

Theses for doctoral thesis (PhD)

**Slovak Emigrants and Hungarian Border Revision:
1918–1943**

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I. Background, Aims, and Scope of the Doctoral Dissertation

The history of Central Europe between the two World Wars can truly be understood at the intersection of the reorganization of the international system, political experiments intertwined with accelerating processes of ethnic-national self-determination, and the often conflicting dynamics of identity constructions. The borders redrawn by the Treaty of Trianon not only reshaped interstate relations but also initiated profound changes in the realm of social loyalties and communal self-identities. The Upper Hungary (Felvidék) region particularly sharply illustrates the nature of these changes: in this region, the cultural, denominational, and linguistic patterns of the "old order" coexisted for a long time with the new norms, institutional logics, and memory politics practices associated with the formation of the Czechoslovak state. It was in this environment that a pro-Hungarian Slovak emigrant group emerged, organized, and sought to gain political weight, the history of which is the subject of this dissertation.

The dissertation focuses on a group of actors who operated simultaneously on the periphery of official foreign policy and within the sphere of informal diplomacy. While

serving the revisionist goals of the Hungarian state, they acted based on their own motivations, identity dilemmas, and personal ambitions, all while striving to gain a voice in the international public sphere. The history of the examined group – primarily František Jehlička, Viktor Dvorcsák, Károly Bulissa, and Ferenc Unger – cannot be reduced to a simple "agent network" or a homogeneous emigrant community. Rather, it was a loose, time-varying constellation held together by the rhetoric of a common cause and Hungarian foreign policy support, while the movements, shifts, and rivalries of the participants constantly questioned even the appearance of organization and unity.

The background of the research is twofold. On the one hand, both Hungarian and (Czecho)Slovak historiography have, since the 1960s, included works that touch upon pro-Hungarian Slovak actors in detail, but mostly approach the phenomenon from the perspective of Hungarian nationality policy, revisionist diplomacy, or the history of local political elites. The other background is a historiographical turn in the last two decades that shows increased interest in transnational networks, minority identities, and informal diplomacy. Juraj Kramer's early, pioneering monograph provided an important foundational layer, but it also established a partly closed narrative in terms of the accessible source corpus and research focus. Miroslav Michela's

works represent a more nuanced perspective, moving away from rigid ideological frameworks, while Angelika Šrámková, through a specific life story – that of Lajos Bazovszky – highlighted the ambivalences of identity choices. Peter Švorc's works on the political history of Eastern Slovakia are particularly valuable for this research: they demonstrated that a part of the Slovak population in the region still harbored significant – though rapidly eroding – pro-Hungarian loyalty in the 1920s. In Hungarian historiography, the studies of Lóránt Tilkovszky, Béla Bellér, and more recently István Janek and Balázs Ablonczy, as well as István Ormos's Kmoskó monograph, serve as distinguished points of reference; Tom Lorman's approach convincingly unpacks the ambivalences of Jehlička's personality and political actions. Building on these works, the aim of this dissertation is not to supersede them, but to foreground organizing principles – identity, motivation, informal diplomacy – through which mosaic-like details can be assembled into a more coherent, yet multi-perspective picture.

The dissertation has a threefold objective. First: to reconstruct the organizational history, key actors, internal relations, and actions of the pro-Hungarian Slovak emigrant group. Second: to analyze how these actors fit into the formal and informal channels of Hungarian revisionist politics – how the

"expert" and "moral" capital, with which Hungarian foreign policy sought to build legitimacy in the international public sphere, was generated, mediated, and transformed. Third: to assess the group's actual impact on Slovak society, Hungarian-Slovak relations, and the decision-making arenas of contemporary international diplomacy. These three goals are interdependent: without exploring the organizational history, the functioning of informal diplomacy cannot be understood, and without knowledge of the latter, the impact can hardly be assessed.

Two dimensions are particularly important in defining the scope of the topic. The geographical framing focuses on Slovakia (Szlovenszkó), while necessarily extending to Budapest, Warsaw, Vienna, Paris, Berlin, and Geneva – places where the emigrant presence and Hungarian lobbying left a significant mark. The temporal framing, even considering the actors' antecedents, primarily spans from the end of World War I to the death of the last active member, Viktor Dvorcsák, in 1943. The circle of individuals – Jehlička, Dvorcsák, Bulissa, Unger – is not exclusive: the analysis also includes cooperating or opposing actors, as well as institutions (e.g., Territorial Defense/Revisionist League, Slovak National Council in

Geneva, the Slovak section of the National Christian Socialist Party).

