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Selecting a Majority-Language School by Hungarian Minority Students, or From PISA Results to Discourses in the Carpathian Basin[1]

The schooling of children, their transition from kindergarten to school and from one educational level to another, sets the direction of their entire future career path, and it is usually embedded into parental decisions – be it conscious or determined by the environment. Besides the individual benefits (success), real or assumed, the outcome of these decisions and series of decisions has social and economic relevance affecting public good. From a minority perspective, these decisions may be coloured by further special aspects, since by choosing the language of schooling, parents opt not only for a school, but for a language as well.

International comparison: faith in school choice and counterexamples

Based on the international PISA tests, we can affirm that in the OECD countries, the possibility of school choice itself can have a beneficial effect on average school performance. In those educational institutions where parents could choose between several similar schools, the pupils admitted perform better on the whole than those who had no choice or had only a limited one.[2] However, it should be noted regarding the methodology that for the OECD, two mean values are used: our statement above has been formed on the basis of valid responses, but if we consider the OECD countries as a unit, within which each country is represented proportionately to the

[1] This study is the extended version of the summary of the research project entitled "Majority-language school choice". The research was supported by the 2012 DOMUS tender of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The research was directed by Barna Bodó, the members of the research team (besides the two of us) were János Márton, Tünde Morvai, Ábel Ravasz, Éva Szügyi, Tímea Trombitás, Magdolna Séra, and Viktória Ferenc. The author of the present article is a fellow researcher of the Minority Research Institute of the Social Sciences Research Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and he cooperated in the research as a counsellor.

[2] The PISA figures published in this article are available at www.oecd.pisa.org.

number of its pupils,[3] then the results of those who did not have a choice regarding their school are not inferior to that of those pupils who could have chosen a different school (but they are lower than the performance of those who could choose between two or more schools apart the one they attended). Thus, strictly speaking, we can only observe that although a more competitive situation produces a significant increase in school performance, the lack of competition does not necessarily lead to a poor performance.

Table 1. *The averages and standard error of competency (SE)[4] according to the number of schools that could be chosen at the time of schooling (PISA 2012)*

	How many schools could parents choose from at the time of schooling?					
	Two or more		**One more**		**No other school**	
	Mathematics					
	Avrg	*Standard error*	Avrg	*Standard error*	Avrg	*Standard error*
OECD-average	501	*(.76)*	488	*(1.69)*	481	*(1.71)*
OECD total	493	*(1.48)*	475	*(4.55)*	475	*(2.55)*
	Reading					
OECD-average	504	*(.77)*	491	*(1.70)*	482	(1.79)
OECD total	502	*(1.48)*	483	*(3.65)*	482	(2.66)
	Sciences					
OECD-average	508	*(.74)*	497	*(1.71)*	489	*(1.67)*
OECD total	502	*(1.59)*	485	*(4.36)*	487	*(2.73)*

However, PISA tests allow not only for the comparison of different school types, but they also report about system-level performances. Competition between schools does not necessarily go hand in hand with a rise in system-level performances, as we could see in the case of Switzerland, Finland and Lichtenstein, all of which did well on the 2012 tests. More than half of the parents of the pupils of these three countries did not have a choice regarding the school of their children, and yet, these countries are considered to be in the lead in Europe. At

[3] In the PISA-OECD reports, the former is indicated in the lines of *OECD Average*, and the latter as *OECD Total,* completed by the following explanation: "*OECD Average* – the average of the valid percentages and mean performance of OECD countries", and "*OECD Total* – (OECD as single entity) – each country contributes in proportion to the number of 15-year-olds enrolled in its schools."

[4] At a 95-percent probability level, the mean confidence interval is: [average – 1,96*SE; average + 1,96*SE].

the same time, most of the students in Estonia and the Netherlands attend a school that the parents could select from at least two institutions, and these educational systems also fared well on the tests.

The situation gets even more complex if we examine the school performance of "school choice 1",[5] "school choice 2"[6] and "no school choice"[7] pupils. In some countries, pupils without a school choice do better or at least, not significantly worse than those pupils whose parents could select between schooling options. And interestingly, countries that exhibited excellent performances in mathematics in 2012 can be found among the abovementioned educational systems: China Shanghai, Macao, Hongkong, the provinces of Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and the Netherlands and Lichtenstein among the Europeans. In the case of these countries, we can note that having a school choice contributed more to the decrease of the national performance. In the United Kingdom, pupils who did not choose their school do not lag behind those who did, although the country's performance is considered to be the average among OECD countries.

