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# CHANGING ETHNIC GEOGRAPHY AND CHANGING ASSIMILATION PATTERNS IN THE NITRA DISTRICT, SLOVAKIA

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## Absztrakt

AZ ETNIKAI ARCULAT ÉS AZ ASSZIMILÁCIÓ VÁLTOZÓ MINTÁZATAI A NYITRAI JÁRÁSBAN

Tátrai Patrik

*Jelen tanulmány a Nyitrai járás etnikai arculatának változását kísérli meg bemutatni a 2001-es és 2011-es népszámlálás, valamint két terepmunka (2002 és 2012) adataira alapozva. A lakosság etnikai összetételének változása, az etnikai szerkezet generációs különbségei, a nyelvhasználat, a vegyes házasságok aránya és az iskolaválasztási szokások mind a helyi, nyelvsziget helyzetben levő magyarság gyorsuló asszimilációjáról tanúskodnak, amely a magyarság csökkenésének fő oka e régióban.*

*Kulcsszavak: asszimiláció, etnikai földrajz, nyelvhasználat, Szlovákia, magyar kisebbség*

## Introduction

From demographic perspective, the minority Hungarian communities in the Carpathian Basin can be characterized in the last decades by continuous population decrease, which is caused by natural loss, emigration and other subjective factors in the ethnic self-identification (like assimilation). Recently, the ratio of assimilation of the Hungarian minorities is estimated to be the highest in Slovakia out of the four numerous transborder Hungarian communities (Slovakia, Transylvania, Transcarpathia and Vojvodina). Furthermore, within Slovakia, one of the most significant effects of assimilation concern the Hungarians in the Nitra district (or Zoboralja),<sup>1</sup> whose number decreased more intensively than the Slovakian Hungarian average over the last two censuses.

Based on official statistics and two field works, the present paper aims at introducing the background of the rapid assimilation process characterizing the Hungarians in the Nitra district. Besides analyzing the ethnic data of censuses, the study provides survey data on ethnic composition, age structure, command of the Hungarian language, language use, intermarriage and school choice of five selected settlements in order to show the changing ethnic geography of the Nitra district.

## Transformations of the ethnic structure in the Nitra district

Ethnic geography of the Nitra district underwent significant changes during the 16-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, thus the region formerly inhabited mostly by Hungarians

<sup>1</sup> Zoboralja (or Zoborvidék) is a Hungarian historic/ethnographic term for this region, which includes those settlements inhabited by Hungarians that belong (predominantly) to the present-day Nitra district.

turned to be an area with Slovak demographic dominance. Since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ethno-demographic processes have been strongly influenced by the Hungarian and – after the WWI – the (Czecho)Slovak nation building always favoring the titular nation. The present-day ethno-demographic conditions are rooted in the post-WWII era. Although the direct oppression of minorities between 1945 and 1948 (deportation, forced population exchange) hardly concerned the local Hungarians (Vadkerty 2001), other ‘nationalizing’ measures (like reslovakization, closing the Hungarian schools and the ban on the Hungarian press and language use in the public life) have had a long lasting effect.

From the 1960s, the collectivization and modernization in the agriculture sector, and simultaneously the constrained industrialization resulted in a growing spatial and social mobility. This process started to weaken the traditional rural society, which – together with other factors such as the Slovak demographic predominance in the area and the geographical proximity of Slovak settlements – contributed to the increased number of mixed marriages and thus to assimilation. In this early period, the above effects turned up only in the towns (Nitra, Vrábľa) and in some peripheral Hungarian settlements north of Nitra (Gyurgyík 1994).

By 1991, the year of the first census after the socialism, the share of the ethnic Hungarians fell to an all-time low 8.2% (1910=43.5%) in the present territory of Nitra district. The demographic processes unfavourable for Hungarians did not cease: by 2001, due to demographic (ageing, assimilation), geographical (ethnic enclave position), political (strong nationalizing politics during the 1990s) and social-economic reasons (low prestige of the Hungarian minority and the Hungarian language in Slovakia, high unemployment in South Slovakia), the share of Hungarians decreased to 6.7% by ethnicity and to 7.9% by mother tongue criteria (Tátrai 2009).