The research hypothesis suggests that this pro-Hungarian emigrant activity – despite all its visible activity and propaganda abundance – had a limited impact: it did not significantly reshape the identity and political preferences of the majority of Slovak society; it had only an indirect, rather symbolic weight on the decisions of great power diplomacy; and while it served as a tool for Hungarian foreign policy, the contradictions of revisionist policy (the parallelism of autonomy promises and assimilationist practices) ultimately undermined the credibility of the emigrants themselves. At the same time, the hypothesis does not speak in the simplistic language of "failure": the study assumes that the group's sustained, albeit low-intensity, presence contributed to keeping the "Slovak question" on the international agenda and maintaining the informal infrastructure of the Hungarian lobby.

Clarifying the conceptual framework is essential. The term "pro-Hungarian" in the dissertation is not a moral judgment but an analytical concept: it refers to actors of Slovak origin or with Slovak identity elements who acted politically in alignment with Hungarian state interests. The term "Slovjak" in Dvorcsák's case serves to describe the East Slovak regional identity

formation, which is not considered a simple "sub-variant" of the Slovak national idea, but rather a local belonging that also intersected with a Hungarus tradition. "Informal diplomacy" refers to communication, lobbying, and reputation management activities operating outside official foreign policy channels but partly connected to them, in which the emigrant group played a key role. Finally, the concept of "political adventurer" appears as an interpretive concept: it is not a pejorative label but a description of a role perception in which rapid adaptation, flexibility in choosing means, and personal career building are visibly intertwined with ideological self-representation.

The choice and delimitation of the topic were also motivated by practical reasons. Due to the abundance – and at the same time fragmentation – of source material, focusing was unavoidable: the foreign ministry and prime ministerial archives, the MTI news archive, and the Slovak and Czech police and government documents outlined a corpus that, based on the above personal and territorial framework, is capable of providing a coherent narrative. The specificities of these sources (propagandistic discourse, subjective elements of agent reports, gaps caused by wartime document losses) demand continuous source-critical vigilance and caution against overly strong causal statements. Therefore, the dissertation consciously strives for

multiple perspectives: it verifies the same event from several types of sources and uses probabilistic rather than categorical statements where the material does not allow for definitive reconstruction.

Finally, the research aligns with newer trends emerging at the intersection of minority history and international relations history. Instead of merely listing the decisions of "grand diplomacy," it examines how subsystems worked: how networks were built, what linguistic and argumentative repertoires propaganda drew upon, how emigrants created "expert" competence around themselves, and how Hungarian foreign policy "used" all this. At the same time, the dissertation draws a clear line: it does not aim to provide a comprehensive Central European comparison with other national emigrations, nor does it undertake a comprehensive analysis of the entire minority policy of the Czechoslovak state. The goal is to draw a concentrated, yet multi-layered case study in which the human contours of the actors – faith, loyalty, opportunism, disappointment – emerge as clearly as the larger structures of the geopolitical force field providing the background.

II. Applied Methodology

From a methodological point of view, the research focused on source-critical analysis. The comparison of documents from different origins allowed for filtering out elements of propaganda and self-justification, and for drawing a more nuanced picture of the movement's activities. The biographical approach also played a decisive role: the works of Giovanni Levi and György Kövér inspired an approach that examines the emigrants not merely as political actors, but also in the context of their personal dilemmas, shifts in loyalty, and identity searches. Following Levi, it became clear that biographical writing always carries distortions, as the historian tends to reconstruct coherent and unchanging personalities, while Kövér drew attention to the significance of the "life curve," meaning that a more complete picture can be provided by presenting public roles and private experiences together.

The research also organically included the analysis of informal diplomacy. The emigrants primarily sought to exert influence through unofficial channels: pamphlets, open letters, memoranda, and personal lobbying. Their activities fit well with the characteristics of international politics of the era, in which small actors also sought to gain visibility before the great powers.

