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The Ethnic Question in 1848: The Long Debate of Széchenyi and Kossuth

István Széchenyi is one of the few historical figures that every Hungarian knows something about, regardless of school qualification. Most would, however, say the overused phrase that he was “the greatest Hungarian”. Most Hungarians who visit Budapest will encounter the visible products of his activity pursued for the ascent of Hungary, for example the building of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences or the Chain Bridge. It is also common knowledge that he did not share the same opinion in several important matters regarding the future of Hungary with Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the 1848 – 1849 Revolution and the War of Independence. Even today, Hungarian academics are still divided between those who agree with Széchenyi’s reform plans that were to “proceed slowly and with care”, and those who favour Kossuth’s revolutionary, passionate and fiercely innovative proposals. However, the general public are not fully aware of their long debate concerning many important questions of their time and that they are partly still relevant today, neither do we know most of his activity as a public writer. With the exception of his most significant political writings (*Hitel ‘Credit’, Világ ‘Light’, Stádium*) and his *Diary*, people may not even be able to mention any more titles. He dedicated several writings to the ethnic question that was the second most important matter after our relationship with Austria, and in which Széchenyi held a markedly different viewpoint from Kossuth’s. In his conviction, this question was of decisive importance and it put limits on our pursuit of independence. He warned against the dangers of breaking up with Austria, the forced usage of the Magyar language, he could also recognise the changes in the situation of the Slavic population, and prophetically foresaw the possibility of Russian intervention. With hindsight, being aware of the catastrophes that struck Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century, Széchenyi proved to be a remarkably farsighted politician. It was the inability to recognise these dangers that Széchenyi was missing in the revolutionary leadership of Kossuth and his circle, the members of the responsible Hungarian government. The tragic end that he could foresee raised an all-consuming guilt in him. Széchenyi saw himself as the main culprit in lighting the torch towards progress in the backward country, thus leading his nation towards decline. On the eve of the Serbian uprising against the Hungarian revolution,

he said the following words to János Vitkovics, the Serbian priest of Buda: *“It was my warmest wish that all the peoples of Hungary should live together in peace and love. In the twenties, I lit the torch of enlightenment, I guided the country towards cultural and material development. ... And when I thought that I had accomplished my goal, a new statesman rose, the flawed genius of this country, and extinguished the torch that I lit; he destroyed everything with his two hands that I had built with blood and sweat throughout the years. ... And this man, who destroyed the achievements of my work: Kossuth, whom the people revere and follow blindly. If this is what the nation wants, their will should be done, but the person, who led them on this path, should answer before God and man; but I will not survive this national disaster.”*¹

Széchenyi wanted more than political and economic reforms. He called on the Hungarians to practice self-criticism, to admit their mistakes and atone for them, and to start a slow, gradual, or as we would say nowadays, “sustainable” development. When promoting the reforms, he was not under the influence of liberal or revolutionary ideals, but he was guided by his faith in the equality of all men in front of god. His popularity was not unanimous. Not only because of the Hungarian national character that is so unwilling to hold introspection, and that was so often judged by Széchenyi, but also because of the romantic nationalism sweeping across Europe at the time, which urged more radical, expeditious changes, and for the sake of reforms sacrificed even the good and useful elements of the old regime.

Political situation and the revolutionary wave sweeping Europe in the first half of the 19th century

Széchenyi's appearance on the political scene in 1825 was a direct consequence of the general situation of Europe and of Hungary. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 ended Napoleon's reign, abolished the majority of his liberal reforms, and restored the old regime and absolutism. This was intended to strengthen the monarchs' legitimacy and to oppress the nationalistic, liberal efforts of the bourgeoisie. However, the restoration was by all means only outward and temporary. Certain developments in both the foreign and home policy, and social problems arising from the spread of the industrial revolution soon lead to another landslide, the July Revolution of 1830 in France. Similar to the great French Revolution, the flagbearer liberal bour-

¹ In: *Biografija J. Vitkovicha*. Letopis Matice Srpske. 159. k. p. 32-38.

geoisie allied with the most desolate social group of society, the proletariat. In preparation for the revolution the press took a leading part, especially the journal *Le National* and its editor-in-chief, *Adolphe Thiers*, who had a key role in later French governments. The July Revolution ended with half-measures. The proletariat shed blood on the barricades, but their dream, the republic could not come true – due to the predictable consequences of foreign policy, namely the certain intervention of the Holy Alliance². Eventually, the revolution put Louis Philippe, the cousin of the deserting king, Charles X, known as the Citizen King on the throne.

The July Revolution whipped up great waves all over Europe: in the Italian and German states, and, what is most important from the Hungarian viewpoint because of the later developments, in Poland, which was divided by the great powers in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna. Here, the independent Polish national government of Czartoryski³ deprived the Russian tsar of the royal crown of Poland. The numerically superior Russian military force soon crushed the Polish revolution, government was abolished, and Poland was made into a low-ranking province of the Russian Empire. Czartoryski first fled to England, where he established close connections with Lord Palmerston⁴, he then moved to Paris. Using mainly his connections with the English freemasonry, Czartoryski continued his fight against the Russian and Austrian expansion in South-Eastern Europe. The

² The alliance between the Catholic Habsburg emperor, the Orthodox Russian tsar and the Protestant Prussian king that was formed after the defeat of Napoleon in Vienna, in 1815. In its founding diploma the three monarchs emphasized the principles of graciousness and peace; the Christian religion was highlighted as the foundation of the political establishment, and committed to help one another against any threat to the order. As the members of the three most important denominations of the Christian religion, they expressed their hope that all the Christian rulers of Europe would accept these principles and would join the Holy Alliance. That became the case, except for the English king and the Papal State, every ruler of Europe joined the coalition (The Pope abstained due to the alliance being above denominations). France became a member in 1818, but went its separate way after the 1830 July Revolution. With this, the Holy alliance lost its Pan-European nature.

³ Adam Jerzy Czartoryski (1770–1861), Prince. After the defeat of the Kościuszko Uprising, he was summoned to the court of the tsar in Russia as a hostage. He formed a close friendship with Tsar Alexander I, who also appointed him as a Minister of Foreign Affairs (1804–1806).

