




Top-down and bottom-up Magyarization in multiethnic Banat towns under dualist Hungary (1867–1914)

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines entanglements between aspects of linguistic Magyarization in four towns of the Banat under Dualist Hungary, two of which are today in Romania and two in Serbia. After outlining local power relations and the shifting relations to central and county authorities, the author assesses the spread of Hungarian language skills in the urban population and charts out the evolution of language policies. This reveals that local decision-makers had to walk a fine line between the expectations of a monolingual norm and their home-grown elites' limited competence in the state language. While the four towns continued to project a multilingual image to their citizenries and their elected bodies continued to rely on the local languages, government agencies had by the end of the era enforced the use of Hungarian in everyday bureaucratic routines. Special focus is placed on German-speaking Catholic elites, who often resonated with Hungarian state nationalism, but typically without full cognizance of its linguistic consequences.

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Straddled between today's Romania and Serbia, the Banat featured the most staggering linguistic mosaic in Europe West of Russia prior to the Second World War. The British travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor was right in quipping that a chameleon placed on its coloured population map would explode.¹ This complex patchwork came about through immigration from all points of the compass after Habsburg troops had reconquered the region from the Ottomans in the early eighteenth century. In 1867, Hungary got far-reaching autonomy within the Habsburg Empire in the constitutional framework called Dualism, and the Banat became reunited under Hungarian rule, as its previously militarized southern stripe was joined to the rest. Independent Hungarian government policies, however, soon took an increasingly nationalizing turn, and this was destined to stir up spite in a region where native Hungarians made up just around 10% of the population, and those lived disproportionately along the western edges.

This paper is about how Roman Catholic and Orthodox (in small part also Uniate) local elites in four towns of the Banat tackled expectations of linguistic and symbolic Magyarization under Dualist Hungary. It will identify the agents in the process and the strategies and room for manoeuvre available to local elites, in particular in their language policies. As a first step, I find it important to unravel the facets of this notion. Since its political legacies have turned

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Magyarization into a taboo word in some arenas and an ideological cudgel in others, the existing literature is rarely helpful and sometimes outright deceptive. Thankfully, the well-known distinction between the meanings of the analogous contemporary notion of Russification can create some clarity around this other embattled term. The close match between the Russian and Hungarian concepts does not mean that I want to draw a parallel with the late Romanov Empire, however. If a comparison is implied here, that is the potentially more relevant one with the better-studied, divergent developments of contemporary Austria.

For one thing, Russification was *obrusenie*, derived from the intransitive verb *obrusit'*, which refers to the voluntary process of adopting Russian language and Russian ways of living, with connotations of the unplanned. More than in the Romanov Empire, adopting Hungarian language in daily life with the outlook of turning oneself and one's family into Magyars was the zeitgeist among the middle classes in nineteenth-century Hungary, especially in German-speaking Christian and Jewish families. This self-Magyarizing drive emerged well before 1867. It took the shape of a social movement with Magyarizing associations, which usually boasted a healthy contingent of born-and-bred as against would-be Magyars and, under Hungarian rule, established points of contact with the state bureaucracy. Grassroots activism could then latch onto administrative Magyarization, which Edward C. Thaden sees as another side of the concept – introducing Hungarian language (in writing and speech), symbols and unitary rules into various institutional settings. This could involve bottom-up and top-down measures depending on whether associations or autonomous bodies shifted to Hungarian on their own initiative or officials on the government payroll made such steps in their orbits, forcing the public and lower-level administration into line.

Thirdly, through Hungarian schools and institutions, the political pundits of the day hoped to impose Hungarian language and culture on the people. This aspect, embodied in discourses and policy designs and expressed by the transitive word *obrusevanie* in Russian, was the flip side of *obrusenie* in the first sense: it also aimed at transforming people's private sphere, but through external agency and from the top down. Such plans could cover a range of possible goals, from spreading knowledge of the language to forced assimilation; however, since both Magyar and minority nationalists understood societal bilingualism as an intermediary stage between two monolingualisms, these two extremes differed in degree rather than in kind.²

Magyar politicians and commentators probably made wider use of the term Magyarization than their Russian peers did of its pendant, occasionally also distancing themselves from it.³ Inhabitants of core-Hungary, where everyday life was in fact hurtling towards monolingualism, were regularly treated to overblown reports from the non-Magyar peripheries about the forward march of Hungarian.⁴ When officials seemingly acted on the belief that public life went on in Hungarian over the entire expanse of contemporary Hungary, that could be the result of such illusory appearances.

The dominant ideology attached talismanic significance to linguistic behaviour and language repertoires, especially the knowledge of Hungarian, which Hungarian censuses would eagerly measure and track. Despite many examples to the contrary, upper-class Magyars insisted on viewing proficiency in Hungarian as a sign of political loyalty, at least until the turn of the century. They were split, however, as to how to assess ignorance in it when it came without a defiant posture.

The dichotomy of top-down, potentially coercive *obrusevanie* or *russifikatsia* (*magyarosítás*) and bottom-up, self-induced *obrusenie* (*magyarosodás*) can also subsume a contrast between intentions, as evidenced in discourse and behind policies, and outcomes. Urban families Magyarized themselves by the tens of thousands and the knowledge of Hungarian made inroads among some segments of the peasantry, partly independent of government policy measures. But even the growth of Hungarian bilinguals fell far behind initial hopes, to say nothing about linguistic assimilation, and administrative Magyarization sparked tensions even where people responded positively.⁵

One distinction needs to be made regarding the Catholic and Jewish, German-speaking middle class, which made up a large segment of the urban population in the Banat. The inconspicuousness of German activism outside of Transylvania earned them some benevolence from the Magyarizing regime. Sometimes pictured as a model minority, they reported soaring rates of Hungarian language knowledge and an increasing number of them declared Hungarian mother tongue at censuses. Their occasional poor command of the language was sooner attributed to conservatism – to be interpreted as language loyalty in most cases – than any hostile political stance. Added to that should be the class-based solidarity of local state officials and other middle-class Magyar men who intermingled with German burghers, and the cultural authority of German, which far more of them understood than other minority languages. They could put up with the boom in German-language newspapers in the Banat as long as these papers remained acquiescent to Hungarian state nationalism. And acquiescent most of them were.⁶

But in general, the Magyar political elite saw it as a priority to secure its cultural hegemony among the ‘trouser-wearing’ classes and do away with separate minority elites. Educated people of non-Magyar birth were supposed to meld into Hungarian society and by no means were they to channel modern culture to their kin constituencies, bypassing the Hungarian intermediary. Just like in other nationalizing states, Magyar decision-makers were prone to frame administrative Magyarization as a defensive action against separatist tendencies. They liked to imagine that a good knowledge of Hungarian was indispensable for white-collar jobs in Hungary and often read recourse to a non-dominant language as a marked choice carrying a political message. Then, the symbolic stakes of language choice in public lends particular interest to the continuing sway of local languages in the political life of Banat towns.

