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## The Hungarian National Community in Slovenia and the Covid-19 Epidemic

Based on interviews and newspaper and internet sources, the study explores the impact of Covid-19 and the related measures on the life of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia during the first wave of the epidemic, i.e. from 12 March to 31 May 2020. Members of the Hungarian national community and their respective institutions, as well as all residents of the border area, were directly affected mainly by border closure, since following the democratic processes after the 1990s, and especially after accession to the European Union, life in the border zone had changed in both qualitative and quantitative terms. In the last decade, residents of the border area on both sides of the border have been integrated in the economic, transport, educational, cultural and sports life of the neighbouring country, their homeland.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 and ethnic minorities, Hungarian national community in Slovenia, Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje, Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture, Népiújság, Hungarian radio of Pomurje, TV studio Lendava, bilingual schools in Prekmurje.

### Madžarska narodna skupnost v Sloveniji in epidemija bolezni covid-19

*V študiji je s pomočjo intervjujev ter časopisnih in internetnih virov predstavljen vpliv bolezni covid-19 in z njo povezanih ukrepov na življenje madžarske narodne skupnosti v Sloveniji v času prvega vala epidemije, to je od 12. marca do 31. maja 2020. Pripadniki madžarske narodne skupnosti in njihove ustanove ter vsi prebivalci obmejnega območja so bili neposredno prizadeti predvsem zaradi zaprtja meja, saj se je po demokratičnih procesih po devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja, posebej pa po priključitvi tega območja k Evropski uniji, bivanje v tako imenovanem obmejnem pasu kvantitativno in kvalitativno bistveno spremenilo. Prebivalci obmejnega območja na obeh straneh meje so v zadnjem desetletju integrirani v gospodarsko, prometno, prosvetno, kulturno in športno življenje tudi sosednje, tako imenovane matične države.*

**Ključne besede:** covid-19 in narodne manjšine, madžarska narodna skupnost v Sloveniji, Pomurska madžarska samoupravna narodna skupnost, Zavod za kulturo madžarske narodnosti, Népiújság, Pomurski madžarski radio, TV studió Lendava, dvojezične šole v Prekmurju.

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of 2007, when Slovenia joined the Schengen area, members of the Hungarian national community as well as other residents of the north-eastern part of Slovenia felt very optimistic about the free movement of people, goods and services across Europe's internal borders. The new millennium opened a whole new world for many generations of Prekmurje (and the Raba Region on the Hungarian side) and their descendants who, at the time of the Iron Curtain following the Yugoslav-Hungarian conflict in the aftermath of 1948, had been almost hermetically sealed in a narrow and strictly controlled border zone. Upon the abolition of border controls within the Schengen area, state borders "have become symbolic" (Göncz 2015, 367).<sup>1</sup>

The significance of the abolition of borders is evidenced by the fact that on the eve of the abolition of border control at land and sea borders within the Schengen area, the umbrella self-governing political organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia – the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Prekmurje (PMSNS) – organised a ceremony with fireworks at the Dolga vas – Rédcis international border crossing. The PMSNS president József Kocon addressed the participants at the ceremony with the following words (Bence 2007, 5):

I think it's clear and understandable for every Hungarian in Prekmurje that we are witnessing an event that has no precedent in the past 100 years. All those who feel Hungarian or sympathise with Hungarians should be at the border on Thursday, for one thing is certain: the existence and the proximity of the border have made the lives of many, both members of the majority and the minority, difficult. Of course, the abolition of borders also means joining the Schengen area. We can indeed understand that some people will see its only benefit in the fact that they will no longer need to present an ID and will be able to move freely in the border area. Border control will be replaced by internal control. Yet for us – Hungarians – this should have an added value, and we want to celebrate this 'added value' tonight on our common, soon-to-be abolished border.

The PMSNS president's words clearly suggest that the Hungarian national community in Slovenia saw a great opportunity in the expansion of the Schengen area. By opening the borders, which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had shaped the fate of the border population, the long present negative consequences were mitigated or annulled. As a result of positive changes, especially in the last decade, cross-border communities have formed and have been co-shaping the living space in the border areas regardless of national affiliation. Within such areas, assets were shared; cultural events and programmes were designed and attended by all border residents, educational institutions became accessible to pupils and students from both sides of the border, economic and trade ties intertwined in many ways. The findings are similar when assessing the personal contacts of

the population on both sides of the border, as the lives of the people along the border are intertwined and linked to the neighbouring country in all areas of life. People have slowly learned to live along and with the border and to take advantage of living in a border area. The importance of the border for the local residents – and especially for members of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia (Prekmurje) and for the Slovene minority in Hungary (Raba Region) – is evidenced by the fact that it has been a recurrent topic at the meetings of the Slovene-Hungarian Joint Commission (SMMK) established on the basis of the Agreement on Ensuring the Special Rights of the Slovene National Minority in the Republic of Hungary and the Hungarian National Community in the Republic of Slovenia. After the political changes in Hungary in 1989–1990 and Slovenia's independence in 1991, both countries sought to re-establish road and rail links and open new border crossings. This was important both in terms of ensuring free and direct contacts of minorities with the kin-nation and its state and public institutions, and in terms of promoting the economic and general development of the border area. For this reason, until 2003 (until the accession of both countries to the European Union (EU) in 2004), the following border related topics regularly appeared on the SMMK agenda: opening new border crossings and expanding existing ones, simplifying border crossing procedures, establishing the Lendava – Rédics rail link, and constructing and establishing the rail link between Slovenia and Hungary on the Murska Sobota – Hodoš route (Bešter & Pirc 2018, 147–154).

