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Ferenc Deák and the Minority Issue

The statistical publications of Elek Fényes appeared in the late 1830s and early 1840s. His contemporaries were shocked when they read the results of the detailed data collection of the author: that the proportion of Hungarians was no more than 37.4% in the countries of the Hungarian crown. The proportion of those of Hungarian mother tongue was 44% in a more narrowly delimited Hungary and 28% in Transylvania. Ferenc Deák, similar to his contemporaries, was rather concerned about these data. These figures “alone point out clearly: what will once bring a disaster upon our homeland and the Austrian Monarchy,” Deák wrote to Miklós Wesselényi in March 1842.¹ He discussed this threat in detail in his letter written to his brother-in-law in the autumn of the same year. In this, he regards the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy and, with it, historic Hungary, together with the formation of independent Slav and Romanian states around a reduced Hungary as some imminent danger. “I firmly believe that the Monarchy is in danger, and the independence and nationality of Hungary is under lethal threat [...]. If there is a way to ward danger off at all, then it is the following: the people, who are not related to this nation and this national independence neither by love, nationality, trust, nor financial and moral well-being, should be tied to this homeland through civil rights guaranteed to them, so that afterwards they too would have a reason to protect their circumstances.”² Accordingly, together with the majority of the reform politicians, he too saw only one way out of the situation; one way to ward off the threats inherent in the nationality issue: civil transformations, the realisation of equality before the law, and the granting of civil and political rights to the entire population of the country regardless of nationality, language, and religion.

That he had these thoughts on his mind constantly, we can observe from another letter of his addressed to his brother-in-law almost twenty years later. Following the “October Diploma” and his audience in front of Francis Joseph, he writes in his letter dated on 9 January 1861: “I am convinced that Hungary has never before been in a more uncertain situation than today. Even if we assumed the best intentions everywhere, disregarding the absolutistic goals above and revolutionary overstrained hopes below: *the purposeful settlement of four essential issues seem to me as little short of impossible.*” Besides the treatment of financial, military and common affairs, “the third difficult question is that the non-

¹ Ferenczi, Zoltán: Deák élete [The Life of Deák]. I. Budapest, 1904. 329.

² Sándor, Pál: Deák politikai koncepciójához (Ismeretlen levele 1842-ből.) [To the Political Conception of Deák (Letter of unknown writer from 1842)]. In: Történelmi Szemle, 1979. 272–273.

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Hungarian nationalities come forth with exorbitant demands. The Croats, Serbs, and Vlachs all want to appear as independent political nations and present demands, the fulfilment of which would result in the division of the country. This would be the end of Hungary and, at most, would give rise to a new federal state, in which the Hungarian race would form only a fraction in the centre of the country lacking every natural defensible borders.³

In 1861, he envisaged the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy as a realistic possibility once again. Nikola Krstić, delegate of the Serb government, gave account of his talks with leading Hungarian politicians in Pest in his handwritten diary. Deák told him on 8 June: "Great changes and intense convulsions are likely to overwhelm the world at the time when Turkey and Austria dissolve. In that case, a federal state might emerge here. This will be legally feasible once nations develop. However, the Hungarians cannot acquiesce to this before the occurrence of such events." On 9 August Deák declared that the "imperial ordinance [that rejected the petition of 21 July] is the first step toward Hungary and, together with it, other countries transforming into a federal state. As for the Hungarians, as soon as their country ceases to be Hungary, they will be more eager to form an alliance with other nations on completely new grounds for the preservation of their liberty than to remain under the absolutist power of Vienna."⁴

In the years that followed, Deák insisted on a Compromise, that is, the transformation of the Monarchy into a constitutional dualist state. He found that this would be a better solution for Hungary in the future than the aforementioned federal state. On 28 March 1867 he said in his great speech during the debate of the Compromise Bill in the lower house: "Some worry that dissolution threatens the Austrian Empire, and do not want the fate of Hungary to be bound by this... I do not know whether there is anybody who would want the dissolution of Austria. However, if there is, that person is surely not one who promotes our interests. I fear, I truly fear that we would not gain from dissolution; our situation would not change for the better." Deák believed Hungary would not be strong enough to stand firm as an independent state in the case of the dissolution of the Monarchy for two reasons. First, because of the disruptive trends inherent in the minority issue and, second, the ambitions of the two great powers, Russia and Germany. "Should we want to establish then a federal state with other peoples, would not there be common affairs we would have to administer with them? Would not we have to administer these jointly? Would not we be constrained to accept the idea of delegations the same?"⁵