⁴ Viscount of Palmerston, Henry John Temple (1784–1865): Secretary at War between 1812 and 1828, Foreign Secretary in several governments, Home Secretary between 1852 and 1855, Prime Minister from 1855 to 1858, then from 1859 until his death. He opposed the expansion of Russian influence in Eastern Europe.

Hôtel Lambert, the Paris home of the Czartoryski family became the centre of the Polish emigration. Emigration as a political factor is one of the most important legacies of the 1830 Polish uprising even up till today. The July Revolution reinforced the advance of the liberal-democratic ideas in the whole of Europe. However, Louis Philippe became distanced from them with time. Simultaneously, the emerging socio-economic problems (i.e. the growing social differences) led to another revolution in France in 1848 that was followed by revolutionary movements similar to the French event in several countries; Hungary among them. These movements shook the foundations of the political and social establishments not only in France, but all over Europe: in the German and Italian states, in the multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire, the Balkan-peninsula, all the way down to the borders of the Ottoman Empire. As a consequence, the restoration that was orchestrated by Metternich⁵ in 1815 collapsed, and the status of the Habsburg Empire as a great power ceased. The most important endeavour of the revolutions in 1848 was to create nation-states, to bring about democratic governments and to achieve various social entitlements. Oppressing these revolutions meant that the expansion of the democratic and liberal ideas slowed down, but the changing attitudes that these ideas brought forward continued to ripen underground – the Habsburg Empire is an example of this, and at the appropriate time (after the First World War) broke to the surface.

The situation in Hungary

“At the beginning of the 19th century, from the viewpoint of common law and economics, Hungary was the same state as in the 16th century” – observed Gyula Szekfű in his historical study titled *A magyar állam életrajza (The biography of the Hungarian state)*⁶. The necessary conditions had not yet been given for the formation of the modern constitutional state: the urban population was not significant enough to possess considerable material and intellectual culture, where the “same ideas had the same effects”. The preconditions for a notable urban population growth and for the ability to produce a unanimous reaction – the advanced capitalist monetary economy, the movement of the village population into cities, or the appearance of the prole-

tariat – did not exist. The 1767 Urbarial Patent (*Urbarium*) of Maria Theresa was enacted in 1790, removing all restrictions on the peasants’ movement, but the civilian middle class and the urban proletariat still could not emerge. The primary reason for this was the underdevelopment of industry and trade, as a direct consequence of the century-and-a-half long Ottoman occupation and the trade policies of Vienna that was disadvantageous for Hungary. The thin layer of urban tradesmen and merchants were predominantly foreigners, who did not speak or feel Hungarian/Magyar. It was going to be the duty of the nobility to embrace the cause of progression. However, the majority of the nobility displayed insensitivity towards the great questions affecting the fate of the Hungarian nation. The aristocracy was attracted to Vienna, the politically active part of the lesser and middle nobility was busy fiercely protecting their own privileges (for example being exempt from taxation). They did not look beyond the borders of Hungary, so remained unaffected by the contemporary economic and political movements of Europe.

The beginning of the reform movement and its main schools of thought

Serving as guards in Vienna, young Hungarian noblemen with a modest income started to pay more attention to other countries. First of all, they were more receptive to culture, and the cultivation of mother tongues. Eventually, it was an aristocrat, Istvan Széchenyi, who was brought up exposed to western culture, who launched the liberal reform movement in Hungary, under the influence of the English, French and American constitutions. To start with, at the 1825 – 1827 Diet, he pledged the full annual income of his estates towards the foundation of the Hungarian Learned Society (later called the Hungarian Academy of Sciences), which would aim to cultivate the Magyar language. However, he wanted more general changes with a deeper impact: he wanted to improve the self-knowledge of the Hungarian people as a society, help them realise and acknowledge their mistakes, and to make these mistakes right by discipline and self-moderation. He took practical steps to revive the spirit of community and to create a civil society (for example the foundation of the National Casino). He summarised his plans and ideas on the economic and social ascent of Hungarian society in books (*Lovakról [About Horses], Hitel, Világ, Stádium*). His intention to improve came from his religious belief that man was the highest achievement of creation, and not from political considerations, and that fundamentally set him apart from the other leading personalities of the

⁵ Klemens Wenzel Nepomuk Lothar von Metternich-Winneburg zu Bleistein, Prince (1773–1859), Austrian statesman, as a Chancellor, practically the ruler of the Habsburg Empire, the most efficient and most determined guardian of its internal order.

⁶ It was first published in German (*Der Staat Ungarn, eine Geschichtsstudie*) by *Deutsche Verlags Anstalt Stuttgart-Berlin* in 1917.

Reform Age. In his eyes, lawfulness was the most important attribute of any social movement, and he considered a revolution or an uprising morally wrong. He wanted to protect his nation from rapid, sweeping changes, he advocated “progress slowly and with care”, slow, organic development that the nation could understand and keep up with. The historical moment, when he appeared, was not in his favour, nor was the Hungarian spirit, that, waking from its indifference, suddenly wanted to feverishly act, and which Széchenyi criticised and intended to change. He was aware of the vulnerability of the country, and he warned again and again that Hungarians lived in changed circumstances now, and the reality of our situation could only be assessed by looking at it from a distance, both in time and space. He believed that Hungary needed Austria, so we were not facing alone the hostile nations surrounding us in and around the country. He was filled with worry seeing the great proportion of non-Magyar speaking people in Hungary (around 1840 it was about half of the population), and he called for patience and respect towards the ethnicities, rather than enforcement (for example in language usage).

