

Changing Serbian Ethnic Patterns in the 20th Century Within the Borders of Present-day Hungary¹

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Abstract *The main aim of the present paper is to show the time - space dynamics of the Serbian ethnic territory during the 20th century in the present-day area of Hungary, and also the changes and present state of their population number, their proportion and linguistic-(ethnic) boundaries on regional and settlement level. In the last chapter we try to highlight the connection between the ethnicity and the minority self-government system of the Serbian minority in Hungary, too.*

Key words *ethnic geography, Serbian minority, Hungary, minority self-government bodies*

During the last three centuries the history of Serbs living in the centre of the Balkans has been rather stormy and burdened with wars. This shows in the considerable changes of their ethnic territory as well. During the advancing of the Ottoman Army, the Serbs found themselves in the front line which resulted in the relocation of their ethnic territories mainly to North and West. This process lasted until the 18th century, during which a considerable number of Serbs settled down in Hungary and in various parts of Croatia, where having enjoyed a special legal status, they became residents of the so-called military frontier zone. Meanwhile, due to their continuous migration, a reduction of their original territories can be observed in Kosovo, Methohila and in the territories of the later Sandžak (Jelavich, B. 1996).

After World War I, following the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs-Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), the Serbian ethnic area expanded mainly within the territories of the new state, whereas outside the borders – in Hungary and Romania – a considerable number of Serbs found themselves in minority (Mihajlović, 1919). Their more rapid regression can still be seen. This process is primarily due to the repatriations and options within the borders of present-day Hungary.

The disintegration of Tito's Yugoslavia from 1991, then its entire collapse significantly rearranged the Serbian ethnic settlement pattern. As a result, on the independent territories of the former Yugoslavia – Croatia, Bosnia and in the autonomous Kosovo within Serbia until 1989 – the number and proportion of Serbs have drastically dropped, whereas in Serbia, above all in Voivodina, the opposite can be seen.

1910-1990

The first smaller Serbian minority groups in Hungary could already be traced in the Middle Ages, however, it was the advancing of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire to North and North-West that caused the first signif-

icant Serbian population to move towards Hungary. Up until the Turkish Occupation – when the Serbian ethnic area reached its largest extent in present-day Hungary – there was a growth in the number and ratio of the Serbian-speaking population of orthodox religion, which contributed to their gradual ethnic expansion. As a result of these migration processes, their ethnic patterns mark three well-defined, connected territories of various sizes.

Since the 18th century - in parallel with the more intensive migration of the Serbs towards the further South - then after World War I due to the options, then the linguistic assimilation to a smaller extent, the Serbs' ethnic areas have gradually been decreasing in present-day Hungary. This can be seen from sources since the beginning of the 18th century – though sometimes insufficient – and data from regular censuses.

The bloody events of World War I and the following peace treaties created a completely new situation. Whereas approximately half million Hungarian-speaking communities living in one block in Bácska became part of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs-Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), the majority of the Serbian settlements also became part of the new state. It is only a couple of communities with significant Serbian population along the Danube (in the vicinity of Budapest), to the East of Baranya county and South-East Hungary forming part of our research, that stayed within the borders of present-day Hungary. (Figure 1.)

After the withdrawal of the Serbian Army and the exploitation of the possibilities of options, Serbs mainly living in the Eastern part of Baranya county and in the Tisza-Maros region, left the country in large numbers and moved to the other side of the borders (Urosevics, D. 1969; Oltvai, F. 1991). Therefore only a small number of Serbs are still inhabitants of the 93.030 sq. km present-day Hungary.