Due to all the above, the Hungarian national community in Slovenia (as well as the entire population along the Hungarian border) was severely affected by Slovenia's declaration of the Covid-19 epidemic, which lasted from 12 March to 31 May 2020. Although the restrictive measures arising therefrom were the same for all citizens of Slovenia, the border population was additionally affected by border closure or restricted border crossing. Among them, a special emphasis is on the members of the Hungarian national community and their institutions, which were particularly disadvantaged during the epidemic due to their strong attachment to their home country and various cross-border contacts.

The impact of the epidemic and related measures on the life of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia during the epidemic will be presented in more detail below. The emphasis will be on the activities of political entities, self-governing national communities and public institutes involved in information, culture and education. The organisation of education was a particular challenge also in the ethnically mixed area. In order to present the problems and hardships of members of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia as illustratively as possible, and to shed light on the impact of the coronavirus emergency from several angles, extensive talks were held in the second half of April with representatives of Hungarian self-governing national communities in Prekmurje, with selected mayors of municipalities in the bilingual area, and with representatives

of Hungarian nationality public institutions and bilingual schools. In addition to interviews with prominent representatives of the Hungarian national community, media and Internet sources were also consulted in writing this article.

## 2. Briefly on the Hungarian National Community in Slovenia

The settlement area of the autochthonous Hungarian national community in Slovenia is spatially compact and extends over a narrow strip of territory along the Slovene-Hungarian border, dividing the area of the settlements of Kobilje, Strehovci and Bukovnica with Slovene population into a northern and a southern part. The northern part comprises eight settlements and covers an area of 65 sq. km, while the southern part comprises 22 settlements and covers 130 sq. km, i.e. 195 sq. km in total.<sup>2</sup> Within this area is also the settlement of Benica, which *de facto* is not part of the ethnically mixed area to which the legal and institutional protection of the Hungarian minority in Slovenia mainly relates.<sup>3</sup> The Hungarian national community belongs to the circle of minority ethnic communities whose exercise of special minority rights is tied to a specific territory traditionally inhabited by members of the said national community. As regards local government, the area covers the territory of five municipalities (Hodoš, Šalovci, Moravske Toplice, Dobrovnik and Lendava), whereby it should be stressed that the territory of the ethnically mixed area is specifically defined in the statutes of individual municipalities and made up of territories of the settlements of an individual municipality where members of the autochthonous Hungarian national community live (Komac 1999, 25, 38).<sup>4</sup>

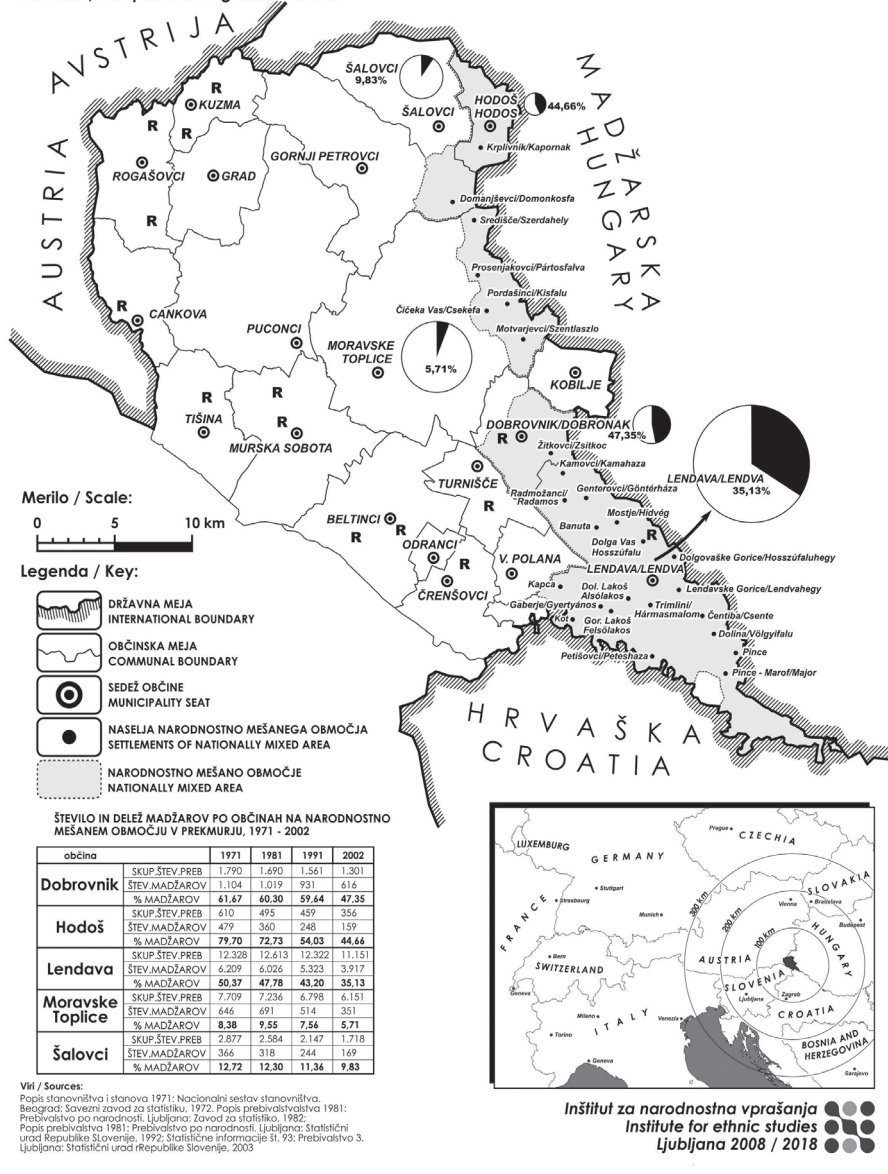
Regarding the number of members of the Hungarian national community, we only have data from 2002, and even these are shown only for municipalities. As revealed by Table 1, the 2002 census in Slovenia listed 6,243 persons who identified themselves as having Hungarian nationality and 7,713 persons with Hungarian mother tongue. In the ethnically mixed area of five municipalities, 5,212 persons with Hungarian nationality and 6,237 persons with Hungarian as their mother tongue were registered. About 16 % of the members of the Hungarian national community at that time already lived elsewhere in Slovenia, outside the ethnically mixed area.