Undoubtedly, Széchenyi was the pioneer of liberal reforms. However, there were others from the beginning, who similarly to him, wanted changes, but gained inspiration from other (mainly French) sources and used other means. One of them was Baron Miklós Wesselényi, who, in the beginning, was Széchenyi’s friend and ally. Eventually only their friendship survived. Firstly, he only proved more outspoken than Széchenyi, but with time his goals changed, too. Under the influence of the ideas of the 1830 July Revolution in France, he was not satisfied with pursuing liberal reforms only, and he demanded democracy and the assimilation of minorities living in Hungary. Lajos Kossuth was born into a fortuneless noble family. He entered the legal profession, as it was customary in Hungary for lesser nobles, and he began his political career as a member of the progressive opposition of Zemplén county assembly. Later he sensibly realised that, with modest material resources but blessed with excellent writing skills, journalism could provide him with the opportunity to gain reputation in national politics. He attended the 1825 – 1827 Diet as an absentee’s deputy, appointed by a magnate. He began to produce summaries of the speeches made at the Diet; these reports were copied and spread widely. In 1837 Kossuth was arrested and charged with sedition and given a prison sentence, but after his release, he had the opportunity to return to journalism and became the editor of a daily newspaper, the *Pesti Hírlap* (*Pest News*). In the Diet of 1832 – 1836, the lesser nobility (the county gentry) pursued a livelier political activity, which typically displayed all the extreme

mood swings that Széchenyi often condemned. Especially passionate was a group of young people called the “Dietal Youth” or *jurati*, who attended the Diet as members of the audience. Both groups found the gradual change promoted by Széchenyi too slow, and showed little willingness for self-inspection and to explore their own responsibility for the backward state of the country. The more radical direction of Wesselényi and later Kossuth, was more appealing to their enthusiasm. Through his editorials placed in the *Pesti Hírlap*, Kossuth could directly influence public opinion. His style and powerful rhetoric swept away the most widespread readership. In the beginning, he stood for the same reforms as Széchenyi, but advocated faster progress. Later he defied the Vienna government, which, in opposition to Széchenyi, he perceived to be an obstacle, and aimed for the total independence of Hungary. With regards to the minorities, Kossuth was not averse to the idea of their assimilation, or that the Magyar language should be forced on them if necessary.

The touchstone of the relationship of Széchenyi and Kossuth: our associations with Austria and the minorities

Széchenyi clearly saw the dangers of Kossuth’s sweeping momentum and his emotionally charged politics with regards to multi-ethnic Hungary, and which was also divided itself (for example Transylvania was separate). Although he was not unanimously popular on either side of the political spectrum, he was the unrivalled leading figure of the progressive opposition until 1832. From then on, however, he was eclipsed by Wesselényi and Kossuth. It would have been understandable if he had felt envious of them, and many suspected that was the case when he launched his attacks on Kossuth and the radical opposition. To a certain extent, Széchenyi was vain indeed, and his diary entries reveal that he consciously tried to control this trait of his. Nevertheless, in 1841, it was reasons beyond his personality that made him stand up firmly against the exaggerators, or as he called them, the “Pesti Hírlap Party”. By this time, it had become clear that the imperial government in Vienna gave up plans to integrate Hungary into the Hereditary Lands. They began to accept elements of the Hungarian constitution, for example the Magyar language was accepted as the official language of Hungary. While it was evident for Széchenyi that he too should join the opposition while the threat of integrating Hungary into the Habsburg Empire loomed, it was also natural for him that as soon as the threat disappeared, he should encourage a consensual approach and cooperation with the government in Vienna. Due to a lack of the medium necessary for liberal

reforms (lack of bank system, little and mainly foreign bourgeoisie), Széchenyi was convinced that the country could only be guided to the path of advancement by via measured changes and working through the government. He condemned the stance of being in the opposition at all costs, as he perceived that the government too had taken steps towards reforms, and he urged for support towards it, rather than hurling obstacles.

His first great polemic against Kossuth and the radical opposition was *A Kelet Népe* (*The People of the Orient*, 1841), a diatribe of book-length. In this, Széchenyi primarily condemns Kossuth's manners. He explains that, although reticent from the beginning towards Kossuth, he began to feel aversion when, in his editorials in the *Pesti Hírlap*, Kossuth started to fiercely attack the government, while Széchenyi himself wanted to carry out the reforms with their agreement. He disapproved of Kossuth's outbursts against the magnates and the county assemblies. He also regarded it harmful how Kossuth was going to interfere in the relationship of the Hungarian and non-Hungarian population by demanding the exclusivity of the Magyar language. Kossuth made it clear in his editorial of 17 February that he would not take Széchenyi's peaceful path: [... reforms will be achieved], "*by you, with you if possible, without you, against you if need be*". Széchenyi was alarmed by this, as he believed the Hungarians as a nation were not strong enough in this important period of transformation to trigger fights on two fronts at the same time: with the government in Vienna and the non-Hungarian ethnic minorities living within its borders. He believed Kossuth also could not afford to carry out the reforms by himself, without the wealthy classes. This would be unreasonable anyway, as they were not enemies of the reform pursuits any more. "*He who urges this*" says Széchenyi "*prepares the ground for the failure of Hungary*"; this was his conviction when he turned against Kossuth and he completed the essay *A Kelet Népe*. He painted in dark colours the predictable outcome of Kossuth's minority politics. He observed that the Germans weigh in the largest, the Hungarians cannot measure up against them. It is not good tactics to bring these two into fight with each other. Then looking at the proportion of Hungarians and the overall number of minorities in Hungary, where the scales tip in favour of the latter, he also concludes that the assimilating efforts of the radical camp would lead to the dissolution of Hungarians in the sea of foreigners around them. By the "legalisation" of the Magyar language, Széchenyi believes, we have gained a good position, we should cherish this, but we should not force it in family circles. He warns against fighting for it tooth and nail, or according to the laws of interaction, we will

be fought back and annihilated, since we are weak on the battlefield. Instead, he proposed that we should settle our *conflicts* "*in a field where we are the stronger, and they are considerably weaker, that is the constitutional way: let us include them in our constitution, ...*"⁷ Such constitution needs to be created that gives equal rights to everyone. Let us allow anyone speak his own native language in his circles, but use Magyar in offices and in public life. We must not hasten the reform process, as flustered actions will only create more trouble. Only gradual change could be lasting, anything else will lead to anarchy, and not re-birth. "*Revolution*", he says, "*is the most dangerous lethal disease for us*".⁸ There is still time to put an end to this "misfortunate direction", to extinguish the smouldering fires where needed, but not for long. If we miss the right moment, we will lose our honesty, life and all our hopes forever. He begged Kossuth not to use his popularity to jeopardise Hungary. He also warned against always trying to blame the responsibility for our nation's backwardness on someone else. On the path of progress everyone wants to be the flagbearer and claim the glory for themselves, but nobody is willing to undertake the tenacious, persistent, but less spectacular work. *A Kelet Népe* caused a great stir, not only Kossuth, but also József Eötvös and Mihály Vörösmarty reacted to it. Most of the responses took Kossuth's side, they respected Széchenyi's concerns, but thought they were unwarranted, or at least exaggerating.

