



Summer of 1919: A Radical, Irreversible, Liberating Break in Prekmurje/Muravidék?*

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In this article, I examine political, cultural and social circumstances in Prekmurje/Muravidék after its occupation by Yugoslav forces in August 1919. Since the mid-19th century, Slovene national activists in Cisleithania had considered this part of the Kingdom of Hungary as a territory densely populated by Slovene compatriots and therefore as an integral part of Slovene national space. Drawing on this belief, in 1919 Slovene officials, politicians, and journalists celebrated the act of occupation of Hungarian territory as an event that brought to the end of Hungarian oppression to the locals and with it a radical, irreversible and liberating break with the past. By examining archival sources and secondary literature, I confront the victorious Slovene discourse with the reality on the ground. In addition, I also assess how a set of administrative ruptures and legislative changes imposed by the Yugoslav government in the immediate post-1919 period influenced the everyday lives and experiences of the local population.

Keywords: Prekmurje, Muravidék, Treaty of Trianon, transition, transformation, imperial legacies

On August 12, 1919, military units of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes crossed the border with the Kingdom of Hungary and occupied segments of two counties, Vas (Železna in Slovenian) and Zala. Several weeks before that, the occupation had been sanctioned at the Peace Conference in Paris. To be more precise, in early July 1919, the Council of Heads of the four great powers' included this small fragment of land in the very west of Hungary in the package of territorial compensations promised to Yugoslavia in exchange for Yugoslav participation in the military overthrow of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.¹ The Yugoslav territorial acquisition of Prekmurje was confirmed a year later with the signing of the Treaty of Trianon. With the exception of a short interruption during World War II, Prekmurje, as the region is officially known in Slovenian

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1 In this text, I use the shorter term “Yugoslavia” to describe the polity that was officially known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

(Muravidék in Hungarian), has been under Slovenian administrative control ever since.

The sudden July decision to hand over the territory of soon-to-become Prekmurje to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes came as a surprise, even though the Yugoslav Peace Delegation had laid claim to Prekmurje soon after the diplomats started to convene in Paris at the beginning of the year. According to the statements made by Slovenian members of the Yugoslav delegation, the linguistic and ethnographic facts unambiguously confirmed the region's Slovenian character. To build a political strategy on language and cultural markers was a common practice among Central European diplomats competing for contested areas at the Paris Peace Conference.² Yet in contrast to many territorial disputes that broke out after the collapse of Central European empires, the claim for Prekmurje did not require the Yugoslav diplomats and experts to engage in creative reasoning based on hastily compiled ethnographic and linguistic "facts." On the contrary, in this particular case, Yugoslav diplomats could base their request for territorial rearrangement on "solid" evidence which had already been gathered. Since the late nineteenth century, Slovenian national activists, ethnographers, linguists, and writers living in the Austrian part of the Dual Monarchy had been accumulating extensive knowledge about the Slavophone community densely inhabiting western Hungary.³ In their interpretation, framed and thoroughly impregnated by the ethnolinguistically defined notion of Slovenian national belonging and adherence, these Slavophones were members of the Slovenian nation inhabiting the territory between the upper Adriatic to the west and the outskirts of Pannonian Basin to the east.⁴ In 1919, Matija Slavič, the Yugoslav delegation's Slovenian expert responsible for Prekmurje, thus only additionally elaborated and refined previously published and widely disseminated findings.⁵ The culmination of his efforts was an ethnographic map of Prekmurje which meticulously depicted the area densely inhabited by Slovenian compatriots who had, according to the established Slovenian ethnolinguistic national narrative, been living under oppressive Hungarian rule for centuries.⁶

2 On the border-drawing practices employed at the Conference, see Prött, *The Politics*, 113–47; Crampton, "The Cartographic."