After 2002, there has been no census in Slovenia that would also cover ethnic and religious affiliation or mother tongue of the population. For this reason, we only have estimates of the Hungarian population. Based on the decline in the population in the ethnically mixed area as deriving from the 2002 census, the number of people who would identify themselves as Hungarian today is estimated between 4,600 and 4,800 in the ethnically mixed area, or between 5,500 and 5,800 at the national level (Kovács 2011, 18).

Figure 1: Nationally (i.e. ethnically) mixed areas in Prekmurje in 2002

## NARODNOSTNO MEŠANA OBMOČJA V PREKMURJU LETA 2002 NATIONALLY MIXED AREA IN PREKMURJE IN THE YEAR 2002

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*Table 1: Number of persons with Hungarian as mother tongue and Hungarian nationality in the bilingual municipalities of Prekmurje and in Slovenia in 2002.*

	Total population	Hungarian nationality	Hungarian mother tongue
Hodoš municipality	356	159	210
Šalovci municipality	1,718	169	188
Moravske Toplice municipality	6,151	351	424
Dobrovník municipality	1,307	616	725
Lendava municipality	11,151	3,917	5,216
<b>Total</b>	<b>20,683</b>	<b>5,212</b>	<b>6,237</b>
Other Slovene municipalities	1,943,353	1,031	1,476
<b>Total for Slovenia</b>	<b>1,964,036</b>	<b>6,243</b>	<b>7,713</b>

Source: SORS (2002, 20–23, 28–30).

### 3. Covid-19 in Figures

Below, we briefly present the number of people infected with SARS-CoV-2 virus from the official declaration of the epidemic in Slovenia until it was declared over, i.e. from 12 March to 30 May 2020, with special emphasis on the Pomurje region that includes the ethnically mixed area inhabited by members of the Hungarian national community.

Based on statistical data, 1,473 people tested positive for this virus in Slovenia between 4 March 2020 – when the first case of infection was confirmed – and 30 May 2020, with 80,161 tests performed. Out of a total of 1,473 cases throughout the country, 188 (i.e. 164 persons per 100,000 population) were registered in Pomurje (Covid-19 Tracker).

Infections were reported in three out of five ethnically mixed municipalities of Prekmurje, namely Lendava, Dobrovník and Šalovci. By 30 May 2020, there were no cases of infection in the municipalities of Hodoš and Moravske Toplice (Nemeš & Vrbjak 2020).

## 4. Activities of Political Entities and Hungarian Self-Governing National Communities during the Covid-19 Epidemic

### 4.1 Introduction

Pursuant to Slovene electoral legislation, members of the Hungarian and Italian national communities have the right to representation at all levels of decision-

-making, from the local level (municipal councils) to the National Assembly. Members of the Hungarian (and Italian) national community have the right to cast two votes each in the elections to the National Assembly or local government bodies (municipalities). One vote is given to the candidate that matches their ideological political affinity, while the other is cast to elect a representative of the national community. The two autochthonous national communities in Slovenia therefore have a dual right to vote. Based thereon, members of the Hungarian national community elect their representative to the Slovenian parliament and to municipal councils (Komac 1999, 57–65).

Below is a presentation of how the organisations and institutions of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia (municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities and their umbrella organisation) and the Hungarian deputy responded to the Covid-19 epidemic and how they tried to help community members through their work.

#### **4.2 Municipal Hungarian Self-Governing National Communities and the Umbrella Organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia (Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje) during the Epidemic**

The establishment of self-governing national communities as co-decision-making organisations of the Hungarian (and Italian) national community is provided by Article 64 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, while their organisation, relations with local and state bodies and tasks are determined by the Self-Governing National Communities Act and statutes. Pursuant to this Act, municipal self-governing national communities are established in each municipality where members of the autochthonous national community reside. In Prekmurje, the members of the Hungarian national community established five municipal self-governing communities, namely in the municipalities of Lendava, Dobrovnik, Moravske Toplice, Šalovci and Hodoš. The Act also stipulates that municipal self-governing national communities join into their umbrella national community, in this case the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje (PMSNS). The declaration of the Covid-19 epidemic caught the Hungarian national community in Slovenia at a very unfavourable time. In fact, in March, Hungarians around the world celebrate a major national holiday (15 March), commemorating the revolution and the liberation struggle in 1848–1849. In Prekmurje, too, they were preparing for this holiday as they had been doing for decades already. In all five ethnically mixed municipalities, the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities, together with the relevant Hungarian nationality institute (ZKMN), cultural organisations and bilingual schools, organised various events to mark this day. Two of them were still able to carry out the celebration on 6 March (in the municipality of Hodoš) and

8 March (in the municipality of Šalovci) (Abraham 2020a; Abraham 2020b), while the central ceremony scheduled for Friday 13 March as well as the events planned by the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities of Moravske Toplice (14 March) and Dobrovnik (15 March) were cancelled due to the declaration of the epidemic (Lőrincz 2020a). The formal addresses by the presidents of the abovementioned Hungarian self-governing national communities as well as by the presidents of PMSNS and the Pomurje Youth Association were thus delivered online (Muravidéki Magyar Önkormányzati Nemzeti Közösség 2020 a, b, c, d).