Finally, without socio-historical contextualization, the history of emigration can hardly be understood. The fate and opportunities of the emigrants were closely linked to the transformation of East Slovak society, the consolidation of the Czechoslovak state, and the development of Hungarian nationality policy. The movement is thus not an isolated episode, but part of a broader Central European process, the study of which contributes to a more accurate understanding of the region's social and political dynamics.

III. Scientific Results of the Dissertation

The dissertation's investigations confirmed the hypothesis that the scope of action for the pro-Hungarian Slovak emigration remained limited during the interwar period. Although the movement's members – František Jehlička, Viktor Dvorcsák, Károly Bulissa, and Ferenc Unger – invested significant energy in their propaganda, pamphlets, and diplomatic maneuvers for two decades, their actual influence on both Slovak society and international decision-making proved to be marginal. The results, however, should not be interpreted as a simple "story of failure," but rather shed light on how minority identities and loyalties transformed in the region and how they became intertwined with the processes of informal diplomacy.

The examination of the impact on Slovak society made it clear that the emigrants were unable to win over the population en masse to the pro-Hungarian idea. The consolidation of the Czechoslovak state and the linguistic, cultural, and educational opportunities provided by the new system proved far more attractive than the promise of restoring Hungarian rule. The new generation that grew up in the 1930s, socialized in Czechoslovak schools, had no personal connection to the Hungarian past; moreover, the chauvinistic framework of Czechoslovak history education strongly shaped the youth in an anti-Hungarian direction. The emigrants' propaganda publications – such as *Samostatnosť* and *Naša Zastava* – did reach the Slovak public, but their impact remained marginal, and they were unable to significantly influence public opinion. It is worth noting that the pro-Hungarian spirit persisted much more effectively through other channels, such as the Slovak section of the National Christian Socialist Party, which was able to maintain popularity, especially in Eastern Slovakia, until the 1930s. This pro-Hungarian stance within a party-political framework proved more credible and effective than the actions of the emigrants.

The exploration of the movement's internal workings revealed that the group was far from homogeneous. Its members were characterized by differing identities, motivations, and

political strategies. František Jehlička was driven by strong Catholic commitment and a messianic sense of mission. Although his intention was to improve the situation of his people, his career was marked by constant shifts in allegiance and pressures to adapt, indicating both opportunism and idealistic impulses. The contradictions in his political career contributed to his becoming an outcast from Slovak national memory. Viktor Dvorcsák, by representing the "Slovjak" identity, embodied a transitional category between the Hungarus tradition and Slovak nationalism. His writings and poems in the East Slovak dialect clearly show his attachment to regional identity, which, however, he could not reconcile with the mainstream of the Slovak national movement. In the case of Károly Bulissa and his brothers, the Slovak cause seemed more like a political tool than a deeply felt internal conviction. Although they were art lovers, Slovak consciousness barely appeared in their cultural productions. Ferenc Unger's personality is more difficult to reconstruct due to a lack of sources, but the data uncovered so far suggest that he was primarily guided by practical considerations. The internal relations of the movement were characterized by rivalry, distrust, and struggles for personal ambition, which the case of Mihalusz Vince's double agency clearly illustrates.

The emigrants' relationship with the Hungarian state was characterized by strong dependence. They served as a useful propaganda tool for Hungarian foreign policy, providing the government with memoranda, reports, and pamphlets, which the government then used to seek legitimacy on the international stage. At the same time, the emigrants were largely dependent on the extent and continuity of support, which varied depending on the political situation. The inconsistency of Hungarian foreign policy – promising autonomy while practicing assimilation – not only discredited the movement in the eyes of Slovak society but also made the emigrants themselves victims of this policy.

In international diplomacy, the role of the emigrants remained more symbolic. Their appearances at League of Nations conferences and the submission of various memoranda and propaganda materials through the establishment of the Slovak National Council in Geneva served to attract attention but did not lead to actual decision-making influence. The fate of Slovakia was fundamentally determined by the interests of the great powers, and the emigrants were merely a concomitant phenomenon. Paradoxically, however, the counter-propaganda of the Czechoslovak government, which sought to overemphasize the danger posed by the emigrants, contributed to their being accorded greater weight in the international arena than they

actually deserved. This "unintended tailwind" ensured that they remained a negotiating party at the lower levels of European diplomacy for a long time.

