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## **School choice in South Slovakia Practices in Gemer (Gömör), Matušova zem (Mátyusföld) and Podzoborie (Zoboralja)**

Among Slovakia's districts inhabited by Hungarians, the number of Hungarian primary school pupils has decreased in the highest ratio in the district of Nitra (Nyitra) where Hungarians live in dispersed settlements. The language of instruction has crucial effects on national identity, therefore, education in the majority's language leads to assimilation. During an interview process, we investigated the school selection view-points of the inhabitants in seven locations with Hungarian instruction schools. According to our most important finding, in order to preserve the native language programme education, it is necessary to support the usage of the Hungarian language in the widest range.

In the case of sociological studies carried out among Hungarians living beyond Hungary's borders, it is of crucial importance that we do not consider the minority communities in question as a homogenous unit, but that we take into account the characteristics of different interethnic, social, linguistic, and micro-regional situations. During our research on school selection, we carried out our local study separately in the case of Hungarians living in local majority communities and Hungarians living sporadically in small towns and villages in Slovakia. Despite the fact that the absolute majority of Slovakian Hungarians still live in towns where they form a local majority, the process of the population becoming more and more dispersed is a real problem.

In 2001, there were 411 towns with a Hungarian majority; however, in 144 locations there was no Hungarian-language school. According to minority sources, the number of towns with a Hungarian majority decreased by about 50 according to 2011 census data. In 2011, out of the 363 Hungarian majority towns only 227 had

a Hungarian-language elementary school (in Slovak the term translates into ‘basic school’), which means that the number of villages (136) with a Hungarian majority without a school also decreased. In the meantime, 21 additional Hungarian-language schools had to be closed.<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon of dispersing tendencies is observable in the increasingly mixed Hungarian-Slovak ethnic contact zone. Which at one time was describable as a “distinct boundary of languages” following ethnic boundaries has become today more or less a zone of mixed Hungarian-Slovak-Roma towns (Keményfi 2003). This process is particularly true for cities that began to grow rapidly for various reasons (Senec [Szenc], Galanta [Galánta], Šala [Vágsellye], Levice [Léva], Lučenec [Losonc], Moldava nad Bodvou [Szepsi]) and in the extended agglomerations of the Slovakian cities of Bratislava (Pozsony) and Košice (Kassa). The Hungarian majority areas of Gemer (Gömör), Abov-Turňa (Abaúj-torna) and Zemplín (Zemplén) with a contiguous Hungarian populated zone, situated between the national border and the language border, broke off along the line of several towns where the ratio of the Roma population is continuously increasing. This implies – with the exception of the Roma with a traditional Hungarian identity in Gemer (Gömör) and Medzibodrožie (Bodroghköz) – the strengthening of the Roma or the Slovak ethnic element in more and more areas.

According to the official data on the homepage of the Slovakian Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, the school-age population of Hungarian ethnicity dropped from 44,218 to 34,203 between 2003 and 2011. This corresponds to a 20% decline. During the

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<sup>1</sup> For the 2001-2011 census data, see the electronic publications of the homepage of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (*Základné údaje*, 2012). According to the methodological guideline of the census, the definition of nationality is “being part of a nation or an ethnic group. It is defined on the basis of the individual’s decision. The resident’s mother tongue or the language used by them is not important, what matters is the individual’s decision about being part of a nation, a national minority or an ethnic group.” Ibid. 6. A 2001. évi szlovákiai magyar intézményi ellátottsági helyzetről, *Soóky*, 2003. The statistical data of Hungarian-language schools in Slovakia were collected from the electronic educational yearbooks and chronological data publications of the Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education (*Ústav informácií a prognóz školstva*) [http://www.uips.sk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=459&Itemid=1187](http://www.uips.sk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=459&Itemid=1187).

same period, the number of Hungarian learners increased only in the districts of Revúca (Nagyőrce) and Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat). The number of pupils who considered themselves to be Hungarian increased from 1,038 to 1,288, that is by 24.1%, in the former case, while in the latter, this number shows an increment of 1.6%, or an increase from 3,571 to 3,628 (Štatistická ročenka – základné školy 2003-2011). Parallel with the decrease in the number of school-age children of Hungarian ethnicity, the number of Hungarian pupils in Slovak elementary schools, despite some decline, is still considerable at 10%. In 2003, out of the 44,218 elementary school pupils of Hungarian ethnicity, 37,736, that is 85.34%, attended Hungarian-language schools. Eight years later, in the 2011-2012 academic year, out of the total 34,203 pupils of Hungarian ethnicity, 30,522, that is 89.24%, acquired elementary school knowledge in Hungarian (Štatistická ročenka – Školy a žiaci denného štúdia 1989-2011).

### **1. The methodology of the study**

Our study focused on revealing local problems; therefore, we tried to choose towns in all three micro-regions where the language of instruction, attendance and degree of supply in educational institutions reflected the situation of the characteristic (regional, small town, provincial, etc.) school types with Hungarian as the language of instruction. We carried out semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in the 14 selected towns. Altogether 40 interviews took place, that is, in the district of Gemer (Gömör), Revúca (Nagyőrce) and Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat) 20, in the district of Galanta (Galánta) of Matušova zem (Mátyusföld) 8, in Podzoborie (Zoboralja) and in the district of Nitra (Nyitra) 12 interviews. Thus altogether 40 interviews and one focus group interview were carried out in each micro-region. The focus group interview in Gemer (Gömör) was made with teachers from Tornal'a (Tornalja) and neighbouring Hungarian majority towns; while in the district of Galanta (Galánta) and Nitra (Nyitra), it was carried out with the help of seventh graders of one of the local schools. The rest of the interviews were conducted with headmasters (8), teachers (14), parents (13) and local civic leaders (5) in the towns of four school districts. The

following villages were included: Gemerská Ves (Gömörfalva) (Hrkáč [Harkács]), Tornaľa (Tornalja) in the district of Revúca (Nagyróce); Barca (Baraca), Kaloša (Kálosa), Radnovce (Nemesradnót) and Rimavská Seč (Rimaszécs) in the district of Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat); Horné Saliby (Felsőszeli) and Galanta (Galánta) in the district of Galanta (Galánta); Jelenec (Gímes), Kolíňany (Kolon), Dolné Obdokovce (Alsóbodok), Pohranice (Pográny), Veľký Cetín (Nagycétény), Klasov (Kálaz) in the district of Nitra (Nyitra).

By choosing a qualitative research method, our primary aim was to learn about, (by collecting and analysing the local narratives of the subject matter), the historical, social, familial and socialisational reasons, arguments, and motives of loyalty and identity in the context of making a seemingly simple decision about school choice. Accordingly, the interviewees were not only asked about their current strategy of school choice but also about their own educational path as well as that of their children. We consider it important to analyze the career path of parents and teachers as well.

We managed to uncover several unique stories among those who attended Slovak-language elementary schools. The story of a pupil's mother of Slovak ethnicity in one of the Hungarian-language schools in Podzoborie (Zoboralja) revealed that her children attend a Hungarian-language school because her Hungarian spouse in Podzoborie (Zoboralja) had set the education of their future children in Hungarian as a condition of their marriage. In Gemer (Gömör), we were faced with the dilemma of a Roma family of Hungarian mother tongue which was forced to make a decision based on the welfare services provided by the schools. Although the parents consider Slovak-language education more and more useful for their children because the employment opportunities in the Slovak Republic would provide a real way out of the unemployment that is a characteristic of the micro-regions of Gemer (Gömör).

Another example is the story of parents from a Hungarian-Slovak mixed marriage who finished their elementary school studies in Slovak in Nitra (Nyitra). Nitra (Nyitra), the centre of the district with a population of nearly 1,500 ethnic Hungarians, does not have a Hungarian-language elementary school. Hungarian parents in Nitra (Nyitra) could send their children to neighbouring towns which have Hungarian-language elementary schools. According

to the people interviewed, this is very rarely the case. We encountered a similar situation in the Hungarian-language of the district of Galanta [Galánta]. From the neighbouring town with a Hungarian majority, an unemployed mother – due to the recent closure of the local Hungarian school – takes her two children to the „town school” by bus every day.

According to one of our interviewees who had attended a Slovak elementary school and whose parents were Hungarian, they went to a Slovak-language school because their mother, out of political considerations, opted for the majority language of instruction in the era before the change of the political system in 1989. However, there were contrasting examples as well when parents with strong Slovak ties or a pure Slovak family background picked a Hungarian elementary school for their children because they regarded studying a foreign language as an integral part of education.

During our interviews with the teachers, headmasters and parents, we tried to learn about the ethnic, social, socializational, qualitative and other reasons peculiar to each micro-region for choosing a school and how they are interrelated. In fact, it was one of the hypotheses or the starting assumptions of the entire study that when choosing a minority Hungarian-language school it is not solely the ethnic considerations that play a role. Therefore, when planning the factors that to influence school choice, it would be important to know the real background. In our research, we only examined schools run by the state and municipalities presuming that opting for the handful of Hungarian denominational and private schools was influenced by completely different factors.