Meanwhile, Kossuth began to take a firmer stand against the endeavours of the minorities, especially the Slavs. To the anti-Hungarian incitements of the Zagreb-based Illyrian Party⁹ he responded not only in his editorials, but also at the 10 July assembly of Pest County, by initiating Croatia's separation from Hungary in terms of administration and legislation. True to his firm stance in the matters of ethnicities, in this proposal Széchenyi only saw the source of growing mutual hatred and consequently great dangers looming over Hungary. This, again, spurred him to put pen to paper, but the finished work, titled *Garat*¹⁰ (1842), following the author's decision, was not published. In this, he mainly chastises the Hungarians for their unprovoked arrogance, and for their contempt towards

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 294. Published by Ferenczi, Zoltán: *Fontes Historiae Hungaricae Aevi Recentioris*. Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat. 1925.

⁸ *Ibid*, 315.

⁹ The party of Count Janko Drašković (Ilirska stranka), it was founded in 1841, in response to the Croatian-Hungarian Party of the Hungarian-friendly Croatian noblemen. It changed its name to People's party in 1843.

¹⁰ After Széchenyi's death, the manuscript was lost. The caretaker of Széchenyi's literary legacy, Gyula Vizsota found it and published it in 1912 in Budapest.

others (in this case, Croats), but he especially excoriates those who, whipping up these emotions, are digging pitfalls for Hungary. He condemns those opinionated leaders who claim superiority over non-Hungarians in the name of the whole nation. If this kind pullulates, and the well-meaning Hungarians do not get their act together in time, Hungary “will disappear in that pitfall, and will realise for herself she will receive hatred from everywhere in return”.¹¹

Having finished *Garat*, Széchenyi made considerable efforts to distract Ferenc Deák and the moderate opposition from supporting Kossuth, and to attract them to his side. Simultaneously, he tried to influence the government to initiate reforms. Neither of his endeavours was successful. Several times, Széchenyi tried to win over Metternich to his plans, but the Chancellor, who was practically governing the Empire, misjudged Széchenyi. Metternich fundamentally opposed any change, and did not realise that Széchenyi was not working against the government and the dynasty; on the contrary, he tried to reform Hungary with their cooperation and acquiescence. Széchenyi could not attract Deák either. He followed with mounting concerns the publicists’ debate that was not conducted by Kossuth himself, but the liberal wordsmiths centred around him (e. g. Ferenc Pulszky), arguing with Slovakian, Czech or Croatian publicists. This did not go unnoticed abroad, either: it attracted the attention of the German press. Although there were obvious exaggerations in their statements, the native public opinion did not dare enter into debates with the publicists, as they represented the national standpoint. Széchenyi was the only one who reflected on it in his speech at a general assembly of the Academy on 27 November 1842, and which is known as the *Akadémiai beszéd* (*Speech at the Academy*)¹². He also spoke out against the “external Magyarisation” that so many held acceptable: he warned that just because someone speaks Magyar, they do not necessarily “feel” Hungarian. He deemed the idea pointless that by founding teacher training centres masses of people should be taught to speak Magyar. He protested against imposing the Magyar language by law beyond official use and was against the demand for ethnic minorities to give up their mother tongue and culture.

A more emphatic warning was a series of three articles titled *Vieuxtemps* that Széchenyi wrote in the journal *Jelenkor*¹³ (30 March,

9 and 27 April 1843). He felt compelled to write the series after a concert given by the violinist Vieuxtemps in the German theatre in Pest ended scandalously. Vieuxtemps gave a concert in the National Theatre, then also performed in the German Theatre, however, there he was booed off stage by a group of the *jurati*. The scandal was also condemned by Kossuth himself, but he also thought that a few minor theatre catcalls would not stain the Hungarian virtue. Széchenyi, on the contrary, thought that the incident would provoke the disapproval of the Germans. He concluded that this episode could affect harmfully the peaceful Magyarisation of Pest, considering not only the fact that the majority of tradesmen are German, but they also “own the money”. He warned that the Kossuth-party had already opened Pandora’s box, and its free-roaming content had already resulted in so many negative outcomes that we were on the verge of open war with all the powers and ethnicities. Széchenyi published his *Politikai Programtörvények* (*Fractions of A Political Program*) in June 1847, in which he accused Kossuth of turning the social classes against one another and of inciting a revolution. He deemed the politicians demanding full separation from Austria short-sighted (at this time Ferenc Deák also belonged among them). Here he explained that Hungary could not stand on its own feet not because of its ethnic problems, but under the terms of constitutional law. Széchenyi believed that the root of the problems was the fact that very few Hungarians were able to clearly see the difference between the legal positions of Hungary and the Habsburg Hereditary Lands. Kossuth responded in a similar style, and mocked Széchenyi for his scare-mongering, and tersely called Széchenyi’s writings “revolution-sniffing”. Did Kossuth have a justified reason to be so belligerent with the ethnic minorities of Hungary, especially with the Slavs? And were Széchenyi’s worries valid?

Pan-Slavism and the movement for Southern Slav unity

The answer is unanimously yes. Simultaneously with the Hungarian pursuits of national interests, the Slav nations’ self-awareness also began to wake, in part due to some external encouragement. The impulse came directly from Russia, but the idea of the brotherhood of Slav nations in fact is the product of German Romanticism. The founders of this idea were also Germans, August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735–1809) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), but in the

(*Social Forum*). Its significance grew when Széchenyi chose this journal as his platform in 1843.

¹¹ According to Széchenyi, these loudmouths despise everyone, except the Jews, as the latter, as Széchenyi puts it, “pay in cash”.

¹² It was also published in print in the same year, with the title “*A Magyar Academia körül*”.