3 Kosi, "The Imagined," 90–94; Kosi, "Slovenski nacionalni."

4 On ethno-linguistic nationalism, see Kamusella, "The History"; much more broadly Kamusella, *The politics*.

5 On Slavič's contribution to the "Slovene cause," see his personal account: Slavič, "Prekmurske meje," 83–92.

6 Slavič, "Carte ethnographique."

Despite the seemingly convincing case (convincing at least according to contemporary standards) substantiated with the strong evidence, the great powers were at best lukewarm about the Yugoslav territorial expectations regarding Prekmurje. The situation changed only as a result of the establishment of the Soviet Republic in Hungary. After the French delegation began propagating the need to suppress the Communist regime in Budapest, a window of opportunity opened for the additional readjustment along the northernmost part of the Yugoslav-Hungarian border.⁷

The legitimacy of the Yugoslav occupation of Prekmurje was grounded on the idea of the right of the self-determination, despite ultimately being only a consequence of strategic considerations. In reality, however, the decision could hardly be described as the implementation of the Wilsonian principles. There was no plebiscite in Prekmurje, and the locals were not given the right to choose which state they wished to join. They also had no say in the decision-making process at the Paris Peace Conference, despite different political initiatives formulated and propagated by members of local elites in the period between autumn 1918 and August 1919. It is true that the “Yugoslav option” was not without supporters in Prekmurje. In the months after the collapse of Austria–Hungary, many Slavophone catholic clergymen (though not all) who were in close contacts with Slovenian national activists in former Cisleithanian lands agitated among Slavophone parishioners for the annexation of the territory to Yugoslavia. Yet much more vocal were those members of the local elite who propagated an administrative reorganization within the borders of Hungary that would recognize the linguistic and ethnic peculiarity of the local population and grant the region some sort of autonomy. While these initiatives were seriously discussed on various levels of the Hungarian administration, the most radical application of the principle of self-determination was doomed to fail from the outset. The so-called Republic of Prekmurje, which was proclaimed on May 29, 1919 by Vilmos Tkálec, a low-level official of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, lasted for only slightly more than a week, as it was suppressed by the Hungarian army on June 6.⁸

In the days after the occupation of Prekmurje in 1919, Slovenian politicians, national activists, and journalists employed a common post-1918 interpretation to rationalize and substantiate the territorial gain. The contemporary Slovenian

7 Kyovsky, “Trianonska pogodba,” 236–59; Hornyák, *Hungarian-Yugoslav*, 46–49.

8 For an overview, see Feiszt, “Revolucionarni pokret,” 345–52; Kokolj, “Prekmurje v prevratnih,” 53–205.

press described the territorial acquisition as “a moment of liberation” for the Slovenian compatriots and “a radical and irreversible break” of the region with its Hungarian past. “Nothing will ever be the same,” the Civil Commissioner Srečko Lajnšič promised the locals in August 1919. Lajnšič was the first head of the new Yugoslav administration in Prekmurje. According to him, the Yugoslav occupation of Prekmurje brought freedom after 1,000 years of struggle under the Hungarian yoke; it gave Prekmurje’s Slovenes a chance to unite with brothers in blood to form a single polity. This kind of post-imperial narrative was not uncommon among members of Central European national elites who happened to find themselves on the winning side of history in autumn 1918.⁹ Still, to what extent did the narrative correspond with the realities on the ground? Did the 1919 annexation truly play a role in the groundbreaking rupture with the past for people living in Prekmurje? What do administrative sources, historical accounts, and scholarly works reveal about the nature of this supposedly “radical and irreversible break”? In what follows, I will focus on a set of administrative ruptures and legislative changes imposed by the Yugoslav government after it acquired the region, and I will examine how these changes influenced the everyday lives and experiences of the local population.