The drastic drop in their numbers is demonstrated by data from 1920 and even better from 1930, since it was due to the options given that a significant number of Serbs in Hungary could move to the newly established SHS Kingdom (later Yugoslavia) (Popović, D.I. 1957). (Figure 2.) As a result their numbers were 5443 in 1941 and there are only 36 settlements on the studied area where the ratio of Serbian native speakers is at least 1%. Among these it is just Lórév where they are in absolute majority with a ratio of 69%. Their number is also significant in Szigetcsép where 14% of the population is of Serbian mother tongue. Their ratio is more than 10% in four settlements (Deszk, Battonya, Százhalombatta, Újszentiván) and they live in diaspora with a ratio of 1-10% in 13

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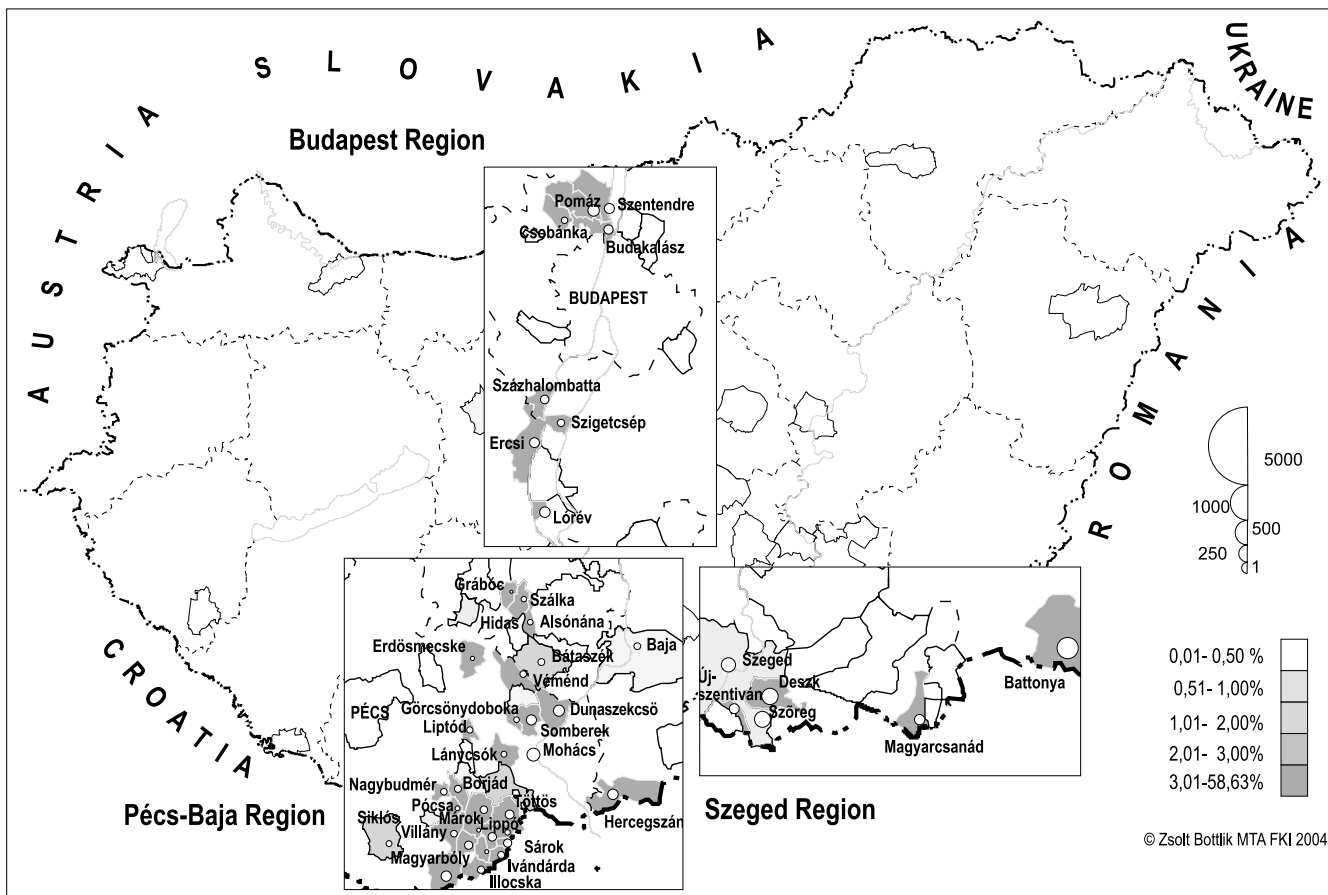