³ Deák Ferencz beszédei [Speeches of Ferencz Deák]. Collected by Manó Kónyi. Vol. II. 1842–1861. 2nd expanded ed. Budapest, 1903. 529–530. (hereinafter: Kónyi)

⁴ Dnevnik Nikola Krstića. Arhiv Srpske akademije nauka i umjetnosti, Beograd. Br. 7198. The relevant sections of the diary are published in: Vučković, Vojislav J.: Politička akcija Srbije u južnoslovenskim pokrajinama Habsburske Monarhije 1859–1874. Beograd, 1965. 46, 52.

⁵ Kónyi IV. 460–461.

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Zala county is bordering on Croatia and, in those times, it was at issue with the Croats because of the Muraköz area. Therefore, it is understandable that Deák paid attention to the Croatian question from the very beginning and played a major role in the constitutional regulation of the Croatian–Hungarian relations in the second half of his career. He discussed the situation within the Croatian Sabor and criticised the politics of the Croatian government in his speech addressed to the general assembly of Zala county in March 1846.⁶

In the summer of 1848, tension increased in connection to the Croatian issue, and it was Deák, then minister of justice, to prepare a bill for its settlement. The Council of Ministers passed the bill late August, and Lajos Kossuth presented it to Parliament on 2 September although he, later on, would not be dealing with it. Deák's proposal sought to establish completely new grounds for the relations of the two countries. According to it, Croatia was to receive full internal autonomy, with only military, financial, foreign, and trade affairs remaining under common jurisdiction, handled by joint ministries with Croatian secretaries of state and departments. A Croatian minister was to represent the interests of Croatia in the joint council of ministers. Croatian was to be the official language in Croatia, and both parties were to use their own language in correspondence between the two countries. The provincial assembly was to continue its operation, but Croatia was to send delegates into the joint national assembly as well. Legislative power was to be divided between the Croatian and the Hungarian assemblies as the executive power is divided between the Croatian and the Hungarian ministry. A university was to be set up in Zagreb. At the same time, the Hungarian Council of Ministers declared that "in the case no reconciliation could happen on these grounds, it would be willing to accept separation and, consequently, a federal relationship with the reservation that it would retain Fiume (Rijeka), the Hungarian seacoast, in its possession and expect free access and trade thereto."⁷

The Croatian issue was again placed on the agenda following the October Diploma. Jellačić occupied Muraköz, which had belonged to Zala county since the Middle Ages but the majority of the population of which was Croatian, and it was annexed to Croatia in 1849. When Francis Joseph received Deák in audience on 27 December 1860, Deák requested the re-annexation of Muraköz⁸, which was in fact carried out one month later. Deák soon had the opportunity to set forth his views concerning the relationship between Croatia and Hungary in detail. Zagreb county sent out a circular letter to the Croatian and Hungarian counties from its general assembly held on 14 February 1861. In it, the county expressed the will-

⁶ Kónyi II. 110–112.

⁷ Károlyi, Árpád: Németújvári gróf Batthyány Lajos főbejáró pöre [Legal Action of Count Lajos Batthyány of Németújvár]. Budapest, 1932. II. 626–628.; Kossuth Lajos Összes Munkái XII [Collected Works of Lajos Kossuth XII]. Kossuth Lajos 1848/49-ben II. [Lajos Kossuth in 1848/49 II]. Kossuth Lajos az első magyar felelős minisztériumban [Lajos Kossuth in the First Responsible Ministry]. Budapest 1957. 805, 870–871.

⁸ Deák's letter dated on 9 January 1861. Kónyi II. 532.