In order to curb the spread of the epidemic, very strict measures were introduced on Monday 16 March 2020, bringing public life in the country practically to a halt. The self-governing and other organisations and public institutions of the Hungarian national community complied with the new measures, introducing remote work or on-call duty (Népűjság 2020a). In larger organisations, where several persons are employed (PMSNS, Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Lendava, Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture (ZKMN), the editorial board of Hungarian RTV programmes, Institute for Information of the Hungarian Nationality (ZIDMN)), on-call duty was organised the whole time. For all those who sought contact or help from the competent municipal national communities, the staff was available online even in smaller self-governing national communities. In most cases, the secretariats operated at all times, although there was no direct physical business. This was confirmed by the presidents of the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities and PMSNS, the director of ZKMN, the editors or heads of ZIDMN, the Hungarian radio of Pomurje (PMR) and the Hungarian TV studio (the dates are indicated under the references).

On the same day when strict measures were introduced in Slovenia to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, i.e. on 16 March 2020, the foreign ministers of Slovenia and Hungary, Anže Logar and Péter Szijjártó, met in Ljubljana. The ministers focused primarily on measures relating to various border crossing regimes, both for freight and passenger transport, and agreed that Hungary would not impose a ban on transit freight transport (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia 2020a). Nevertheless, on 17 March 2020, Hungary closed all border crossings for foreign nationals, i.e. also for Slovenes, including members of the Hungarian national community (Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia in Budapest 2020). This meant that from 17 March, no Slovene citizen was allowed to enter Hungary – including members of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia.

Shortly after the introduction of measures to curb the spread of the virus, the Hungarian radio of Pomurje conducted a telephone interview with the president of the central umbrella organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia (PMSNS) Ferenc Horváth, who is also the representative of the Hungarian national com-



munity in the National Assembly. In the interview published on 26 March 2020, the PMSNS president said that in his opinion there were minimal chances for the life of the Hungarian community to get back to normal before August 2020. At the same time, the president promised that PMSNS and ZKMN would contact the Hungarian associations and offer them assistance in resuming their activities as soon as possible (Fehér 2020). This promise was kept and a few days later, the PMSNS president and the ZKMN director sent a letter to all Hungarian minority associations, announcing that they were forced to cancel cultural and other events due to the epidemic and that during this transitional time they would focus on programme planning. With this letter, they also informed the associations that the Hungarian Government Office for National Policy, which provides material support for the implementation of certain programmes abroad, would not organise or support any event until 31 August 2020 (MNMI / ZKMN 2020).

Hungary thus closed its border crossings to passenger traffic on 17 March, with the exception of daily migrants from border areas and Hungarian nationals returning home from abroad. As the only two open border crossings were on the southern part of the Slovene-Hungarian border, the inhabitants of Goričko and the Slovenes living in the Raba Region had to make a long turn to cross the border. For this reason, at the initiative of the Hungarian national community of Prekmurje and the Slovene minority in the Raba Region, the foreign ministers of Slovenia and Hungary agreed to open additional local border crossings, namely Hodoš – Bajánsenye and Čepinci – Verica/Kétyölgy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia 2020b).<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of April, the PMSNS and the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities distributed face masks to all households in the ethnically mixed area. On this occasion, they also issued the following joint statement (Muravidéki Magyar Önkormányzati Nemzeti Közösség 2020e):

In order to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and based on the Ordinance on the temporary general ban on movement and gathering of people in public places and areas in the Republic of Slovenia, and the consequent mandatory use of face masks in enclosed public spaces, the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje, together with the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Lendava, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Dobrovnik, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Moravske Toplice, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Hodoš, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Šalovci and the Hungarian Youth Association of Pomurje, will deliver one reusable face mask to every household in the ethnically mixed settlements of Prekmurje. Preparations have begun today. It is expected that in a week or two, each household will receive the corresponding package.

Stay at home, take care of yourself and others!

Due to the Covid-19 epidemic, the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities also suspended their general activities. As already mentioned, events in honour of the Hungarian national holiday on 15 March were cancelled in the bilingual municipalities of Lendava, Dobrovnik and Moravske Toplice. In addition to the above, the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities were also forced to cancel other programmes. Thus, the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Lendava (MSNSOL) cancelled the traditional event in memory of György Zala, a renowned sculptor born in Lendava. The epidemic also affected the works on the currently largest investment of Hungarians in Lendava, i.e. the renovation of the ethnographic house in the settlement of Dolina. According to MSNSOL President Judit Vida Törnar, only 25–30 % of the planned renovation works would be carried out in 2020 due to the health situation. The Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Dobrovnik (MSMSOD), too, was forced to cancel one of its traditional events, the exhibition of Easter eggs. In addition, it had planned to build a barn at the György Dobronoki Ethnographic and Tourist House by June 2020, which, according to the MSMSOD president, was postponed until October (Tomka 2020). The Hungarian self-governing national communities in Goričko faced similar problems as Lendava and Dobrovnik. Due to the epidemic, traditional events such as the demonstration of wheat threshing in Domanjševci (municipality of Šalovci), the meeting in Krplivnik – the already traditional opening event of Őrség day for the wider region, especially Hungary (municipality of Hodoš) – and the *bograč* cooking competition in Pordašinci (municipality of Moravske Toplice) were all cancelled. Due to the epidemic, also the restoration works at Škerlak's house in Krplivnik, where the ethnographic museum is located, were postponed to the summer of 2020 (Abraham & Horvat 2020).