Local autonomy under pressure

For most or all of the period, Lugoj/Lugosch/Lugos and Caransebeş/Karánsebes/Karansebesch had majority Romanian–German, while Werschetz/Vršac/Versec/Vârșeț and Weißkirchen/Bela Crkva/Biserica Albă/Fehértemplom German–Serb citizenries (See Table 1). They were sleepy backwaters that owed their status to their administrative, commercial, financial and service functions, and only Lugoj of the four developed modern industry to speak of and registered a steep rise in population. Just like their hinterlands, many of their citizens were engaged in agriculture, with the Germans of Werschetz and Weißkirchen drawing most of their income from wine-growing. Yet, they were home to urban elites with different cultural and political outlooks from those of their rural surroundings. More literate, integrated into the money economy and plugged into the news of the world, they were also more accessible for Magyarization in both senses, as *obrusenie* and *obrusevanie*.

Table 1. Distribution of the population by mother tongue.

	1880	1890	1900	1910
Caransebeş	4764	5464	6497	7999
Romanian	2538	2981	3305	3916
German	1552	1915	2028	2419
Hungarian	302	379	875	1413
Lugoj	11287	12489	16126	19818
Romanian	4852	5277	5564	6227
German	4533	5152	6241	6151
Hungarian	1355	1807	3932	6875
Weißkirchen	9845	9041	10849	11524
German	6644	6040	6245	6062
Serbian	1559	1497	1620	1994
Hungarian	457	574	1571	1213
Romanian	674	670	869	1806
Werschetz	22329	21859	25199	27370
German	12354	12154	13387	13556
Serbian	7382	7712	8112	8602
Hungarian	968	1254	2635	3890

Local governments in Austria-Hungary enjoyed broad autonomy by the standards of contemporary Europe. But in the two halves of the empire, the system of local governance contained different rules that skewed representation in favour of the wealthy. In Austria, only a minority of grown-up men could vote at local elections and they were divided into ‘curias’ based on the amount of tax they paid.⁷ The Hungarian system, meanwhile, reserved half the seats in local assemblies for the biggest taxpayers; only the other half consisted of elected members. In general, this was more than offset by a more inclusive local franchise than either its Austrian counterpart or the voting qualifications in Hungarian parliamentary and county elections. In the villages and the majority of towns, all residents and corporate entities had the right to vote (women and minors through their husband or guardian) if they had paid property tax locally for two years.⁸

Not so in the four towns under scrutiny. For one thing, there was the higher category of ‘cities with municipal rights’ (*törvényhatósági jogú város*), which operated on the restrictive parliamentary franchise. Here belonged Werschetz. Caransebeş and Weißkirchen, in turn, were two of the 47 towns where – a fact entirely overlooked by historians – the cryptic § 5 of Act XX of 1876 had arbitrarily restricted the number of voters. Most of these places had minority majorities, which suggests that one of the legislators’ goals was to overrepresent the relatively prosperous local Magyars. Finally, it is unclear to me how the narrower franchise was extended to the municipal elections of Lugoj, but it had already been in force before the town regained its urban status in 1889.⁹

The civil war that ravaged the Banat in 1848–49 found the four towns on opposite sides by twos. On the one hand, the Romanians and Germans of Lugoj and the Germans of Werschetz, two towns re-annexed to Hungary in the eighteenth century, paid allegiance to the Hungarian government, and the latter even sought protection from the revolutionary Honvéd Army against border-guard militias. On the other, Caransebeş and Weißkirchen were regiment headquarters in the autonomous Military Frontier and became nests of loyalist insurgency against the Hungarian rebels. The pro-Magyar stand of the Germans North of the Military Frontier matured into a long-term commitment, as they had reason to feel pushed to the side under the absolutist regime of the 1850s.¹⁰ In the 1860s, they came to admire the tranquil political wisdom of Ferenc Deák,

the broker of the 1867 Austro-Hungarian compromise.¹¹ This much was by and large true for German-speaking urban elites in Hungary in general. From the late 1870s on, Banat 'Swabians' in particular became the staunchest support base for Albert Apponyi's moderate opposition party.¹² As shall be suggested, Apponyi's Catholic public persona and his call for robust national institutions may have appealed to them more than his firm espousal of linguistic Magyarization (*obrusevanie*).

In the minds of Magyar opinion leaders, their opposite stands in 1848–49 set German-speakers of the former civilian Banat against inhabitants of the former Military Border. One-time border guards embodied everything that was heinous for Hungarian nationalists: they had fought against the revolutionary army and felt loyal to the emperor rather than Hungary. In fact, although generations of military administration had entrenched a distinct border-guard identity with strong dynastic overtones, I will suggest that this dichotomy played out in a less clear-cut fashion after 1867.¹³

The political choices and identity patterns of Orthodox elites are in particular hard to generalize between any two of these towns. In contrast to Germans, rigid confessional boundaries separated Serbian and Romanian-speakers from Magyars, and at best a few Serb priests made symbolic overtures to Hungarian within the precincts of the church. The Orthodox church hierarchy became divided along linguistic lines in the 1860s, with the Werschetz bishopric remaining in Serb hands and a new Romanian one being set up in Caransebeş. Orthodox elites created a separate associational sphere that went beyond confessional matters to include gentlemen's clubs and banks. Nonetheless, the hegemony of German held its grip on middle-class Romanians and Serbs. The former would often speak the language between themselves outside as much as within the former Military Frontier, where its knowledge had been imposed by the military regime, and both Serb and Romanian families regularly sent their children to German schools.¹⁴