¹³ Published between 1832 and 1848 in Pest, conservative political journal, originally initiated by Károly Kisfaludy. Printed twice a week with its supplement *Társalkodó*

relevant part of their lives they were both engaged in Russian service. In the beginning, the study of pan-Slavist ethnography, language and literature that stemmed from their intellectual legacy seemingly only emphasised the significance of the shared of language, writing and folk customs, and at this time it was considered acceptable to cherish this commitment to their shared culture alongside the loyalty towards the country where the given Slavic people lived. However, the desire for a political presence began to be more and more prominent in the pan-Slavist movement. The efforts increased to unite the 60-80 million Slavic peoples living in the area between the Adriatic and the Urals, from the Tatras to the Balkans, who were so unfairly confined into servitude – by the cruelty of Germans and Hungarians – and to provide them their own state. The help was mainly expected from Russia, but there were thinkers who suggested the unity of the Slavs living under the Habsburg crown within Austria. In 1848 a great Slavic Congress was held in Prague between 2 and 12 June, which was attended by not only the Slavic representatives of the multi-ethnic Habsburg empire, but also the prominent personalities of other Slavic nations, for example the Polish, or even from Prussia, as well as the known anarchist Mikhail Bakunin¹⁴, as the only Russian. It was partly due to his incitement that the Congress ended in a revolt, which was swiftly put down by Field Marshal Windisch-Graetz¹⁵. The Slavic Central Committee in Prague made a few important observations with regards to Hungary, for example they noted that there was a war about to break out with the Hungarians, therefore the Slav nations must form an alliance, and the Slavs living in Hungary cannot stay under Hungarian authority any longer. It was also suggested that they should hold another congress in Vienna, where they should make a resolution about the equality of the minorities and about the “external” maintenance of their empire.

The ethnic unity of the Southern Slavs (Croats, Serbs, Wends, Slavonians, Dalmatians, Bosnians) was propagated by the Croatian Ljudevit Gaj (1809–1872). He met Ján Kollár¹⁶ during his university

years in Pest. Gaj was influenced by Kollár when he began to promote the unification of all the South Slavs facilitated through the adoption of a shared literary language and Latin writing¹⁷. The founding principle of his Illyrian movement was the notion that South Slavs were the descendants of the early inhabitants of the area where they live today: the Illyrians. His aim was to linguistically unite these nations on the one hand, and to put an end to the regional divisions on the other. In his opinion, this could have also been an effective tool against the spreading ideology of Greater Serbia which also gained momentum around the same time. Gaj's plans did not make a lasting impression on either the Slovenians or the Serbs. The Serbian Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864) was considerably more successful than Gaj. With the help of Jernej Kopitar (1780–1844), a Slovene linguist who was working in the library of the Vienna court as the censor of Greek and Slav books, Karadžić reformed the Serbian literary language, bringing it closer to the common folk speech. Karadžić also enjoyed support from Russia. What's more, from 1826 the tsar granted full yearly pension for his works. The South Slavs living under the Habsburg sceptre were already given a taste of a united Southern Slav Empire at the beginning of the 19th century, when Napoleon formed the Illyrian Provinces¹⁸ in the territories he occupied. The common folk speech was non-officially accepted at this time¹⁹, and received a huge boost in its cultivation, and also affected favourably the development of cultural and linguistic identity. This historically short period of time (1809–1813) was deeply ingrained in the memory of the intellectual circles.

At the end of the 17th century, as a consequence of a hasty campaign against the Turks by Emperor Leopold I, masses of Serbs settled in the southern parts of Hungary. From the beginning, these Serbs had been demanding special rights, or as we would say today, regional autonomy, notwithstanding the fact that two-thirds of the population of the area in question (Délvidék) was not Serbian. A part of the fleeing Serbians was settled in the Military Frontier. There they lived independently from the Hungarian authorities, under the direct military rule of Vienna, making it possible to use

the Evangelical church of Deák square in Pest between 1819 and 1849.

¹⁷ *Kratka osnova hrvatsko-slavenskoga pravopisanja* (Buda. 1830)

¹⁸ A short-lived autonomous province (1809–1813), consisting of Dalmatia, Istria, Trieste, Görz, Krajna and the western part of Karinthia. Its capital was established in Laybach, the present Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, headed by a Governor-General.

¹⁹ *The Code Civil*, the French civil law was also translated into the local “Slav” language.

¹⁴ Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin (1814–1876), comes from a Russian landowner family, the founder of the anarchist movement, its chief ideologist and most influential activist. He participated in several revolutions; among others, the French Revolution in 1848.

¹⁵ Alfred Candidus Ferdinand Fürst zu Windisch-Graetz (1787–1862), Prince, Austrian Field Marshal. His son got injured and his wife died in the Prague uprising. Friedrich Engels wrote about the events in Prague that the Austrian military ruthlessness drowned in Czech blood the possibility of peaceful coexistence of Bohemia and Germany.

¹⁶ Of Slovakian origin (1793–1852), but mainly wrote in Czech. Poet, collector of folk songs, and the main ideologist of pan-Slav brotherhood. He served as a pastor in

these Serbians against the Hungarians as and when it was needed. The Serbians were given weapons and exemption from taxes. At the same time, their further demands for privileges were only granted by Vienna if they did not interfere with their commitments to serve the Hungarian king and they did not clash with Hungarian laws. Despite all their privileges and the relative welfare, the Serbs never considered themselves to be part of the Hungarian political nation. Their efforts to break away and to take a part of the Hungarian soil with themselves had been on their political agenda even before the 17th century. Jovan Nenad²⁰, known as the Black Jovan, styled himself as the Serbian tsar, and tried to carve out his own state from the southern parts of Hungary in 1526²¹. There was another attempt for this in 1790.

The March revolution of 1848

Széchenyi considered the initial peaceful transformation the triumph of his own reform ambitions. However, his pleasure was not without a speck of doubt, as he was aware that this transformation was happening too quickly and too forcefully, and in opposition to the dynasty, the government in Vienna and the ethnic minorities in Hungary. He kept warning against the dangers of such transformation in his polemic with Lajos Kossuth. It was a principle of his politics that Hungary could not survive in a two-front battle, and its future depended on how useful it could remain as a benefit to the Habsburg Monarchy. He was still hopeful though that the revolutionary zeal would fade and common sense and careful consideration would prevail in the activities of the Hungarian ministries. That was not going to be the case, however. Kossuth and the youth congregating around him had wrecked every authority on the path to revolution. Now this came back to haunt them, the old institutions could not work effectively,

²⁰ In Serbian: Jovan Nenad or Crni Jovan. Facts about his origins are uncertain. He took advantage of the defeat at the battle of Mohács, the death of the Hungarian king and the temporary withdrawal of the Turkish troops to carve out his own state with the help of Serbian marauders, in the southern part of Hungary, in Délvidék (modern-day Voivodina), and declared himself the Serbian tsar or Byzantine emperor. In the struggle for the throne, first he supported Szapolyai, then King Ferdinand. He was decisively defeated by the rejuvenated Hungarian army. A monument was erected to him Subotica bearing the inscription: “*Your thought has prevailed*”.