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ingness of the Croatians to renew the constitutional relationship between the two countries in the spirit of mutual understanding and conciliation. This was conditional upon the Hungarians acknowledging that “Croatians and Slavonians comprise a political and historical nationality, just like you [the Hungarians], and you would have to refrain from everything that could harm this nationality.” The circular then developed its argument reinforcing it with historical data. According to this, originally there used to be a simple personal union between the two countries, and the Croatians enjoyed full autonomy during the independent government of the bans. By the 19th century, however, the independence of the Croatian state had almost completely ceased to exist; the Hungarians were responsible for this who had taken away even Fiume and Muraköz from Croatia by force.⁹

László Szalay refuted the historic argumentation of the Croatian in detail, eager to acknowledge, however, that “the Croatians formed a political and historic nationality, and they were to be granted all those political and constitutional rights that were their due on the basis of their historic right.” Deák responded to the Zagreb assembly with his article entitled “The Circular of Zagreb county and the Union”, published in the 24 March 1861 issue of daily *Pesti Napló*.¹⁰ He did not go into detailed discussion of the historical problems, but pointed out that “the Hungarians never used force against the Croatians” and the Croatian delegates gave up their taxing and administrative rights in 1790 out of their own free will. He recognised that the Croatians “have always possessed a separate territory, had their own political nationality and, besides sharing all of the rights that existed in Hungary, had additional rights as well, which Hungary has always respected. Hungarian law, when addressed these countries as annexed parts, did not allude to some forced relationship or subordination, but to a relationship that Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slovakia voluntarily concluded with us on the grounds of law, equity, and mutual liberty... We know it well that our relationship does not stem from conquest... We consider the three united countries our partners who, out of their own free will, linked their fate with ours centuries ago and have been with us for better or worse for centuries. Superior power and subordinate status is out of the question here; we can talk about the maintenance of a union established by mutual understanding centuries ago.” It was important to articulate this because a fair number of works in the Hungarian press of the time were still writing about conquest and subordination in connection to the Croatians.

Deák did not cede Muraköz to the Croatians, but he acknowledged that the three Slavonian counties (Pozsega [Požega], Szerém [Srijem], and Verőce [Virovitica]) belonged to Croatia. As far as the future of the relationship of the two countries was concerned, Deák formulated the principle of national autonomy explicitly: “The settlement of the question of the union is in the hands of Croatia primarily. If Croatia wants union with us, we welcome this union with pleasure.

⁹ The circular was published in daily *Pesti Napló* on 12 March 1861.

¹⁰ *Könyvi II.* 598–616.

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Should it want to set conditions in the interest of its own nationality or autonomy, should it want to extend the sphere of authority of its legislature, should it want to take part in the joint legislature in a different way and proportion: we shall not reject its conditions and shall not raise objections to its changes... In the case Croatia wanted to terminate every constitutional relation between the countries and break every relationship, we cannot say we would agree to this termination of relations as well; instead, it is our duty to take steps to protect our rights. However, we would not take action in practice to prevent secession and *we would resort to aggression not even if we had the power to do so. Therefore, it is primarily up to Croatia to decide on union or secession.*"

The leading figure of Croatian national politics of the time, Bishop Strossmayer passed through Budapest on his way from Vienna late March and visited Deák. According to the diary of Menyhért Lónyay "Strossmayer and his Croatian colleagues were satisfied with Deák's article."¹¹

Deák expressed his views on the Croatian question in the spirit of his March article in his parliamentary petitions in 1861 as well. He wrote in the first petition: "Croatia has its own territory, an independent standing, and it has never been annexed to Hungary; it has always been in connection with us and has been a fellow country, sharing our rights, obligations, fortune and afflictions. Therefore, should Croatia wish to take part in our legislature as a country; should it first want to see the conditions clearly on the basis of which it could connect its constitutional status with Hungary; should it want to discuss this with us as a nation with a nation, we shall not turn it down."¹² In his second petition, he emphasises that "the laws passed in 1848 aimed not at annexing Croatia but establishing it as an independent fellow country with its own territory." If Croatia wanted to loosen the relationship that has existed between us, we would be ready to discuss it, and the "continuation or reasonable modification of relations does not depend on us."¹³

Negotiations on the settlement of the Croatian-Hungarian relations could start when the compromise process progressed, following 1866. The 12-member committees delegated by the two Parliaments held talks in Pest in the spring of 1866 and the summer of 1868. Deák played an active role during these negotiations and it was primarily thanks to him that the Compromise was concluded between the two countries, even though, as we will see, it did not entirely reflect his original plan. Antal Csengery, member of the Hungarian delegation and close friend of Deák, gave account on the negotiations in his diary in detail.¹⁴

In 1866, the talks did not bear results. They broke off because of the Austro-Prussian War. The Croatian and Hungarian approach to the character of past bi-

¹¹ Kónyi II. 616.

¹² Kónyi III. 26–27.

¹³ Kónyi III. 188–189.