As one would expect, for locals living in Prekmurje, the single most important break with the past was the change of the state regime, embodied in the incoming representatives of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Despite the fact that the local inhabitants and Hungarian officials who were present in the region offered no resistance to the newly arrived Yugoslav officials, the process of the administrative incorporation of Prekmurje initially did not go smoothly. The first weeks following the annexation were marked by internal strife between the Slovenian and Croat mid-level administrative bodies. Slovenian and Croat politicians and administrators could not agree on the question of which geographic and administrative jurisdiction Prekmurje should be associated with. As a consequence of this, both the Slovenian and Croatian provincial governments sent officials to the region seeking to put the territory of Prekmurje under their own administrative control. Moreover, the provincial government in Ljubljana also proclaimed Srečko Lajnšič, the district captain in the neighboring Styrian town of Maribor, the new Civil Commissioner in charge of the organization of temporary administration in Prekmurje. Unsurprisingly, Slovenian politicians saw

9 On the Czech example, see Bugge, “Czech democracy,” 24.

the attachment of Prekmurje to the provincial government in Ljubljana as the only possible outcome of the occupation. In their eyes, it logically harmonized with the predominant reasoning of the Slovenian political and cultural elites from the former Cisleithanian lands, who regarded the formerly Hungarian territory as an integral part of the Slovenian national space. To their chagrin and exasperation, however, Croatian politicians and civil servants in Zagreb did not share their views. Instead, they immediately sent their own officials to take over several government and security posts in areas of Prekmurje that bordered Međimurje on the south, an area which had already been under the control of the Croatian administrative bodies since the winter of 1918.¹⁰

The fragmentation of the civil administration in Prekmurje led to conflicts and misunderstandings, as there was no clear demarcation line between the overlapping jurisdictions of Croat and Slovenian administrative bodies. The dispute was put to an end only after the intervention of a higher authority. On September 2, the Yugoslav minister of internal affairs Svetozar Pribičević finally interfered and provided a conclusive decision concerning the issue of administrative competences in Prekmurje. Pribičević ordered the provincial government in Ljubljana to mitigate the conflict, which was creating internal strife between Slovenian and Croat branches of administration and could also put Yugoslav control of the occupied territory in jeopardy. He thus decided that until the new constitution was written and ratified, Prekmurje should remain a single administrative entity under the auspices of the Civil Commissioner. The Slovenian provincial government should then, he insisted, provide the necessary officials and, in case of need, ask the provincial government in Zagreb for help. In any case, Pribičević reiterated once again, the territory of Prekmurje should remain a single unit with the Civil Commissioner in charge of the administration.¹¹ The next day, the president of the Slovenian provincial government, Janko Brejc, ordered the subordinated departments and offices immediately to provide the requested personnel to the Civil commissioner.¹² The Civil commissioner then moved the seat of his office from Radgona/Radkersburg in Styria to Murska Sobota in Prekmurje.¹³ With that, the first phase of the consolidation of the new administration in the occupied territory was completed.

10 Kokolj, *Prekmurški Slovenci*, 21–22.

11 Arhiv Republike Slovenije (ARS). Pokrajinska uprava za Slovenijo – predsedstvo (AS 60), Prekmurje IV, V. 10417, 2.9.1919.

12 ARS. AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V. 10417/1919. Upravna ureditev v Prekmurju, 2.9.1919.

13 ARS. AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V. 10595/1919, 6.9.1919.

The Yugoslav occupation of Prekmurje in August 1919 thus marked the end of Hungarian administration and of Hungarian as the official language of the state administration. From the outset, the incoming state representatives did not tolerate the existing Hungarian administrative structures. The newly arrived Slovenian administrators regarded the presence of Hungarian officials in Prekmurje as a security risk. “The state within the state cannot exist,” Lajnšič insisted. He added, “law won’t be restored as long as the administration remains in the hands of those who constitute a threat to the new order.” Given the fact that “a proper administration must be established,” the Civil Commissioner continued, “authorization should be given to take over or at least to suspend the work of the existing administrative bodies, for the Hungarian authorities only work against the establishment of public order.”¹⁴ Many Hungarian officials thus voluntarily left the region soon after the occupation, while others were encouraged, by different means, to hand over their official responsibilities to the Yugoslav representatives, pack their belongings, and leave for Hungary. The replacement was quick and clinical. Several weeks after the Yugoslav forces started entering Prekmurje, the Slovenian officials had taken over all the public offices and administrative posts in Prekmurje, from the courts and the gendarmerie to post offices and railway stations, and they had subordinated them in the process to the administrative bodies in Ljubljana.