Table 2. *The averages and the standard error (SE) of performance points according to the number of schools available at the time of schooling in some Central and Eastern European countries (PISA 2012)*

	How many schools could parents choose from at the time of schooling?						**Difference***	
	Two or more		**One more**		**No other school**			
	Avrg	*Standard error*	**Avrg**	*Standard error*	**Avrg**	*Standard error*	*No choice – school choice 1.*	*No choice – school choice 2.*
Hungary	486	*(6.72)*	466	*(9.89)*	468	*(9.84)*	2	-18
Czech Republic	510	*(4.45)*	481	*(10.15)*	459	*(11.31)*	-22	**-51**
Slovakia	493	*(4.25)*	446	*(15.32)*	448	*(11.21)*	2	**-44**
Slovenia	519	*(1.80)*	477	*(3.27)*	478	*(2.23)*	1	**-41**
Poland	524	*(4.95)*	518	*(10.50)*	504	*(4.86)*	-14	**-19**
Romania	449	*(5.61)*	434	*(10.51)*	443	*(6.94)*	9	-6
Serbia	450	*(5.15)*	440	*(12.89)*	447	*(10.37)*	7	-3
Croatia	477	*(5.18)*	485	*(12.25)*	445	*(6.27)*	**-40**	**-32**

* *The differences between the averages in bold can be considered significant at 0.05 level.*

[5] Those pupils whose parents could have enrolled them in another school.
[6] Those pupils whose parents could have enrolled them in at least two other schools.
[7] Those pupils who had no choice at the time of their enrolment.

Now let us have a look at these trends in our region, Central Europe. Is it true that the schools attended by "school choice 1" or "school choice 2" pupils as defined above perform better than those which cannot select their pupils due to structural reasons? In our region, and also among ethnic Hungarian parents in the countries surrounding Hungary, there is a kind of faith in school choice: the bulk of parents believe that they have to select the school for their children, because in this way, they can contribute to the future success of their children, i.e. their success on the job market.

If this job market success is "operationalized" with the competence values, then we can state that in our region, it is only Croatia where the educational system is selective to such an extent that the competition contributes substantially to the increase of skill points. In other countries, including those located in the Carpathian Basin, the possibility to choose between two schools does not affect the performance of pupils in terms of competences. However, if competition becomes fiercer, the issue of school choice may become decisive: besides Hungary, this also holds true for Slovakia. Interestingly enough, both Romania and Serbia have such a homogeneous school system that in reality, there is nothing at stake. Even though ethnicity does not appear as a factor in these figures, they seem to suggest that from an ethnic Hungarian point of view, choosing between schools has a serious impact in Slovakia whereas it makes no big difference in Transylvania and Vojvodina.

The majority school choice of ethnic Hungarian minorities

Somewhat tautologically, we can only talk about school choice if a choice is actually made at some point. If there is only one school that is available, for instance due to school districts or the specificities of the settlement, then we have a case of "forced ride" for lack of another choice. If we put this choice into a minority language context, we can observe that theoretically, school choice matters where there are institutions competing with each other linguistically as well. Consequently, one can talk about a real choice in those regions which have relatively balanced ethnic proportions and mother-tongue institutions as well. Where the ethnic minority's ratio is very low and there is no mother-tongue institution, or in the opposite case, where ethnic Hungarians are the regional majority, the ethnic aspect of school choice is pushed into the background. Based on our interpretation of the PISA figures, however, that does not mean that in ethnically homogeneous situations (as a regional majority), choosing

a particular school would not change anything. On the contrary, it is in these regions and where parents have to choose from at least three potential schools that the danger is the greatest: there is a risk that those who cannot choose fall back, while those who can will become separated, i.e. they can go to a high-performance school.

Thus, in regions where minorities live dispersedly one often encounters a forced choice and advanced assimilation, whereas in the block regions (where minorities make up the majority) the ethnicity- and language-based school choice does not make a difference, because almost everyone can study in their mother-tongue. Nonetheless, specific school choice can be overridden by macro processes as a result of which dispersed communities may attach a renewed importance to the maintenance of minority forms of education, and on the other hand, ethnic Hungarian block regions may also face the challenges of majority-language school choice.