During this time, several members of the Hungarian community asked their respective organisations (especially the umbrella political organisation) for help or contacted them with various questions. Due to the start of spring field work, there were several requests for finding a solution to cross the border since every day matters when it comes to work in the fields.<sup>6</sup> Their interventions were successful and the farmers were able to carry out the necessary field works. There were also several requests from individuals from both countries, i.e. Slovenia and Hungary, in the first days after the border closure to ensure border crossing for work purposes (Interviewees 9–14).

Representatives of national communities assessed mutual cooperation during the epidemic as constant. They also had a similar opinion about cooperation with Hungarian nationality institutions, although they also said that professional institutions could have done more in finding contacts with municipal self-governing national communities. Municipal self-governing national communities also

expressed satisfaction with the cooperation with municipal leaderships. However, according to the representatives of the Hungarian minority, the response of health care institutions was not always appropriate (Interviewees 9–14).

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### 4.3 Activity of the Deputy of the Hungarian National Community in the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia during the Epidemic

Since the deputy of the Hungarian national community in the National Assembly has also been president of the central umbrella organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia (PMSNS) since 2018, only the activities carried out by Ferenc Horváth in his office as deputy are listed below.

Just like other organisations of the Hungarian national community, Ferenc Horváth's office informed the population through the Hungarian minority media in early March 2020 that any personal contacts were suspended and that the office was only available by phone or e-mail until further notice (Népújság 2020a, 12).

As deputy of the National Assembly, Ferenc Horváth intervened with the competent Slovene and Hungarian authorities asking for the possibility of crossing the border in case of agricultural activities, daily migrants, and in some other cases. He was also in regular contact with the leading officials of the neighbouring counties of Vas and Zala and with representatives of the Slovenes of the Raba Region (Ferenc Horváth was interviewed twice).

On 10 April 2020, the Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó announced to the public that Hungary would provide medical equipment to Hungarian border communities and areas where these communities live, as well as to Prekmurje Hungarians i.e. Prekmurje. Medical aid, including surgical masks, goggles, protective clothing, protective gloves, hats, visors, protective footwear and a large amount of disinfectant, was transported to the General Hospital of Murska Sobota. Ferenc Horváth (Lovrić 2020) helped to establish contacts between the hospital and the Hungarian government.

In the columns published in the form of parliamentary diary once a month in the weekly Népújság, the newspaper of the Hungarian national community, Ferenc Horváth wrote on 21 May that due to the epidemic, the cooperation agreement between the government and coalition partners on the one side and the deputies of the Italian and Hungarian national communities in the National Assembly on the other had not been signed yet, but the text of the agreement was in the final phase and would contain, in addition to the general part, eight specific short- and medium-term tasks (Horváth 2020).

## 192 5. Activity of the Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture and Cultural Societies during the Covid-19 Epidemic

The organisation in charge of promoting Hungarian culture in Slovenia is the Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture (ZKMN), which also runs the Bánffy Centre housing a Hungarian bookstore and a café. The Institute coordinates and directs the work of 29 societies from the ethnically mixed area promoting Hungarian culture.

The ZKMN, like other Hungarian minority institutions, informed the public on 13 March 2020 that it would close its doors to external visitors until further notice. It closed exhibitions and cancelled performances, events, roundtables, trainings, literary activities, etc. Giving the problems with the delivery of newspapers and books from Hungary, the Bánffy Centre and its bookstore were also closed on Monday 16 March 2020.

The ZKMN was among those institutions of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia that faced the greatest problems due to the epidemic, as cultural life was suspended in all areas, especially in amateur activities where the work of societies and cultural sections was interrupted. A special emphasis is to be placed on the interruption of once daily professional contacts (e.g. cooperation in the preparation of ethnographic exhibitions, drama productions, etc.). Due to the situation, there were insurmountable difficulties in carrying out amateur, ethnographic and other activities in the field of culture which, according to the Institute, would have far-reaching consequences. They partially managed to carry out the national Hungarian language competition Petőfi Sándor, but were forced to cancel the trip won by the pupils from bilingual schools. As a substitute for the cancelled programmes, they also tried online recitation to attract the younger population, but there was not much interest (Interviewee 1).

The Bánffy Centre with its bookstore and café only reopened on 6 May 2020. Thus, the purchase of Hungarian books and Hungarian newspapers published in Hungary was again possible. On this occasion, ZKMN director Mihály Soós presented to the national media the current situation in culture and spoke about plans for the summer. He said that no event would be organised by the Institute in May, but various scenarios had been prepared for the time when life returned to normal. Thus, they had already started planning summer camps for children to take place in Prekmurje, if the state would permit it. They had also started planning minor events for numerically smaller groups. Moreover, they had considered postponing some of the events cancelled in spring to the fall (Bence 2020).

