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The Echo of the Prague Congress in Hungary in the Contemporary Press and Political Thought

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Abstract. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Hungarian state faced a significant dilemma: It had to assert its independence within the Habsburg Empire while navigating the challenges of modern ethnic and linguistic national movements in Hungary. Many members of the reform-era Hungarian aristocracy believed that modernization, urbanization, and the extension of rights would lead to the assimilation or, at least, to loyalty of non-Hungarian groups. They envisioned a multi-ethnic state where Hungarian would be the official language for political and administrative purposes, while acknowledging the existence of other languages within the realm. This concept of a 'Hungarian political nation' was later formalized in the 1867 Compromise. However, others warned that the rise of Hungarian nationalism could alienate non-Hungarian groups, particularly the Slavs, and competing nation-building processes might be a threat to the integrity of the multi-ethnic Hungarian state.

Intended to foster Slavic cooperation within the Habsburg Empire, the Prague Congress in June 1848 further intensified concerns. While initially seen as a potential ally against Austrian dominance, the Congress's pronouncements on Slavic rights and autonomy were perceived as a threat to Hungarian statehood. Kossuth, in particular, reacted strongly to the Congress's accusations of Hungarian oppression and its calls for Slavic independence.

The Prague Congress had a profound impact on Hungarian political thought. It solidified the perception of Slavic nationalism as a threat to the integrity of the Hungarian Kingdom. Rather than fostering cooperation, the Congress turned out to be a symbol of conflict and a point of contention in Hungarian-Slavic relations.

Keywords: national movements in Central Europe, political nation, nationalities, languages of Central Europe

The Hungarian dilemma

At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Hungarian state faced a critical dilemma: how to reconcile its strengthening historical autonomy against Vienna within the Habsburg Empire with the rise of ethnic and linguistic nationalism among the non-Hungarian nationalities in Hungary. The linguistic and ethnic

diversity of the Hungarian state further complicated the situation. In the state rebuilt after the Ottoman occupation, Hungarians (Magyars) were only a relative majority, often in areas with populations that were mixed due to internal migration and resettlement. The majority of non-Hungarian nationalities were Slavs (Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Ruthenians, and Slovenes).

Already at the end of the eighteenth century, the 1790–1791 Diet raised the question of the official use of the Hungarian language. However, this did not primarily stem from an ethno-nationalist agenda. Instead, supporters sought to replace the country's official language, Latin, with Hungarian, primarily to counterbalance the growing influence of German in the Habsburg Empire.[1] This reflected the belief that Hungary, with its own historical constitution and traditions rooted in the coronation of St Stephen, should have a separate administrative language. The idea was also formulated in the Diet's declaration: "Hungary cannot be governed in the same way as the rest of the Empire."[2]

The aristocratic elite of the Reform Era (roughly from the 1820s to the revolution of 1848) recognized that promoting the Hungarian language would probably stimulate the development of a Hungarian national consciousness and thereby encourage the development of national movements among other non-Hungarian nationalities within the Kingdom of Hungary. However, most reform-minded aristocrats were confident that some balance and harmony between liberalism and the national idea could be achieved. They thought that the 'Hungarus' consciousness, patriotism that prevailed up to the end of the eighteenth century, could be transformed into civic patriotism. However, based on the liberal development of law, the nationalities launched their own linguistic, cultural, and later their political movements,[3] and gradually gravitated out of the Hungarian state.[4]

Optimism and anxiety

Despite this background, the elite of the Reform Era held an optimistic, almost Mazzinian, view. They believed that the successes of the reform process, including

1 Kamusella, *The Politics of Language,* 434–38.

2 Németh and Soós, "A magyarországi hungarus-tudat."

3 It was in this period that the Slovak, Serbian, and Croatian literary language movements were initiated. Anton Bernolák founded the Slovak Learned Society in 1792 in Trnava (Nagyszombat), and in 1826 the Matica srpska was established in Pest. By 1848, the first political programs had also been formulated. The Slovaks' demands were met with an uprising against the Hungarian government in 1848, while Jelačić articulated the demands of the Croatian nation before leading his army across the Drava River to confront the Hungarian government.

4 Molnár, "Etnikumok."

the building of a modern civic Hungarian state, the extension of rights, the inclusion of everyone behind the ramparts of law, and the growth of urbanization would naturally lead to the non-Hungarian nationalities' loyalty and to their partial and voluntary assimilation or Magyarization. They envisioned these groups becoming Hungarian out of gratitude for the benefits they would receive.

Members of the elite believed that, protected by Hungarian laws and benefiting from the guidance of the Hungarian political elite, non-Hungarian nationalities would be gradually assimilated into Hungarian society and culture. They did not expect full linguistic assimilation, but rather that the inhabitants of the multilingual Hungarian or rather 'Hungarus' state would consider the state with the Hungarian official language as their own homeland. Count István Széchényi exemplified this optimistic view.[5]

Hungarian would have served as the official language of the state, while acknowledging the multilingual reality of the Kingdom. The concept of a 'Hungarian political nation' was envisioned, similar to the one that emerged after the 1867 Compromise. This concept emphasized the unity and indivisibility of the Hungarian state, while acknowledging the existence of various nationalities within its borders, including Hungarians themselves, primarily as linguistic groups.[6] This recognition was reflected in the 1848 revolutionary currency, the Kossuth forint, which bore inscriptions in five languages, reflecting the impracticality of imposing a single language.