²¹ After the first empire of Tsar Dušan, the borders of the second Serbian empire expanded to Szeged in the north, to the Danube along the borders of the Ottoman Empire in the south, to the Sava river in the west, and to Arad and Lipova in the east.

anarchy began to take over the ministries. Széchenyi's predictions were seemingly becoming fulfilled in other aspects too. The abolition of the feudal burdens of the peasants raised the people's expectations to an unachievable extent, and the signs of a social revolution began to manifest. Kossuth's minority politics proved an even bigger fiasco. He was far too optimistic in believing that the ethnic minorities would be content by being granted the individual rights of freedom, and the Serbs and Croats living in Hungary would abide by the laws of the country, whereas a considerable part of them had not been loyal to Hungary for a while, and in reality were only waiting for the right moment to turn against us. Széchenyi believed it was necessary to come to an agreement with the Croats, and thought Vienna could be appeased. He was wary, however, of the Serbs. His diaries testify that it was one of his recurring nightmares that the Serbs would march all the way to Pest, and they would ransack and persecute the fleeing Hungarians. He reprimanded his fellow ministers for engaging so easily in the fight provoked by Kossuth's politics, a war which he judged was doomed to failure. Kossuth and his ministers did not take the ethnic revolt seriously, even though they had information about the external support (e. g. Russian, Serbian) given to them, and they were also aware of the intrigues of Vienna. Széchenyi realised that there was no hope of avoiding an armed conflict and making peace with Vienna, when the Hungarian government, under the leadership of Kossuth, held back troops to help the Habsburg Empire in its fight for its Italian lands. His diary says of this day (4 July 1848): “*I can see everything is lost now! Vienna will form an alliance with Zagreb against us, and they will devour us; – unless N(ota) B(ene) the Serbs won't come sooner to Pest on our steamships.*” He envisaged the end of Hungary, and consumed by guilt that he had started this destruction, he retired from his ministerial position, and on the advice of his doctors, withdrew to an asylum in Döbling at the beginning of September, a sort of voluntary exile. Most of his nightmares came true, if not immediately, within a couple of decades.

Growing international support for the ethnic minorities

When on 11 April 1848, under pressure, Ferdinand V (French revolution, inner revolts, war in the north of Italy), gave his sanction to the body of legislation drafted at the last Diet of 1847–1848, Hungary shifted from a feudal state into parliamentary democracy. Kossuth believed that by abolishing the feudal privileges and by providing civil rights, the ethnic minorities in Hungary could be drawn in and

be part of a united political nation. The minorities were delighted about the developments, but it was soon obvious that they wanted more. They held congresses all over the country. They regarded an independent Hungary an easier opponent than the Monarchy, they presented their demands now at this vulnerable time: they wanted equal status with the Hungarian population, and in the long run, as it was clear in the case of the Serbs, they wanted to unite with their brothers beyond the borders. The Romanians were opposed to the union with Transylvania, as they must have already been given promises (by Russia) that Transylvania could be theirs. The Romanians living in Hungary, similarly to the Serbs, enjoyed the support of external principalities in their fight against the Hungarian revolution. The Croats demanded their separation from the Hungarian Crown and the unification of Croatian territories – as it turned out a couple of decades later, this would only have been the first step towards building a united Southern Slav state. The Slovaks demanded their equal rights and the use of their own national symbols. The obvious mistake of the responsible Hungarian government was its delay to pass the Minority Laws. In foreign and Hungarian historian circles the opinion is widely accepted that the minority laws of Hungary were advanced and uniquely inclusive in its own era (providing free usage of the native language in local administration and education). It was passed too late, during the course of the revolution (on 29 July 1849). With hindsight, it was clear though that by that time the cards had been handed out, the field of action for Hungary had narrowed. The Serbian plans of state-formation seemed the best planned, probably this could expect the most international support too.

In European politics, on a government level (maybe with the exception of France) plans to dismember the Catholic Habsburg Empire had not yet occurred, partly because they were worried about the increasing influence of Russia in the Balkans, and partly because they could not agree on how to settle the area in the possible power void. Great Britain was especially interested in this question. Without a doubt, they were keen to expel the Austrian emperor from Italy; however, they considered the monarchy useful in Central Europe as a *cordon sanitaire*. Britain's interest in the southern Slav nations had always been changeable, but from the middle of the 19th century it became more and more intense. Serbia was brought into Palmerston's view by David Urquhart²². He visited Serbia three times between 1832 and 1837, and in 1833, in his report to the Foreign

Office he wrote that Great Britain should support Serbia, as it was suitable for the role of attracting and leading the Southern Slav peoples, but it must also be saved from Russian influence. The idea of breaking up the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as it was a possible German ally, only came later, when the political position of the unified Germany was increasing. Theorising about the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire began a lot earlier, but the question of Russian expansion always came up in British minds: how could Russia be prevented from getting to the straits and gaining territories in the Balkans, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Czartoryski, in emigration, worked out his own programme, which suggested that the unifying leader of the South Slavs, freshly freed from the Turks, could be the almost independent Serbia. He summarised his propositions to the Serbian government in a separate piece of work (*Conseils sur la conduite à suivre par la Serbie*)²³, in which he warned his protégés coming under Russian influence. His aspirations for a Serbian state contributed a great deal to the proposals of French diplomacy, according to which a Serb-dominated Southern Slav state would be the best solution to balance the powers in the Balkans after the decline of the Turkish Empire. In conclusion, the minorities in 1848 (primarily the Serbs and Romanians) had the support of great powers to turn against the Hungarian revolution, but they got ahead of themselves a little bit. While Russia had not been yet attracted to the Entente Cordiale, it was necessary to preserve the Austrian empire to limit the expansion of Russia.