## **2. Trends in Hungarian-language education in Gemer (Gömör)**

The districts inhabited by Hungarians in the historic South Slovakian Gemer (Gömör) region have been gerrymandered to provide administrative divisions which ensure the regional majority of the Slovak population. The Hungarians of the region are forced into a minority position everywhere (even on a local regional level): namely, in the districts of Revúca (Nagyróce), Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat)

and Rožňava (Rozsnyó) crossing language boundaries and comprised of towns interlinked in a north-south direction. Nonetheless, the Hungarians of the river and stream valleys of Gemer (Gömör) try to assert their minority interests in the framework of the existing administrative zones and through cultural and educational cooperation between municipalities. For instance, the villages of the valley of the Slaná (Sajó) have developed touristic cooperation in the Slaná (Sajó) Valley Micro-region by setting up an information centre in 2008. Similar initiatives can be observed in the cooperation of villages with a Hungarian majority in the valleys of the Blh (Balog), the Rimavská (Rima), the Valice (Vály) and the Cremosná (Csermosnya) who work together, from time to time, with neighbouring Hungarian micro-regions.<sup>2</sup>

The two districts selected for our research represent remarkable exceptions with respect to the number of school-age youth of Hungarian ethnicity. The previously mentioned increase in population indicates an unusual growth, and it must be closely related to the higher number of children in Hungarian mother tongue Roma families of the two micro-regions. The fact that this ethnic data is currently present in the Hungarian school registration data of Gemer (Gömör) is a promising sign.

In 2011, we examined Hungarian school choice and registration trends as a pilot field study in cooperation with the pupils of the Faculty of Education of the János Selye University and the Municipal Cultural Centre of Tornaľa (Tornalja). We carried out interviews with teachers and parents in the last small town with a Hungarian majority in Gemer (Gömör) and the neighbouring villages. In addition, in the framework of a focus group interview in Tornaľa (Tornalja), we tried to assess the headmasters' opinion regarding the present and the future of small schools – that are characteristic of Hungarian education of the micro-region – as well as that of mixed Hungarian-Roma education.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Information centre in Tornaľa (Tornalja), *Új Szó*, 30 April 2007; On the cooperation between the micro-regions of the valley of the Slaná (Sajó) and Bátortereeny, see *Összefog két határmenti kistérség*, Ibid. 14 December 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The outlines of the interviews were made by Attila Z. Papp who participated in the pilot studies as well. The polls made by the Áron Márton College with the purpose of updating the data of the across-border Hungarian educational survey in Slovakia were performed during field work. Cf. The database of the Hungarian educational and scientific institutes in the Carpathian Basin. . <http://kataszter.martonaron.hu/index.php?page=adat>

Tornaľa (Tornalja) belongs to the district of Revúca (Nagyróce), and it is an important centre of the Slovakia's Hungarians of the Slaná (Sajó) valley, fulfilling several functions of a district centre. The town has one mixed Hungarian-Slovak-language and one Hungarian-language kindergarten, two Hungarian-language elementary schools, one Hungarian-language secondary school and one 'special' school (for children with special needs) operating with three merged classes.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the two schools in Tornaľa (Tornalja), there are nine-grade Hungarian-language elementary schools in Hrkáč (Harkács) and Gemer (Sajógömör). In the schools of Hucín (Gice) and Držkovce (Deresk), there are only four classes at the lower elementary level. During the 2012 school registration, 116 children were enrolled in the six schools of the district, out of which 80 first graders started their studies in the Ferenc Kazinczy Hungarian-language Elementary School of Tornaľa (Tornalja). The two lower-elementary schools, however, attracted only 4 pupils, respectively.

In the neighbouring district of Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat), there are altogether 36 Hungarian-language elementary schools, out of which only 7 are fully developed or nine-grade institutions. Out of the 29 lower-elementary schools, 22 institutions do not have enough pupils to launch four different classes. Children are taught in three merged classes in three schools, in two merged classes in 15 schools and in one merged class in five villages.<sup>5</sup> In the 2012-2013 school year, altogether 486 first graders were enrolled in the above mentioned schools. 63 families enrolled their children in the Mihály Tompa Hungarian-language Elementary School, which is the biggest school of the district of Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat). Twenty or more first graders started their studies in the 2012-2013 school year in the school of Bátka (Bátka), in the fully segregated school of the Dúža settlement inhabited by Roma in Rimavská Sobota (Rimas-

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<sup>4</sup> The 2010-2011 data of the seven Hungarian-language educational institutions in Tornaľa (Tornalja) can be found at the following address: [http://kataszter.martonaron.hu/index.php?page=adat&p=1&desc=&orderby=&institute\\_type\\_id=&country\\_id=5&county\\_name=&city=tornalja&name=&leader\\_name=&terkepkel](http://kataszter.martonaron.hu/index.php?page=adat&p=1&desc=&orderby=&institute_type_id=&country_id=5&county_name=&city=tornalja&name=&leader_name=&terkepkel)

<sup>5</sup> The data of Hungarian schools in the district of Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat) can be found at the following address: [http://kataszter.martonaron.hu/index.php?page=adat&p=1&desc=&orderby=&institute\\_type\\_id=&country\\_id=&county\\_name=rimaszombat&city=&name=&leader\\_name=&terkepkel=](http://kataszter.martonaron.hu/index.php?page=adat&p=1&desc=&orderby=&institute_type_id=&country_id=&county_name=rimaszombat&city=&name=&leader_name=&terkepkel=)

zombat) and in the Hungarian-language schools of Jesenské (Feled), Hodejov (Várgede) and Lenartovce (Lénártfalva). At the same time, the number of first graders enrolled was less than 10 in 21 schools, among them such Hungarian villages of great history as Hajnáčka (Ajnácskő) (9), Král (Sajószentkirály) (8), Blhovce (Balogfalva) (7), Nová Bašta (Egyházásbást) (6), Chanava (Hanva) (5), Rimavské Janovce (Jánosi) and Tachty (Tajti) (1-1). (Štatistická ročenka – základné školy, 2011-2012)

Nevertheless, municipalities and teachers which still try to hold on to the bitter end to small schools find themselves in an increasingly difficult situation. The Hungarian headmasters and teachers participating in the focus group interview in Tornaľa (Tornalja) argued according to their individual situation for or against the small schools that are operating with mixed classes in most places. The arguments of the supporters of district and town schools related to the equipment, and the number of teachers and their competitiveness, while representatives of the small schools mentioned 'the loss of the last and only intellectual workplace' in their hometown, the bonds of their native village, staying in place and strengthening community relations. Apart from the many advantages of the dual maintenance of schools by the state and municipalities, these contrasting opinions were also good indicators of the fact that small villages in the face of a rapidly decreasing population can only maintain their schools with the inclusion of Hungarian mother tongue Roma families.

Since the majority of pupils enrolled in Hungarian schools come from Roma families in an increasing number of towns, the process of segregation is gaining momentum in the Gemer (Gömör) micro-regions as well. Consequently, Hungarian parents send their children to municipal or district schools of a Hungarian majority to Tornaľa (Tornalja), Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat), and Plešivec (Pelsőc), while local Roma families are left to their own devices in the Hungarian-language schools maintained by small towns. At several places, this process of segregation makes its influence felt not only in schools, but it transforms entire towns from Hungarian farmer villages to communities exclusively composed of Romas. In the villages of Barca (Baraca) and Kaloša (Kálosa), this process is quite advanced. In the towns of Radnovce (Nemesradnót) and Rimavská

Seč (Rimaszécs), the local majority is comprised of Romas as well. (Prónai, 2005, Gecse, 2007)

Regarding the Hungarian-language rural schools that have a Roma majority for the most part, the representatives of the local Hungarian and Roma communities mentioned four kinds of behaviour in the interviews conducted during our fieldwork.

1. According to a considerable number of parents, the first years of school should require no travelling if possible, and it should be near the place of residence, the hometown and the family. In order to achieve this, even the disadvantages of small schools and the conflicts of coexistence with Roma pupils are worth the price. Furthermore, parents should join forces with the mayor in order to have an orderly and fruitful education in the school. It is to be feared, however, that without efficient state-run grant programmes or well thought-out educational models, these endeavours are doomed to failure in the short run in the Hungarian towns of Gemer (Gömör) that are slowly overwhelmed by the Roma population, and are thus finding themselves in a socially disadvantaged and deteriorating situation.
2. It would be a mistake to underestimate the role of patterns that emerge in the settlements from time to time among parents and pupils. These patterns are often shaped by the local school or a neighbouring one, the good reputation of the teachers working there as well as by the appeal of the schools entitled to receive certain social benefits (free meals, school equipment) because of their socially disadvantaged pupils.
3. These small schools represent a negative and unsustainable model for those parents and teachers who stress the difficulties of acquiring competitive knowledge through them. Therefore, parents make an effort to enrol their children in a nearby district school or municipal school in the centre of the region. This family strategy has an adverse effect on the survival of the local network of schools wherever there is a Hungarian-language school in the centre of a micro-region. In the district of Gemer (Gömör), due to the increasing appeal of the central and municipal schools of Hrkáč [Harkács], Plešivec (Pelsóc), Tornaľa (Tornalja) and Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat), rural small schools quickly find their existence threatened despite the fact that they are

unique in the country and the number of children is increasing. This process is apparently intensified by segregation trends that can be observed in the entire region of East-Central Europe in the micro-regions inhabited by the Roma.