A layer of Romanian craftsmen and merchants and its county seat status made Lugoj the centre of the Romanian national movement in the Banat.¹⁵ Arguably, its Romanian Greek Catholic bishopric played a more modest role. Organized as a missionary outpost for a creed that was a recent transplant to the region, it gained relatively few converts during its first 50 years of existence, including in the town.¹⁶ Lugoj was composed of a Romanian and a German neighbourhood on the two banks of a river. The local Romanian intelligentsia, still seeking an alliance with Hungarian nationalists in 1848, turned confrontational, as the latter secured their power and set out to dispense with unwanted competition. The fault lines of ethnic politics were none too rigid, however, and public figures found ways to square pragmatism with Romanian sympathies. Take the notary public Mihai Bésán, for instance, the son of a Romanian priest who came to fortune through his marriage into a landowning, Magyarophile Orthodox family. His support for local Hungarian cultural ventures drew aspersions of 'renegadism'. Nevertheless he won an award from the Romanian Academy for translating the anonymous medieval chronicle that made the first mention of Vlachs in Hungary, and he teamed up with a nationalist journalist in 1903 to describe a Cyrillic inscription on bark as the earliest Romanian literary document.

Until 1889, Lugoj was a county seat without an official urban status. In 1881, the district administrator moved to introduce Hungarian town assembly minutes through the back door, but his scheme foundered on the vigilance of Romanian council members.¹⁷ Then in 1886, a group backed by the Magyar district administrator, Árpád Marsovszky, put the

idea of applying for town status on the table. It became clear that the county leadership was pursuing a hidden agenda when the introduction of Hungarian as the third language of the minutes, still voted down in July that year, was made a requirement for the promotion.¹⁸

At that juncture, the county subprefect described the town council as acting under the influence of a clique of Romanian 'extremists', and expressed hope that he could get a 'patriotic' majority elected by gerrymandering the electoral wards.¹⁹ The ministry dismissed a minority appeal against the request for town status, and Hungarian became the third language of the minutes under the new statutes. This left the town hall with no excuse to reject Hungarian rescripts, as it had done previously. But the subprefect had to compromise on its initial plans, and the electoral wards were left untouched.²⁰ Neither could county potentates create majorities to their liking, although they may have raised the local franchise for that very purpose.²¹

The district administrator Marsovszky was elected town mayor in 1889, an office he held until 1911. Upon his retirement, the Romanian half of the assembly voted into office the chief clerk Dimitrie Florescu. By that time, the linguistic make-up of the town assembly no longer reflected that of the town population; between 1880 and 1910, the statistical number of Magyars had increased fivefold, while the entire population had only doubled. During 1912, Florescu assigned an ad hoc committee to redistrict the town and give the enlarged Deutsch-Lugosch its fair share of mandates. They divided up the new streets on the edge of Deutsch-Lugosch between the existing outer-Lugojul Român wards. This map, combined with the placing of voting precincts on the Deutsch-Lugosch side, put Romanians at a disadvantage, especially that with two out of the town's three bridges washed out in the spring flooding, Lugojul Român voters had to take a detour across the centre to get to the polls.²² Further, Hungarian parties also ran jointly. The confluence of these factors secured a solid majority for German and Magyar assembly members at the autumn elections, for the first time in history. The new majority elected an ethnic Romanian former county official as the new mayor.²³

Caransebeş became another Romanian political stronghold thanks to its bishopric and the Caransebeş Community of Property, which managed the estate previously belonging to the Romanian Banat Border Regiment. General Traian Doda represented the constituency in the Budapest parliament between 1873 and 1888 despite his alleged lack of Hungarian, a precondition for standing for election.²⁴ In 1882, he presented an unsuccessful petition for the establishment of a Romanian *Gymnasium* at the cost of the Community of Property, over which he presided. In protest against the rigged 1887 elections, he announced he would be staying away from parliament meetings. His moderately worded letter to his voters stirred an all-out onslaught from the Hungarian press and earned him a two-year prison sentence for incitement, from which he was promptly pardoned by the monarch.²⁵

In the meantime, the transition team of mostly Magyar, unelected officials that governed the former regiment territory did a poor job of endearing Hungarian rule to the hearts of locals. The profiteering of this provisional county leadership was too much for the Budapest government, which moved to dissolve the county and merge it with its neighbour.²⁶ Replicating the Lugoj pattern, the supervising county administrator then became the first Magyar mayor of Caransebeş in 1892, defeating a Romanian candidate.²⁷ He passed the office onto Constantin Burdia, a Romanian political boss affiliated with the governing party.

Burdia's circle, which included local German leaders, kept municipal affairs under its thumb for the rest of the era. Conciliatory with Hungarian state nationalism, they introduced Hungarian into the town's administration and diverted funds from the

Community of Property to establish a Hungarian state Gymnasium.²⁸ Allegedly, Burdia stood to profit handsomely from his political services.²⁹ That said, he and his Romanian acolytes were obliged to deliver progress and fashion themselves as ‘good Romanians’ and pious Orthodox to be accepted as true servants of their community.³⁰

The higher legal standing of Werschetz entailed tighter government control via centrally appointed prefects (*főispán*). The relations between governments and town assemblies were relaxed as long as the prefects were ethnic Serbs. Elemér Pálffy, however, the son-in-law of the ultra-chauvinist Dezső Bánffy’s minister of the interior, rode roughshod over local sensibilities as the first non-Serb prefect in the 1890s. His misdeeds included defunding Serb schools, pitting Serbs against Swabians, refusing to answer inconvenient questions in the town assembly and trying to provoke the mayor into a duel.³¹ In a series of articles, the acclaimed writer, hometown boy and MP for Werschetz Ferenc Herczeg warned against alienating Banat Swabians by impatience and excessive measures, but the damage had been done.³² Such a rampage by an adherent of Bánffy could not fail to trigger a backlash against Magyarization – as *obrusevanie*, and consequently also as *obrusenie*. Heralding the change was a statue of Queen Elisabeth adorned with a German-only inscription, and it peaked with the foundation of the Bürgerpartei, which put in its platform the unrestricted use of German in official life, schools and the church.³³ The Bürgerpartei failed to seize the momentum to take control of the town hall, but it remained a force to be reckoned with in local politics.