This trend has not changed during the last decade thus according to the 2011 census out of the 160.000 inhabitants of the Nitra district only 9 thousand declared Hungarian ethnicity (5.7%) and 10.500 self-identified as Hungarian native speaker (6.6%) (Figure 1). The role and prestige of the Hungarian language further decreased even in the private sphere owing to the high number of mixed marriages and other interethnic contact situations in the everyday life. This is clearly reflected by two census categories (public and private language use) introduced in 2011.<sup>2</sup> The advanced assimilation is also reflected by the growing gap between the Hungarian ethnicity and mother tongue data (Gyurgyík 2006; Tátrai 2011), which reaches one of its highest values in the Nitra district within Slovakia.

In the last decade, the territorial distribution of the population underwent some significant changes. The population of urban areas (Nitra and Vrábľa) decreased by 10 and 5% respectively, while the suburban areas’ population grew

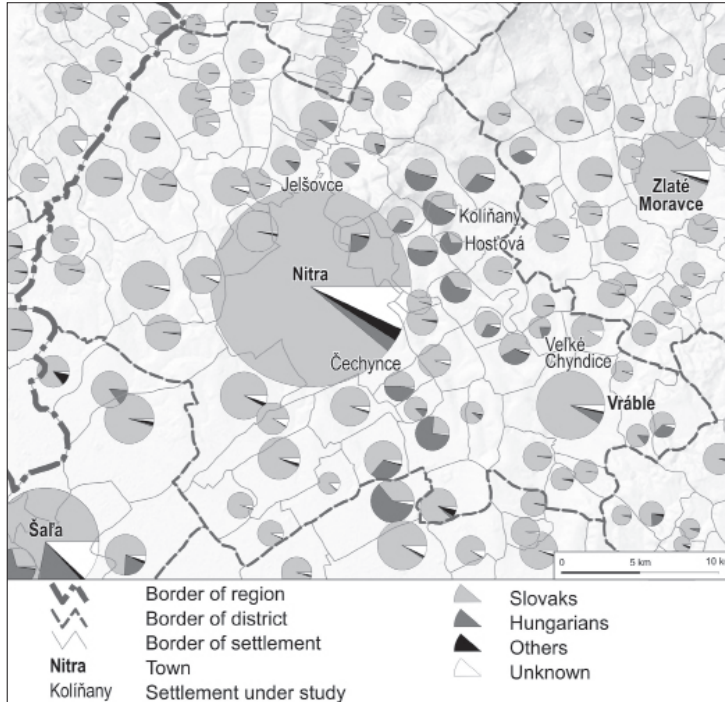
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<sup>2</sup> Hungarian as most often used language in the public sphere was marked by 5 thousand persons and as most often used language in the private sphere was declared by 8.6 thousand persons in the Nitra district.

significantly. The number of rural population stagnated or slightly increased in general but this could not compensate the population loss of the urban areas, therefore the population of the district slightly decreased between 2001 and 2011.

**Figure 1**

*Population by mother tongue in the Nitra district, 2011*



**Changing ethnic structure of the selected settlements**

The above-described ethnic process based on the census figures can be refined by the data of two field works carried out in five ethnically mixed settlements in 2002 and 2012. Both field works aimed at revealing the ethnic structure and the patterns of ethnic residential segregation, assimilation and ethnic identity by applying external classification method. This method means that local informants (e.g. mayor, priest) provide anonymous information on the local population regarding their ethnic affiliation, mother tongue, language use, etc. (see Keményfi 2004 for details about the method). Since the relationship network of the informants is limited, the method should be applied only to settlements with less than 2.000 inhabitants. Hence, five villages were selected (Čechynce, Host'ová, Jelšovce, Koliňany, Veľké Chyndice) representing different ethnic proportions, different sizes and dispersed geographical locations within the district (Tátrai 2013).

Regarding the population number and the ethnic composition, some general characteristics are shown up. First, our surveys found fewer inhabitants in the settlements

than the 2001 and 2011 census, since the informants reported only about those living *de facto* in the given settlements. Compared to the official statistics, the proportion of the non-Slovak ethnic groups (Hungarians, Roma) was higher. The main reason for that is the different methodology: the ethnic data provided by the census is based on auto-identification, while our survey applied hetero-identification (the informants classified the inhabitants on the basis of the personal experiences gained during the co-existence. In case of the Roma population, their anthropological characteristics highly influenced the categorization. The most significant difference between the census and our survey is manifested in the categorization of the uncertain, multiple, in-between or hybrid identities, since there is no room for such identity declarations in the census, however a significant proportion of the local population can be characterized by such identities. The comparison of the 2011 census and the 2012 survey shows that most of those who were classified as having uncertain/multiple ethnic affiliation most likely claimed Slovak ethnicity in the census (table 1, 2).