¹⁴ Csengery Antal hátrahagyott iratai és feljegyzései [Documents and Notes that Antal Csengery Left Behind]. Published by Lóránt Csengery. Budapest, 1928. 179–239. The quotes of the next section are from this volume.

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lateral relations and the territorial issues (Fiume, Muraköz) was so different that it was not easy to bridge the gap. All of the Croatian delegates but one were members of the National Liberal Party led by Bishop Strossmayer, who would have preferred to see a federal transformation of the Habsburg Monarchy. According to Csengery, "considering the [Croatian] delegation, the Hungarian delegation could not hope to achieve anything but by the granting of full autonomy." Deák and Strossmayer were the key speakers at the negotiations. "At one of the discussions, Deák gave a speech in German that lasted for an hour and a half. The Croats were amazed at his clear and persuasive argumentation. Strossmayer held speeches prepared in advance, full of commonplaces, fuelling himself and flushing by the end." The following two incidents recorded in the diary of Csengery were characteristic of the atmosphere of the talks. "Once, in the Kisfaludy hall of the Academy of Sciences, when Strossmayer was discussing how the Hungarians persecuted the Croats in 1848, Deák lost his patience, sprang on his feet, and left the hall. The Croats looked at each other. Strossmayer got confused and blushed, and started to excuse himself, saying that he had no intention to offend anybody and, if he had said something offensive, he would ask for forgiveness... In the meanwhile, two of us went after Deák to persuade him to come back. He came back. Strossmayer apologized once more and, having lost his rhetoric pathos, ended his speech soon." The other scene took place at the Queen of England Hotel, where Deák was staying. "When Deák told Strossmayer all the concessions Hungary was willing to make, the Slav apostle jumped on his feet with enthusiasm and kissed Deák. The entrance of the waiter, who announced that a delegation wanted to pay their respects to Strossmayer, ended the scene. Strossmayer left but gave another kiss to Deák in the door, saying that he was leaving with a relieved soul. A bailiff who knew Deák and was lodged in the same inn where Strossmayer, related it later on how the bishop agitated the Slovak delegates from the upper parts, led by Hurbán, as they paid their respects. »Keep on agitating and persist,« he said. «Strike the iron now. And all I ask is this: don't you believe the Hungarians, and especially not Deák. He promises the world to you, but will surely deceive the Slavs!«"

As a result of the activity of Governor Rauch Levin, the unionists formed the in majority in the Croatian delegation of 1868, mocked by the Croatian opposition as "Hungarones". The National Party had only 3 representatives. The Hungarian delegation was divided over the issue concerning the extent of Croatian autonomy. As Csengery put it: "Ministers Andrassy and Lónyay, who took part in our discussions, opposing views they disputed at the time of the 1866 compromise, they now supported a narrower autonomy. They urged on a continued joint handling of finances with regards to both governmental and legislative aspects... Andrassy, who, back in 1861, had been ready to yield to the Croats everything the National Party wanted but Fiume, now found it dangerous to grant rights to Croats that would transcend the scope of autonomy of the Cisleithan countries. Let us be cautious, he said, not to take a step that would precipitate the transforma-

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tion of the monarchy on a federal basis. This is not in the interest of the Croats either. They need great investments so that their country could emerge from its current miserable state. Now, the more autonomy they will enjoy, the less inclined Hungarians will be to invest in Croatia. At last, with the exception of the extremist party, the Croats themselves do not want full financial autonomy. Their main endeavour is to secure a certain amount of sum for their administration they can dispose of within the scope of their autonomy." According to the proposal of Minister of Finance Lónyai, the two countries should have a joint financial legislation and government. The Croats would receive HUF 2 million to cover the expenses of their internal administration, while the rest of their income would be spent on matters of common concern.

However, Deák wanted to grant full autonomy to the Croats in finances as well. "According to him," wrote Csengery, "we must not care whether Vienna likes our policy toward the Croats or not. Ambitions against us were instigated there, and it is through us that Vienna wants to have the fulfilment of those denied. It does not matter much to Deák that the majority of the Croatian delegation does not demand financial autonomy. This majority, it seems, does not truly represent the Croatian public opinion; they are not in control of domestic situation... Deák wants to grant financial autonomy to the Croats to an extent that would satisfy them, and maintain relations between the two countries only to an extent that would not interfere with the preservation of the unity of the countries of the Hungarian crown... The proposal of the ministry on granting them support may offend their self-respect. It would be like making them accept an allowance. Deák did not want this. Part of the indirect taxes would have to be administered jointly, since those taxes, according to a common agreement with the other countries of His Majesty, are to be handled jointly. Deák wanted to hand finances over to the Croats in every other respect and in a way that the amount they would be expected to contribute to common expenses would be established from time to time on the basis of their administrative needs and not their taxing capacity (because that would take up the finances available to the Croats almost in full)."

