hungarian. They would put down and forward council resolutions in Hungarian and translated to the council members all rescripts and replies received.

Dualist Hungary outsourced the oversight of local governments to the counties, and with it much of the linguistic forcing into line. But the proliferation of state bureaucracy also reduced linguistic freedom in a more direct fashion, by placing a wide array of tasks under the control of new, specialized agencies, of which there is no mention in the Nationalities Act and which expected business to be transacted in Hungarian as a matter of course. The respective documents were the first to be prepared in Hungarian, and new tasks of this kind were added during the period. Crucially, however, all the functions where Hungarian became compulsory were to be carried out by the village secretaries, which confirmed them in their role as linguistic brokers for Hungarian-less communities.

A village secretary who did not speak the local tongue did not pose the greatest threat to village folk, however. The damage he could do was mild compared to his bilingual colleague, especially if he was someone who

also hobnobbed with county top brass. He will have mitigated the reality of a literally unintelligible state machinery by explaining the Hungarian documents and letters to villagers, thus keeping them in a kind of bubble in which they felt able to make confident decisions about their lives. Nevertheless, he had a hard time overcoming their distrust and assuring them that his translations were accurate. And for good reason. Suspicion always lingered around translators who mediated between cultures, as was the case with colonial interpreters.[107] In a half-patrimonial county administration where officeholders told well-meaning anecdotes about the corruption of their colleagues, and sometimes entire county leaderships were suspended or removed from office for their shenanigans, there was a strong temptation to exploit the vulnerability of peasants, which was exacerbated by the language barrier.[108] Peasant communities often had no choice but to accept village secretaries' corrupt activities, such as tampering with the books, or bribing and extorting alleged petty offenders, since complaints could easily be covered up by county officials and could even bring retributions. Worse still, a corrupt village secretary could also frame them in crimes by misrepresenting their words in the minutes of council meetings.[109]

In general, the factors driving Magyar political elites' hostility to the public use of non-dominant languages were, in varying combinations, nation-state ideology, a modernizing ethos, self-interest, contempt, a strategy to weaken their prestige, usefulness and market value, and a fear of the high costs of multilingualism. Their hostility was less pronounced towards the spoken word as it was in writing and towards people ignorant of Hungarian, in particular the unwashed masses, as long as their reliance on their mother tongue did not hint at defiance. Ultimately, those in power had to recognize that the limited spread of Hungarian among the citizenry set bounds to its exclusive use in any slice of official life that involved public participation. Although time and again, journalists vented their frustration that the administration did not force minorities to

[107] Michelle T. King, 'Replicating the Colonial Expert: The Problem of Translation in the Late Nineteenth-Century Straits Settlements', *Social History*, 34, 2009, pp. 428–46 (pp. 430 and 436–44).

[108] Pál Csaba Szabó, 'Szörény és Krassó vármegye egyesítése', *Acta Historica* (Szeged), 109, 1999, pp. 43–63 (pp. 53–55); 'A marostordai anarchia', *Magyarország*, 30 August 1910, pp. 4–5; 'Uj botrány-megye', *Világ*, 16 May 1911, p. 5; Adolf Lendl, *Utazás a kerületemben: nemzetiségek és közigazgatás*, Budapest, 1902, pp. 28–30.

[109] Prefect Guidó Bauszner's yearly report to the minister of the interior from 1901, MNL-OL K26, bundle 1683, 1292, IV/31901; Albert Gáspár to Lajos Kelemen, on 2 March 1901, in *Kelemen Lajos levelezése: 1889–1909*, p. 331.

learn Hungarian, a low-key presence of non-dominant languages in local governments seemed a reasonable compromise to state actors, provided it was invisible to the broader Magyar public, and local officials translated documents into Hungarian. They probably also imagined this setup as temporary since minority languages were expected to fade out from public functions as new generations became proficient in Hungarian.