The minorities turn against the Hungarian revolution

The Serbs already summarised their demands on 17 – 19 March, in an assembly in Pest, where the main points were the yearly gathering of the Serbian national assembly, and the right to hand in their proposals of their assembly directly to the ruler, bypassing the Hungarian parliament. True, there were points among the proposals that gained support from the Hungarian side, the latter demand was deemed separatism by Hungarian political and public opinion and was rejected. The national assembly in Pest was followed by several other gatherings in the Serbian-inhabited Military Frontier, where the mood was less and less friendly towards the Hungarian nation. This was encouraged by the incitement by agents from Serbia itself. The turning point came on 14 April,

²³ Archives Czartoryski 5404. The original text in French was published by: D. Stranjakovic; Beograd: Spomenik Srpske kraljevske akademije XCI. 1939. 105-115.

²² A Scottish diplomat (1805–1877), writer, a Member of Parliament.

when the Serb National Assembly in Karlóca declared the formation of the province of Serbian Voivodina, with the unification of Baranya, Szerémség, Bánát and Bácska, taken from Hungary, with the Serb voivode as its head. To gain support for the proposals of Karlóca, a movement was started with the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox church, with Josif Rajačić, the metropolitan of Karlóca at its fore. The national assembly created a so-called main committee, which sent representatives led by Djordje Stratimirović landowner to Kossuth. Kossuth actually received them twice, but on hearing the list of “privileges that the Serbian nation is due”, Kossuth announced that he cannot allow any part of the homeland to become a separate country, and if they cannot accept this peacefully, then the decision would have to be made by swords. Stratimirović himself acknowledged in his memoirs that those demands at the time could only have been achieved by war, and no other way. On the Hungarian side, several people regretted Kossuth’s explosive personality (Deák, Eötvös, Széchenyi). Later he also made the mistake of belittling the Serbs’ uprising, and the Hungarian government reacted too late and with inadequate force. However, his responsibility was mitigated by the fact that neither Kossuth nor his government had any influence in the question of minority rights of the Serbs living in Hungary.

Jelačić²⁴, Ban of Croatia called the first general, Croatian-Illyrian Provincial Assembly in March 1848, which issued postulates to the emperor with demands consisting of thirty articles. The Assembly demanded the unification of all Croatian provinces (Croatian-Slavonian Kingdom, Istria and Dalmatia), separation from the kingdom of Hungary, abolition of serfdom, full civil rights and the general right to vote. Jelačić hoped that if he supported the Habsburg court against the rebelling Hungarians, then he would earn their goodwill for the unification of all the Croatian territories, belonging directly under the Habsburg Empire as an independent province. On this issue, his endeavours met with the Serbian efforts in Hungary, who also strived for an independent Voivodina, which they believed to be Serbian anyway. As a first step, they wanted to achieve separation from the Hungarian Crown, becoming part of

the Habsburg common land, then, as a next step, to integrate into Serbia. These distant plans must have been familiar to Jelačić, as both his father and himself spent time in service on the Military Frontier, where he would have heard of these future aspirations among the Serbs. Although he had earlier proclaimed unconditional loyalty to the Habsburgs, he still allied himself with Serbian rebels against the Hungarian war of independence. With this act, he practically turned upon his own nation, as the Croatian population also suffered from the consequences of this alliance. The Croats had to endure the looting, plundering and ransacking of the Serbian fighters in the Military Frontier and the free units sent from Serbia. This episode left a lasting negative impression in the relationship of the two nations. The national movement of the Slovaks, which also peaked during the revolutionary wave of 1848, could not unfold in a similar way to the Romanian, Croatian or Serbian movement and develop into an armed fight, as there was not an independent Slovakian state in the background that could have supported their efforts for independence.

Ilija Garašanin, the Interior Minister of Serbia, realised with a good sense that the chaotic revolutionary episode of 1848 was a favourable time to revive the centuries-long Serbian dream to restore the empire of Tsar Dušan. In his famed political programme called *Načertanije* (The Draft), he aligned Czartoryski’s proposals to the Serbian interests, and he declared that first and foremost they must strive for the creation of Greater Serbia. Garašanin had several plans with regards to Hungary. In case the collapse of the Monarchy was not going to happen, he believed it was still possible to separate the *Délvidék* from Hungary and turn it into a separate crown-estate, which would have been a serious step towards complete independence from the monarchy, and later on, towards merging with Serbia. It was in the interests of the Vienna-government to support the Serbian rebels against the Hungarian revolution. For this reason, they did not reject the idea of a Serbian Voivodina, but would not yet take steps for its actual creation. Through the consul, Ferdinand von Mayerhofer, the Austrian representative in Belgrade, the Vienna government actively participated in organising the Serbian uprising in Hungary, by recruiting and arming Serbian volunteers, even taking over command in December 1848. After having opened up the southern borders, the marauders could freely stream into Hungary from Serbia. The Hungarian government objected to this through the Austrian-Hungarian joint foreign ministry. As a response, the Serbian government officially declared its neutrality, but secretly still engaged in assisting the rebels. Garašanin only gave up his double-

²⁴ Josip Jelačić Bužimski (1801–1859) imperial and royal Field Marshal Lieutenant, Ban of Croatia between 1848 and 1869. Born into a family of military officials, his father was the lieutenant Field Marshal of the military Frontier in Slavonia. Jelačić was born in the military garrison of Petrovaradin. He represented the nationalist aspirations of the Croats against the Hungarians. As a noted army general, he supported the imperial attacks until the defeat of the Hungarian war of independence.

act when he realised that Vienna was not going to grant the Serbian demands, and he recalled his associate from leading the Serbian volunteers (March 1849). Despite this development, the Serbs in Hungary continued their armed fight, just like the Romanians in Hungary. The Hungarian government initiated peace talks, and was willing to offer considerable concessions, going as far as the territorial integrity of the country allowed it, but it was in vain. The ethnic minorities would not put down their weapons until the end of the war of independence. During the course of April to June, Mór Perczel was successful in nearly fully clearing the Délvidék from hostile units. At this point, however, Széchenyi's prediction came true: "...if we win, the Russians will interfere".