Some organisations and individuals easily adapted to the new circumstances and tried to establish contacts with members of the Hungarian community

(also) via social media. As already mentioned, the exhibition of Easter eggs in Dobrovnik was cancelled due to the epidemic, but the organisers adapted to the new conditions and set up an online exhibition of Easter eggs on the Facebook page of the Dobrovnik House of Handicrafts. As the programme manager Anna Berden told in the show *Hidak – Mostovi* (Bobovec Szabó 2020a):

We need to adapt to the current circumstances and since the Facebook page of our House of Handicrafts already has many followers, we have decided to extend our offer with this programme. I can say that the response is good, with currently 73 exhibitors from Slovenia and other European countries, and even from the United States, posting photos of Easter eggs.

The possibilities offered by social and other online media were primarily used by members of the younger generations. Thus, in April, the Hungarian Youth Association of Pomurje (PMMD) started broadcasting a series about the adventures of a young boy named Kar Anthony during the epidemic. From 18 April 2020 when the first episode was aired on the Association's Facebook page, to 6 May when Kar Anthony "found out that the restrictions had been lifted", a total of six episodes were aired (MMISZ / PMMD 2020).

Prior to the onset of the coronavirus epidemic, evangelical priestess Judit Andrejek had been conducting regular music workshops in bilingual kindergartens in the ethnically mixed area. As kindergartens were closed upon the introduction of restrictive measures in March, the priestess, assisted by the umbrella organisation PMSNS, produced virtual music workshops for toddlers and their parents (Andrejek 2020).

Despite the described initiatives by younger members of the Hungarian national community, the fact remains that the epidemic greatly influenced the cultural life of the national community, which also involves much older members. The latter are less skilled in the use of ICT that would help them overcome the difficulties encountered in organising cultural activities. Another problem was the fact that cultural groups in which elderly people participate (embroidery knitting, folk choirs, drama groups, etc.) required joint rehearsals with mentors, which was not allowed under the measures in force.

## 6. Prekmurje Bilingual Schools during the Covid-19 Epidemic

A distinctive feature of bilingual (Slovene-Hungarian) schooling in the bilingual area in Prekmurje is that it is compulsory for all children in this area. In other words, there are only bilingual schools in the ethnically mixed area and no monolingual Slovene or Hungarian schools (Komac 1999, 46–49). In the 2019/20 school year, the ethnically mixed area of Prekmurje comprised nine bilingual



kindergartens, five bilingual primary schools and one bilingual secondary school with various educational programmes. The tertiary level of education in Hungarian is provided by the Department of Hungarian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Maribor.

In the 2019/20 school year, the bilingual primary schools of Prekmurje were attended by 803 pupils, while the bilingual secondary school in Lendava was attended by 284 pupils. More than half of primary school pupils attended the bilingual primary school I in Lendava (536 pupils), while others attended the bilingual primary schools in Genterovci (80 pupils), Dobrovnik (81 pupils) and Prosenjakovci (82 pupils). The bilingual primary school II in Lendava (with an adapted curriculum) had 24 pupils in the 2019/20 school year (Király et al. 2019).

After the introduction of the Schengen regime at the borders, a new practice developed, namely the enrolment of pupils from Hungary into bilingual educational institutions in Prekmurje. Initially, there had been few such cases, but later the number of pupils from Hungary increased considerably. In the 2019/20 school year, 55 pupils from Hungary attended bilingual primary schools in Prekmurje, with the Prosenjakovci bilingual primary school (in the municipality of Moravske Toplice) standing out with as many as 35 children from the neighbouring Hungarian settlements. In other primary schools, the number of children from Hungary was as follows: 12 at the bilingual primary school in Genterovci and 8 at the bilingual primary school Lendava I (Interviewees 2–5).

On 16 March, all educational institutions in Slovenia, including bilingual ones, shut down and remained closed for two months, until 18 May 2020. During this time, classes were held remotely, online, in virtual classrooms. In such regard, bilingual schools faced similar challenges and problems as all other educational institutions in Slovenia. According to the principals of bilingual schools, pupils from Hungary had no major difficulty with remote learning and contacts were maintained by e-mail and via virtual classrooms (Interviewees 2, 4, 5). The principal of the bilingual primary school of Genterovci pointed out the problem of remote learning for Roma children because they did not have computers or Internet access. In such cases, the school's janitor would deliver teaching materials to their homes once a week. The principal also pointed to the problem of smaller schools or rural communities, as many parents did not know how to help children with remote learning because they themselves lacked computer skills (Interviewee 3).

Hungarian self-governing national communities indeed responded to the closure of educational institutions. To ensure the conditions for a smooth running of remote learning, all municipal Hungarian self-governing communities provided free printing, copying and scanning for pupils and students for school and study purposes (Népújság 2020b).

As already mentioned, educational institutions reopened on 18 May 2020. Schools prepared for the resumption of the teaching process on the basis of the instructions provided by the National Institute of Public Health, but their practical implementation posed many challenges. A special problem for bilingual schools in Prekmurje was the closed state borders. When schools reopened in mid-May, the border between Slovenia and Hungary was still generally closed and only three border crossings were open, namely Dolga vas, Pince and Hodoš. Parents of Hungarian pupils who attended bilingual primary schools in Lendava, Genterovci and Prosenjakovci were issued certificates of attendance and were thus able to cross the border with the children to take them to school. For pupils who attended primary school in Lendava and Genterovci, there were no problems in coming to school, as their parents could use the border crossing Rédics – Dolga vas (Bobovec Szabó 2020b). But there were problems for pupils attending the bilingual primary school in Prosenjakovci. Before the pandemic, their parents would drive them to school through the Magyarszombatfa – Prosenjakovci border crossing, but this border crossing was still closed in May, so they had to travel many kilometres to the much more remote Bajánsenye – Hodoš border crossing to bring children to school in Prosenjakovci. In some cases, families travelled over 100 km. The situation was resolved by the school sending a bus to the Bajánsenye – Hodoš border crossing. There, the children boarded the bus that took them to Prosenjakovci school. After classes, the same bus would take them back to the border crossing Hodoš – Bajánsenye, where their parents were already waiting for them. Some of the pupils from Hungary who lived far from the Bajánsenye – Hodoš border crossing stayed at home and received the necessary materials via e-mail. This situation lasted just over two weeks, until the beginning of June, when the Slovene-Hungarian border was reopened and border crossing and school attendance returned to normal (Interviewee 4).