Another important case indicating a clear rupture with the past involves the new categories introduced for the population. A series of decrees and laws enacted in the weeks and months after World War I had ended revealed that in the newly constituted nation state of South Slavs, citizenship would be “nationalised.” The national belonging ascribed to each citizen would play a crucial role in determining a given citizen’s rights and the extent to which these rights were respected and protected by the authorities. In other words, national belonging would influence the way in which the authorities treated a particular citizen. Since the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in December 1918, the newfound Yugoslav official ideology propagated the state as a nation state. Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were regarded as constitutive tribes of the so-called three-named nation (*troimeni narod*), or the Yugoslav nation. In this sense, the new state was understood as a culmination and embodiment of the principle of the national self-determination of one sovereign Yugoslav

14 ARS. AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V. 10092, Položaj v Prekmurju, 26.8.1919.

nation.¹⁵ However, alongside Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, many people lived within the borders of the kingdom who identified themselves or were identified by the state administration as members of other national and religious minority communities, for instance Montenegrins, Macedonians, Jews, Germans, Hungarians, Muslims, etc. Following the postwar international agreements on the protection of national minorities, the state granted the members of several of the abovementioned communities a set of specific minority rights. In this sense, the new state officially recognized the existence of several other national groups, the members of which were normatively bestowed equal citizenship rights and, in some cases, also specific minorities rights.¹⁶

After acquiring Prekmurje, the new Yugoslav administration began applying the new categories to the local population. Locals who were granted citizenship (the majority of people living in Prekmurje) were divided into two distinct categories. The first one consisted of locals who spoke Slovenian dialects. This part of Prekmurje's population was regarded as an integral part of the Slovenian tribe and thus as members of the Yugoslav nation. The second category, however, was reserved for members of the local population who were identified by the state administration as belonging either to the German or to the Hungarian minority. According to the peace treaty, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was not allowed to discriminate against citizens who belonged to minorities. But the state bureaucracy nonetheless treated citizens in Prekmurje differently with respect to their presumed national affiliation. Many documents reveal that the level of citizenship rights depended on the ascribed national belonging, as only citizens who were regarded as members of a dominant nation were granted full citizenship rights.¹⁷

In addition to the replacement of the state administration and the introduction of the distinction between majority and minority groups, inhabitants of Prekmurje experienced another major shift in the years following the occupation, namely the land reform. In 1919, Prekmurje was a predominantly agricultural region. The majority of the population consisted of peasants who owned no land and farmers who had small holdings. The division of large estates into parcels gave the peasant population of Prekmurje access to a means of basic survival, i.e.

15 On the nature of citizenship in interwar Yugoslavia, see Kosnica, "Odnos državljanstva," 61–83; Štiks, *Nations and citizens*, 32–34. On the idea of "troimeni narod," see Troch, "Yugoslavism between," 229–32.

16 For more detailed information on the minority and religious rights in Yugoslavia, see Greble, "The Uncertain," para. 9–17.

17 Kovács, "Agrarna reforma," 68–97. Komac, "Narodne manjšine," 59–66.

land. The decision of the state to introduce the land reform and hence intervene in the existing property relations was thus perhaps the most important rupture affecting the everyday lives of the local population.