What the Bürgerpartei could not achieve occurred in Weißkirchen, where the concerted efforts of local elites successfully held back state and county incursion for two decades. With first-hand knowledge of the town, Herczeg stressed its special ties with the monarch:

[The town is] not even half the size of Werschetz, but it has its division headquarters, a cavalry and an infantry regiment, a state Gymnasium, an appeals court, and many other public institutions that the good Werschetz burghers fretted about with yearning and envy. Even a demoted Serb patriarch resided in the city, in sulking retirement. All these blessings, with the exception of the patriarch, were due to the paternal care of Francis Joseph. His Majesty, during the dissolution of the Military Frontier, saw to it that his beloved border guards did not suffer loss. [...] There was a kind of cordial dislike between the two cities.³⁴

Judging by reports from the 1870s and 1890s, however, its past did not predestine Weißkirchen to openly defy state nationalism as long as it remained within proper and moderate bounds. As in other cities of the Banat, so in Weißkirchen, German, Serb and Romanian gentlemen took membership and even assumed leadership duties in the local Hungarian club, where they could read Hungarian journals and listen to Hungarian lectures.³⁵ Presumably, their sense of loyalty and obedience also demanded that they should accept the status quo that received the emperor’s blessing.

It was in the 1890s, amid the national euphoria of the Millennial Celebrations, that local society broke out in revolt against official Hungary. The public turned away from the Hungarian club, now denounced as an instrument of Magyarization (*obrusevanie*).³⁶ The outreach of Transylvanian Saxon activists, who had settled in the town and funnelled money into kindling a German national movement, certainly contributed to the rupture. The mayor was himself a Transylvanian Saxon.³⁷ But the fact that the message fell on fertile ground suggests that the home-grown German intelligentsia that had previously supported the ruling Liberals or Apponyi’s moderate opposition had grown disaffected with Hungarian nationalism. Joining forces with Serb and Romanian voters, they roundly

defeated the county's men at local elections, and after the Transylvanian Saxon mayor died, they even elected a successor on a Romanian nationalist ticket.³⁸

Then in 1907, the county administration pressed into office its long-time candidate, Lajos Dsida, who had served as the chief clerk under the two previous mayors.³⁹

Political tensions came to a head in 1908, when Dsida ostentatiously remained seated (as befitted a proper Hungarian patriot) while the imperial anthem was being played to honour a visiting Habsburg archduke. The assembly duly passed a vote of non-confidence.⁴⁰ Dsida attempted suicide, but remained mayor until 1912, and was succeeded by a former county official.⁴¹

The spread of Hungarian

Not much Hungarian was heard spoken in these towns during the 1870s.⁴² Its knowledge and use progressed slowly, via multiple channels. These were essentially the same as in most German-speaking cities of Dualist Hungary. The best-established language acquisition method, child exchange, consisted of sending one's 10-year-old son to live a year in a Hungarian-speaking town. This practice tapered off as local schools were Magyarized, which was at once German burghers' safest bet for acquiring Hungarian and a measure intended to demonstrate their loyalty. The words that one Sebastian Kössl from Werschetz flung at Bürgerpartei stalwarts in 1907 are suggestive in this regard and typical of a generation of philo-Magyars of German extraction. He regretted not knowing Hungarian (debates about future Magyarization went on in German), but insisted that his children must learn it.⁴³

The predominantly Neolog Jewry of the region was the first to introduce Hungarian into its schools. In the 1870s, the Romanian district administrator still enrolled his son in the Jewish school of Lugoj as the only place where he stood a fair chance of picking up both German and Hungarian.⁴⁴ State-run schools, like the Weißkirchen Gymnasium (meant to become a powerhouse of Magyarization) and the Werschetz Hauptrealschule (*főreáliskola*), were to operate in Hungarian from scratch. In theory, at least, for the Caransebeş Bürgerschule (*polgári iskola*) taught in German and Romanian for five years after its inception, and the German medium of instruction was tolerated for 14 years in Lugoj until the old, Hungarian-less teachers retired.⁴⁵ The Lugoj Catholic Gymnasium transitioned to Hungarian progressively between 1867 and 1874, and the Werschetz municipality introduced the language into its primary schools in 1893.⁴⁶

Should one credit schools with too much influence in disseminating Hungarian, however, a local historian of Werschetz argues that children's last day in school may have also been the last time they used the language.⁴⁷ Active competences could fade away quickly after teenagers had returned into an environment where the language was barely spoken. Herczeg even questioned that Swabian boys acquired solid Hungarian while attending school in Hungarian-speaking Szeged, where they boarded among themselves.⁴⁸

Newcomer Magyars also brought some momentum for the language. There were not as many of them as the census figures suggest; many German-speaking locals identified as Magyars and thus contributed to their statistical growth. The former intermingled with the latter in cafés and clubs, which provided a laid-back setting for developing the habit of speaking Hungarian, but likely also of improving one's German. Unlike Romanians and Serbs, Magyars emphatically did not aim at a parallel civil society, since Hungarian was meant to be the unmarked code for all and sundry. In that way, Hungarian

associations aspired to become rallying spots for local society at large. Catholic elites gradually gave up on the institutional use of German. In Lugoj, the German choral society merged with its Magyar counterpart in 1902, while the new theatre building inaugurated in 1900 received a trilingual inscription on its façade after a few years of wavering; it went on to house no German performances.⁴⁹

The Catholic Church joined in and sometimes championed this trend by handing over its schools to the municipalities and gradually shifting to Hungarian the parts of the liturgy not reserved for Latin. The Werschetz church witnessed a first in 1885 when, at the ‘inspiration’ of the school inspector, participants at the student Mass sang in Hungarian. They converted to Hungarian-only singing after half a year.⁵⁰ Occasional Hungarian sermons began in 1887 and prayer meetings in 1894.⁵¹ The Weißkirchen parish lagged behind not just Werschetz, but the general trend, too, by introducing Hungarian sermons every second week only some time between 1905 and 1910.⁵²