Figure 1 The ratio of Serbs in Hungary and their bigger settlements according to their mother tongue in 1910; Source: Hungarian census data 1910 (mother tongue - native language)

other settlements. Due to their big losses it is only in the case of Battonya where their numbers exceed 1000 inhabitants. The population of the other 11 larger Serbian groups is between 100 and 350.

During and after World War II the ethnic settlement pattern of the Serbs already living sporadically in present-day Hungary does not show a significant change. The ethnic data in the 1949 census do not in all cases show the real situation, however, the data referring to religion provide a more reliable picture. Based on the above mentioned data, the number of Serbs living in Hungary decreased only by 284 in eight years. According to census data, their ratio in their settlements shows an average 2-3% change. There existed 12 settlements with more than 100 Serbs. The biggest settlement was Battonya with 485 Serbs and there were four settlements with more than 300 Serbs (Magyarcsanak, Lórév, Pomáz and Deszk).

The proletarian internationalism of the period following World War II was not

in favour of the existence of the minority groups with smaller numbers and ratio living in Hungary. It is especially true of the Serbian minority with more than 5000 persons. Only the years preceding the change of regime bring some alteration and bigger publicity to these minorities. The reason for the decrease in number and ratio of Serbian minority and also that of their ethnic area is due to the weakening of their national self-awareness which was caused by their assimilation.

The Serbs' strong identity-consciousness, the above-mentioned assimilation processes and their numbers are partly related to the geographical environment of their settlements. The question is whether their place of residence is the urban region, which is the primary source of the main social-economic modernization, or is it the severely underprivileged peripheral areas, which offer worse living conditions. The aforementioned urban territories are obviously the majority of Hungarians' target

area as well, therefore their settling process could cause the breaking up of the minority communities, providing more opportunities for the Hungarian assimilation pressure, eg., in case of the former settlements in the vicinity of Budapest and Szeged with a significant number of Serbs (Kocsis, K. 1989). On the other hand, the economically more underdeveloped territories urge the younger generation to migrate causing not only the decrease of their number and ratio but the disastrous ageing of the ethnic population (eg., in East Baranya).

Studying the data from 1990 it becomes obvious that the once so significant Serbian presence has reduced. Although their appearance in new settlements manifests itself in a slight change, the significant decrease since the end of World War II is due to the linguistic assimilation. It can be seen that from the 18th century the ratio of the Serbs undergoes a gradual decrease, there are less settlements where they are in majority, in fact, by 1990, with the exception of Lórév, it falls below 25% in all their settlements (Hoóz, I.-Kepecs, J.-Klinger, A. 1985). The greatest loss, over 10%, is in Lórév and Battonya, whose settlements are the most important in the Serbian ethnic territory. In the case of Pomáz, Csobánka, Lippó, Szigetcsép and Százhalombatta the loss is 5-10%. This process requires the usage of the Hungarian language which might in a while result in the Serbian mother tongue being pushed into the back-

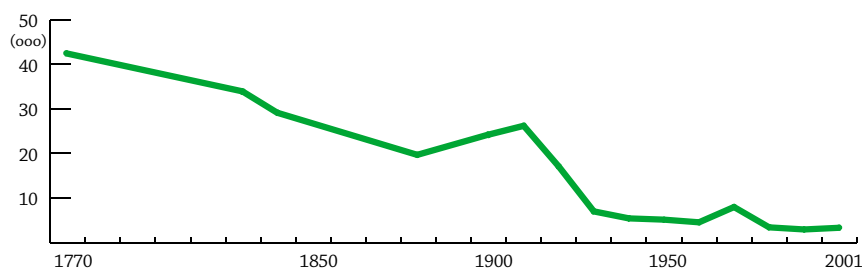


Figure 2 Changes in the number of Serbs in present-day area of Hungary (1773-2001)