The final act, reward and punishment

Encouraged by the Hungarian military successes, which were greatly boosted by the victorious campaign of Józef Bem in Bánság and Transylvania, Czartoryski called another conference in Paris for 18 May, 1849. Its immediate purpose was to lay the foundations of a future confederation of the Central-European nations, Slavs, Italians and Hungarians, on the ashes of the Habsburg Monarchy, naturally. The further, distant aim was to break up the Russian empire. The Hungarian delegation (Count László Teleky and Ferenc Pulszky, among others) was dispatched by Kossuth with the message to Czartoryski: Kossuth wanted to let him know that Hungary was ready to create the alliance of nations, instead of the Monarchy, on the basis of Czartoryski's proposals. It is not certain if this event had any direct influence on the tsar's decision to give a helping hand to Vienna and restore the divine order. Franz Joseph I asked for the tsar's intervention claiming that there were Polish conspirators fighting in Kossuth's army. Tsar Nicholas I nodded in agreement, which was expected, as in St. Petersburg it was believed that the Polish and Hungarians were threatening the peace of the Polish provinces that were under Russian rule. As the tsar wrote to Franz Joseph: "*Your battle is my battle*". After the surrender at Világos and having drawn their own conclusions, many of Kossuth's followers became advocates of making peace with the Austrians. Bertalan Szemere's diary²⁵ was written in exile, its fifth volume contains a letter addressed to

Elek Fényes²⁶, in which he evaluates Kossuth's "masterly" plan for a Danube confederation, where Pest, Zagreb, Belgrade etc. would take turns as the capital city of the confederation. Szemere now criticised the plan saying that this would have downgraded Hungary with its 13 million inhabitants to the level of a county, and of Kossuth he said that he lacked the feeling of responsibility for his actions. This justified Széchenyi, who always called Kossuth's policy "*a game of dice*".

The court in Vienna disappointed everyone. It did not grant the separation of Croatia from Hungary, despite informally backing Jelačić. After defeating the Hungarian war of independence, Vienna *de facto* withdrew Croatia from under the authority of the Hungarian Crown, only to refer it back after the Compromise in 1867. Dalmatia's administration remained under Viennese rule. The emperor did not reinforce the declaration of the independent Serbian Voivodina in his ascension speech in 1848 or in his Imposed March Constitution in 1849. The new Serbian Voivodeship and the Banate of Temes was very different from what the Serbian's had expected, primarily in the area concerned, but also in many other aspects. What is more, it only existed for barely more than 10 years. The Romanian expectations also had to wait a few decades to be fulfilled. In historical terms, it did not take long to become obvious that this Austrian political policy was foolish and short-sighted when in 1848 they relied on those who later turned against them. The Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence, even if it failed, weakened the Habsburg Empire, and indirectly contributed to its exclusion from Germany, and made it possible for Prussia to be the leader of the German unification. This created the atmosphere for the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867. The Compromise opened up the path to unparalleled economic development in Hungary, but also intensified the tension between the minorities. At the same time, the Compromise also made the Hungarians content in the illusion of unchangeable conditions, until the rude awakening in 1920.

Who was right in the ethnic question, Széchenyi or Kossuth?

On the basis of the above, both were right. Could Széchenyi's more permissive politics have been more successful? Probably it could, but the conflict would have probably been still unavoidable. Referring to the words of Stratimirović, the leader of the Serbs in Hungary, weapons

²⁵ Bertalan Szemere (1812–1869), writer, Home Secretary, then Prime Minister alongside Regent Lajos Kossuth. *Opus cited: Naplóm. Száműzetésben.* Pest: Ráth Mór. 1869.

²⁶ Elek Fényes (1807–1876), statistician, writer of economic and geographic statistics, the first member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1837).

were going to be given a role in any circumstances. If Kossuth and his circle had not deposed the Habsburgs on 14 April 1849, perhaps the conflict would have ended sooner, as the rebel minorities would not only have faced us Hungarians, but also the Austrians. This would also have made the retaliation less bloody. Of course, this is all only post factum guesswork. With hindsight, on the basis of later developments, it is obvious though that the Slav ethnic demands had to be dealt with sooner or later, and the creation of independent Slavic countries was merely a question of time. As Pillersdorf²⁷ put it in his letter to Archduke Franz Karl: “*As the Czech resistance towards the German parliamentary elections and the Slav General Assembly shows, the Slavs let their national feelings be manifested... the great Slavic Empires, which are only ideas for now, could only be halted if Germany allies with Hungary. The Slavs must be recognised, as much as the cohesion of the Empire allows it.*” This wording allows us to see that the hope of victory over the independence-seeking nations of the Empire could only be temporary, and the period of time while they could have been satisfied with less than full independence was very short. This was also demonstrated by their opposition to the Compromise in 1867, where the flagbearer was the Slovakian ethnic minority that was the least organised back in 1848. Finally, let us present a quote from Bertalan Szemere’s article²⁸ that he wrote in exile, and which attempted to respond to a French journalist’s question. The journalist raised the point against the Hungarians that we did not want to acknowledge the Romanians’ equal rights; therefore they picked up their weapons against us. In his response, Szemere drew attention to the fact that with the union of Hungary and Transylvania, the Romanians gained equal rights with the Hungarians. His words about the armed uprising were: “*There were some who wanted to tear up the shared homeland, and from its rags to extend a Daco-Romania or a new Great Serbia that never existed; and there were some who only pursued their own personal advancement in the general chaos of events and ideals. The Serbian uprising was mainly instigated by those 30,000 external Serbs that Alexander, the king of Serbia sent into Hungary; the Vlachs of Transylvania were incited for rebellion by their brothers in the Danubian Principalities. The rest was dealt by the clever intrigues of Austria: they promised anything before the victory, but then denied everything. But does the fact that we were attacked really prove that we were guilty? And because some*

ethnic minorities turned against us, would that really conclude that they were right?”

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²⁷ Franz Freiherr von Pillersdorf (1786–1862), Austrian government official of high rank, statesman. A rival of Metternich. Minister of the Interior in 1848.

²⁸ *Naplóm. Száműzetésben*. Pest: Ráth Mór. 1869. II. 175.