Andrássy stated in his following proposal that the Croatian delegation should be left to decide whether they wanted full financial autonomy and the payment of their contribution to the common expenses proportional to their taxing capacity; or, whether they wanted a common budget and, with it, Hungary covering the expenses of Croatian administration up to a certain amount, and an obligation for Croats to contribute only their excess income to the common budget. Deák rejected this latter solution because he found contribution to common expenses in proportion to taxing capacity would be unfair, since this would leave next to nothing for the Croats for the financing of their internal affairs. "This would mean: pay as much as you can and then you can have your autonomy; or accept a common financial administration with us, and then we will pay for your autonomy."

Palpable tension evolved within the Hungarian delegation. The Croats protested against the proposal of Deák as well. "The majority of the Croatian del-

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egation has been panic-stricken since they got to know about our views,” wrote Csengery, “for Deák’s proposal would assist the cause of the National Party”. Yet, it would turn out that Deák was a truly visionary politician who offered a long-term solution in this case. For in the decades that followed, tension mounted in the bilateral relations each time the Croatians brought up the issue of financial autonomy. Great mass movements ensued exactly because of this in 1883 and especially in 1903.

Andrássy and Lónyay declared that they “would never sign a document that would rip the common budget apart.” Furthermore, the sovereign would not consent to it either. The Austrian ministers “similarly feared that this could be a dangerous precedent to which Galicia and Bohemia could make reference in the future.”

At last, Csengery managed to convince the “old man” that “although his proposal was the best, it could not be implemented since nobody wanted it: the Croatian unionist party, the Hungarian government, His Majesty, and other members of Deák’s party were all against.” Therefore, although he insisted on advancing his minority opinion at the joint meeting with the Croatians as well, “he sent the members of the Hungarian delegation the word not to take his view into consideration and vote him down tranquilly.” This happened indeed, with only Kálmán Ghyczy and, out of loyalty, Csengery voting in support of Deák. Naturally, the three representatives of the Croatian National Party also seconded Deák’s proposal at the joint meeting.

We know it from Csengery’s diary that Deák accepted the views of the Croatians concerning several important matters for the sake of an autonomy of wider scope. Furthermore, when the two delegations started the drafting of the document and the Croatians from the National Party expressed their dissenting views, “Deák, who was prepared to push to the extremes in the negotiations,” as we could see, approved of several of their proposals. The next day “Deák would make further concessions in matters concerning which we had already reached a contrary agreement.” Csengery called his attention to this on several occasions and then he said he would leave the session of the committee should the “old man” continue acting that way. At last, Csengery took up to draft the document on the basis of the negotiations. Andrássy and even Deák liked this idea, and the Croatians accepted it as well.

No agreement was reached concerning the territorial disputes. Deák suggested that the decision concerning Fiume should be put off, since it would jeopardise the whole compromise. Deák proposed cautious proceedings – ones that would take into account the interests of the population there – for the lifting of defended borders because, as far as he knew, “the lands of the higher border regiments were too barren to let people live out of them, and there was almost no industry in those areas. ...It would be dangerous to dissolve these regiments before making sure that the government would provide for the development of industry and new opportunities. Furthermore, Deák added that “there was another reason why part of the population of the border regions disliked the idea of civil administration: as

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opposed to the quick and cheap, although sometimes despotic military jurisdiction, it was slow and expensive.” Concerning Dalmatia, he recognised the historic right of the Hungarian crown and the Croats to that territory. However, actual “re-annexation cannot be carried out so easily as the Croats think; not even if the prince declared re-annexation.” Thorough preliminary works would be needed, several legal problems would have to be resolved, and, besides, the opinion of the Dalmatians would have to be found out. Another matter to clear up would be whether they would want to join Hungary or the Croats, concluded Deák.

