

Abstracts of the Thesis

Takács Tibor

**Urban Elite and Municipal Government in Nyíregyháza
in the First Half of the 20th Century**

Debrecen, 2005

1. Theme

In my dissertation I am examining the elite of Nyíregyháza, a Hungarian middle-sized town, in the first half of the twentieth century. In Hungary there have been major results in revealing the social features and concept of the elite during the last decades. Especially the investigation of the local elite has a rich literature, though in my opinion this is the very field where from the consequences of the usage of the social-historical definition of the elite shows great deficiencies. The need of thorough and detailed examination of the local elite made me investigate this question through the example of only one country town, Nyíregyháza. As the history of one of our biggest country towns is not completely revealed yet, I chose this theme to investigate.

2. Methods of the Examination

I attempted to define the concept of local (urban) elite on the basis of the interpretation of the concept and the researches on elites in Hungary. On the basis of this, town elite refers to the group of local people with decision-making and influencing competencies. These competencies are attached to different organisational and institutional positions. The ruling elite ensures the monopoly of their leading role with these competencies. From these it can be concluded, that the leading elite supposes the existence of decision-making and influencing competencies on the municipal level, that is the existence of the autonomy of the local society. As I am using the concept of the elite with supposed institutional relations, the exploration of the informal relations is almost impossible because of the void of resources, that is why I have been concentrating on the formal, institutional relations. In my opinion, among the institutional positions of the self-governing local society, the closest position to the local elite is the membership of the municipal council. I was examining the organisational framework and composition of the local ruling members of Nyíregyháza through the local representatives.

Treating the theme required a great deal of work in the archives. Without the minutes of the general assembly of the council, the documents of the mayor and other documents from the archives it would have been impossible to create the composition of the municipal authority, to establish the results of the local elections and the lists of the greatest taxpayers and to create the division of the members in terms of occupation, fortune and religion as well. The local press provided excellent and abundant resource about the activity of the municipal

representatives and about the local public life. I could not have worked without the different statistics, directories and of course the studies on urban history of Nyíregyháza.

I chose nine sample years for the investigation (1900, 1906, 1912, 1924, 1930, 1935, 1940, 1944). On the basis of this I received lines of data in segments of 5–6 years which showed tendencies on the basis of the given data and from this it was convenient to draw conclusions about the local elite. While creating the methods of the research I had to take it into consideration that the concept of the elite which I chose can be different in some aspects from the concept of the elite used in the urban history researches in Hungary. As I interpreted this concept in the field of power of the local elite, the examination made it necessary to go beyond the borders of social history, as the investigation of the power-relationships cannot miss the usage of methods in the field of legal history, political-philosophy and first of all history of events and politics. Beyond the introduction of the local elite, I was examining the elite relationship as the legitimacy of power-relationship as well. Besides I attempted to introduce the achievement and work of the local ruling group so as to reveal the relation of its interest more exactly.

3. Achievements

By examining the legal background of the municipal council it can be stated that the organisation of the local elite is in accordance with the principles of classic liberalism which had effects on the compound and legitimacy of the elite relationships. The liberal legitimacy did not require the support of the wide social stratum of the local elite to occupy elite positions. Serious challenges questioning the basics of the organisation including the possession of institutional positions only rarely (in 1918–1919, 1944–45) reached the urban elite. Questioning the legality of the position-possession of the ruling class partially or totally only rarely happened, though the local elite of Nyíregyháza survived the only serious crisis (deleting the results of 1929 local elections) without any serious convulsion.

There is no serious difference between the ‘virilist’ (i.e. those members of the local committee who received their places because they were the ones in town who paid the biggest taxes) and the elected membership considering the stability of the local elite, the fluctuation was in accordance with the average. The most stable group of the leading elite was the municipal officials, yet the most changes occurred among the delegates chosen by the greatest taxpayer women and institutions. The rate of position-changing was smooth, and owing to this the average age of the local elite of Nyíregyháza changed slowly from 50 to 53. There is no

considerable difference in the field of age distribution between the ‘virilists’ and elected members.

The ‘virilism’ helped the intellectuals with benefit of doubling tax-allowance to become members of the elite, and they were followed by the merchants far behind. The delegates of the institutions, of women, and of those who lived somewhere else, until the 1920s were mainly done by employees (bank leaders), and in the 1930s and 1940s by people with intellectual professions (lawyers, teachers) and landowners. During the elections until the First World War mainly smallholders and craftsmen, the two most organised groups of the local society became members of the local elite. Between the two world wars the involvement in politics resulted in drawing back of the craftsmen and pushing forward of the intellectuals. Until 1930s only municipal officials had memberships in the council because of their positions in offices. State officials appeared among them only after the nationalisation of the local medical care service and the municipal audit office.