4. In village schools with a Hungarian majority, parents who attribute great importance to the knowledge of languages regarding the future of their children's career consider acquisition of proficiency in the majority language as hopeless from the onset. Therefore, they opt for municipal schools.

Regarding the first kind of attitude, parental opinions accepting coexistence – and by extension, common education as a concomitant of local circumstances of life – are losing ground in the towns of Gemer (Gömör) that we studied. In most places, the school cannot handle the common problems of the 2 schools due to the deepening social and cultural differences and the frequent local conflicts. Even those parents who do not enrol their children in urban schools regard choosing a school with a Roma majority as a temporary solution at the lower elementary level. According to the interviewees, the main reason for this is not the majority of Roma pupils and their educational and behavioural problems but the poorer equipment of small rural schools and the inferior quality of education in merged classes.

Headmasters, teachers, and Hungarian parents are all aware that when Roma families choose schools with a Hungarian or a Slovak majority, this can fundamentally determine the fate of individual villages and the situation of Hungarian-language education in an entire micro-region. Debates and questions surrounding the proper acquisition of the majority Slovak language date back to the emergence of the Hungarian school system in Slovakia. Today, the only promising attempts signal a shift towards the communication-centred majority language education. Obviously, the majority of Hungarian and Roma parents of Hungarian mother tongue are equally aware that education in their mother tongue for their children could pose a lesser problem. At the same time, they would also welcome a good quality education in the Slovak language. A Roma mother who raised two children who have already finished secondary school and who, at the time, had chosen the local Hungarian-language school of Nižná Kaloša (Alsókálósa) over the Slovak one (closed in the meantime due to the lack of children) claimed:

*“Hungarian was a better choice for me and it was good for us, I could pay more attention to them and they wouldn’t have obtained a secondary school diploma or nothing (smile). Really, because they wouldn’t have been able to cope with Slovak. That’s why it was this way.”*

This demonstrates the difficulty of choice and starting a career in a micro-region in spite of a successful final exam, which is extraordinary among the Roma, both youngsters of Kaloša (Kálosa) have been unemployed for two years. Even their intermediate knowledge of English is of little help, and they obviously regret having attended a secondary school. They are without work just like those who didn’t even finish elementary school. They would like to acquire a pedagogical qualification in a complementary school, so that they could get a job in the local school. They do not aspire to higher education due to lack of funds, but if they had known about the possibility of getting a scholarship, they would probably have tried to get into a university.

The changing appeal of Hungarian schools in a Roma majority area demonstrates the power, or the lack thereof, of the local patterns that historically have worked well for a long time. In the town of Radnovce (Radnót) in the Blh (Balog) valley, which still retains a gentry past in its appearances, but today has a strong Roma-Hungarian majority, a mother of three of Slovak ethnicity living in a mixed Hungarian Slovak marriage and working in the local school during the day as a teacher, considered the only Hungarian-language elementary school of the village as a self-evident solution for her children:

*“Since we are of Hungarian origin, the idea of choosing the Slovak school didn’t even occur to us. Although my dad is Slovak and I’m a little of both. But my husband is Hungarian and I consider myself of Hungarian origin after my mother. My children are also Hungarians but naturally, they also speak Slovak like I do because in Slovakia, in this world, it is a must. Take my grandchildren, the eldest is 15 years old and he attends a Slovak school, upper elementary, he has just started (...) because for the kind of job he picked, that is architect, there were no other schools to attend in Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat) but this Slovak one. And he finished a Hungarian school, the one in Bátka (Bátka), but there was only a Slovak school there so he just started in Slovak, whether*

*he succeeds or not, I have no idea. So we are amalgams of a sort. But I'm happy about this because we live in Slovakia and here if somebody goes to official places they say 'Dobrý deň!'. What's more, they won't say a word in Hungarian to me in that situation."*

The majority of pupils in the Hungarian-language school of Radnovce (Radnót) and Rimavská Seč (Rimaszécs), similar to the one in Barca (Baraca), are Roma. The interviews with the teachers in Barca (Baraca) and Radnovce (Radnót) revealed that an increasing proportion of Roma families try to spend time with their children at home to strengthen their education. The walls of the school corridors in Barca (Baraca) where only Roma pupils learn, are decorated with the medals and memorial certificates of the victories of pupils in national and district competitions. Apart from the extra energy required to continuously maintain the quality level of education, special talent is needed in order to prepare pupils for competitions while holding daily classes.

*"Yes, let's say that I'm in charge of first graders because I'm with them inside and I hold their hands. But the children are very good, very clean and clever if they have a good head on their shoulders. But these children here, we see that they are properly looked after, cared for, some really care for them. This is a Roma school that only Roma children attend. Clean, very proper, they have to go to school, I don't know, we visited several schools in the neighbourhood because my children and grandchildren already finished school, but a school like this, as decent as this one, I'm not saying this because I work here but still... (...) It's great here, the teachers, the headmistress, the janitor are all great. You can go to the rest room, it's like a five-star hotel, very orderly but really you must go in and see it for yourself, otherwise you might not believe me."*

The merging of schools in Gemer (Gömör), also supported by the state of Slovakia, has its unique contradictions. While the municipalities of the micro-region dominated by small villages are unable – despite their efforts – to ensure appropriate conditions of education in the small schools and in the long run they quite often operate with only one merged class, at the same time more and more parents opt for enrolling their children in an urban school. At the same time, the number of pupils in the urban environment does not grow at the

pace expected. In this context of competing Slovak- and Hungarian-language urban schools, more and more people choose the Slovak ones due to the criterion of “more efficient self-fulfilment” associated with the knowledge of Slovak and also as a result of mixed marriages opting mostly and increasingly for the Slovak language and schools.

This way, Hungarian pupils commuting from small villages to the city can barely make up for the children of urban Hungarian families choosing majority language schools. For rural pupils, studying in small cities or even in district schools provides a way of getting into higher education. When asked about the reasons for choosing the small town elementary school after or instead of the local small school, in increasing numbers the Hungarian parents of Kaloša (Kálósa) mentioned the higher standards and the better preparation as their main reason:

*“We had made some inquiries and we only heard good things about the secondary school of Tornal’a (Tornalja) so they prepare really great pupils. Two of my kids can illustrate this, they are very versatile, I don’t know, can I say this? My son was the only one to participate in the 20th international Math competition which was held in Bonyhád this year but he took part every year in the Math and Hungarian-language competition as well. In the reciting contest, my daughter won first place so this school prepares them for a lot of things and I’m happy that they attend this school.”*

Hungarian parents are divided in several other South Slovakian cities over choosing urban Slovak or Hungarian schools. Parents usually start considering as early as at the time of choosing a kindergarten that in Hungarian-inhabited cities, the transmission of Hungarian as a language is taken for granted while the acquisition of Slovak is regarded more feasible in majority kindergartens and schools. There are, for instance, families in Komárno (Komárom) and Dunajská Streda (Dunaszerdahely) that enrol their children in Hungarian elementary schools after completing the Slovak-language kindergarten where the children have acquired a solid foundation in the Slovak language.

The phenomenon of choosing a school in Hungary across the border in the villages and small cities near Gemer (Gömör) gained momentum in recent years. This can mainly be observed in the case of secondary schools that offer a higher standard of education or a secure profes-

sion, but it is not uncommon in the upper elementary, either, that they enrol children in schools in Hungary. We found only sporadic examples for cross-border, inter-school cooperation, though, a well thought-out interinstitutional cooperation could solve many problems.

In Gemer (Gömör), the willingness of Roma children with Hungarian mother tongue to attend Hungarian language schools, which is still two to three times bigger than the average, ensures the survival of existing bigger Hungarian-language schools in the short run. However, this cannot be taken for granted in the case of small schools in the districts of Revúca (Nagyróce) and Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat). Despite various one of a kind actions, positive initiatives, and institutional efforts, there is no comprehensive idea and programme concerning the Hungarian-language education of the South Slovakian Roma of Hungarian mother tongue. The *Roma school* of Rimavská Seč (Rimaszécs), the only “beyond-the-border” institution of the Hungarian *school programme*, tries to continue its talent programme amidst financial difficulties year after year and accordingly, its role as an example is minimal.

### **3. Elementary schools in the centre of the district and the big villages of Matušova zem (Mátyusföld)**

In the last fifty years, the (Czech)Slovakian public administrative divisions that often alternated each other, have basically induced solutions aiming at assimilation not only in Gemer (Gömör) but in Matušova zem (Mátyusföld) as well, bordering the Hungarian bloc of Žitný ostrov (Csallóköz) from the north. Each of the districts of Senec (Szenc), Galanta (Galánta), Šaľa (Vágsellye) and Nové Zámky (Érsekújvár) were established on a north-south axis, so that the Hungarian majority strip of the southern territories found itself in a minority position everywhere against the Slovak parts annexed to the same district and lying north of the language border.