Deák, as one can see, was deeply familiar with problems associated with the Croatian compromise and he would have liked to achieve the creation of a lasting and firm basis for Hungarian-Croatian relations. This explains his behaviour at the negotiations, his passionate antagonism with Andrassy and Lónyay, and the opinion of the majority of the Hungarian delegation. He saw it clearly that the majority of Croatian public opinion stood behind the National Party and that the bilateral relations could not, in the long run, be left in the hands of the unionists, the majority of whom were enlisted in the Sabor by force or bribery by Governor Rauch. This was the reason why Deák wanted to grant financial autonomy to Croatia and supported the proposals of the National Party’s representatives, then in minority in the Croatian delegation. If the conception of Deák had been fully realised, the Croatian question would have caused much less problem to the Hungarian governments in the fifty years that followed.

* * *

Deák set forth his views on the nationality issues of a more narrowly defined Hungary publicly in the general assembly of Zala county in 1843 for the first time. Many protested against certain people speaking in German at the meetings of the royal cities, and requested Parliament to oblige the citizens of the cities to learn the Hungarian language within a certain period. Deák was against using force, since it would never lead to any results. No deadline should be established for the learning of the Hungarian language, “because the learning and use of our mother tongue is rather difficult... Let us take the example of the Muraköz region. There, the county and the landowners have been trying to spread the Hungarian language among the population by the most appropriate means for fifty years now. They have Hungarian school masters to teach them. But, may I ask the officials of Muraköz county, have the people learned Hungarian there?”¹⁵

Deák spent considerable time on nationality issues in the 1860s. Contrary to József Eötvös and Lajos Mocsáry, he did not write books on this subject, and he did not produce thorough journalistic pieces like Zsigmond Kemény and Móric Lukács. However, his views had a profound impact on Hungarian policy and legislation concerning nationalities.

¹⁵ Kónyi II. 54–55.

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In his first petition of 1861, he acknowledged that “our fellow-citizens of non-Hungarian nationality have put forward claims concerning their nationality and the constitutional status of Croatia, which we cannot and do not want to ignore. We are decided to do all in our power to avoid every misunderstanding, and we will do anything we can without having to divide the land and sacrifice its independence, so that the citizens of the various nationalities of this country could achieve a union of interests and sentiments. We desire to amend the provisions of our legislation that could hinder this process on the basis of our mutual interests and equity; in order that this could be accomplished, it is inevitable to expand Parliament”, that is, invite the representatives of Transylvania and Croatia.¹⁶

Deák emphasised that union with Transylvania came about by legal means in 1848, so it was time to carry out the unification in practice. “We believe that the non-Hungarian citizens of Transylvania will not see their national interests threatened by unification, for they will be satisfied with the decisions we will make with respect to our fellow-citizens of other nationalities and find those reassuring.” Deák discussed the nationality question in Transylvania in more details in his second petition. Although “Romanians were not considered a separate nation [prior to 1848],... no distinction was made on the basis of nationality with respect to the elections to Parliament and the delegates... At the election of county delegates, the Saxon and Romanian nobles, of quite considerable number, had the same right as the Hungarians. There was no difference between qualifications needed for elections between the Hungarians, Saxons, and Romanians in the Székely (Szekler) and Saxon counties and the cities. The so-called regalists, who were to be invited from among the most important figures of nobility, moreover the key officials, included not only Hungarians.” In connection to the union he wrote: “We do not know, in what way the union could imperil the national interests of the non-Hungarian speaking population of Transylvania. For the same law that established the union emancipated the people in Transylvania, proclaimed equality before the law, extended civil and political rights to all classes and nationalities in society; the first result of unification being that the difference that had been present legally first, between the Hungarian, Székely, and Saxon and, second, the Romanian nations was abolished at once. We shall recognise the nationality rights of the non-Hungarian speaking population in Transylvania in the same way as we recognise the rights of those in Hungary.”

As far as a more narrowly defined Hungary was concerned, Deák asserted that the claims stating “that the legislation of 1848 violated the nationality rights of the non-Hungarian speaking population in Hungary,” groundless. These laws emancipated the serfs, “established equality before the law, extended civil and political rights to all classes of society, and turned millions into liberated citizens of this homeland. Furthermore, all nationalities were given an equal share in these generous measures.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Kónyi III. 25–26.

¹⁷ Kónyi III. 184–192.

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In conformity with the promise of Deák, a committee elected by Parliament drafted the bill on nationalities. However, its debate could not take place because of the dissolution of the Diet.