‘Associations for the spreading of Hungarian’ received a great deal of coverage in the news, giving the false impression that they operated regularly and commanded large memberships. The opposite is closer to the truth. In fact, the longest-running such venture in any of these towns was a one-man affair by a Hauptrealschule-teacher in Werschetz, who also put out the local Hungarian paper. As the engine behind the association, he raised money for Hungarian institutions, organized child exchange and lobbied for introducing Hungarian into churches, schools, journals and on street signs.⁵³

Consecutive censuses registered a surge in the knowledge of Hungarian, with native Germans far ahead of the rest. Mapping the increase onto age, German men in their twenties recorded 45.8% and those in their sixties 16.8% at the 1910 census in Werschetz, for which data are available (See [Table 2](#)).⁵⁴ Narrative sources, however, qualify the declarations behind these figures as containing more than a bit of a symbolic element. Returning to his home town in 1878 after attending high school in Temeswar and Szeged, Ferenc Herczeg (then Herzog) still found no match for his Hungarian fluency in Werschetz society.⁵⁵ Since the ministry would not allow another medium than Hungarian in apprentice schools, which few apprentices understood in Werschetz, the town assembly rather backed off from establishing one in 1907.⁵⁶ Even on the eve of the First World War, the teacher supervising the Hauptrealschule’s student literary society found members’ limited Hungarian to be a major obstacle for achieving higher standards.⁵⁷ Somewhat ironically then, more Werschetz Germans spoke better Hungarian in the inter-war, Yugoslav period than any time under Hungarian rule.⁵⁸ But if anything, they still outstripped Weißkirchen, where the German and Serbian-speaking locals serving on the jury relied on the interpreter to deliberate in Hungarian, although a declared knowledge of the language was a prerequisite for entering the jury list.⁵⁹

Table 2. Knowledge of Hungarian as a second language (in percentage of the non-Magyar population).

	1880	1890	1900	1910
Caransebeş			24.8	35.7
Lugoj			32.5	45.1
Weißkirchen			28.5	36.5
Werschetz				
Germans	6.0	12.9	23.9	34.7
Serbs	3.5	5.7	12.9	19.3

Linguistic policies local and central

There was a distinct set of tasks that local governments were to perform in Hungarian, since apart from their functions strictly derived from local autonomy, they also represented the lowest level of state administration, in coordination with government agencies. These tasks included updating the lists of taxpayers and taxable items, collecting tax returns, drafting lists of conscripts, providing information on artisans applying for business licences and diseased animals and later keeping the civil registry. It was the increase of such duties that had put everyday paperwork on a Hungarian track by the end of the era, ultimately even in Weißkirchen.⁶⁰

In a curious contrast, the locally spoken languages remained recognized and highly visible in speech and writing in the elected bodies of all four towns, on a par with Hungarian or overshadowing it. This discrepancy led to awkward conflicts between the two spheres, as town leaders often did not understand the documents that employees were churning out daily.

Prefects appointed to Werschetz could do little else but reconcile themselves with multilingual debates since local patricians who had grown up before the 1890s had at best a tenuous grasp of Hungarian. Even the rumbustious Pálffy recoiled from trying to upset the status quo in the town assembly, although he was the first prefect of Werschetz not to understand Serbian. Assembly meetings went on and were minuted in German and Serbian, all items on the agenda were announced in both languages and the members who knew Hungarian accommodated their speeches to the majority.⁶¹ Around the turn of the century, one of the rare Hungarian speeches, an hour long no less, was delivered by the first Romanian elected into the assembly, the lawyer Olteanu. He chose the state language as a neutral code (in the given context) for his maiden speech, which was anything but politically conformist in tenor.⁶²

Since no clerk knew Hungarian at the Lugoj town hall until 1886, they inescapably wrote all outgoing communication in German or Romanian. Sometimes a recipient town asked them for a Hungarian translation or sent their letter to the ministry to get it translated.⁶³ Then, thanks to the foresight of concerned assembly members, the town statutes of 1887 declared residents' right to address municipal departments in any locally widespread language and, as long as the matter did not fall under state competency, to receive an answer in the same idiom. This prescient measure was a rare case in contemporary Hungary where language choice became subject to explicit local regulation: usually, local majorities chose to skirt the issue out of caution.⁶⁴

The town hall in fact retained the outside trappings of its trilingual policies and continued to release certificates and acquittances in Romanian and German after its internal administration had shifted to Hungarian.⁶⁵ The town statutes of 1886 established trilingual minutes, but the German version was later discontinued. Simultaneous minutes alternated between Romanian and Hungarian for lack of scribes.⁶⁶ All items on the agenda were announced and explained, and the reports of the mayor printed out in Hungarian and Romanian.⁶⁷ Mayor Florescu still chaired town meetings in Romanian in the 1910s, as was brought up against him resignedly by his opponents.⁶⁸ Announcements and notices to the public carried texts in all three languages.⁶⁹ The Hungarian street names were painted alongside the Romanian (in Lugojul Român), with the German ones (in Deutsch-Lugosch) starting in 1891.⁷⁰

The internal administration of Caransebeş was carried out in German until 1876, but in 1873, the town council declared Romanian the official language of its minutes and instituted Hungarian for contact with state authorities and answering petitions drafted in that language. Such a resolution was renewed in 1888, and again in 1905.⁷¹ The mayor, the town prosecutor and the police chief had already submitted yearly reports in Hungarian alongside Romanian during the first 13 years of the twentieth century. In 1903, a Hungarian inscription dislodged the Romanian one on the front of the new town hall, leaving a place for Romanian on the lateral façade.⁷² As Mayor Bordan spoke poor Romanian, even town council meetings partially shifted to Hungarian on his watch after 1907, although most members were Romanians and the minutes were kept in Romanian.⁷³

The Budapest government had enforced Hungarian correspondence on local governments by the 1890s, but in the early period, it had still complied with § 21 of the 1868 Nationalities Act and tried to accommodate linguistic diversity. In 1882, the Hungarian Ministry of Defence called on Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza to instruct the Weißkirchen town leadership that they should write to the government in Hungarian. Tisza ordered an investigation to find out the language of town assembly minutes. After learning that the assembly had voted to retain German the previous year—‘until the time when the larger expansion of Hungarian makes it possible to introduce the state language in the town hall’⁷⁴ — Tisza resolved that this circumstance justified the town’s usage of German.⁷⁵ The future that the decision anticipated was slow in coming, and Mayor Dsida still vowed at his inauguration in 1907 to defend the German language of the minutes.⁷⁶ Town meetings took place in German, and after the 1898 law of locality names had only allowed each town to keep one version of its name for official purposes, all but one member came down in favour of the German name.⁷⁷