This way, after the big public administrative restructuring of 1960s, the so called “big district” in Galanta (Galánta) encompassed the former purely Slovak district of Sereď (Szered) and the former district of Šaľa (Vágsellye) that is half-Hungarian but has a Slovak majority centre (Kocsis, 1995; Szarka, 2001). Among the Hungarian

majority towns of the district, Topolníky (Nyárasd) is the only one where there is no Hungarian-language school. Among schools that have only lower elementary section, the one in Kráľov Brod (Királyrév) operates with three mixed classes while the schools of Dolný Chotár (Alsóhatár), Kajal (Kajal), Matúškovo (Taksony), Vozokany (Vezekény), and Čierny Brod (Vízkelet) have two, and the school of Košúty (Kossuth) has only one. In nearly all towns, more children were enrolled in 2012 than in the previous years.

*The Hungarian-language (HL) elementary schools of the district of Galanta (Galánta)*

	Town	Name of the school	Type of school
1	Galanta (Galánta)	Zoltán Kodály HL Elementary School	class 1-9
2	Sládkovičovo (Diószeg)	HL Elementary School and Kindergarten	class and kindergarten 1-9
3	Trstice (Nádszeg)	HL Elementary School and Kindergarten	class and kindergarten 1-9
4	Horné Saliby (Felsőszeli)	István Széchenyi HL Elementary School and Kindergarten	class and kindergarten 1-9
5	Velké Úľany (Nagyfödemes)	Mihály Borsos HL Elementary School	class 1-9
6	Tomášikovo (Tallós)	HL Elementary School and Kindergarten	class and kindergarten 1-4
7	Jelka (Jóka)	Lipót Gregovits HL Elementary School	class 1-9
8	Velká Mača (Nagymácséd)	Dávid Mészáros HL Elementary School	class 1-9
9	Váhovce (Vága)	HL Elementary School	class 1-9
10	Mostová (Hidaskürt)	HL Elementary School and Kindergarten	class and kindergarten 1-4
11	Vozokany (Vezekény)	HL Elementary School	class 1-4
12	Dolné Saliby (Alsószeli)	HL Elementary School	class 1-4
13	Čierna Voda (Feketenyék)	HL Elementary School	class 1-4
14	Kráľov Brod (Királyrév)	HL Elementary School	class 1-4
15	Kajal (Nemeskajal)	HL Elementary School	class 1-4
16	Čierny Brod (Vízkelet)	HL Elementary School	class 1-4
17	Košúty (Nemeskosút)	HL Elementary School	class 1-4
18	Matúškovo (Taksony)	HL Elementary School	class and kindergarten 1-4
19	Dolný Chotár (Alsóhatár)	HL Elementary School	class and kindergarten 4

Source: Štatistická ročenka– základné školy, 2011/2012, Ústav informácií a prognóz školstva. <http://www.uips.sk/prehlady-skol/statisticka-rocenka---zakladne-skoly>

It was considered a favourable development that, in the Hungarian-language school of the district centre of Galanta (Galánta) named so in honor of Zoltán Kodály, 26 families that are town residents enrolled their children, and apart from them, only 10 first graders were enrolled in Galanta (Galánta) from neighbouring villages. In the preceding years, several of the Hungarian families in Galanta (Galánta) picked the Slovak school, but this time, even parents whose children had attended a Slovak kindergarten opted for the Hungarian school.<sup>6</sup>

However, there are still serious problems regarding the number of pupils in the towns with a Hungarian majority in the vicinity of Galanta (Galánta) where the majority of Hungarian families registered their children in Galanta (Galánta) or a Slovak-language school: 1 first grader started the year in Matúškovo (Taksony) and Košúty (Nemeskosút), 2 in Čierny Brod (Vízkelet) and 4 in Kajal (Nemeskajal). In this district, only the villages of Jelka (Jóka) and Tomášikovo (Tallós) have a considerable Roma population, therefore, the behaviour of Roma families cannot be considered quintessential here.

Using our interviews, we wanted to gain an insight into the enrolment practices of the Hungarian and mixed families in Matúšova zem (Mátyusföld) through the situation of the district school of Galanta (Galánta) and the István Széchenyi Elementary School of Horné Saliby (Felsőszeli), which is one of the most successful Hungarian-language institutions of the micro-region. The number of pupils in each of the Hungarian schools of the district has been decreasing for the last 15 years, and the primary reason for that is the shrinking of the number of pupils in the school-age category of Hungarian-ancestry.

On the homepage of the Slovakian Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, the data of the district of Galanta (Galánta) between 2003 and 2011 largely surpassed the afore-mentioned 20 percent reduction of the Slovakian school-age children of Hungarian ethnicity: in the central micro-region of Matúšova zem (Mátyusföld), the number of elementary school-age children of Hungarian ethnicity decreased by 32.4 per cent during the period of eight years available to us (Štatistická ročenka – základné školy, 2003-2011). The reasons cited for the rapid decrease of school-age classes of Hungarian

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<sup>6</sup> Enrolments: 36 first graders were enrolled in Galanta (Galánta) and 11 in Diakovce (Deáki), *Felvidék hírportál*, 14 February 2012 [www.felvidek.ma](http://www.felvidek.ma)

ethnicity are the fertility rate of Hungarian families which is below the national average, as well as the predominantly Slovak ethnicity of children born in mixed marriages are usually cited. These two factors also appear in other analysis of Matúšova zem (Mátyusföld).<sup>7</sup>

Among Hungarian-language schools in Galanta (Galánta), those that had only lower elementary classes found themselves in a difficult position during the past two decades. This was partly due to the overall decline in the number of children and partly because parents tried to enrol their children as soon as possible in schools that have both upper and lower elementary classes. The dramatic decline in the number of pupils in the Hungarian school of Galanta (Galánta) is an entirely different case for which there are different explanations. László Pukkai, the former president of the Slovakian Hungarian Association of Teachers and a retired teacher of the secondary school of Galanta (Galánta) believes that during the last 20-22 years, the number of pupils of the Hungarian-language elementary school has been nearly halved because of the assimilation potential of the Hungarian urban communities that was facilitated by their lost roots, and because of the ambiguous identity – which is getting more and more Slovak-dominated – of the “original dwellers of Galanta (Galánta)” intimidated by the reslovakization between 1945 and 1948.

*The loss of momentum of the assimilation alternative*

According to the headmistress of the school, the idea of assimilation as a way out seems to be losing momentum among the younger Hungarian city dwellers. Similarly to the other South Slovakian small towns, a considerable part of the Hungarians of Galanta (Galánta) also expected a miracle from the knowledge of Slovak. At the same time, the Slovak school choice has been shown to entail serious linguistic and spiritual difficulties for small children, and there is no

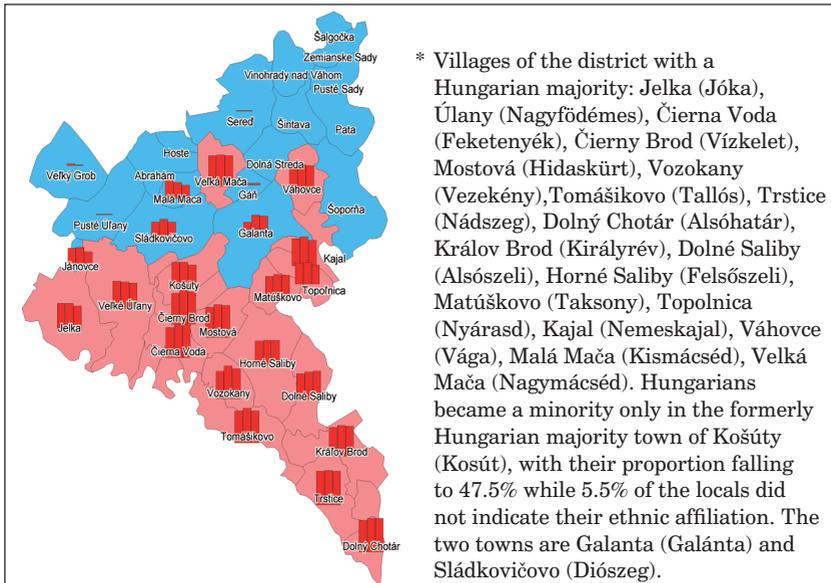
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<sup>7</sup> Among the reasons for the decrease, the similar data of the district of Dunajská Streda (Dunaszerdahely) bordering the one of Galanta (Galánta) often seem to call into question the supposedly greater willingness to assimilate in the border regions in a near-language-boundary situation. In the heart of Žitný ostrov (Csallóköz), which is relatively far from the highly intensive expansion of the agglomeration of Bratislava (Pozsony), the number of pupils of Hungarian ethnicity dropped by 27.4 percent between 2003 and 2011 which is, taking into account migration loss as well, seems to support the strong fall in birth rate as the main reason.