## 7. Hungarian Nationality Media during the Covid-19 Epidemic

The Hungarian national community in Slovenia runs three media that provide information in its mother tongue. In addition to the weekly *Népújság*, which falls under the auspices of the Institute for Information of the Hungarian National Community, there are also two media operating under the national television: the Hungarian radio of Pomurje (PMR) and TV studio Lendava.<sup>7</sup>

The above media responded to the epidemic according to their nature or the way they operate. Thus, the weekly *Népújság* continued to be published without any major problems, according to the already established scenario. In fact, the weekly's employees managed to perform a considerable share of work remotely, from their homes (Interviewee 8).

In case of media operating under RTV Slovenija, i.e. PMR and TV studio Lendava, the situation was different. The Hungarian radio and TV programmes provided for some journalists on duty, while other journalists possibly worked remotely. Another problem was the fact that some employees had permanent residence in Hungary and were unable to come to work due to closure of the Hungarian-Slovene border. Eventually, after a few days, they were able to reach their place of work based on interim interstate agreements. PMR, which broadcasts 24 hours a day,<sup>8</sup> aired up-to-date information on the epidemic in Hungarian, also those received from central news agencies, relevant government departments, Hungarian state authorities and other sources. It also prepared talk shows on the current situation in Prekmurje, both in the ethnically mixed area and in the wider Slovene-Hungarian border region. After 15 April, it resumed some of its regular shows (Interviewee 6).

Hungarian television shows, which are broadcast four times a week, have also been aired; the gap was bridged by repeating some of their high-profile content recorded before the epidemic (Interviewee 7). As regards broadcasting TV programmes in the Hungarian language, the national television unfortunately took a unilateral decision that went to the detriment of Hungarian television programmes. Immediately upon the introduction of the measures to curb the epidemic, television broadcasts in Hungarian language were moved from channel 1 of RTV Slovenia to the regional programme. RTV Slovenia director justified such decision by saying that due to the epidemic, the entire channel 1 was reprogrammed for the needs of a wider audience, including children who stayed at home due to the closure of schools. The editorial board of TV studio Lendava and the programme council of Hungarian RTV programmes opposed this decision, but remained hopeful that when the epidemic was over, these programmes would return to the usual TV agenda. As pointed out by the assistant director general of RTV Slovenia for Hungarian nationality programmes (Lőrincz 2020c):

Great damage was done to the programmes during the epidemic as our viewers, who were also at home at that time, could not watch the shows on the usual channel at the usual time. This damage cannot be repaired.

Despite the epidemic being declared over in May 2020, TV shows in Hungarian language were still not aired on channel 1 of the national television. Hungarian nationality organisations reacted decisively and demanded that the management of RTV Slovenia return Hungarian TV shows to the main channel of RTV Slovenia. Eventually, as of 23 June 2020, Hungarian TV shows were broadcast again on channel 1 at the usual time (Interviewee 7).

## 8. Instead of Conclusion

On 31 May 2020, the Republic of Slovenia finally declared the Covid-19 epidemic over. Thereby, life gradually began to return to normal. After 73 days, Slovenia and Hungary re-established the free movement of people between the two countries. This was announced by the foreign ministers of both countries at a press conference held at the border crossing Dolga vas on 28 May. As Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó said on this occasion: "From this moment on, Slovene and Hungarian citizens can travel freely between the two countries for any purpose – for any honest purpose, of course." His Slovene counterpart Anže Logar added: "[W]e have concluded an important episode that to some extent restricted the free movement of people, and thus together achieved important progress in diplomacy." Five border crossings were reopened on the border between Slovenia and Hungary, namely Čepinci – Kétyölgy, Hodoš – Bajánsenye, Dolga vas – Rédics and two border crossings between Pince and Tornyiszentmiklós (Lőrincz 2020b).

On this occasion, the Hungarian foreign minister also met with representatives of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia. They discussed the free movement of people between the two countries. In this regard, Ferenc Horváth, president of the umbrella organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia, said (Lőrincz 2020b):

I have told the minister that it would be wise to reach an agreement between the two countries – should, God forbid, a similar situation reoccur – to automatically set up a border crossing regime so that we do not have to wait for days or weeks to find an optimal solution for crossing the border. The minister thought the proposal was good and supported it.