The land reform in Prekmurje was part of the broader strategy of rural pacification adopted by the government soon after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in December 1918. In the precarious first postwar weeks and months following the proclamation of the new state, the Yugoslav countryside was plagued by a wave of discontent and a series of more or less violent outbreaks.¹⁸ The uprisings of the rural population were influenced by a revolutionary movement in Russia and enabled by a fragile state apparatus, massive social deterioration, and a weak or non-existent monopoly of the state on violence. Since the economic recovery was at best gradual, the government decided to use the promise of land reform as a tool to quell rural social movements. As part of this strategy, in February 1919, regent Alexander confirmed a provisional bill that dissolved all large estates in exchange for financial compensation.¹⁹

In the years that followed, in Prekmurje as in the rest of the kingdom thousands of hectares of farmland changed the ownership. In truth, the transfer of property (the ownership of arable land) came into effect sluggishly because of the many conflicting interests and the complexity of the process of land division itself. The constant shifting of people in government also slowed down the procedures, as did the complaints concerning the measures, the revisions that were made to the decrees, the annulment of some decrees, and the involvement of political parties. Nonetheless, the change of ownership of arable land transformed the economic and social conditions in the region. Before the beginning of the agricultural reform in Prekmurje, one could cross the whole region from one end to the other (approximately 90 kilometers) without leaving the estates of only twelve large landowners. A good decade after the introduction of the first decrees, almost ten thousand land seekers held legal property rights to 56 percent of the farmland that had formerly been part of large estates. Much of the land was thus still part of large estates, but the land reform enabled many farmers to get their own plots.²⁰

18 Banac, “Emperor Karl,” 284–305; Newman, “Post-imperial and post-war,” 249–65; Beneš, “The Green Cadre,” 207–41.

19 *Službene novine Kraljestva Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, February 27, 1919, no. 11.

20 Kokolj, *Prekmurski Slovenci*, 483–591.

The three post-1919 changes described above significantly influenced the everyday lives and routines of locals living in Prekmurje. In many ways, at least at first glance, the 1919 rhetoric thus indeed did describe actual changes which had taken place in Prekmurje in the years that followed the Yugoslav occupation and the subsequent annexation. Still, did these changes retrospectively substantiate the narrative of a “liberating,” “radical,” and “irreversible” break with the past in the summer of 1919?

To begin with, in post-1919 Prekmurje various institutional practices, administrative procedures and norms, and also everyday habits survived the collapse of the Dual Monarchy. Many sections of Hungarian civil law and other decrees from the Hungarian era were simply translated into Slovenian and remained in force in Prekmurje throughout the interwar period, despite the inclination of the Slovenian provincial government to replace the existing Hungarian body of law with the normative framework that was in use in other territories under its control. In the late 1920s, the “Provisions of Vas County Regarding Buildings and Public Cleanliness” from 1909, for instance, still regulated the urban spatial restructuring of Murska Sobota, the administrative center and commercial hub of Prekmurje, while the unique combination of former Hungarian laws specified the rights of citizens regarding fishing and hunting in Prekmurje.²¹

The aspirations of Slovenian state actors completely to reorganize everything in Prekmurje were not inhibited solely by pragmatic reasoning and the lack of state resources. Their ability to address and their willingness, ultimately, to tolerate the reality on the ground and the continued attachment to customs and practices were often influenced by conflicts with the expectations of locals. Through dynamic negotiations, locals on many occasions managed to convince the representatives of the Yugoslav state to show some consideration for established practices and existing institutions. When in 1920 the Slovenian administration tried to put the existing network of elementary schools run by the local clergy under the control of the state, the local Catholic and Protestant dignitaries viciously opposed the proposals. As a consequence, until the early

21 On regulations concerning the outlook of public space in Murska Sobota, see Brumen, “Panonskost Murske Sobote,” 91–102. The fishing and hunting rights in Prekmurje were regulated with the official translation of fragments of Hungarian laws combined with administrative procedures that were used in the former Cisleithanian lands; see Lipovšek, *Lovski in ribiški*.