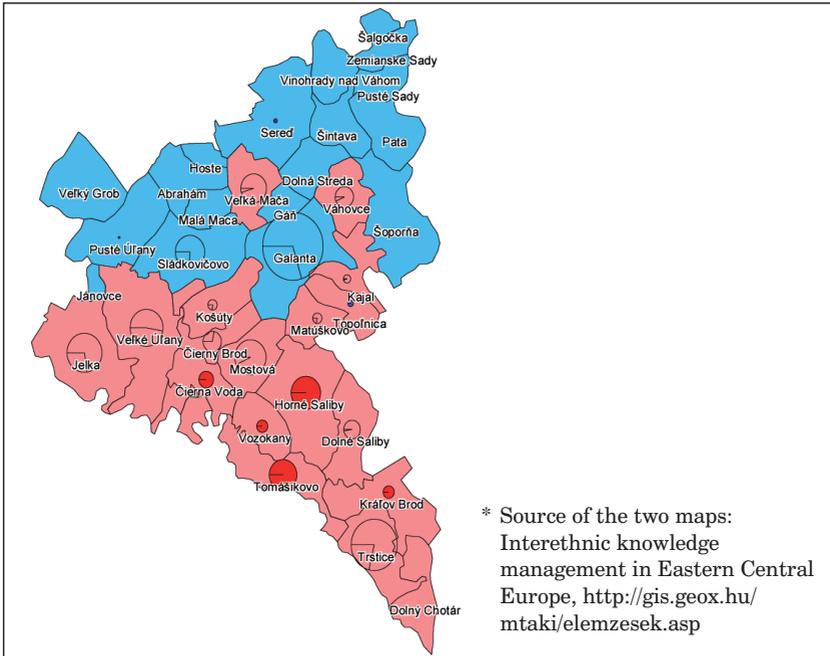
guarantee that after completing their studies, Hungarians leaving the majority school would be more successful in the job market than the ones attending a Hungarian school.

*“There are 340 children here. This is the third year that this number seems to consolidate because compared to 1990 and 2000, let’s say rather to 2000, when we had 600 children in the upper elementary, the number of children decreased by dozens from year to year. It is possible that there was a baby boom of a kind back then and we had a lot of children here and in Slovak schools as well. After the year 2005, we could really feel that a lot of children were taken to Slovak schools. When the huge popularity of the idea that ‘Hungarian kids should be enrolled in Hungarian schools’ ended, well, we were pretty desperate. This is perhaps the third year that this trend has been halted. If I project it to the next 5-6 years, – one can pick up indicators here and there – it seems to become stable. This means that, with the exception of the fourth grade, we will have parallel classes in every class next year. We could have one in the fourth grade as well but, in that case, we do not split up the 28 children due to economic considerations.”*

*The Hungarian population of the district of Galanta (Galánta) between 1980 and 2001\**



*The ratio of pupils attending Hungarian- and Slovak-language schools in the Hungarian majority towns of the district\**



One of the most serious educational problems of Hungarian-language elementary schools in the district is the decrease in the number of rural small schools in the vicinity of the large towns and the disproportionately strong appeal of the urban schools. While in the other small town of the district, Sládkovičovo (Diószeg) and in the central towns of the bordering two districts of Matušova zem (Mátyusföld), Senec (Szenc), and Šaľa (Vágsellye), the goal is more and more the mere preservation of the Hungarian school, the school of Galanta (Galánta) has stabilised its position largely due, in fact, to the influx of pupils from neighbouring villages. When asked to assess this tendency, which could be a potential source of major conflicts, the headmaster of the school of Galanta (Galánta) thought that by choosing the urban Hungarian school, parents try to secure quality education for their children.

*(...) a lot of people bring in their children from as early as the first grade, not the fifth. But while we had one class in the first grade,*

*sometimes we opened three classes in the fifth. Surely, since the number of children is pretty low in rural schools, there are mixed classes – several grades are taught in the same class – and parents fear that, in this way, their children can't get as high quality education as when they study in separate classes. I don't reproach neighbouring schools – but sometimes I hear from parents that some teachers there are not always on top of the situation (...) But in Kráľová pri Senc (Királyfa), for example, the teachers who worked there could have taught anywhere."*

*Language of instruction, majority language – bilingualism*

The Zoltán Kodály elementary school is in competition with the other three Slovak schools of the city for children among whom many Hungarians continue to study in Slovak schools. In recent years, they tried to target young parents living in a mixed marriage, showing that there are institutional possibilities in the Hungarian-language schools to acquire a conscious and high-level bilingualism. It may be the first result of this information campaign that, in 2012, there was a positive turnaround in the enrolment willingness (far greater than previously) of mixed families which are residents of Galanta (Galánta) as well as among Hungarian first graders arriving from Slovak kindergartens. Moreover, they got positive feedback from parents that the school's intimate atmosphere is important and also the fact that this elementary school is better equipped than the Slovak ones. Parents and pupils also welcomed the conscious use of interactive boards and, in general, the systematic application of pictures and illustrative material. Pupils can become better engaged and education can be connected to careers in data processing, and textual and image content that comes natural to this generation.

Based on the experience of Galanta (Galánta), the success of Slovak language teaching depends on several factors: they range from choosing the right and efficient method of language instruction to family support and friendly background, and to the active reinforcement of linguistic knowledge. They very rarely lodge complaints against the standard of language instruction in the bilingual milieu of Galanta (Galánta).

Despite the educational and pedagogical support of Hungary, which has been criticised in many respects by teachers and pupils, the headmaster of the elementary school of Galanta (Galánta) considers

the potential tenders invited by the Gábor Bethlen Foundation extremely positive. This way, besides a stable Slovakian budgetary support, they can always count on the possibility of satisfying their developmental needs from Hungarian funds.

The interviews conducted with parents in Galanta (Galánta) reflected a positive opinion of the school. For a number of urban Hungarian families, choosing a Hungarian school means the potential for continuing their own school experience, in other cases, it could be the key for bringing up their children in balanced bilingualism. The parents of pupils enrolled to Galanta (Galánta) from neighbouring villages see urban schools as the guarantee of quality education and, quite practically, they usually bring children to school while going to work in Galanta (Galánta) or they teach their children how to travel independently on their own quite early.

The interview with the teachers gave us an opportunity to learn about the practical difficulties of teaching the majority Slovak language and the potential of the language owing to the bilingual small town milieu. They try methodological innovations – other than the “Szkabela-Bona” method developed by Slovakian Hungarian teachers 15 years ago – in Slovak classes whose effectiveness is augmented by the fact that there are one or two pupils with Slovak language proficiency in nearly every class who can be really involved in the exercises illustrating new material.

*“I have a lucky combination of pupils in my class since there are three children coming from a mixed marriage and I have a purely Slovak girl whose parents don’t know anything in Hungarian. And I don’t know, somehow the rest too, maybe there are a few weaker pupils, that’s true, but the majority of the 27 children – about 15 – surely have a very good vocabulary. And they have probably learnt it at home.”*

The teacher brought up a very interesting example of the language profile of the Hungarian-language school that has potential for the majority as well. She shared the story of two Slovak parents who did not speak any Hungarian and still chose Kodály for their children saying that learning a foreign language at school age is important. In Galanta (Galánta), if there is one language that can be learned really well, that is Hungarian. The decision of one Slovak family was reinforced by what happened to the mother:

*“ (...) she lost her job and she was offered a really good post in Bratislava (Pozsony) where speaking Hungarian was a condition for the job. Then she said that now she has all the more reason not to regret that her daughter attends this school because this would have been an excellent job, true, in Bratislava (Pozsony). The company she would have worked for had some kind of relations with the Hungarian plant, but she was eliminated at an early stage due to her lack of Hungarian.”*

In the bilingual environment of Galanta (Galánta) and the surrounding villages, the changes of the situation, the prestige and the relations to one another of the two languages with different status and the esteem of bilingualism have always come down hard on parents facing the choice between “majority” and “minority” schools. According to Zsuzsa Árendás who studied the question in the framework of a doctoral dissertation, although there is a strong correlation between the ethnic makeup of the families and school selection, their choice is almost always influenced on some level by considerations of success related to the child’s career and the parents’ expectations. One of the lasting components of the considerations is the appropriate-level acquisition of the majority or national language. While examining the “difficult decisions” of mixed marriages, the author has reasonable grounds to suppose that in the majority of the ethnically homogeneous marriages, parents choose schools more easily for their children. The experience of the elementary school of Galanta (Galánta) shows that choosing between local, urban, small and central schools is often as difficult as selecting the language of instruction (Árendás, 2012).

In addition to that, based on the information from Galanta (Galánta), it is worth pointing out that in the bilingual small town milieu, relatively flexible and quickly changing social patterns are in place that put school choice in an entirely different context, for instance, during times of economic prosperity or crisis.

*Competitiveness and the creating of identity in the elementary school of Horné Saliby (Felsőszeli)*

Among the Hungarian-language nine grade big schools of the district of Galanta (Galánta), the István Széchenyi Elementary School of Horné Saliby (Felsőszeli) is undoubtedly one of the most successful

ones. In the upper elementary section of the school that has a Hungarian-language kindergarten as well, there is also a place for the neighbouring children of Dolné Saliby (Alsószeli). The schools of the two villages have a rich past since Lutheran and Catholic schools operated here side by side until 1945 under the leadership of excellent and nationally acclaimed teachers (Boros, 2005). The parallel education has been conducted in Hungarian and Slovak since 1949. In the interviews with the headmistress and the teachers of the school and within the framework of a focus group interview with seventh graders, we gathered some interesting information on the coordination of educational work ensuring the school's competitiveness and the functions creating a Hungarian identity. The school-age classes in both towns have shrunk dramatically: instead of the former 80-90 pupil classes, in 2012, 8 pupils were enrolled in first grade in Dolné Saliby (Alsószeli) and 23 in Horné Saliby (Felsőszeli).