Based on both our surveys and the census statistics, the ethnic homogenization process is accelerated in the last decade – with considerable spatial differences. At the edge of the Hungarian settlement area, where the share of Hungarians is low (including mostly the localities north of Nitra), there is a rapid decrease in the number of Hungarians. Out of the settlements under study, it is Jelšovce and Veľké Chyndice where our survey found 77 and 64 percent decline in the number of local Hungarians between 2002 and 2012 (table 1). By contrast, the Hungarians’ number decreased ‘only’ by 10 to 40 percent in the core area, in Kolíňany, Čechynce and Hosťová, which are still high figures but partly explained by the different methodology of the 2012 survey resulting in high number of uncertain or in-between identities (table 2).

**Table 1**  
*Aggregated ethnic composition of the “edge settlements”, 2001–2012*

		total pop.	Slovak	Hungarian	Roma	Other, uncertain
2001 census mother tongue		1300	933	348	7	12
2001 census ethnicity		1300	1096	185	7	12
2002 survey data		1272	763	461	40	8
2011 census mother tongue		1294	1102	163	2	27
2011 census ethnicity		1294	1168	101	1	24
2012 survey data		1194	891	124	36	143
2001 ethnicity	0-19	290	282	1	..	..
	20-59	694	615	67	..	..
	60-x	315	199	116	..	..
2012 survey	0-18	225	204	0	21	0
	19-59	706	582	30	14	80
	60-x	263	105	94	1	63

Considering the age structure of ethnic groups, both the census and the survey data refer to ethnic assimilation process in the background. In the “edge settlements” (Jelšovce and Veľké Chyndice), despite the existence of a relatively numerous Hungarian community, there was only one ethnic Hungarian under 18, however Hungarians constituted the majority in the population older than 75 (Jelšovce) and 70 (Veľké Chyndice) in 2001. This clearly shows the ageing and the intergenerational assimilation of Hungarians.

Similarly to the edge settlements, a generational gap appeared in the Hungarian communities of the “core settlements” (Kolíňany, Čechynce and Hosťová) reflecting the effect of intergenerational assimilation as well. The share of young people under 19 decreased and the percentage of elder generations over 60 rose within the Hungarians in all three localities, meanwhile the number of the total population remained stable or grew slightly. However it should be noted that the above age distribution is highly influenced by the classification of the uncertain and in-between identities. Latter group is constituted mainly by youngsters and middle-aged persons descending generally from interethnic marriages, which reflects the belated starting date of the assimilation process compared to the edge settlements.

**Table 2**

*Aggregated ethnic composition of the “core settlements”, 2001–2012*

		total pop.	Slovak	Hungarian	Roma	Other, uncertain
2001 census mother tongue		2846	996	1823	8	19
2001 census ethnicity		2846	1096	1721	16	13
2002 survey		2804	848	1880	37	39
2011 census mother tongue		2981	1276	1564	8	133
2011 census ethnicity		2981	1347	1497	8	129
2012 survey		2829	1023	1385	46	375
2001 ethnicity	0-19	730	369	354	..	..
	20-59	1598	602	976	..	..
	60-x	510	123	385	..	..
2012 survey	0-18	550	310	137	16	87
	19-59	1750	644	839	29	237
	60-x	529	69	410	1	49

**Changes in the language use, school choice and intermarriages**

The language use and command of Hungarian language strongly depends on the local ethnic proportions. Between 2002 and 2012, the role of the Slovak language is strengthened in many fields of the everyday life, while the Hungarian language continued to loose its positions even in the private sphere. Naturally, this

is closely connected to the decreasing prestige of the Hungarian language and of the local Hungarian dialect stigmatized as “backward” and “rural”. Outside the Hungarian villages, the role of the Slovak language is exclusive: Nitra, the centre of the district – as a symbolic place for the Slovak nation-building – “quittens and mutes the Hungarian talking” (Ilyés 2012, p. 447). The nationalizing policy of the Slovak government adopting a discriminative language law in 2009 also contributes to this situation.

In the localities under study, the dominance of the Slovak language increased between 2002 and 2012. A significant share of Hungarian parents choose the Slovak school for their children; moreover many of them talk to the children only in Slovak bringing them up as to be Slovak native speaker. This is strongly connected to local families’ strategies which associate the Slovak language and the Slovak schools with the increase of the social status; therefore the language of prosperity, progress and success is thought to be the Slovak. Hence, it is not surprising that the language preference of the younger generations basically transformed in the last decades (see also Presinszky 2008).