Other representatives of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia also pointed out the problems related to border closure. In general, the respondents were of the opinion that the closure of state borders was necessary in the given circumstances, but was also strongly felt by the residents of the border area. Members of national minorities were thus prevented any contact with their kinship. Representatives of the Hungarian self-governing national communities unanimously stressed that in recent years the EU had missed the opportunity to establish clearer conditions for the Schengen regime in a crisis situation, forcing countries to take partial action, which was most felt by border residents and minorities. Some added that the measures taken by the home country (Hungary) were too harsh and not flexible enough. The answers and opinions of the leaders of Hungarian minority organisations and institutions related in particular to the psychological consequences of border closure, which will certainly have a negative impact on the preservation and development of national identity. Some be-

lieved that if borders were closed for too long or if such events reoccurred several times, this would have irreparable consequences for a community as small as the Hungarians in Prekmurje in terms of preservation of national identity. One interviewee even spoke of an “accelerated end of small communities” (Interviewee 11). For this reason, the interviewees believed that it would be necessary to ensure greater flexibility of cooperation in the border area in emergency situations, such as the Covid-19 epidemic. According to some representatives of the Hungarian national community, a unilateral closure of state borders causes national minorities to “denationalize” or “makes their development even more differentiated and partial” (Interviewees 10, 12, 13). It was especially pointed out that when the border was closed, members of the Hungarian minority “did not have access to a single book or newspaper in their mother tongue published outside Prekmurje” (Interviewees 9, 10).

Representatives of the Hungarian national community also pointed out that in recent years cross-border cooperation flourished in all areas of life. Children were enrolled into educational institutions in the neighbouring country, people registered permanent residence on the other side of the border, etc. All this now presented a similar problem as prior to the entry of the countries of our wider region into the EU or the Schengen area. Border settlements have woven close links over recent years, jointly planning development, cultural and other projects. These settlements experienced border closure – although justified in terms of public health – as unnatural and harmful. As some respondents pointed out, it took decades for border communities to improve the situation and the life along the border, yet it took a lot less to destroy what had been built. For this reason, members of Hungarian self-governing national communities pointed out that they would politically engage in the issue of border closure immediately after the situation calmed down and would submit their views and demands to the competent state and European authorities (Interviewees 9–14). Anže Logar, Slovenia’s minister of foreign affairs, said some encouraging words in such regard (Lőrincz 2020b) at the opening of the border in Dolga vas on 28 May 2020: “I look forward to our good cooperation in the future and I am confident that the issues raised will be resolved with dialogue, for the benefit of the people on both sides of the border.”

## Interviews

Interviewee 1 – Director of the Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture, 15 April 2020.

Interviewee 2 – Principal of the bilingual primary school I in Lendava, 15 April 2020.

Interviewee 3 – Principal of the bilingual primary school in Genterovci, 15 April 2020.

Interviewee 4 – Principal of the bilingual primary school in Prosenjakovci, 16 April and 23 October 2020.

Interviewee 5 – Principal of the bilingual secondary school in Lendava, 16 April 2020.



- Interviewee 6 – Editor-in-chief of the Hungarian radio of Pomurje, 16 April 2020.
- Interviewee 7 – Editor-in-chief of TV studio Lendava, 16 April and 27 October 2020.
- Interviewee 8 – Editor-in-chief of the weekly *Népújság*, 17 April 2020.
- Interviewee 9 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Lendava, 18 April 2020.
- Interviewee 10 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Dobrovnik, 18 April 2020.
- Interviewee 11 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Moravske Toplice, 19 April 2020.
- Interviewee 12 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Šalovci, 20 April 2020.
- Interviewee 13 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Hodoš, 20 April 2020.
- Interviewee 14 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje, 16 and 21 April 2020.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It needs to be emphasised that upon Slovenia's joining the Schengen area, border controls with three out of four neighbouring countries (Italy, Austria and Hungary) were abolished. Border controls with Croatia remain in force although the southern neighbour became a full member of the EU on 1 July 2013, as it has not yet joined the Schengen area.
- <sup>2</sup> The northern part of the settlement area includes Hodoš/Hodos, Krplivnik/Kapornak, Domanjševci/Domonkosfa, Središče/Szerdahely, Prosenjakovci/Pártosfalva, Pordašinci/Kisfalva, Čikečka vas /Csekefa and Motvarjevci/Szentlászló. The southern part comprises Dobrovník/Dobronak, Žitkovci/Zsitkóc, Kamovci/Kámaháza, Genterovci/Göntérháza, Radmožanci/Radamos, Mostje/Hídvég, Dolga vas/Hosszúfalva, Dolgovaške gorice/Hosszúfaluhuég, Lendava/Lendva, Lendavske gorice/Lendvahegy, Čentiba/Csente, Dolina/Völgyifalu, Pince/Pince, Pince Marof/Pince-Major, Benica, Petišovci/Petesháza, Trimlini/Hármasmalom, Dolnji Lakoš/Alsólakos, Gornji Lakoš/Felsőlakos, Gaberje/Gyertyános, Kapca/Kapca and Kot/Kót.
- <sup>3</sup> A settlement established in the 1920s by the Slovenes from the Primorska region.

- <sup>4</sup> Of these five municipalities, only Hodoš is entirely an ethnically mixed area. In the remaining four municipalities, the ethnically mixed area covers different proportions of the municipal territory.
- <sup>5</sup> The border crossing Čepinci – Verica was closed soon afterwards as the Hungarian authorities reported that the interested persons crossed the border less than once a week.
- <sup>6</sup> Quite a few Slovene citizens rent and cultivate large agricultural areas on the Hungarian side of the border.
- <sup>7</sup> More details on the history of the weekly *Népújság* in Zágorec-Csuka (2006, 224–250); on the history of the Hungarian radio of Pomurje and TV Studio Lendava in Zver (2008, 27–126).
- <sup>8</sup> The show is broadcast live from 5.30 am to 7 pm; overnight, the radio plays Hungarian music or repeat shows.

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