In Lugoj, the entire internal administration had shifted to Hungarian by the turn of the century.⁷⁸ Under the leadership of Burdia’s faction in Caransebeş, the pre-eminent role that Romanian had enjoyed as the official language gradually turned fictitious in internal administration. There, the transition to Hungarian included a period at the turn of the century when each official used his preferred language in writing, except when addressing a fellow official with a limited passive repertoire – like the municipal steward, who apparently did not understand Hungarian. Asset registers, financial accounts and other numerical records carried bi- or trilingual headings, while office correspondence, internal records on town-hall employees and so on were sometimes in the one and sometimes in the other language.⁷⁹

It was an irony of the system that the lower category of ‘towns with settled councils’ (*rendezett tanácsú város*), into which three of the four towns fell, guaranteed more freedom for elected leaders to enact (as a rule, implicit) independent policies. This also applied to communication with the public and personnel matters, where towns with settled councils may have found it easier to pursue their own line. In Caransebeş around the turn of the century, new employees would still sign a Romanian oath, while in Lugoj, a job call from 1901 expected policemen to be fluent in all three local languages.⁸⁰

In contrast, Werschetz burghers already bore the brunt of government representatives’ greater say in hiring decisions before the turn of the century, as they started to receive Hungarian notifications from the town hall. There was a widening communication gap between the Hungarian-less city elite and town-hall employees who could not or would not respond to them in German or Serbian.⁸¹ Early in 1899, the assembly passed a resolution on

hiring two translators, who would translate letters to the public to German and Serbian.⁸² Accommodating the language of paper communication to the recipient was a feasible task that worked in towns of similar size in Transylvania, as it had worked earlier in Werschetz, too. Mayor Seemayer, however, likely foreseeing the refusal from the government, called the plan impracticable in the assembly.⁸³ Rushing to take the onus from the ministry, Magyarophile assembly members then filed an appeal against the decision.⁸⁴ The ministry resorted to delaying tactic, but the changing assembly majorities showed remarkable determination on the matter.⁸⁵ Finally, after more than eight years of stalling, the ministry notified Werschetz that they did not approve of the translators, with the reasoning that the German and Serbian minutes of town assembly meetings made translations unnecessary. They further deployed their staple argument that officials could not be forced to know an 'extra' language, which made remarkably little sense here.⁸⁶ With this ruling, the government openly sabotaged the execution of § 21 of the 1868 Nationalities Act: 'The communal officials are bound, in their intercourse with persons belonging to the commune, to use the language of the latter'.⁸⁷

Conclusions

This article has looked at administrative Magyarization and its discontents against the twofold background of central expectations and policies (*obrusevanie*, with an analogy from Russian history) and the often ambiguous and wavering local support for official state nationalism (*obrusenie*). The Banat region featured exceptional diversity, but the three-way constellation made up of German, an underprivileged language and Hungarian was also typical for contemporary Upper Hungary, today's Slovakia, and the historically Saxon cities of Transylvania. It is harder to generalize for other contexts, like the majority of ethnically Romanian areas, where towns tended to be Hungarian speaking.

It is customary to put Magyarization in Dualist Hungary in stark contrast with its twin polity Austria (Cisleithania), where the central power worked to counterbalance the policies of linguistic homogenization that nationalist elites pursued relentlessly in the provinces and municipalities. First, the Hungarian Nationalities Act of 1868 declared – however vague – linguistic rights in the official realm, but from early on, the government and its proxies routinely violated its provisions. Although empirical studies are few and far between, they would not invalidate this conventional wisdom. What they are unlikely to show is that Magyarization was the unstoppable steamroller that is often assumed. Administrative Magyarization was slow, uneven across domains and contingent on local power dynamics. Its high-powered advocates encountered firm resistance even in relatively friendly territory, and when they tried to impose Hungarian on local elites, their attempts were often halted or ended in uneasy compromises.

The government first encroached on local autonomy by tampering with the franchise, and the last pre-war years saw renewed attacks on the principle of self-government, this time from the autonomous county authorities and coupled with a push for Hungarian. In the meantime, government agencies and counties largely enforced the use of Hungarian in the bureaucratic processes of data reporting. On the other end of the scale, local languages reigned supreme and were on full display in town assemblies. County authorities further meddled in local affairs, whether with the government's consent or on their own accord, co-opting local clients and exploiting existing divisions along the way. Only in Werschetz did the initiative belong to government representatives.

One reason for the enduring diversity was the limited knowledge in high places about the actual practices in the non-Magyar peripheries. For core-Hungarian audiences, to be sure, even the most visible – although shrewdly underpublicized – aspects of peripheral language policies were out of sight. But the ministries also did not keep track of the languages recognized in county assemblies, let alone in local governments. In 1902, the minister was shocked to find out from the Werschetz prefect's letter that even the elected town leaders and assembly members delegated to the administrative committee (the executive body running day-to-day affairs) were ignorant of Hungarian.⁸⁸ For government officials, so long as the municipal bodies corresponded in Hungarian and seemed politically reliable, it was convenient to imagine that at the least power-holders were competent Hungarian-speakers who made prevalent use of the language while in office. Convenient not the least because this assumption automatically redefined any potential demand for the recognition of local languages as ideological rather than merely instrumental.