Based on our earlier research, it has been revealed that choosing a particular school can be motivated by various reasons. That is why it is difficult to treat this cluster of problems as a solid unit.[8] Nevertheless, the analyses carried out in various locations and ethnically diverse (block and dispersed) environments have shown several similarities. The motives of school choice can be grouped in several ways. From a pragmatic point of view one can distinguish symbolic (the transfer of the language and the culture) and rational (characteristics of the school) motivations. If one takes interethnicity as a starting point, one can distinguish the particular motivations of those living in dispersed communities and in blocks, while if one considers the person actually making the decision one may differentiate between the decisions of parents, pupils, teachers or other professionals, and so on.

Systematizing the motivations of ethnic Hungarians regarding school choice, one need to look at them on macro, mezzo and micro levels, and one has to distinguish between factors directly and indirectly related to ethnicity, i.e. minority education. The macro level refers to the motivations pertaining to the whole of the educational system, the mezzo level is constituted by the factors closely related to school, while the micro level represents the motivations underlying individual decisions.[9]

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[8] See the compilation entitled Iskolaválasztás határon túli magyar közösségekben (School selection by transborder Hungarian communities) *Kisebbségkutatás* 2012/3. pp.399-566.

[9] For further details, see Papp Z., Attila: Az iskolaválasztás motivációi és kisebbségi perspektívái. (Minority perspective as a motive for school selection) In *Kisebbségkutatás* 2012/3. pp.399-417.

According to the data of a survey published recently, the majority of those participating in state-language education were born to interethnic marriages.[10] Mixed marriages, the educational level of the parents and the socio-economic status related to the above all affect majority-language school choice. Based on the international PISA figures, it can also be shown that lower socio-economic status increases the probability of majority-language school choice in Transylvania and Vojvodina, while it is not necessarily the case in Slovakia.

As for the mezzo level, school choice is also influenced by the prestige of the institution, the services provided by it, and the local opinion of the quality of those services. Whether the majority-language school is "better" than the minority-language school is not only a question of minority politics, but also a factor with a significant impact on school choice on the local level. The fact that one can perfectly acquire academic knowledge only in one's mother-tongue has often been demonstrated scientifically,[11] but (minority) parents do not necessarily base their decisions on scientific grounds. The local prestige of an institution is determined by the judgement formed about its students and teachers, school results made public, the conscious recruitment strategy of the institution, etc. Minority parents may be targeted by the services of the majority-language school as well, or minority parents may look for the majority-language school if they think or hope that education is more effective there – at least, that of the majority (state) language.

At the same time, the language-oriented organization and tradition of the educational system (Is it a separate system of institutions?; Are there mixed or bilingual schools or classes?; Is the environmental language part of the curricula?; etc.) also affects the school performance of those pupils who do not study in their mother-tongue. Based on the recent 2012 PISA figures, I can affirm that in our region, those who do not study in their mother-tongue in the educational system of Serbia and Croatia, both having traditions of bilingual school organization, do not fall behind those who study solely in their mother tongue.[12]

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[10] Dobos, Ferenc: *Asszimilációs folyamatok az erdélyi, felvidéki, kárpátaljai és vajdasági magyarság körében 1996-2011.* (Assimilation tendencies among Hungarians in Transylvania, Hungarian part of Slovakia, Carpatho-Ukraine and Vojvodina 1996-2011) B Fókusz Intézet, 2011. http://www.kmkf.hu/tartalom/assszimilacio.pdf

[11] See also the accumulated OECD data of Table 3.

[12] In Hungary, there is no significant divergence in this respect, but that is probably related to migration factors and the state of assimilation of ethnic minorities living in Hungary. It is most likely that this has also contributed to the fact that a minority educational sub-system based on independent institutions is not typical in Hungary, either.

Table 3. *Competence values according to the language spoken at home and the language of the test in some countries of this region (PISA 2012)*[13]