Critics of the assimilationist potential of extending rights pointed to the inherent diversity of the Hungarian Kingdom. They argued that the formation of a unilingual political nation, the French model (its partial implementation) of a nation-state was not applicable due to the Hungarian Kingdom's multi-ethnic character. There was a fear that the success of the Hungarian national movement, driven by a relative majority, would alienate rather than attract members of the non-Hungarian nationalities. These groups, fearing assimilation or subjugation by the dominant Hungarian movement, might initiate their own national movements, formulating their own political goals and leading to the disintegration of the Hungarian state.

In his 1843 Speech on the Issue of Slavic Nationality in Hungary, Miklós Wesselényi warned that growing nationalism among Slavic populations within the Kingdom of Hungary could lead to their alienation from the Hungarian state and their potential turn towards Russia. Given the sensitivity of this topic and its potential to fuel separatist sentiments, Wesselényi's book could only be published abroad,

5 Fried, "Széchenyi István."

6 Demeter, "Politikai nemzet."

in Leipzig, suggesting a desire to avoid direct confrontation within Hungary.[7] Thereafter, the distrust towards non-Hungarian national movements in Hungary was almost constantly present in Hungarian political thought. This was the case even though the movements were not entirely homogeneous; in fact, particularly within the Croatian and Slovak movements, some factions were ready to accept the framework of the Hungarian state and the existence of a Hungarian political nation.

The 1848 Revolution and its aftermath in light of the Prague Slav Congress in June 1848

As the Hungarian revolutionary government's ambassador to Paris, László Teleki, despite his initial enthusiasm for the 1848 Revolution, viewed Kossuth's declaration of independence in Debrecen as a tragic turn. He wrote to Kossuth on 14 March 1849, voicing his belief that extending rights to the nationalities within the Kingdom was crucial for success. He argued that the declaration of independence would not only end Austrian rule but also dismantle the historical Hungarian state integrity, as an independent Hungarian nation-state could not exist within its traditional borders. This conviction remained with Teleki until his death by suicide in 1861, even though the Compromise of 1867 was drawing close.[8]

Despite its failure, the 1848 Prague Congress, which was built on ethnic nationalism and promoted a common Slavic policy, held significant importance for the Hungarian political elite, especially given their own claims to historical rights in opposition to the assertion of ethnic rights. Many believed that the Czechs, drawing inspiration from the Hungarian example, would assert similar claims to their own historical rights and autonomy. While the April Laws of 1848 modernized the Hungarian state based on historical constitutional law, and many in the Hungarian national movement assumed that the Czechs would follow suit, there was a current in the Czech national movement that opted for a modern linguistic and ethnic solution. This was natural, as in the spring of 1848, they had essentially two options: Frankfurt and modern pan-German ideas, or cooperation with other Slavs within the Empire.[9] From the moment it was organized, the Hungarian press viewed the Prague Slav Congress with mistrust, seeing Pan-Slavism as the greatest threat.[10]

However, when the Prague Congress issued demands for linguistic and ethnic autonomy and characterized Hungarian reform efforts as acts of tyranny against

7 Wesselényi, *Szózat*.

8 Demeter, "Politikai nemzet."

9 Schelle, *Státoprávní aspekty*, 5–59.

10 See e.g., *Jelenkor*, 23 May 1848 ("A miniszterelnök a külügyminiszternek").

the nationalities within the Kingdom, it provoked outrage in Hungary. In July 1848, Lajos Kossuth published an article in his newspaper *Hírlap* that vehemently denounced these accusations of Hungarian tyranny.[11]

The idea of a Slavic cooperation of the Prague Congress first appeared in Hungarian public discourse in the context of Hungarian–Croatian relations. Kossuth emphasized that there were strong historical connections between Hungarians and Croats, whom he considered brother nations. He argued that these ties were unbreakable and highlighted that when Napoleon's conquests had disrupted this historical unity and these territories had fallen under Austrian rule, Croats longed to return to the Hungarian Crown. Kossuth explicitly emphasized that the use of the Croatian language was permitted within the Kingdom of Hungary.