Visibility is an aspect of core-periphery relations that deserves more attention when studying nationalizing states. The mutually cloudy perceptions between Washington politicians and New Mexicans before 1902 make for a parallel. The US Senate sent a subcommittee to the territory on a fact-finding mission, in part to investigate New Mexicans' knowledge and use of English versus Spanish. New Mexican representatives wildly inflated the prevalence of English in their land to prove its fitness for statehood, and the picture that emerged from the national press was contradictory. The senators returned to Washington appalled by what they had found, but New Mexicans, who considered themselves to be loyal citizens, felt no less irritated by the senators' obsession with language.⁸⁹

Even where government officials were in the know, they insisted on keeping up the appearance of a progressively shrinking diversity. The Magyar political elite saw it the measure of its power to impose the use of Hungarian on public life, particularly in the cities. The long saga of municipal interpreters in Werschetz shows that by the turn of the century, the Budapest government could not accept public multilingualism to become institutionalized in plain sight, although town governments were allowed to fully operate based on continuous and extensive translation as long as they did so silently and relying on the skills of their existing staff. At best, the government could resign itself to the public recognition of a local language as a temporary arrangement until the office-holders in charge learned Hungarian. There was no going back to a non-dominant language once Hungarian had been adopted. To be sure, the latter need not imply that elected office-holders could handle the language, as zealous bureaucrats often imposed its written use despite or even unbeknown to the majority, to expedite their own work and score brownie points. Such was the case in 1899, when the Weißkirchen municipal school board replaced its Hungarian minutes with German ones. The county assembly promptly invalidated that amendment to their statutes, and the minister later also turned down an appeal from the town hall. The incident is also notable because the exchange of reproaches and accusations suggests that school board meetings had never actually taken place in Hungarian.⁹⁰

Clearly, the expansion of the social domains where Hungarian was used and its overall knowledge in locales such as the four towns under study did not keep pace with its offensive in public institutions. The limited understanding of the centre about the dynamics of multilingualism in the peripheries could then occasionally raise conflicts, but it more often acted as a shock absorber. Another buffer towards urban people in the Banat was a linguistically more inclusive vision of state nationalism, which downplayed

the politics of language choice. This vision, showcased in the Magyarophile German press, goes some way to explain the contradiction between German-speaking burghers' cheer for the slogans of Magyarization (*obrusenie*) and the low profile that Hungarian occupied in their lives.

Without locally born, Magyar or Magyarizing (*obrusenie*) allies, the efforts of the central government and county leaderships could hardly bring about deep change. In the Banat, the main agents of change were affluent German-speaking Catholics. At no point was that layer entirely Magyarophile. Especially in the former Military Border, the Habsburgs could easily override Hungary as the objects of civic loyalty, and German could command symbolic power not just as a language of culture, but also as the imperial language. But many accepted the idea of a culturally Magyar Hungary out of loyalty, although few who had been grown-ups in 1867 spoke Hungarian. They gradually geared their schools and associations towards the state language with the long term in mind, without anticipating that the process could upset their daily lives. They foresaw internally driven *obrusenie* rather than externally imposed *obrusevanie*, and envisioned cultural change as additive rather than substitutive.

Later, as the Magyarizing (*obrusevanie*) agenda assumed a more aggressive and intolerant garb, it touched off a revolt in the former border-guard town of Weißkirchen and created a wider backlash among younger generations, which were also more versed in Hungarian. The excellent Hungarian of some minority nationalists who had already come of age under the Hungarian regime ultimately brought it home to their Magyar peers that no one-to-one relationship existed between language skills and political loyalties. In turn, this lesson was absorbed by those integral, racial strands of Hungarian nationalism that came to prevail in inter-war, downsized Hungary.

Notes

1. Fermor, *Between the Woods*, 110.
2. Thaden, "Introduction"; and Gal, "Polyglot Nationalism," 42–3.
3. Weeks, "Russification," 486; and Malte, "Russifizierung," 82.
4. Cf. Weeks, "Russification," 475, 484.
5. *Ibid.*, 486.
6. Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye története," 507; and Rózsa, *Deutschsprachige Presse in Ungarn*.
7. Klabouch, "Die Lokalverwaltung in Cisleithanien."
8. Under §§ 38 and 40 of Act XVIII of 1871.
9. *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, April 28, 1887.
10. Szekfű, *Három nemzedék*, 168–9.
11. Herczeg, *Emlékezései*, 69.
12. Windisch, "Kisérletek," 25–6.
13. Marin, "Formation and Allegiance." On status-based identity overriding religious fault lines in the Croatian Military Frontier, Alaica, "Mixing of Cultural Identities."
14. Oallde, *Lupta*, 41; Vaida-Voevod, *Memorii*, 138; and Milleker, *Geschichte der Freistadt Werschetz*, 325.
15. Slavici, "Studie asupra Maghiarilor," 251–2.
16. Wallner-Bărbulescu, *Zorile modernității*.
17. Iványi, *Lugos története*, 127.
18. *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, July 29, 1886; and *Luminatoriulu*, July 23/August 14, 1886.