In his petitions, Deák could make promises only in general, since the Diet was to decide on the specific rights of the nationalities. Certain sporadic data suggest that he spent time studying these specific questions in those years. Serb Foreign Minister Ristić recorded in his memoirs that he was in Pest in company of Head of Government Garašanin in March 1861 and they held talks with leading Hungarian politicians, like Andrásy and Eötvös. These politicians considered the border changes of the counties to match the nationalities possible, an idea also Deák embraced.¹⁸ Nikola Krstić, envoy of the Serb government visited Budapest in the summer of 1861, and had several meetings with Deák. According to his diary, “Deák would consent to Bácska (Backa) and Bánát (Banat) being transformed into Serb counties,” but he opposed the title “Vajdaság”.¹⁹ The Italian consul in Belgrade, who was in contact with the Hungarian politicians, reported on 12 February 1863 that he was informed that Deák would consent to the idea of the Serbs forming an autonomous territory from those counties, in which they were in majority.²⁰

At the end of 1864, Antal Augusz visited Deák in Pest on the authority of Francis Joseph, and enquired what the conditions of the compromise were. Deák declared that the first step would be the invitation of Transylvania and Croatia to join the Diet. As far as the nationality question was concerned, he believed that the majority should be able to decide about the official language of the counties and districts, while the costs of maintenance of the churches, schools, and cultural institutions of the nationalities should be met from the national budget. He found the drafting of a detailed legislation on the granting of equal rights to nationalities indispensable.²¹

When the Diet gathered for its next session in December 1865, the petition drafted by Deák, similar to his petition of 1861, set forth the following: “It is necessary to pay attention to the developing consciousness of nationality; it is beyond the reach of times past and former legislation. We will not forget that the non-Hungarian speaking population of Hungary are citizens of Hungary the same, and we genuinely want to grant them by means of law what their interests and the public interest of the homeland requires in this respect. We shall adhere to the principles of justice and fraternity in the drafting of these laws.”²²

¹⁸ Risztics, János: *Szerbia külügyi viszonyai az újabb időben* [Recent Foreign Relations of Serbia]. Vol. 2. 1860–1868. Nagybecskerek, 1892. 37–38.

¹⁹ *Dnevnik Nikola Krstića*, 8. Juni; Vučković. op. cit. 46.

²⁰ According to the report of Consul Scovasso “alcuni distinti Ungheresi mi assicurarono che il Deák darebbe la sua adesione a tale progetto di autonomia.” *Archivio storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, Roma. *Consolato in Belgrado*, 225 (863).

²¹ On the negotiations between Deák and Augusz (see the original reports in: Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Wien, Kabinettsarchiv, Geheimakten, Karton 3. “Deák Franz”) see in detail: Hanák: *Deák húsvéti cikkének előzményei* [Antecedents of Deák's Easter Article]. 125–129, 135–136, 140–141. See also: Redlich, Josef: *Das österreichische Staats- und Reichsproblem*. II. Leipzig, 1926. 388–390.

²² Kónyi III. 394.

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It was at the end of 1866 that Deák formulated publicly his famous thesis on the political nation, which later on would be included in the law on nationalities as well. Serb Representative Miletić Svetozar wanted a compromise between Hungary and the nationalities prior to Hungary's compromise with the sovereign and Austria, and proposed that this could take place with the transformation of the country into a federal state. Deák argued that they were, for the time being, striving for the restoration of the Hungarian constitution, and the principle of federalism was contrary to that, given that the constitution was based on the territorial integrity and indivisibility of the country. Under the Hungarian constitution, "there is only one political nation in Hungary, and this political nation included Romanians and Hungarians, Serbs and Slovaks."²³

According to Deák, the relationship of Hungary and the empire would have to be settled first, followed by the regulation of the status of the nationalities. Accordingly, the committee entrusted with nationality matters presented its bill only in the summer of 1867 and, after modifications, it was then presented to the lower house for debate in November 1868. On the first day of the debate Deák submitted a new bill. The contents of it corresponded to the original bill for the most part, "but it did not correspond to it in the structure of its text and the logic of its argumentation." Deák made fundamental changes to the structure of the original bill: starting out with the highest level, the national assembly and the government, through the local authorities all the way down to the districts. He then discussed the courts, churches, educational institutions, regulating the rights of the citizens concerning language use. The bill of Deák was undoubtedly more logical in its structure and clearer in its wording.