1930s, the network of confessional semi-independent schools remained intact in Prekmurje.²²

The occasional willingness of Slovenian judges sent to Prekmurje from Ljubljana to include in their rulings specifics of Hungarian law and practice that did not exist in the existing body of law of the former Cisleithanian lands is also telling. For instance, after the death of Štefan Kerčmar, his wife Fani Kerčmar asserted the right of survivorship (widow's right), which gave her the right to use her husband's property until her death or marriage. Though since 1914 the imperial Austrian Civil Code had not acknowledged this right, a Slovenian judge who followed imperial Austrian procedure regarding the inheritance recognized the legality of the widow's request in the concluding verdict.²³

Furthermore, despite the intention of the Slovenian government to purge the administrative bodies in Prekmurje of any Hungarian influence entirely, several Hungarian lower officials retained their positions. Soon after the occupation, the new Slovenian civil servants came to the conclusion that they would not be able to govern without the help of experienced and literate officials fluent in Hungarian. These individuals were familiar with the circumstances on the ground and as such an important source of reliable information about the expectations and needs of local communities, and they could also function as intermediaries between the state institutions, where predominantly Slovenian was used, and locals who spoke only Hungarian.

The example of a dispute which erupted in November 1920 between the two highest representatives of the state authority in Prekmurje concerning the employment of a municipal clerk who had dubious political views illustrates how the pragmatic aspects on many occasions prevailed over political and nationalistic ones. On November 2, the Civil Commissioner wrote to the head of the regional State Police Department, Gustav Puš. He expressed his dissatisfaction with what he saw as the inappropriate prerogatives given to one of Puš's subordinates. Puš was the highest state law enforcement official, and he also held the position of provisional unelected mayor (gerent) of the Murska Sobota municipality. In the complaint, the Civil Commissioner thus revealed his astonishment at the fact that he had received an official certificate issued by a municipal clerk named Györy. He could not understand how it was possible that Györy was still employed at the municipal office and had the right "to sign

22 Kokolj, Horvat, *Prekmursko šolstvo*, 318–24.

23 Nemeč, "Pravo v Prekmurju," 54–64. On differences between the Hungarian and Austrian inheritance law, see Milić, *Pregled*, 58–76.

documents in the name of municipality and even use the municipal seal,” given that he had recently been convicted by the Civil Commissioner and even served a sentence for having committed anti-state acts. Györy was not loyal to the state, he continued, hence it was “absolutely unacceptable” to grant him authority to issue certificates and handle the official municipal seal. For this reason, the Civil Commissioner instructed the head of the state police and the provisional mayor of Murska Sobota to sort out the scandalous situation. In short, he asked him to replace Györy as a municipal clerk with someone who would be seen as trustworthy by the Slovenian population of Murska Sobota.²⁴

Gustav Puš's response was surprising. He explained to the Civil Commissioner that Györy was in charge of issuing certificates on the conditions of families and properties so that grain could be distributed to the poor population as had been demanded by the Civil Commissioner in the instructions Puš had recently received. Györy had been entrusted with this task for a good reason, as he knew the conditions of the local population well, Puš asserted. He continued: “I am well aware that Györy was punished, for I was the one who led the investigation in question. At the municipal council meeting on July 23, 1920, Györy was nominated and accepted unanimously to serve as the municipal secretary. The transcript of the municipal meeting in question was sent to the Civilian Commissariat. If today, as the order demands, the district government wants to dismiss him, this would create many difficulties. [...] I must point out that Györi has done a good job so far. His specific task has been to compile various lists, such as a list of recruits, a census of livestock, and other things that would be difficult for someone else who does not know the situation, people, and language.” In short, in his role of provisional mayor of Murska Sobota, the head of state police defended diligent work of his subordinate clerk, whom he had previously persecuted. On this occasion, the smooth functioning of the administration took precedence over the more abstract interests of the state.²⁵

These cases suggest that the consequences of the transfer in 1919 of power over the territory were far from radical and irreversible. But neither was the annexation liberating, at least not for many locals living in the region. As mentioned above, the newly founded Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes promised to respect the citizenship rights of all citizens regardless of their

24 Pokrajinska in študijska knjižnica Murska Sobota (PIŠK). SI_PISK/0001/001/001/00027. Dopis Civilnega komisarja, predstojniku oddelka državne policije o potrebni zamenjavi občinskega tajnika v občini Murska Sobota, 11.2.1920.