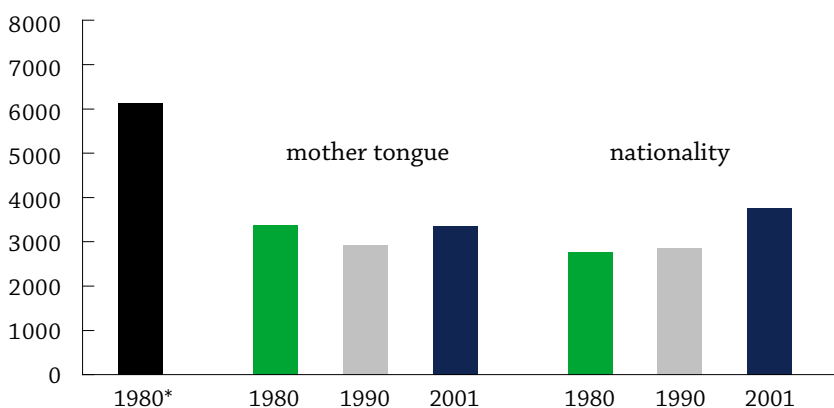
ground. Studying the position of the Serbian communities shows that they live in a rather scattered settlement pattern. They do not form bigger groups and apart from their more significant numbers in Pest and Csongrád counties there are only smaller scattered settlements in Baranya, Bács-Kiskun, Békés, Fejér and Tolna counties. Except for Lórév (53%) their numbers are very low. Their ratio reaches the 5% limit in only 3 settlements (Battonya 5.5%, Újszentiván 5.0% and Deszk 5.3%). In another 21 settlements their share in population is below 5%. The biggest Serbian minority group lives in Battonya. In the present-day Hungary there are only 4 settlements with a population of over 100 persons (Lórév, Pomáz, Szigetcsép, Hercegszántó).

Present-day Serbian ethnic patterns

The present-day ethnic pattern of the Serbs living in Hungary can be reconstructed based on the last census carried out in 2001. Although it was not obligatory to answer questions referring to 'ethnicity', it was possible to give a multiple (maximum three) choice of answers. With regard to the situation of the mainly sporadically living minorities in Hungary, who are subject to an increasing assimilation pressure, this census provides questions – among the usual ones asking about mother tongue and ethnicity – finding out about language spoken within the family and with friends and also about cultural affiliation with ethnic minorities.

The summary data (Figure 3) show that the least number of Serbs (3388 persons) considers Serbian their mother tongue, which could be mostly related to their advanced linguistic assimilation. Possibly due to their assimilation most Serbs (5279 persons) do not use their mother tongue, but still kept some of the Serbian cultural heritage. Comparing these data to those of the censuses carried out in 1980 and 1990 it shows that a considerably bigger number of Serbs consider ethnic Serbs (3814 persons) than those who chose Serbian as their mother tongue (Figure 4).

According to the latest data the 3388 Serbian native speakers live rather scattered in Hungary, but mainly in their old settlements. This assumes a 14% increase compared to the data of the last century. This is due to the above mentioned possibility for multiple choice answers and not to real demographical processes. The 5% threshold is reached only in Lórév (on Csepel Island), where the 175 Serbs form the absolute majority of the population. Their share in the population exceed 1% in 10 settlements (Szigetcsép, Deszk, Battonya, Hercegszántó, Újszentiván, Medina, Lippó, Magyarcsanád, Vécse, Magyarbóly). Their biggest communities live in Szeged (299 persons) and Battonya (225 persons). There are six settlements with



■ **Figure 3** Changes in numbers of Serbian population in the last twenty years * according to the qualifications of the commune councils

more than 100 persons, out of which two are in Budapest (7th and 2nd districts).