Kossuth presented a historical legal argument, pointing to the 1830 Hungarian Diet, where Croatian representatives supported the introduction of Hungarian as the official language.[12] He stressed that this was not perceived as an act of conquest or forced assimilation, but rather as a symbol of Hungary's independence from Vienna.[13] However, as evident in the resolutions of the Prague Congress, the emphasis shifted towards Croatian language education as the foundation for political organization. Despite the Hungarian desire to share the fruits of their revolutionary gains with all nationalities within the Kingdom, these efforts were met with rejection.[14]

This highlights the fundamental conflict between the Hungarian emphasis on historical rights and the emerging ideology of linguistic and ethnic self-determination. However, in Hungary, this approach was perceived as a threat of a conquering Pan-Slavism. This interpretation persisted until the end of the Dual Monarchy. As Lajos Csernyátonyi wrote in the newspaper *Marczius Tizenötödike* in June 1848:

> "Do not be afraid that Paskievich will come with 109,000 men to help the Illyrian rebels and Prague intriguers. This is a bogeyman who used to frighten children, but keep your eyes open to the invisible army of emissaries among you who may surprise you with their plots. The Muscovite can only come as a constitutional prince, he sees that absolutism has no future in Europe, and if he were assured that the planned constitutional South Slavic empire would also choose him as its head, it is quite likely that he would grant a constitution to his present peoples."[15]

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11 Kossuth, "A szlávok első gyűlésének proclamatiója."

12 In reality, the Hungarian Diet adopted this despite protests from some of the Croatian representatives.

13 Kamusella, *The Politics of Language*, 439–52.

14 Gergely, "Kossuth."

15 Csernyátonyi, "Pest jun. 16."

The Hungarian revolutionary government sought to extend the rights and freedoms gained through the revolution to all nationalities within the Kingdom of Hungary. However, instead of gratitude, they encountered hostility. Kossuth lamented:

> "It was from there that mother-murdering hands rose against us, from where we had the right to expect the clearest signs of recognition."[16]

The Prague Congress advocated for the ethnic and linguistic rights of the Slavic peoples. This concept, which represented the idea of an ethnic federation within the Habsburg Monarchy, directly challenged the historical rights and territorial integrity of the Hungarian state. It also raised concerns in the Hungarian press about some Slavic national movements' increasing political reliance on Tsarist Russia. Furthermore, the Congress not only rejected claims based on Hungarian historical rights and emphasized linguistic and ethnic self-determination, but its proclamation also called for the 'defeat of tyrants' (referring to Hungarian politics). The Hungarian press interpreted this as incitement for Slavic-majority territories to secede from the Kingdom of Hungary.[17]

Kossuth believed that a peaceful resolution between the Hungarian pursuit of independence based on historical rights (which, he acknowledged, had an inherently ethno-nationalist dimension) and the emerging demands for linguistic and ethnic autonomy was unlikely. He increasingly saw armed conflict as the inevitable outcome, foreshadowing the impending military struggle.

Zsigmond Kemény, a prominent supporter of Count István Széchenyi and a leader of the centralist faction, echoed these concerns in the 17 June 1848 edition of the *Pesti Hírlap*. He condemned the Prague Congress, accusing it of being dominated by Slavic propaganda. Kemény argued that by rejecting historical legal foundations, the Congress had declared an open war against Hungarian interests.[18]

The legacy of the Prague Congress in Hungary

By the end of the nineteenth century, a negative stereotype of the Prague Congress had taken hold within Hungarian political thought. Initially, there had been expectations of finding an ally in the Czech nation in the struggle for independence from Vienna, given their shared historical statehood. However, the Congress instead presented a new set of demands based on national and ethnic principles, directly contradicting Hungary's

16 Gyetvai, "A nemzetiségi kérdés."

17 Kossuth, "A szlávok első gyűlésének proclamatiója."

18 Kemény, "Pest, jún. 16-án."

emphasis on historical rights and legal claims. Moreover, the Congress accused Hungary of forcibly oppressing the Slavs living in Hungary. Coupled with fears of Slavic unity and the potential disintegration of the Hungarian state, this led to deep-rooted antagonism towards the Czech national movement and the idea of Slavic unity. The Prague Congress was seen as a threat rather than a parallel to the Hungarian Revolution. Figures like Štúr and Hurbán, who, according to Hungarian interpretations, advocated at the Congress for an aggressive, even violent path towards Slavic unity, became symbols of this perceived threat. The failure of the Slavic revolutionary movements in 1848–1849 further reinforced the Hungarian belief in the historical and legal legitimacy of their own claims within the Habsburg Empire.[19]

The proclamations issued by the Slav Congress, outlining their goals and aspirations, were met with suspicion by many Hungarians. Some Hungarian observers, with a degree of exaggeration and prejudice, satirically, but with apprehension suggested that the Slav Congress had plans to 'consume' neighbouring states: Hungary for 'breakfast,' Austria for 'lunch,' and Germany for 'dinner.'[20]

After the 1867 Compromise, this fear increasingly shifted to the interpretation of Czech–Slovak relations: In the Prague Congress, the beginning of Czech political interference in the political life of Slovaks in Hungary was seen, specifically in Palacký's federalist plan. This view became particularly prevalent in the last decades of the nineteenth century, mainly after 1895, when the idea of modern Czechoslovakism—which was still politically marginal and primarily cultural at the time—began to be articulated more intensely and with the engagement in Hungarian political life of the, Hlasits, former Slovak students from Hungary studying at the University of Prague and belonging to Masaryk's circle.[21]

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19 Demmel and Ábrahám, "Gyökerek és választások."

20 "Míg Ausztria fennáll," 2.

21 Mészáros, *A csehszlovakizmus*, 107–59.

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