25 Ibid.

nationality and to recognize minority rights of several national communities. In spite of these promises, after the war, Prekmurje's Hungarian speaking population encountered many obstacles. The majority of the educated Hungarian speaking inhabitants of Prekmurje left the region after the occupation and annexation and settled in the new state of Hungary. Others, especially Hungarian administrative employees and teachers, were fired soon after the occupation because they allegedly did not speak the official language of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.²⁶ Their departure was a major reason why it was difficult to set up a network of schools for the Hungarian minority. The interwar circumstances were precarious from the perspective of elementary schooling in Hungarian. This eventually led to a decrease in the number of pupils and, later, to the almost complete abolishment of minority schools in the region.²⁷

In addition to disrespecting the rights of the Hungarian minority to their own educational institutions, the new authorities discriminated against members of the Hungarian minority, especially its rural segment, in another way. Hungarian speaking peasants, who densely inhabited the area around Lendava along the new border with Hungary, were also excluded from the land reform. Though the local Hungarian speaking farmers and rural communities were initially allowed to rent out arable land of the sequestered and dissolved large estates, they were forbidden in the second stage from buying it, and hence they were prevented from becoming proper owners. This opportunity was given to locals and newcomers considered Slovenians instead of to Prekmurje's Hungarian speaking population. In contrast with what took place in some other parts of Yugoslavia, the exclusion was not about citizenship, but about the presumed nationality of the locals. At the beginning of the reform, the Yugoslav administration allowed peasants and farmers in Prekmurje who either spoke Hungarian or identified as Hungarians to lease the land, even though they still held the right to opt for Hungarian citizenship. Yet, in 1924, when these locals had become citizens of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, their contracts were revoked on the basis of their presumed nationality, which was determined by using the 1921 census. The officials of the district state agency responsible for the land reform in Prekmurje analyzed records of the census taken in villages along the Yugoslav-Hungarian border and postulated that the declaration of a local citizen's mother tongue should be regarded as an objective marker of his or

26 Kosi, "Slovene ethnolinguistic," (forthcoming).

27 Göncz, "Madžarska manjšina," 81.

her national identity. In this sense, the state officials classified inhabitants of villages who declared Hungarian as their mother tongue as being of Hungarian nationality and, as such, potentially unreliable citizens, whose ownership of the land along the border could cause potential problems for the integrity of the Yugoslav state.²⁸

The integration of Prekmurje's Slavophone speakers of the region into the new Yugoslav frame was not exactly smooth either. The incoming administration perceived the Slavophone population of Prekmurje as their Slovenian brothers who had finally been liberated from one thousand years of Hungarian domination. The local Slavophones, however, looked on the newcomers with suspicion. Many of them were in fact patriotic Hungarians who expressed particular notions of self-belonging as Slovenes that did not correspond with the understanding of "Slovene-ness" cultivated in the former Cisleithania. As a result, after the Yugoslav occupation and annexation, two separate notions of "Slovene-ness" began to intersect in the region of Prekmurje. The sentiments of ethnic belonging held by the local Slovenian speakers were very different from the idea of "Slovene-ness" developed and widely disseminated in the course of the nineteenth century on the other side of the former border between the Austrian and Hungarian parts of the Dual Monarchy. The officials who came to the region after the war were for that reason identifying Prekmurje's Slovenian speakers as a part of their own Slovenian nation, which supposedly stretched from the coasts of the Adriatic to the westernmost parts of Hungary. In contrast, the local inhabitants, with the exception of a few catholic priests, continued to nurture their own local and regional identifications. As a result, in 1919, members of Prekmurje's Slovenian speaking population predominantly identified themselves as "Sloveni" or "Slovenci," yet they regarded the incoming Slovenian officials sent to the region as representatives of the new Yugoslav state as Carniolans, Slavs, or simply "newcomers." Prekmurje's Slovenes hence did not think of the incoming Slovenes as belonging to the same ethnic group as them.²⁹