The chart based on the census data also shows in what ratio the listed Serbs or people of Serbian origin live in towns and villages. According to the data the majority reside in towns which means contact with the majority Hungarian population, therefore they are more exposed to the increasing assimilation pressure.

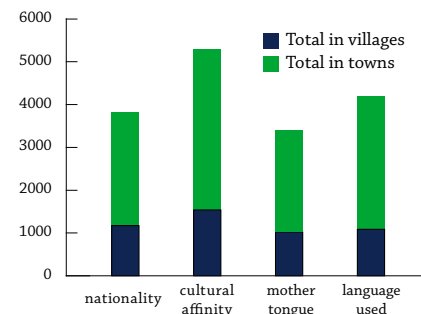
According to data after World War II and especially from the last twenty years it can be stated that the linguistic assimilation of the Serbs living in Hungary is at a rather advanced state. It can also be established that the most settlements with Serbian population can be found in Baranya and Tolna counties. Due to the size of these settlements, the share of the Serbs in the population is lower than, for example, in the bigger villages of the earlier mentioned other two territories with Serbian populations. (This is especially true for the settlements in the Tisza-Maros region.)

Beside the official census data, the degree of their political activity can also provide information on the number of Serbs and the territorial structure of their settlements. This mainly shows in the existence and the type of minority self-governments formed. (Figure 5).

It was the third time in 2002 - after 1994 and 1998 - that minorities living in Hungary², including the Serbs, had the opportunity to exercise their rights and elect their own minority self-government bodies in accordance with the Act LXXVII of 1993. Through these official bodies they can assert their interests and deal with issues of concern. According to the law, based on the weight of the proportion of the minority group in concern, minority self-governments³ can be formed indirectly or directly. Minority self-governments on the national level can be formed by minority representatives within 120 days following the elections of self-governments.

The self-government elections of 2002 are considered to be successful for the Serbs. 43 self-government bodies were formed, which is only one less than what the Romanians - whose population in Hungary is al-

most double - could achieve. The Serbian minority self-governments were set up mainly along the Danube, in the Tisza-Maros region and East Baranya county, these territories are basically their traditional settlement areas. It is worth mentioning that in 16 districts in Budapest the Serbs managed to form self-governments.