For the successful headmistress of the school who stepped down just while we were visiting, it was difficult to face the demographic plunge and its consequences: for the first time, the number of pupils fell below 200 in the 2011-2012 academic year. This represents a more than 50% drop compared to the golden age. In the third minute of the interview, after praising the renowned, active, and innovative teaching staff, she moved on to talk about one of the strengths of the school: its identity creating and strengthening activity based on the conscious promotion of Hungarian cultural and historical traditions.

*“What values we represent is very important in our school, and it is also part of our teaching programme. In one respect, we build on traditions. It has always been important here that the Hungarian identity of the children should be sufficiently thorough to be familiar with the local values. Therefore, we say that – and not because of a trend – we preserve and communicate values. All of our work, within or without the frame of education, follows and focuses on this. Teachers pass on their creative work and writing talent to the children. The pupils are involved in a lot of competitions of penmanship, they write really nice compositions that are awarded even on an international level.”*

The school has been in the same building as the Slovak-language elementary school for more than 50 years, but professionally they work almost completely separately. There is no exchange between

the teaching staffs and the pupils; apart from the shared operating costs, the two schools are completely autonomous. Their first concerted action was within the framework of an EU call for tenders. They succeeded in obtaining funding, which set the foundations for regular common work. Despite the coexistence going back several decades, the experiences gained from this cooperation represented a real novelty for the teachers of both schools.

*“We wrote and realised the bid together. So, this means that we worked on the educational development of biology; we prepared methodological books, textbooks, and electronic teaching material. There was a team comprised of the teachers of our school – four from the Hungarian school and four from the Slovak one – that prepared documents in Hungarian. The management was also common. Well, we had monthly meetings, what’s more, people writing the books were in daily contact with each other. And yes, everybody agreed that the work was really good because if there is a working process, then during this process, certain compromises have to be made, so we operate by compromising and that’s the way a team functions.”*

The school works like a real elite school: pupils continuously and successfully participate in Slovakian and Hungarian competitions individually and in teams as well. All this is accompanied by appropriate competition and bidding work. Revenues generated from these additional and uncertain sources are used, among others, to reward the most successful pupils. The headmistress considers that relations are appropriate with parents of kindergarteners who ensure replacement for the school. The school plays an active, local, and social role; they get in touch with the parents of future first graders early on, and they capitalise on every enrolment campaign, assistance, and networking opportunity.

It was revealed by the teacher interviews that the Hungarian- and Slovak-language schools under one roof are characterised by a unique linguistic symmetry. While children of Hungarian mother tongue learn the bases of the Slovak language with a considerable mental effort, in the Slovak school, half of the pupils come from families where Hungarian is a means of communication of equal rank. This one-sided “symmetry” of bilingualism makes its influence felt in the Hungarian-like and –dominated two towns. The number of mixed

marriages is on the rise and the ratio of kindergarten registrations for the two classes is influenced by a quota established in the same manner:

*“... the enrolment period has just finished and we are a kindergarten with two groups. We have 46 children in the groups, Slovak is very dominant in our village, despite the fact that there was a time when there were fewer Slovaks, and now we are at the point of a 50-50 ratio and many move here. They sell their house, so people from Bratislava (Pozsony) buy them, and then come the mixed marriages. (...) There are parents who account for this in several ways... The village is big but still our relations are intimate. I know the parents; I am on good enough terms with them to talk about the reasons for their decision of enrolling their children in the Slovak kindergarten. And then they say things, the mum takes her own example. Look here, I didn't learn Hungarian and Slovak properly, I had problems during my career because of the deficiency of my Slovak. Or take the elder child, sometimes, she takes the example of the older kid that went to a Hungarian kindergarten. He didn't learn the language properly and moved away from the village.”*

During the focus group interview with seventh graders, pupils were proud of both the good reputation of their school and the preparation of their teachers that offered them a lot of advantages. At the same time, they quite naturally missed the various supplementary programmes appropriate for their own spheres of interest in the place from which there are usually historical and traditional activities aimed at identity creation during field trips. Participants gave proof of their developed sense of justice when they criticised the selfish behaviour of some of their teachers and reproached them for the insufficient enforcement of pupils' rights.

The conversation echoing criticism also proves that the demanding and competitiveness of the school builds sovereign characters that notice and distinguish quite early the useful and the unnecessary, the fake and genuine values.

In two towns with an ethnic background that became unstable not quite unexpectedly, the István Széchenyi Elementary School and Kindergarten of Horné Saliby (Felsőszeli) are both identity creating and educational institutions. Their achievements, successes and

initiative demonstrates that the schools of big villages in Matušova zem (Mátyusföld) may survive the present demographic plunge that promises to be prolonged, as well as the assimilation tendency gaining ground. People moving out from Bratislava (Pozsony) that is 50 kilometres away and the majority workers of the Samsung plant who are scattered around the district of Galanta (Galánta) indicate in any case that they have to continuously face new challenges and trials in a district clinging to the Funeral Sermon (*also title of earliest literary text in the Hungarian language from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, trans.*) used in the neighbouring Diakovce (Deáki) settlement and the intellectual tradition of Zoltán Kodály.

#### **4. The situation of the Hungarian education in Podzoborie** (Zoboralja)

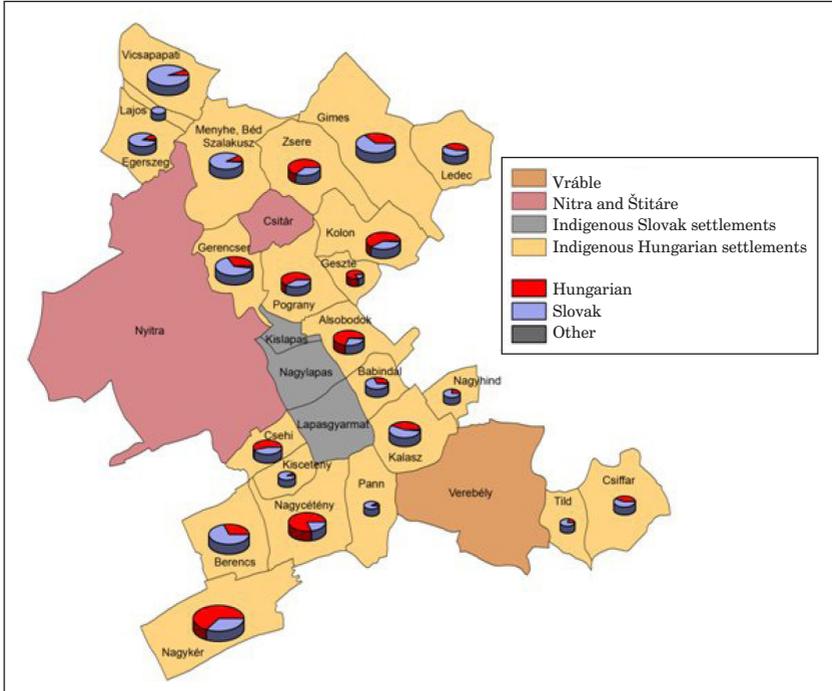
Besides the big cities in Slovakia (Bratislava [Pozsony], Košice [Kassa]), the largest Slovakian Hungarian community lives sporadically in towns inhabited by Hungarians in the district of Nitra (Nyitra), in Podzoborie (Zoboralja). We chose this region as the third site for our study since it is here that the number of children attending Hungarian schools has fallen most significantly in recent years. According to the 2001 census data, 10,956 persons considering themselves of Hungarian ethnicity lived in the district of Nitra (Nyitra), which represented 6.7% of the population. The 2011 census data indicate an 18.16% decrease during the last decade: 9,076 persons, that is 5.7% of the population claimed to be of Hungarian ethnicity in the district.

The available demographic data and the registration indices provide us with information about the constantly decreasing number of Hungarians in Podzoborie (Zoboralja) and children attending Hungarian schools. “Conforming” to the European wave of population decrease, the negative demographic indices are the main explanation to the dwindling number of children in this case as well. In the diaspora setting, this phenomenon is exacerbated by the strong willingness to assimilate (Bodó, 2003). Earlier studies prove that finishing school in the majority language leads to losing one’s ethnic identity. However, identity loss is already tantamount to assimilation (Lampl, 2009.41.). The choice of a Slovak-language school that could

trigger the process of assimilation is in the hands of parents since, in compliance with the effective laws of Slovakia, parents are free to choose any school for their children. The question is what aspects parents take into consideration when making a decision.