19. His letter to the minister of the interior on August 17, 1888. Magyar Országos Levéltár (henceforth MNL-OL) K150 1888-VI-2a-27871, filed under K150 1890-VI-3-2352.
20. *Südongarischer Bote*, 2, August 27, 1912.
21. MNL-OL K150 1890-VI-3-2352; and Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye története," 533–4; *Analele Naționale României* (henceforth ANR) Timișoara, Fond Primăria orașului Lugoj 18/1888.
22. *Drapelul*, 2–3, August 16/29, 1912; *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, 2, August 8, 1912; and *Ibid.*, 1, December 5, 1912.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye története," 389–90.
25. Kemény, G. G., ed., *Iratok*, 740–3; Huszár and Diamandi, *A magyarországi románok*, 370–4; Marchescu, *Grănicerii bănățeni*, 383–6; and Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye története," 389–90.
26. Szabó, "Krassó és Szörény vármegye egyesítése," 54–6.
27. *Pesti Hirlap*, 5, January 12, 1892; and *Ibid.*, 9, March 11, 1892.
28. Gajda, "Az intézet alapítása," 21–40.
29. Magiar and Magiar, *Monografia localității Bozovici*, 68.
30. Jumanca, *Amintiri*, 258.
31. *Délvidék*, 1–2, June 28, 1896; *Ibid.*, 3, July 19, 1896; *Ibid.*, 2, September 27, 1896; *Ibid.*, 2, October 3, 1897; *Ibid.*, 2, December 18, 1898; *Ibid.*, 2, October 22, 1899; *Ibid.*, 3, July 22, 1900; *Ibid.*, 1, September 23, 1900; *Magyarország*, 11, September 23, 1899; *Alkotmány*, July 18, 1899; *Ibid.*, 3, October 10, 1900; and *Pesti Hirlap*, 8, September 19, 1900.
32. Herczeg, *Német nemzetiségi kérdés*.
33. *Hazánk*, 5, September 12, 1899; and Senz, *Die nationale Bewegung*, 88.
34. Herczeg, *Emlékezései*, 125–6.
35. Gál, *A Fehértemplomi 'Társaskör' története*, 13.
36. *Ibid.*, 12.
37. Windisch, "Kisérletek," 34–5.
38. *Pesti Hirlap*, 7, June 26, 1904; and Windisch, "Kisérletek," 36.
39. *Budapesti Hirlap*, 15, February 13, 1907.
40. *Pesti Napló*, 4, July 24, 1908.
41. *Tolnai Világlapja*, 1265; *Városok Lapja*, 234; and *Ibid.*, 81.
42. Jumanca, *Amintiri*, 266; and Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye története," 507.
43. *Délvidék*, 2, May 5, 1907.
44. Stan, *Mihai Bejan*, 106.
45. Milleker, *Geschichte des Schulwesens*, 50; Ghidiu and Balan, *Monografia orașului Caransebeș*, 245; and Rettegi, *A lugosi állami főgymnasium*, 162–3.
46. *Ibid.*, 71 and 75; and Senz, *Die nationale Bewegung*, 64.
47. Gerhard Eder in Frisch, *Werschetz*, 368–9.
48. Herczeg, *Emlékezései*, 204.
49. Fassel, *Bühnen-Welten vom 18.–20; Jahrhundert*, 227; *Drapelul*, July 9/22; and *Ibid.*, November 5/18, 1902.
50. Buday, *A verseczi állami főreáliskola*, 89.
51. Perjéssy, *Verseczi Magyar Közművelődési Egyesület*, 15.
52. Botár, "A fehértemplomi állami főgimnázium," 12; and *Fehértemplom és Vidéke*, 2, October 20, 1910.
53. Perjéssy, *Verseczi Magyar Közművelődési Egyesület*.
54. *Magyar statisztikai közlemények*, 196–7 and 366–7.
55. Herczeg, *Emlékezései*, 123.
56. *Délvidék*, 2, May 26, 1907.
57. Csabai, "A verseczi állami főreáliskola," 29.
58. Paládi-Kovács, *Tájak, népek, népcsoportok*, 382.
59. *Délvidék*, 1, February 18, 1900; *Ibid.*, 2, November 4, 1900.
60. *Südongarischer Bote*, 2, September 19, 1912.

61. *Délvidék*, 2, May 24, 1896; *Ibid.*, 1, June 28, 1896; *Ibid.*, September 26, 1897; *Ibid.*, 2, May 25, 1902.
62. *Ibid.*, November 22, 1903.
63. "Harcz az 'is' ellen," *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, July 29, 1886.
64. *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, April 28, 1887.
65. ANR Timișoara, Inventory 363 (Primăria orașului Lugoj).
66. *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, April 28, 1887. Cf. the trilingual minutes from 1887; ANR Timișoara, Fond Primăria orașului Lugoj 18/1888.
67. *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, 1, February 11, 1912; *Drapelul*, 2, April 28/May 11, 1912.
68. *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, February 18, 1912, 3.
69. "Städtische Generalversammlung," *Südungarn*, November 13, 1910; and Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye története," 535.
70. *Ibid.*; and Lay, *Denumirea străzilor lugojene*.
71. ANR Caransebeș, Inventory 1624 (Primăria orașului Caransebeș); Brătescu, *Orașul Caransebeș între 1865–1919*, 22 and 25. Cf. ANR Caransebeș, Fond Primăria orașului Caransebeș 2/1884–93; 1/1897–9, 40 and 104–5; 19/1909, 93–6, 212–17 and 254–6 and 4/1913–14, 11.
72. ANR Caransebeș, Inventory 1624 (Primăria orașului Caransebeș); Poganello, "Dela Caransebeș: impresii," *Drapelul*, April 17/30, 1904.
73. *Tribuna*, June 16, 1911, 6; ANR Caransebeș ^{Fondul Primăria Orașului Caransebeș 19/1909}.
74. Böhm and Kuhn, "Weißkirchen im ungarischen Staatsverband," 88.
75. MNL-OL BM K150, 1890-II-2 (bundle 1,857).
76. *Budapesti Hirlap*, 15, February 13, 1907.
77. *Pesti Hirlap*, August 20, 1904; and *Délvidék*, 3, September 23, 1900.
78. *Südungarn*, November 13, 1910; ANR Timișoara, Inventories 363 and 364.
79. "Harcz az 'is' ellen," *Krassó-Szörényi Lapok*, July 29, 1886; ANR Caransebeș, Fond Primăria orașului Caransebeș 2/1884–93, 94–5; *Ibid.*, 147/1898–1900, 3; *Ibid.*, 1/1897–1899; and *Ibid.*, 4/1913–14, 37.
80. ANR Caransebeș, Inventory 1624 (Primăria orașului Caransebeș); *Ibid.*, Fond Primăria orașului Caransebeș 147/1898–1900, 3; *Ibid.*, 1/1897–9, 64; *Tribuna*, 7, March 6/19, 1907; *Drapelul*, 2, February 9/22, 1912; and *Magyar Közigazgatás*, 12, April 14, 1901.
81. *Délvidék*, 2, September 20, 1896; and *Ibid.*, 2, September 4, 1898.
82. *Ibid.*, 2, September 4, 1898; and *Ibid.*, 2, February 5, 1899.
83. *Ibid.*, December 18, 1898.
84. *Ibid.*, 1, July 30, 1899.
85. *Ibid.*, 2, October 8, 1899; and *Ibid.*, 2, February 17, 1901.
86. *Ibid.*, 2, May 26, 1907.
87. Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems in Hungary*, 432.
88. Prefect Milán Zákó's letter accompanying the 1902 report of the administrative committee; MNL-OL K26, 1675.
89. Lozano, *An American Language*, 111–34.
90. *Délvidék*, 3, July 9, 1899; and *Budapesti Hirlap*, 9, September 22, 1899.

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