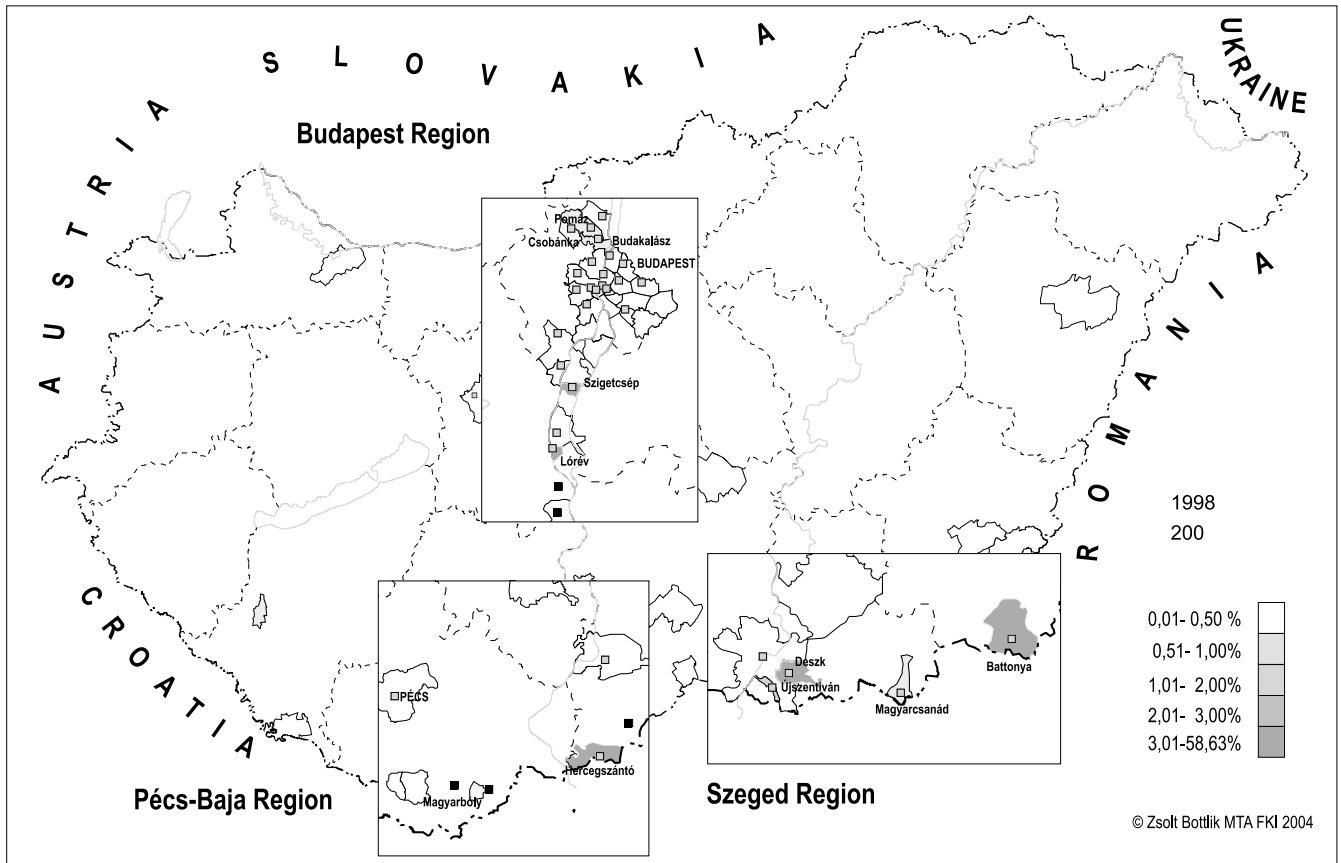


■ **Figure 4** Number of Serbian inhabitants in present-day Hungary in 2001

It can be stated that with the growth of the Serbian population in Hungary, their political activity has been intensifying, since even in settlements where – according to census data - their number and ratio were not significant there still was a demand for setting up self-government bodies (Kocsis, K. 2003). Therefore self-governments seem to be a means of expressing their identity and cultural affinity, the importance of which is crucial since although the Serbs are definitely a growing population in Hungary, their linguistic assimilation and the regression of their ethnic areas have been obvious even 10 years before the last census.

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■ **Figure 5** The ratio of Serbs (2001) and their minority self-governments (2002) in present-day Hungary;
 Source: Census data 2001 (ethnicity - *nemzetiség*) and *A Magyar Köztársaság helységnévkönyve (Gazetteer of the Hungarian Republic) 1st January, 2003*, Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Budapest

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Endnotes

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² The law applies to the 13 autochthons minorities (i.e. those non-Hungarian minorities who have been living in Hungary for at least a hundred years, such as Germans, Romas, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Romanians, Slovenes, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Poles, Greeks, Armenians and Bulgarians) and therefore it does not apply to the newly established communities with significant population such as the Arabs, Russians and Chinese.

³ Local minority self-government bodies can be formed where more than half of the representatives in the body are elected as candidates of a minority group. Indirectly formed minority self-government can be set up if at least 30% of the local government body was elected as minority representatives and they can form a local government body of at least 3 members representing each minority. According to the law, directly elected minority governments can be established as well by those representatives who collected signatures from at least 5 electors. After the collection of 50 or more valid notes in settlements with less than 1300 inhabitants three elected minority representatives are allowed to form a minority self-government. In settlements with a population number between 1,300 and 10,000 it is five.