		READING		MATHEMATICS		SCIENCES	
	Language spoken at home	**Average**	**SE**	**Average**	**SE**	**Average**	**SE**
Albania	same as test language	395	(2.97)	394	(2.02)	397	(2.34)
	other language	382	(18.43)	382	(13.95)	394	(14.01)
Austria	same as test language	**502**	(2.69)	**519**	(2.60)	**521**	(2.42)
	other language	**453**	(6.26)	**460**	(6.03)	**452**	(5.80)
Croatia	same as test language	486	(3.29)	472	(3.55)	493	(3.10)
	other language	462	(15.89)	460	(16.75)	473	(16.89)
Hungary	same as test language	490	(3.18)	478	(3.21)	496	(2.97)
	other language	473	(16.59)	483	(20.13)	498	(18.81)
Romania	same as test language	**439**	(3.96)	**445**	(3.76)	**440**	(3.24)
	other language	**384**	(14.00)	**418**	(13.02)	**403**	(12.21)
Serbia	same as test language	448	(3.47)	450	(3.43)	445	(3.41)
	other language	441	(9.83)	447	(9.00)	450	(10.21)
Slovakia	same as test language	**474**	(4.05)	**491**	(3.34)	**482**	(3.57)
	other language	**351**	(13.89)	**394**	(12.51)	**367**	(13.27)
Slovenia	same as test language	**487**	(1.21)	**507**	(1.09)	**520**	(1.29)
	other language	**431**	(4.87)	**447**	(5.95)	**457**	(5.02)
OECD TOTAL	same as test language	**500**	(1.13)	**492**	(1.11)	**502**	(1.13)
	other language	**469**	(2.55)	**459**	(2.83)	**463**	(2.71)

Note: the averages in bold vary significantly within the given country. It is important to point out that the group of people who filled in the test in a different language includes not only Hungarians, but other ethnicities as well in Slovakia, Romania and Serbia. We will come back to the discussion of the data regarding the Hungarian minority later on.

[13] http://pisa2012.acer.edu.au/interactive_results.php table: 190800. Retrieved: 20 September 2014

Figure 1. *The competences of ethnic Hungarian pupils in mathematics (PISA 2003-2012)*

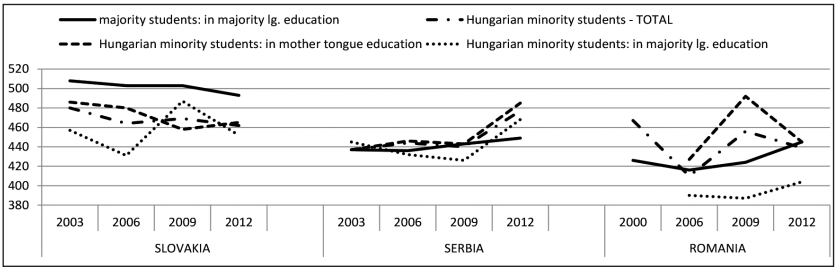


Figure 2. *The competences of ethnic Hungarian pupils in reading comprehension (PISA 2003-2012)*

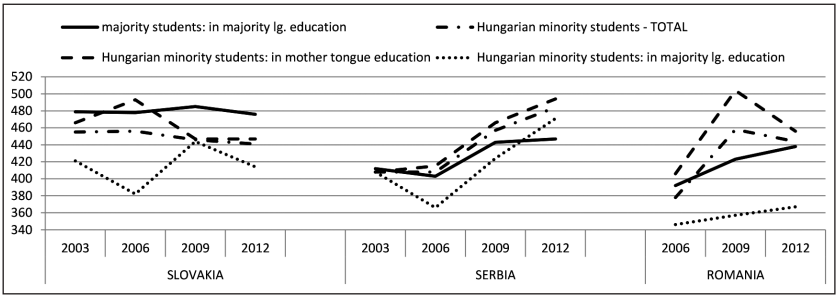
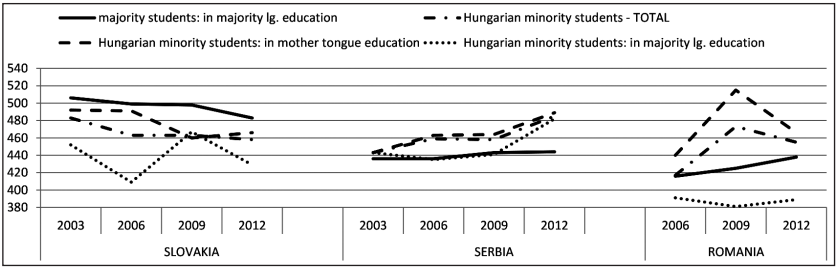


Figure 3. *The competences of ethnic Hungarian pupils in natural sciences (PISA 2003-2012)*