**Figure 1.**

*The ethnic ratio in the district of Nitra (Nyitra) based on the 2001 census data*



Source: <http://korkep.sk/cikkek/egyebek/2010/09/28/8042-ketnyelvuseg-helyzete-zoboraljan>

Attending kindergarten is not obligatory before the 10-year compulsory schooling; more than 90% of kindergarten-aged (3-6-year-old) children go to this institution on a national level. In Podzoborie (Zoboralja), bilingual education can be excluded as one of the reasons behind the choice of kindergarten since there is no independent Hungarian-language kindergarten and they have Hungarian-language sessions in institutions attended by children of Hungarian mother tongue. In terms of the language of instruction, if the reasons underlying the choice of school or kindergarten were

identical, there would be no Hungarian-language elementary school in the studied area any more. Some parents do not automatically choose a Slovak-language school for their children finishing a Slovak-language kindergarten.

*The Hungarian-language school network of Podzoborie (Zoboralja)*  
In the district of Nitra (Nyitra), there are seven Hungarian-language schools in various towns inhabited by small Hungarian populations. Three of these schools admit pupils from the first to the ninth grade, the other four function as lower elementary (grades 1-4) schools. The nine grade elementary school of Pohranice (Pográny) is the only independent Hungarian-language elementary school in the district, the rest of the schools are managed together with the Slovak section by a common school administration.

**Table 1.**

*The Hungarian-language schools of the district of Nitra (Nyitra)*

Town	Type of school	Number of pupils 2011/12
Dolné Obdokovce (Alsóbodok)	1-4-year	6
Čechy (Csehi)	1-4-year	9
Jelenec (Gímes)	1-9-year	37
Kolíňany (Kolon)	1-4-year	14
Velký Cetín (Nagycétény)	1-9-year	71
Pohranice (Pográny)	1-9-year	60
Žirany (Zsére)	1-4-year	7
<b>Sum total</b>		210

Source: www.uips.sk

In the district, there is only one bilingual kindergarten operating as a section of the similarly bilingual elementary school that was attended by 13 kindergarteners in the 2011/2012 academic year. In the other villages inhabited by Hungarians, Hungarian-speaking kindergarten teachers hold Hungarian-language sessions. According to one of the local civic leaders, there was an initiative at the beginning of the 1990's to establish a Hungarian-language kindergarten in the biggest Hungarian-language town, Velký Cetín (Nagycétény). However, parents did not support it arguing that their children learn Slovak in kindergarten and they will have Hungarian-language instruction in the school anyway.

*Aspects of school choice among Slovakian Hungarians*

The most recent empirical study on school choice strategies of Slovakia's Hungarians was carried out by the Focus Institute (Fókus Intézet) in 2011; in fact, it has relevant data going back as far as 1996. Results of the study show that Hungarian-language instruction is losing ground against the majority language in several Hungarian blocks and dispersed clusters and, from the point of view of school choice, the cluster and dispersed distinction is no longer a determining factor (Dobos, 2011). Nevertheless, we believe to have found, while studying the habits of school choice of parents in Podzoborie (Zoboralja), some distinctive features that support arguments against mother-tongue education. Apart from the above-mentioned negative demographic indices, there are several other special factors to be considered in connection with the question of survival of Hungarians in Podzoborie (Zoboralja).

**Table 2.**

*The number of pupils of Hungarian ethnicity in the district of Nitra (Nyitra)*

School year	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	2007/ 2008	2008/ 2009	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011	2011/ 2012
Number of Hungarian pupils	550	501	452	412	377	350	325	314	302

We would like to highlight the most significant aspects regarding school choice. The number of pupils of Hungarian ethnicity attending a Slovak school is the highest in the district of Nitra (Nyitra), that is, it was 41 percent in the previous school year. The number of mixed marriages is on the rise nationwide, especially in this district, and as a consequence, the language of instruction of children born in mixed marriages is a question of compromise, but according to estimates, two thirds of them opt for a majority-language school. However, it is not only the school choice of parents living in mixed marriages that shows an increased tendency towards the majority-language school, but of parents in homogeneous Hungarian marriages as well. In Podzoborie (Zoboralja), 40 percent of children of parents living in a homogenous marriage attend a Hungarian-language elementary school, and this figure is half of the national average. The proximity of the city of Nitra (Nyitra) also negatively impacts Hungarian-language

small schools; children travelling to the city with their parents is a widespread phenomenon in the area and in this case due to the lack of Hungarian-language elementary school in Nitra (Nyitra), the language of instruction of the children can only be Slovak. The prestige of Hungarian keeps deteriorating, which has an adverse effect on identity. It is typical of dispersed populations that belonging to an ethnicity that is different from the majority one is regarded as a burden, and it became evident during the interviews as well.

*“It is a burden for her and she may have been victim of slander or atrocity because of being Hungarian.” (local civic leader)*

*“... staying Hungarian feels kind of a burden for parents.” (a teacher in Velký Cetín [Nagycétény])*

*“Being Hungarian is a hazard here in the region of Nitra (Nyitra).” (a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])*

There is a sort of automatism guiding the school choice of certain parents. They follow their own example concerning the language of instruction of their children and, in some cases; this may mean choosing the same institution that they used to attend. This kind of automatism can be the decision of parents who attended a Hungarian-language school and live in a homogeneous Hungarian marriage. There were several examples to the generational school choice among our interviewees:

*“my father, his brothers, too, and everybody went to school here” (seventh grader)*

The reason most frequently voiced by parents for choosing a Hungarian school is that they want to have their children taught in Hungarian so that they would learn the language, the literature, the history in order to get to know their past. A parent who attended a Slovak-language school misses this knowledge from her own life, which is why she chose the Hungarian school for her children:

*“If my son becomes acquainted with Hungarian literature and culture, then he can go to that country, he can feel something for it. Otherwise, the latter disappears from Slovakian children even if their parents are Hungarian and grandpa and grandma also, but if children go to a Slovak school, this disappears from them like it disappeared from me; who will talk to me about Petőfi or ... when that name didn't mean anything to me, they didn't teach us about Hungarian writers, maybe on purpose ...” (a parent from Dolné Obdokovce [Alsóbodok])*

A teacher working in a bilingual school chose a Hungarian school for her child despite the fact that she used to go to a Slovak one. Knowing the Slovak curriculum, she came to the conclusion that “*the Slovakian curriculum is anti-Hungarian*”, so her child would not only be unable to learn Hungarian literature and history in a Slovak school but even Hungarian history would not be taught in an objective manner.

In terms of school choice, practical reasons like proximity to the school were not given in this area. There is also a Slovak-language school in the majority of the villages inhabited by Hungarians in Podzoborie (Zoboralja) while in most cases, the Hungarian ones have only 1-4 classes. With the exception of three villages where there is a nine-grade Hungarian section, pupils living in the rest of the villages have to commute after finishing the lower elementary section.

Parents and pupils had a positive view of the atmosphere of intimacy of the schools. As these schools are attended by a low number of children, pupils feel the attention of their teachers that, according to them, does not exist in schools with a greater number of children. This atmosphere of intimacy is, of course, the consequence of the reduction in the number of pupils; this is coupled with the merging of classes in 1-4-grade schools in most cases because they can only survive in this form.

Nobody mentioned Hungarian educational assistance as a motivating factor when choosing the Hungarian school. Answering the question whether parents are motivated by this aid, one of the parents said that the parents of a child from a mixed marriage chose the Hungarian school because of the aid. The rest of the parents said that this doesn't play a decisive role when choosing a school.

*“I think this is one part of the mosaic. This is not the main consideration.” (local civic leader)*

*“No, this is no longer a motivating factor. If they get it, they accept it, but they don't expect to get I don't know how much money.” (a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])*

*The aspect of choosing a Slovak-language school*

One of the objectives of our study is to shed light on the aspects that form the basis of the decision of parents in favour of a Slovak-language school. We could say that we did not address the immediate target group since our present study focused on Hungarian-language

schools. We questioned our interviewees as external observers because the vast majority of them and their children had Hungarian-language schooling. The attitude of the external observer can be felt in the interviews since besides the opinion of the parents who chose the Slovak-language school, they add their own counter-arguments every time. The interviewees said that the most common reason for choosing a Slovak-language school for their children was success. They consider finishing the Slovak-language elementary school as a means to succeed at further studies, on the job market and in every walk of life.

*“what influences parents, well, a lot of things, first of all, it is foolishness, what they say in the neighbourhood, this success ... once they were saying this and it is like a bad commercial, it is hard to explain that the opposite is good that not only children who attended Slovak schools can succeed, there are many examples that pupils learning in their mother tongue were a lot more successful during that time. Saying that is the most simple.” (local civic leader)*

Hearing this argument, the interviewees list many counter-examples. Parents take examples from their own environment concerning the fact that a child who attended a Slovak school did not have a more successful career in a given case than his peer attending Hungarian school. Headmasters and teachers boast their top pupils who graduated from them, pointing out that pupils who went to Hungarian schools can have a fruitful career path and that success does not depend on the language of the school. Schools publish their achievements at inter-school competitions in publications and yearbooks so that they can demonstrate the success of the school to parents who will enrol their children in the future. A headmaster of a school states, however, that despite the school being under common Slovak-Hungarian headmastership, the Hungarian section participates much more actively in inter-school competitions.