Predominance of the intellectuals featured the local elite of Nyíregyháza. Among them the number of lawyers and others with legal profession was very high, and the town hall employees were in the greatest number among the officials. Among the landowners the numerous „tirpaks” (i.e. the name of smallholders of Slovak origin living around Nyíregyháza) became members of the elite only through elections, meanwhile those with bigger lands became members as ‘virilists’. The craftsmen – mainly due to the results in the elections – were the determining group of the elite till the 1920s. They drew back in the 1930s, yet their number grew among the ‘virilists’. The merchants were one tenth of the ruling social stratum, and they were from the greatest taxpayers. The role of house-owners and privates were even smaller, their presence only made the scene more colourful.

Compared to the local society the ascendancy of the intellectuals were even higher, and the smallholders were far more under-represented: a professional had about twice as much chance to become a member of the leading class as an agricultural producer. This is because liberal frames defined the borders of the elite. The classical liberalism puts the leading role in the hands of those who deserve it, i.e. bourgeoisie and qualified intellectuals, excluding the less rich members of the society and the women.

The number and proportion of wealthy members of the elite decreased gradually. Between the two world wars the income of the richest came from several sources. Almost everybody had a house and a smaller land (garden, vineyard). The richest people of the town and of the elite were the Count Dessewffys. Besides them only half a dozen members of the elite reached the upper-middle class level. We can group the other ‘virilists’ in the middle

class, as the elected part of the municipal council was composed by the lower-middle class. The difference between the elected members and the 'virilists' is shown by the measurement of possessing a house and the place of their habitat. Because the number of the 'virilists' with once tax-counting was decreasing we can draw the conclusion that the presence of the richest families drew back in the town elite.

From the turn of the century until the middle of the 1920s the number of those town leaders was doubled who were among the leaders of some joint-stock company. They were one third of aldermen. In the second half of the period the relations between the local economic elite and the urban elite were loosening and fell back to the level of the turn of the century. Those elite members who were company leaders at the same time were 'virilists', mainly intellectuals (mostly lawyers) and private employees and merchants. The elite members were in numerous numbers among the leaders of companies with long-traditions.

From the national and language point of view the elite of Nyíregyháza can be considered homogenous, that's why the main ethnic differences in the town leadership were because of religious background. Considering the religious composition of the urban elite the number of people with Jewish religion was increasing and the number of the Lutherans was decreasing until the First World War, but between the two world wars representatives of both religions were drawing back. Opposed to them in the 1920s the Calvinists, and in the 1930s the Catholics was becoming more dominant. By the 1940s Jews were driven out of the town leadership administratively, on the other hand the number of the Lutherans was increasing compared not only to Jewish but to other religions as well.

The religious diversity and the dynamic changes of the religious proportion hid the possibility of conflicts in itself, and it can be traced in the town leadership. The biggest conflicts were between the Catholics and the Lutherans, and the anti-Semitism was rarely touched upon. The dominance of the native Lutheran inhabitants was not triggered by the Jewish 'virilist' bourgeois but by the more dynamic and active Catholic intellectuals. The anticlericalism served as a bridge between the Lutheran intellectuals and the Jewish professionals and merchants.

Until the First World War the party politics did not play an important role in the organisation and activity of the local elite. In municipal elections the parties did not play an active role, their place was taken over by other, mainly organised groups of the urban society. The election of representatives between the two world wars brought fights between the parliamentary parties, and the winner of this fight was the governing party mostly with 100 per cent. For different reasons in the municipal council there was no organised, party-like

opposition, this way it was rarely the field of fights for party politics. Even if this way there is not much to say about the political features of the urban elite, it is quite obvious that the leaders of the town organisations of nation-wide parties, the local ‘creators of the politics’ was coming from the urban elite apart from some other groups

The most important aims of the leaders of Nyíregyháza concentrated on three main fields: receiving the right of municipal authority which gave more freedom; strengthening the central urban functions, on the one hand by becoming a railway junction, and on the other hand by placing institutions and offices here; and town planning and town improving. From time to time there were other, more promising conceptions for example developing the industry but there were not any actual steps taken to achieve them. From the different developing conceptions it is clear that the leaders of the town recognised the most important challenges and tried to find adequate solutions to them. These answers usually aimed at the development of central functions: in my opinion the town policy concentrating on strengthening the most important urban functions cannot be judged negative.

The main field of action of the urban elite, the number of the general assemblies of the municipal council was gradually decreasing in the first half of the 20th century. Only a fragment of the number of town representatives took part in general assemblies. The willingness to the presence depended on the subject of the meeting, so the most frequently visited assemblies were the re-elections of municipal officials, but there were a lot of people at celebrating or at festive general assemblies. The current topic on the agenda must have influenced the presence of different elite groups. The most active group of the town elite was the officials and the most indifferent ones were the ‘virilists’, mainly the merchants and the intellectuals. The craftsmen and the smallholders also can be regarded active. In spite of the relative high degree of indifference of the intellectuals – because of their high number among the representatives - the majority in the town general assembly were the intellectuals.