Based on what can be gathered from the PISA tests (see *Figures 1-3*), ethnic Hungarians usually fall below the average in the Slovakian system considered to be mediocre in European comparison, while they have above the average competencies in the Romanian and Serbian educational systems, which seem to lag behind compared to the rest of Europe. In Vojvodina and Transylvania, one can see the success of the mother-tongue education of ethnic Hungarians (those participating in Hungarian-language education do better than their majority

fellow students), while among Slovakian Hungarians, the performance of those attending majority-language education has been catching up since 2009, whereas the performance of mother-tongue education has been decreasing over the years. At the same time, one can also observe that from an ethnic perspective, the most homogeneous results have been produced by Serbia, while the processes going on in the other two, rather fragmented systems point in the opposite direction. In Slovakia, the majority is "winning", and this is also indicated by the fact that ethnic Hungarians studying in Slovak-language education did better than "average" Hungarians in 2009 – at least in the domain of mathematical competences. In Romania, trends seem to be the opposite: the performance of Hungarians was better between 2006 and 2009 than that of Romanians, but the results became more even by 2012. At the same time, ethnic Hungarians studying in the majority Romanian language seem to lose the most, as they have been steadily producing the poorest results among the groups examined in the three countries.

The discursive space of majority-language school choice in Carpathian Basin

As one can see, choosing a majority-language school shows various patterns according to the PISA figures: in certain places, it can produce virtually equivalent results with mother-tongue schooling, while in other places it projects the possibility of school failure. Therefore, in the framework of our qualitative research, we wanted to find out why a smaller group (about 20 percent on average) of ethnic Hungarian parents chooses majority-language schools. Based on the schema presented above, this problem can be classified as an ethnicity-related micro-level analysis. To put the question differently: through which micro-mechanisms did parents make their decision to opt for education in the majority language? Our research was mainly qualitative (based on interviews), but we are aware of the fact (as demonstrated by PISA figures) that opting for majority-language education varies from country to country and from region to region, and it is also related to the ethnic composition of the settlements. Although we made interviews in the first place, the analysis of the interviews shed light not only on the importance of micro-levels, but also on some opinions regarding educational institutions and the local functioning of educational systems.

In the framework of the research, we examined the motivations for choosing majority-language schools in two micro-regions within each of the four greater ethnic Hungarian regions. Altogether, we designed eight micro-region case studies, which were created on

the basis of the interviews made with the parents concerned, school directors, teachers, and representatives of other pedagogical service providers.

However, the fieldwork made us reformulate many of our original ideas. In some regions, we encountered genuine resistance when it came to finding subjects to be interviewed and in conducting the interviews. Most of all it was the case studies of Dunajská Streda (Dunaszerdahely) in Slovakia and Gheorgheni (Gyergyószentmiklós) in Transylvania that made it clear that a more thorough investigation of this topic may run into major methodological difficulties. According to our Slovakian colleague's interpretation of this phenomenon, the topic is likely to be a taboo, and that is why it encountered opposition. The parents who choose a majority-language school for their children can sense their non-conformity to certain expectations of the local society, thus they would like to cover up/hide their decision in discourse in order to mitigate this structural tension. At the same time, the heads of some of the schools concerned did not wish to share the specificities of the problem with outsiders (e.g. researchers), so they applied a strategy of non-disclosure through a certain administrative discourse.

Nonetheless, if we found a few willing interviewees thanks to the local resourcefulness of our colleagues, a whole new world opened up. These conversations revealed the worries of parents concerning the future of their children. In many cases, these worries are not of ethnic nature, but rather they reflect both the effort to meet the particular characteristics of the local structural and educational policies and the future prospects thus undertaken. It should be highlighted again that these parents often go against the conventions of the local society and the ideological considerations of preserving ethnic Hungarian identity. These decisions are simultaneously affected by the individual level and the mezzo- and micro-levels going beyond that, and it is often difficult to tell to what extent these factors are related to ethnicity. If we assume that opting for the majority schooling language means that the mother-tongue of one or both of the parents will not be regarded as the language of schooling, then this act will have a linguistic, i.e. ethnicity-related aspect (besides the potential negotiations and conflicts within the family). Thus, the fundamental question is rather what kind of rationalizing discourses are born in this situation that carry a structural and interethnic perspective and how these discourses are related to the local microcosmos. Although it is impossible to give a unified picture based on our research and methodology, one can still point out the principal forms of discourse.