The dissertation's scientific contribution can be grasped at several points. Firstly, the study complements previous historical works by presenting the emigrants not merely as instruments of Hungarian foreign policy but also examining them within an independent framework of identity and motivational history. Secondly, the application of a biographical approach succeeded in uncovering the human dilemmas, personality contradictions, and identity searches of individual actors. Thirdly, by incorporating the concept of informal diplomacy, it became clear how Hungarian foreign policy decision-makers used these emigrant actors in the international struggle for legitimacy. The dissertation thus does not supersede but rather complements and nuances the picture drawn by authors such as Juraj Kramer, Miroslav Michela, Peter Švorc, Lóránt Tilkovszky, István Janek, or Balázs Ablonczy.

Overall, the history of the pro-Hungarian Slovak emigration demonstrates that minority identities and loyalties are never unambiguous but are the result of multi-layered and often contradictory processes. The political failure of the movement is

explained by geopolitical realities, the inconsistency of Hungarian policy, internal divisions, and the changing needs of Slovak society. At the same time, their activity, which persisted for over two decades, ensured that the "Slovak question" remained continuously present before international public opinion, even if without real political weight.

The dissertation also identified new research directions. Particularly promising is the history of the Slovak section of the National Christian Socialist Party, the study of which can help reveal how a fundamentally Hungarian political party was able to maintain significant influence in Eastern Slovakia for a long time. Furthermore, the work of pro-Hungarian Slovak organizations in the United States deserves further research, which can provide a new perspective on assessing the international scope of action of the emigrants. Finally, a more detailed examination of regional identity forms – such as the "Slovjak" identity – can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the transitional categories between loyalty and national belonging.

The history of the pro-Hungarian Slovak emigration thus remained limited in its direct political outcomes, yet its significance is not negligible. By demonstrating the complexity

of identity formation, the instability of political loyalties, and the functioning of informal diplomacy, it contributes to a deeper understanding of Hungarian-Slovak relations, revisionist policy, and Central European political culture.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (2)

1. **Iváncsó, Á.:** Az Eperjesi Torna és Vivő Egyesület története: 1896-1938.
Fórum Társadtud. Szle. 25 (4), 119-132, 2023. ISSN: 1335-4361.
2. **Iváncsó, Á.:** A Pozsonyi Torna Egylet története: 1880-1945.
Fórum Társadtud. Szle. 22 (4), 53-80, 2020. ISSN: 1335-4361.

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

3. **Iváncsó, Á.:** The sports club of a disappeared Hungarian community: Eperjesi Torna és Vivő Egyesület.
Kaleidoscope history. 13 (27), 389-400, 2023. EISSN: 2062-2597.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17107/KH.2023.27.46>

Hungarian conference proceedings (4)

4. **Iváncsó, Á.:** Bullissa Károly az irredenta szlovák ügyvéd.
In: *Korszakokról korszerűen : A 2022. április 29/30-án megrendezett Modernkortörténeti Doktorandusz Konferencia tanulmányai I.. Szerk.: Püski Levente; Ónadi Sándor; Schrek Katalin; Sipos Nikolett, Debreceni Egyetem Bölcsészettudományi Kar Történelmi Intézet, Debrecen, 117-130, 2023. ISBN: 9789634905615*
5. **Iváncsó, Á.:** Szlovák emigránsok és a magyar határrevízió: 1918-1943.
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6. **Iváncsó, Á.:** Dvorcsák Győző - egy szlovák/szlovák irredenta politikus életpályája.
In: *XXV. Tavaszai Szél Konferencia Tanulmánykötet III.. Szerk.: Molnár Dániel; Molnár Dóra; Nagy Adrián Szilárd, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Budapest, 369-381, 2022. ISBN: 9786156457134*





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7. **Iváncsó, Á.**: A szokol- és a frankhamisítás felvidéki vonatkozásai.

In: Tavaszi szél - Spring Wind 2019 : Tanulmánykötet. III. kötet. Szerk.: Bihari Erika; Molnár Dániel; Szikszai-Németh Ketrin, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Budapest, 710-719, 2020. ISBN: 9786155586620

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