The number of the approved decisions showed an increasing tendency, which together with the decreasing number of assemblies resulted that these meetings were gradually less and less suitable to discuss the questions on its merits. The general assemblies were becoming a so-called ‘voting-machines’, which manifested in the decrease or almost disappearance of remarks, contributions, suggestions and turned-down proposals or the votes against. The reason for the slow loss of activity and initiative of the town representatives is bureaucratising and narrowing the local government.

The examination of the functioning of the general assembly showed that there was not a numerous number of opposition in the town hall, at voting – if the votes were distributed in

a greater rate – the direct interest, the social and religious affiliation was important. Mainly the smallholders voted against the proposals of councillors and the mayor, usually against the investments with bigger expenses, because of their thrift and because by living in farms around the town they did not have a share or had only a little advantage of these developments. The town-dweller citizens, mainly the intellectuals, supported greater sacrifice for the town more actively, but it is obvious that it was them who enjoyed the benefits of these developments. The opposition of the smallholders and the intellectuals brought conflicts at the beginning of the century, but after the First World War these open oppositions disappeared, which can be explained by the transformation, politicisation of the local public life, which created new borderlines in the urban society.

The examination of the functioning of the Nyíregyháza urban elite showed that the special committees were getting more and more important roles. These committees had been the opinion-giving organisations of the municipal authority, but in practice they became real decision-making organisations. Opposed to the general assembly committees had less members, had meetings more frequently, voted in fewer questions and there were more chances of having real debates and discussing the questions more thoroughly. The opinions accepted by the common meeting of special committees were accepted by the general assembly without changes, i.e. the relations of the committees influenced the decisions of the council. From this point of view it should be emphasised, that in these special committees the intellectuals and officials were always the majority. Therefore, the key-positions in the local decision-making process were taken by them, because they could play an important role in the preparations of the decisions, meanwhile for the smallholders, craftsmen and merchants the only opportunity to have a say was if they took part in the general assemblies.

It can be stated without any doubt that municipal officials had a growing and a more important role in the activity of the municipal council and the preparatory committees, eventually in leadership of the local government. The growing influence of the bureaucracy was a constant tendency, which helped the apparatus to become independent on the local level from the rest of the local elite, not only in decision making mechanisms, but from existential point of view. Parallel with this the dependence and defencelessness of the local bureaucracy from the central government was growing. These two processes, on the one hand the growth of the power of the bureaucracy and on the other hand its growing subordination to the central government resulted in the narrowing of the local government. Opposed to this process the non-bureaucratic part of the local elite proved to be powerless, only the native inhabitant smallholders made some futile opposition steps.

Publications

1. Konferencia az elitről (Budapest, ELTE–Egyetemi Színpad, 1996. április 26–27.)
(‘Conference on the Elite – Budapest ELTE–University Stage, 26th-27th April, 1996.’), Szociológiai Szemle, 1996/3-4. 265–274.
2. Bevezetés (‘Introduction’), in A magyar elit természetéről (‘On the Nature of the Hungarian Elite’), ed. Müller Rolf & Takács Tibor, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 1998. 3–8.
(together with Müller Rolf)
3. Helyi választások Nyíregyházán a húszadik század első felében (‘Local Elections in Nyíregyháza in the First Half of the Twentieth Century’), Szabolcs-Szatmár-Beregi Szemle, 2001/3. 277–291.
4. A nyíregyházi képviselőtestület választott tagjai 1902–1939 (‘The Elected Members of the Municipal Council of Nyíregyháza 1902–1939’), in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Beregi Levéltári Évkönyv XV. Ed. Henszel Ágota, Nyíregyháza, 2001. 93–120.
5. A nyíregyházi bank-elit (1900-1944) (‘The Bank Elite of Nyíregyháza [1900–1944]’), Szabolcs-Szatmár-Beregi Szemle, 2002/2. 159–176.
6. Nyíregyháza legnagyobb adófizetői 1927, 1930, 1940 (‘The Greatest Taxpayers of Nyíregyháza 1927, 1930, 1940’), in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Beregi Levéltári Évkönyv XVI. Ed. Henszel Ágota, Nyíregyháza, 2003. 203–233.
7. Kujbusné Mecsei Éva, Nyíregyháza önkormányzata (1753–1848) (‘Kujbusné Mecsei Éva, Government of Nyíregyháza [1753-1848]’), Levéltári Szemle, 2004/1. 64–67. (book review)