Like in case of the ethnic composition, the peculiarities of the language use are somewhat different in the edge and core settlements. In Jelšovce and Veľké Chyndice, the share of people who can speak Hungarian dropped from 41 and 51% in 2002 to 26 and 44% in 2012 – naturally, there are significant differences by age groups aligning to the ethnic composition. Although the respective data of the core settlements are much higher, they show the same pattern: decreasing (but still important) role of the Hungarian language with significant age divisions. Here, the ratio of people who can speak Hungarian fell from 88 to 69% in Čechynce, from 80 to 70% in Kolíňany, and from 95 to 87% in Host’ová.

Generally, and especially for Hungarians living in the Zoboralja, elementary schools play a key role in the reproduction of ethnic identity. Thus the availability of Hungarian schools has basically influenced the school choice and thereby the transformations of the ethnic structure. Due to the nationalizing politics of Slovakia and the demographic decline, the number of the Hungarian schools in the Nitra district dropped from 21 in the 1960s to 7 in 2015. In addition, fewer and fewer Hungarian parents register their children at Hungarian school, because (1) the number of children is declining, (2) almost no pupil from intermarriage enrolls Hungarian school and (3) Hungarian schools are considered unfit to effectively serve the social mobility thus their prestige lags far behind the Slovak schools in Nitra. But this decision results in assimilation of the Hungarian children – especially in Zoboralja where the proportion of Hungarian pupils registered at Slovak schools is the highest within Slovakia (Kontra 2010; Morvai – Szarka 2013; Séra 2014).

The survey found Hungarian children attending Hungarian school only in the core settlements in both dates. In 2002, pupils in the core settlements attending Slovak schools outnumbered those in Hungarian schools, however the majority of



the Hungarian children were registered at Hungarian schools. By 2012, no significant changes occurred: even higher share of the children attended Slovak school, but most of the Hungarians were enrolled Hungarian school. The main difference is that in 2012, almost only those children were classified as Hungarians who attended Hungarian school. This phenomenon is reflected by the share of children attending Hungarian school (Kolíňany 30→20%, Čechynce 36→21%, Host'ová 42→33%) and by the number of pupils attending Hungarian school compared to the total Hungarian children (Kolíňany 52→75%, Čechynce 72→82%, Host'ová 53→75%). This calls attention to the role of school choice in the ethnic identification process.

The ethnically mixed marriages play a key role in the school choice, the ethnic socialization and thus the whole assimilation process. Between 2002 and 2012, the share of intermarriages within the total marriages with at least one Hungarian partners slightly decreased and stabilized around 25%, which is close to the Slovakia Hungarian average. The proportion of intermarriages declined in those settlements where the decrease in the number of Hungarians was above the average (Jelšovce and Veľké Chyndice).

### Conclusion

The present study argues that based on the census and survey data, the main reason for the changes in the ethnic geography of the Nitra district is the assimilation process. The selected settlements represent different assimilation patterns. In the beginning of the assimilation process, the number of young generations with uncertain/multiple/hybrid ethnic identities increases (e.g. contemporary Host'ová), followed by the middle-aged (e.g. Kolíňany and Čechynce) and the elder generations (e.g. Jelšovce and Veľké Chyndice). At the end of the process the number of people with uncertain/multiple/hybrid ethnic identities will decrease forming a homogenous ethnic structure (in our case with Slovak dominance). According to this approach, the uncertain/multiple/hybrid ethnic affiliations are considered to be temporary, while the ethnic homogeneity represents the "balance" situation.

The above described process called assimilation is induced by the asymmetric majority-minority relationship of Slovaks and Hungarians. Furthermore it is fueled by the settlement patterns (local Hungarians live in ethnic enclaves; two third of the Hungarians live in settlements where the Slovaks outnumber them), the demographics (the ratio of Hungarians does not reach the 10% in the district), and the low and decreasing prestige and role of the Hungarian language. The increasing number of intermarriages and the predominant Slovak school choice has also catalyzed the process.

The data from the 2002 and 2012 survey underpin the existence of the assimilation and the language shift process. All selected indicators (ethnic composition, language use, command of language, school choice) in all the selected settlements

show the gradual shrinkage of the Hungarian community and the spheres of Hungarian language use. The data analysis by age groups foreshadows the continuation and acceleration of the process outlined in this study.

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