*“they say that parents want the school to be good and nice ... it is absolutely not the Hungarian section that represents 80 percent of the results of the school” (a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])*

Some parents say that the state language can be acquired on a proper level in Slovak-language schools. This standpoint, however, is considered a commonplace in the dispersed settlements where the

language of the environment is basically Slovak. In public offices, at the doctor's or in the shops, one can achieve one's goal by using almost only the majority language. As a result, people living here do not really learn Slovak in school but in everyday life as a language of their environment. The Hungarian schools of the district of Nitra (Nyitra) do outstandingly in Slovak-language competitions. One teacher gives her opinion on the level of the language skills of her pupils, namely, in a national assessment test,

*"... we passed the Monitor with 80 percent for the Slovak language"  
(a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])*

During the focus group interview of pupils, we once again discovered that they spoke Slovak well. There was one exception who admittedly does not speak the language well since he does not have any Slovak friends. He does not seek the company of his Slovak peers since he is from a family with several children so his playmates are his brothers and sisters. He probably does not even make an effort to learn Slovak on a higher level since he knows already as a seventh grader that he would like to pursue his secondary school studies in Hungary.

Numerous factors are at play when choosing a school for a child, and as it turned out, the constraint to meet expectations at work can also be a decisive factor. The interviewees told stories in connection with the fact that some do not openly admit at work that they are Hungarian, so, enrolling the child in a Hungarian school would be even more uncomfortable for them.

*"they cannot know that I'm Hungarian, let alone the fact that my child goes to a Hungarian school ..."* (a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])

Thus, among parents working with majority nationals, the conformist attitude and conformity to the majority pushes them towards choosing a Slovak-language school. Similarly, the majority-language environment and friends can affect parents and even children. It is possible that the child decides which school he wants to attend and, having Slovak friends, he decides in favour of the majority-language school. A teacher relates a counterexample in connection with this case: a child from a mixed marriage, even though his brother attends a Slovak school, will go to a Hungarian school because of his Hungarian-language friend.

The language of education of children born in Hungarian-Slovak mixed marriages is a particularly important question in the dispersed

communities since there, the number of mixed marriages compared to Hungarian cluster settlements is considerably higher. The results of previous empirical studies show that the child of a mother of Slovak mother tongue is more likely to attend a Slovak-language school than the child of a mother of Hungarian mother tongue. Our respondents came from different background situations. In the experience of one of the teachers, the language of education of the child in a mixed marriage will be determined by the dominating parent in the marriage.

*Survival strategy in Podzoborie (Zoboralja)*

Several civic initiatives were realised after the political changeover for the preservation of the Hungarians of Podzoborie (Zoboralja). Parents argue for choosing the Slovak school saying that there is no Hungarian-language secondary school for their children in the neighbourhood, therefore, they select a Slovak-language school in order to facilitate further study. The Hungarian section of the secondary school of Nitra (Nyitra) was closed down in 1978 and since then, there has been no Hungarian-language secondary school in the district. While trying to find a solution for this problem, an entrepreneur in Dolné Obdokovce (Alsóbodok) founded a private vocational secondary school in his village, which is the only Hungarian-language secondary school in the district of Nitra (Nyitra). The founder and owner of the Hungarian-language Private Vocational Secondary School in Dolné Obdokovce (Alsóbodok) founded in 2000 does not believe in miracles but he is hopeful:

*“that the initiative will bear fruit after years ... we are in the 24<sup>th</sup> hour, otherwise we will disappear.”*

Hungarian parents living in towns where there is no Hungarian school often choose the local Slovak school for their children due to reasons of comfort or money. After closing the Hungarian section of the school of Klasov (Kálaz) (1984), the locals opted for the same solution. Ten years after the closing of the school, a school bus service was launched mainly with civic support that transports pupils from Klasov (Kálaz) to the Hungarian-language school of the nearest settlement of Velký Cetín (Nagycétény).

The interviews revealed that the Hungarian identity of Hungarians in Podzoborie (Zoboralja) is weakening and they attribute less

and less importance to the preservation of the Hungarian language and culture. Consequently, they do not feel the significance of Hungarian-language schooling.

*“... that we have to legitimise Hungarian, use it bravely, organise big programmes and represent it visually as well.” (local civic leader)*

*“Hungarians here have to be made more visible, we have to organise programmes...” (a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])*

The quotes above point to the fact that Hungarian identity can be enhanced among people living here by organising social events since this is the arena in which Hungarian language and culture can be displayed in its entirety and where Hungarians, who otherwise live their life in a multiple minority situation in dispersion, can feel like the majority.

*“... really, neighbouring villages continue to stay Hungarian near Kolíňany (Kolon), it has to survive in the school of Jelenec (Gímes) because of the old and strong village and traditions and folk traditions. So I think it also depends on how traditional the village is.” (a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])*

*“Take Podzoborie (Zoboralja): it has a culture that shouldn't be allowed to die...” (a teacher in Jelenec [Gímes])*

Apart from preserving traditions and the programmes organised around them, the practice of religion in the mother tongue should be ensured as well since Hungarians in Podzoborie (Zoboralja) form a devout Catholic community. One of the local civic leaders also emphasizes the importance of the conscious organisation of church life:

*“We have to make sure that the cantor is Hungarian, and the sacristan is Hungarian. If there is a nativity play, we have to be active and then we deprive Slovaks from being there because if we leave then they will immediately fill the void.”*

To sum it up, we can say that for Hungarians living in dispersed communities, the condition for preserving the Hungarian-language education is assuring the use of Hungarian as widely as possible. Taking into account that at the workplace, in the office and the shops, the language of the environment of Hungarians is the majority Slovak language, education in the mother tongue can only be motivating if the community lives its church life and does its leisure activities in Hungarian. According to a thesis formulated by linguists as

well, using a language as widely as possible increases its chances of survival. However, several factors are needed to achieve this, especially the increase of the prestige of the language. (Péntek, 2002)

What the statements of the interviewees reveal is that they made an emotional decision when choosing a Hungarian school for their children. They did not consider the quality of the school or the professionalism of teachers. Parents considered the low number of pupils in the studied schools as a qualitative advantage compared to the Slovak-language schools. In their view, their children receive more attention here, and consequently, teachers can both instruct and educate children.

### Conclusions

Five groups can be distinguished concerning the factors influencing the choice of Hungarian-language and partly Slovak-language schools in the micro regions of Gemer (Gömör), Matušova zem (Mátyusföld), and Podzoborie (Zoboralja) that we studied.

1. These factors influence the confident, problem-free and almost automatic “easy decisions” of ethnically (linguistic and cultural and identity factors) homogeneous families. In mixed marriages, they appear in the form of arguments and counter-arguments when there are temporary and hybrid forms of identity. The dominance of the Hungarian mother tongue is an obvious starting point for the majority of people belonging to Slovakia’s Hungarian community, even today, in the 5-6<sup>th</sup> generation of minority existence. At the same time, significantly different practices have developed for learning the Slovak language and acquiring a balanced and good quality bilingualism. The practices vary from trying out different intensive language teaching methods through alternating the Slovak-language kindergarten and the Hungarian-language school training, to opting for a Slovak school. The various success and family strategies and expectations have a fundamental influence on the seemingly straightforward ethnic decisions.

2. We saw the primary importance of family patterns in every school, in all three historical regions. The language use within the homogeneous Hungarian or mixed marriages, the parents’ experi-

ences with school, the linguistic and cultural models established within the family and among relatives and relevant experiences all play a fairly important role in the preparation and (subsequent) justification of school choice. The sensitivity of grandparents and the judgement of relatives could play a seemingly hidden but all the more important consideration when making a decision.

3. In the schools examined and differing from one another in many respects, we revealed a wide range of factors of motivation and environmental socialisation. The local ethnic context (the decreasing number of those choosing a Hungarian school in settlements of Slovak majority; the (non)-acceptance of the local Hungarian population regarding the absence of the Hungarian school; the acceptance or rejection of studying together with the Roma) belongs to the same category as the effect of social circumstances that can restrict or exploit possibilities.

4. The designers of the programmes that aim to influence school choice often forget about the importance of institutional factors. Yet, the equipment of schools, the accessibility of local, small town and district schools, the costs and inconveniences of travel and, especially, the quality of education can shape the trend in school choice in a given town in many cases for years or decades to come. Parents take more and more factors into consideration like the number of teachers, their local attachment, popularity and prestige that – especially in a village environment – this can determine family decisions.

5. In every school, we saw family strategies influencing the school choice of Slovakia's Hungarians. Linguistic, ethnic and from time to time, political "ideologies" evidently put "the easier success of the child" in the limelight. This quickly spreading ideological system of reasoning is often difficult to interpret but is still very effective and easily transferable to future generations. It highlights one of the most problematic sets of factors going against Hungarian school choice; the linguistic policy situation in Southern Slovakia that lacks fundamental balance; the asymmetric relation between the two languages; and the negative effect of assimilative political practices.

*Translated by Judit Pethő-Szirmai*

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