Deák found it necessary to include the definition of what the "official" concept of a nation meant in the preamble of the act. "My opinion in this matter is that one political nation exists in Hungary: the unified and indivisible Hungarian nation, and every person in this homeland is its citizen endowed with equal rights regardless of nationality. The other point I believe in is that these equal rights can be subject to different regulations concerning the official use of the various languages in the country, in so far as the unity of the country, the feasibility of government, and the administration of justice make that necessary." Deák asserted that the law had to declare that Hungarian was the official language of Hungary and, therefore, only Hungarian could be the language used in the Diet and by the government. "On lower levels, however, in the counties, at local authorities, in districts, churches, he was not against equal rights in this respect... I want that litigation could take place in the language of the given population, in the areas where not Hungarians live". Yet, he too could see that public sentiment was not ripe for that. In general, he would have wanted to give more space for the use of the languages of the nationalities than what was proposed in the bill of the committee. The following is a characteristic example of this: the bill of the committee

²³ Kónyi IV. 132–135.

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proposed that the county officials should use the language of the parties in official relations “so much as they could”. As opposed to this, Deák proposed that the language of the parties should be used “if they expressed their desire there-to.” We can find the first version in the official text of the act.²⁴

Following the Compromise, Deák spoke two more times on the nationality issue in the lower house. Both of these interventions contained statements of fundamental importance, characteristic of his liberal views concerning these matters.

In the budget debate of November 1868, the minister of the interior proposed a state subsidy of HUF 58,000 to be given to the pension fund of the National Theatre. Serb Representative Milos Dimitrievic intervened, saying that the Serb National Theatre requested state subsidies as well (the amount of HUF 5000), but the minister rejected their request on the grounds of insufficient funds. Several Hungarian representatives, including Deák, expressed their support for the request of Dimitrievic. “I cannot see how it could be seen as fair,” said Deák, “that the state... should grant assistance only and exclusively to one of the nationalities [i.e. the Hungarian] from the common tax revenues. I believe that it should assist either all, or none... Should we have the means to assist them all, then we should do so; if we have not, then we should not assist our own language either.”²⁵

In January 1872, in his last speech on the nationality issue, he spoke in favour of the establishment of a state secondary school where the language of teaching would be Serb. He argued as follows: “Every nationality, even if it is not a political nation, has the right to educate its children. Be there as many as 300 secondary schools in the country, if the language of teaching in a school in the countryside is not what the population speaks there, then education will nevertheless be rather problematic.” If we had compelled the nationalities “that their children, who are not or only little fluent in the Hungarian language given that they are taught in their own language in the elementary school, be educated everywhere and in everything in Hungarian, then the progress of those young people in the secondary school would be impossible, the parents would spend their money in vain, and the young would spend their time in vain.” Subsequently, as in a political will, he summarised his views on this matter for his contemporaries, who drifted farther and farther from liberalism: “If we want to win the nationalities over, then Magyarising them is not the right path to take. Instead, we should make the circumstances in Hungary popular among them. For I can see two things clearly: it would be ungodly and barbarian to terminate them, even if they had been less in number. Which is not the case, so this would, therefore, be impossible. Furthermore, it is not in our interest to make them become our enemies. Their situation is similar to ours.

²⁴ Kemény, G. Gábor: *Iratok a nemzetiségi kérdés történetéhez Magyarországon a dualizmus korában* [Documents to the History of the Nationality Issue in Hungary in the Dualist Era]. I. 1867–1892. Budapest, 1952. 129–132.

²⁵ Kónyi VI. 93–94.

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Could they secede and form a nation, I would understand this endeavour. Yet, this is impossible in the circumstances that reign in Europe. Therefore, the parties are to make an effort to live together and next to each other in the deepest understanding possible."²⁶

József Eötvös held similar views. This points to the fact that the Hungarian liberal elite of the 1860s agreed that the only possible way for the solution of the nationality issue was the fullest possible assertion of civil rights, together with the freest possible competition of individuals and peoples within the framework of the multinational liberal state, where Hungarians were only first among equals. This state, in their eyes, was not exclusively a Hungarian national state, but an institution above people and nations, a common homeland, the task of which was to ensure and promote the free national development of every citizen and people living within its borders.

²⁶ Kónyi VI. 339–340.