In the Slovakian case, the most striking observation was the *administrative refraining* and the discourse of non-disclosure that

teachers resorted to, and this was partly characteristic of one of the Transylvanian case studies, too. In Subcarpathia (Ukraine), the teachers who were asked used a *self-legitimating discourse*. A teacher working in a majority-language institution, but whose mother-tongue was Hungarian, spoke positively about participating in majority-language education. According to this logic, Hungarian children adapt easily to new linguistic challenges, tackle their linguistic difficulties in a short time, and they do well in school.

This legitimating discourse appears among parents as well, since they also have to explain their decision. In one of the Subcarpathian case studies, it can be seen clearly that this rationalization is closely related to the local educational market. Parents feel that Hungarian-language education does not provide as many opportunities as Ukrainian-language education, which also allows for optional Hungarian lessons. In this view, children "learn to read and write in Hungarian, too", but their competences will develop in the official (majority) language as well, which is important if they want to "exist", prosper and build a career at home. Moreover, this legitimazing discourse goes together with a kind of *compensatory discourse*, which has at least two sources. On the one hand, parents would like their children to avoid the limitations the parents have in the majority language, and it follows from this logic that parents are supposed to provide their children with all that was not granted to them. The other source of compensation can be found at the level of individual careers: during a conversation, it turned out about one of the couples committed to making "an existence" at home that they had tried to live and work in Hungary for years, but it never worked out for a variety of reasons. In this case, it is obvious that their own (mobility) failure affects their future plans regarding their child.

There is also a kind of *affront discourse* that can be observed in the parents' testimonials, which indicates that due to their individual decision, they are discriminated by the representatives and procedures of the local minority Hungarian political body. In this affront discourse, the rejection of the local political entities and the educational policy tools (educational support) of the mother country, Hungary, targeted at ethnic Hungarians living abroad, is apparent. One of our conversations showed clearly how the local society is divided into an official sphere and an informal civil sphere. Regardless of rejecting the official local society (i.e. the partial rejection of the expectation to give children a Hungarian-language education), the local society is still thought of as a resource and a civil sphere, through which parents can uphold their own decision. As it was revealed in one of the conversations, parents assure the transpor-

tation of their children to the majority-language town school from the (Hungarian-majority) village by renting a bus together that takes the children back and forth. "Busing" is not a novel tool in educational policy, but this practice is a clear sign of the quiet resistance of parents, associated with their future plans for their children.

The discourses that could be collected among pupils are quite diverse. The positive (i.e. self-legitimating) discourse of teachers does not always surface in them. As it turned out, Hungarian-speaking teachers are not always helpful, and the use of the mother-tongue is often not readily accepted outside the classroom. Consequently, it is not surprising that internal ethnic lines are created within the classes, and that children who have not mastered the majority language prefer each other's company. However, as we move towards the higher grades, these internal lines begin to fade away because with the improvement of majority-language competencies the youth behave more confidently at the school.

Although there are countless differences between the regions we studied, interestingly enough, two shared features can be distinguished. First, the extra value of majority-language schools is provided by foreign languages taught. On our Subcarpathian sites, these schools are considered to be good by parents and teachers because pupils can study not only Ukrainian, but English and German as well. Similarly, our subject from Dunajská Streda (Dunaszerdahely), Slovakia also reported that learning English had been present in his life since the age of kindergarten, and he could continue learning that foreign language in the Slovakian-language school.

Another shared observation is that the Roma question does not appear in the discourse about majority-language schools, which is mostly due to the fact that there are no Romas in the institutions we examined – the Roma usually go to Hungarian-language schools.

Conclusion

Through the interviews, we were mostly able to uncover individual motivations – however, the presence of system-level factors was also perceivable in the background of these discourses. According to estimates, 16 percent of the pupils studying in the Ukrainian elementary schools of Berehove (Beregszász) are of Hungarian ethnicity, but there are some institutions where their proportion is as high as 30-40 percent in the Ukrainian-language classes. In another location, 20 percent of Ukrainian classes are Hungarian. In this context, opting for the majority-language school should not necessarily be regarded as a rare phenomenon – even if local society treats it as taboo. On

the contrary, it seems to be an increasingly dynamic trend, partly induced by the Ukrainian education policy: system-level actions (e.g. the specifics of the Ukrainian school-leaving exam) affect institutional and invididual strategies as well. Our research was intended to provide a starting point, and we can only hope that these phenomena will be further investigated with the help of quantitative and qualitative methods.