The two abovementioned Slovenian groups commonly fought about the role of Prekmurje's regional literary language, particularly in the educational and church setting. These disagreements were passionate because Prekmurje's Slovenian was both a symbol of the region's ethnical particularity and, above

28 Kovács, "Agrarna reforma," 68–97.

29 Kosi, "The Imagined," 95–102.

all, the language of the local evange­lic and Catholic Church. The incoming Slovenian officials, especially teachers, nonetheless treated Prekmurje’s literary tradition in a patronizing and occasionally even contemptuous manner. In their eyes, the Slovenian spoken in Prekmurje was not a language but merely one of the dialects of “proper Slovenian,” and for that reason, it should be eliminated. After all, according to them, a true nation could only have one national literary standard.³⁰ Misunderstandings between the locals and the newcomers were further exacerbated by a particular group of newcomers, the Slovenian teaching staff who fostered and spread liberal views which differed from the view of the local clergy.³¹

Many archival documents from the months following the annexation reveal the animosity between the local Slovenian speakers and the newly arrived Slovenian administrators. For instance, in April 1922, the commander of Murska Sobota’s gendarmerie reported on the positive responses of the local Slovenian “nationally unconscious intelligentsia” to Hungarian propaganda in support of border revisions and the return of Prekmurje to Hungary. According to the sources, along with the local Hungarians, some Slovenes also supported the return of the region to Hungary, more specifically “all the Lutherans, including Lutheran innkeepers, pastors, and teachers.” The writer of this report continued with the following claim: “Prekmurje’s people hate us—Serbs especially—and are convinced that they form a particular, not Slovenian nation.”³² Furthermore, under these tense circumstances, Jožef Klekl, a priest, a member of the national assembly, and one of the very few people in Prekmurje who had supported the Slovenian national movement in the prewar times, was declared a threat to the state because of his autonomist viewpoints.³³

In conclusion, after August 1919, the inhabitants of Prekmurje had to confront the reality of living in a state in which the institutional framework and the political culture differed considerably from what they had experienced in the Kingdom of Hungary. The new Yugoslav state actors who came to the region replaced the Hungarian officials, but that was certainly not all they did. Almost immediately after the region’s incorporation into the new state, they started to

30 Kosi, “Slovene ethnolinguistic,” (forthcoming).

31 Kokolj, Horvat, *Prekmursko šolstvo*, 307–9.

32 ARS. AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V.Pov 1890/IV. Madžarska propaganda v Prekmurju, 15.4.1922.

33 ARS. AS 60, Prekmurje IV, V. Pov. 6573/IV. Klekl Jožef, upokojeni župnik in narodni poslanec v Prekmurju, informacija, 8.6.1921.

introduce new administrative practices and state institutions, together with a new normative framework that legally divided the body of citizens into separate communities along the lines of presumed or expressed nationality. Generally speaking, the administrative apparatus treated the Slavophone majority of Prekmurje as a constitutive part of the “three-named nation,” and it classified local German-speaking and Hungarian-speaking communities as parts of two recognized minority groups. Last not least, the Yugoslav state enacted the land reform and radically intervened in the existing ownership relations. Thousands of local Slavophone farmers were given an opportunity to become owners of the land they cultivated.

However, a closer examination of several aspects of the local circumstances in Prekmurje in the decade after the incorporation of the region into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes offers a much more nuanced interpretation of the changes which took place. Instead of supporting the characterization of the annexation as a moment of radical rupture, the events which took place on the ground suggest that the changes occurring in the summer of 1919 in Prekmurje instigated a process of pragmatic adaptations and gradual transformations framed by many aspects of the imperial past. In this sense, the documents which survive speak for themselves, and they also cast a shadow of doubt on the prevailing Slovenian national narrative, according to which the summer of 1919 was the moment of the unification of the Slovenes of Prekmurje with the mother nation.

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