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Challenges of Developing the Institutional System of Public Education in the 1920's in Hungary¹

The issue of developing the institutional system of public education significantly determined the area of Hungarian cultural policy in the period following the First World War. As a result of the territorial losses, the reorganization of the public education system became necessary from an administrative position, besides this, the country did not have an acceptable number of public education institutions, and even the condition of the existing schools was not satisfactory in several cases; all of this could not serve the idea of national education appropriately to the era. An identifying politician of the era was Kunó Klebelsberg, who started the building of elementary schools based on the concept of cultural supremacy to deal with the uneducated crowds and to improve the Hungarian economy through the people's knowledge. He has initiated enormous improvements, such as the construction of thousands of new school classrooms and teachers' apartments in just a few years, based on the Act VII of 1926 on the Establishment and Maintenance of Village Schools initiated by him.

Keywords: Kunó Klebelsberg, cultural supremacy, institutions of public education, developing schools, Horthy-Era, ideological education

1. Ideological Background for Developing the Institutional System of Public Education

The significant role of appropriate legal regulation of public education is unquestionable for any state that wishes to survive in the long term. Besides that, in the background of the development of the institutional system of public education, the Christian-national ideology appeared, which determined the entire field of Hungarian cultural policy in the period.² After the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, the country's territorial and population losses gave grounds for the concept of Hungarian cultural supremacy and the reorganization of the public education system became necessary from an administrative position as well. The emphasis on patriotic, national, and religious-moral education already appeared with the ministers of religion and public education *István Haller* and *József Vass*, but it was *Kunó Klebelsberg* who developed the concept of cultural supremacy and based his reforms on the public education system on this.³ The aim of this article is to deal with *Klebelsberg's* activities, highlighting the measures he took to develop the institutional system of public

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² About the Christian-national education see: NIKLAJ, Magyar kultúrpolitika 86–99.

³ Summaries about cultural and educational activities of *István Haller*, *József Vass* and *Kunó Klebelsberg* see: MANN, Magyar oktatáspolitikusok 95–118.

education. This research is part of the author's doctoral dissertation; in its current phase, the subjects of it are the central legislation, periodicals and secondary sources, while the local practice will be explored later, based on archival research. The essence of cultural supremacy was that Hungary could strengthen its position regarding the surrounding nations by raising the standard of culture. According to this, the revision goals, the preservation of the Hungarians who live outside the country borders with the separated territories and the other nationalities living within the borders and the strengthening of the Hungarians in general will be achieved, if Hungary can prove to Europe that it is on a higher cultural and intellectual level than the neighbour countries.⁴

The concept of cultural supremacy and the measures of the Ministry were supported by the *Horthy*-system; this can largely be explained by the fact that the education of children played an important role in the foundation of the ideology. Ideological education began at school, this is also shown by the circumstance that the teaching began and ended with the recitation of the Hungarian Creed.⁵ So, the purpose of education was also to serve the goals of revision, which were founded on the idea of cultural supremacy. In accordance with this, the curriculum published in 1925 stated that *'the purpose of elementary schools is to educate religiously and self-consciously patriotic citizens for the country, who have the basic elements of general education and are able to utilise their knowledge in practical life.'*⁶

Klebensberg headed the Ministry of Religion and Public Education between 1922 and 1931. His cultural policy supported the stability of the government system, but for its implementation it was also necessary to settle the country's economic situation, so in practice it could be implemented after that, in the second half of the 1920's. In his first years as a minister, he focused on higher education and science – based on German models⁷ –, and later, on public education. *Klebensberg* started the building of elementary schools based on the concept of cultural supremacy to deal with the uneducated crowds and to improve the Hungarian economy through the people's knowledge. He kept in mind that *'all healthy public education system must be based on the everyday elementary school and all further education and similar issues are only secondary questions.'*⁸ He has initiated enormous improvements, such as the construction of thousands of new school classrooms and teachers' apartments in just a few years.⁹

In addition to the ideological background, the infrastructural situation also created a basis for the developments, however, these two issues were connected, as the effects of Trianon were in the background of both. Territorial annexations not only strengthened national consciousness and thus the concept of cultural supremacy, but also had the consequence that a significant part of the school network got outside of the Hungarian borders. *Klebensberg* highlighted this in the justification of the Act VII of 1926 on the Establishment and Maintenance of Village Schools, adding that this unfortunate situation of the location of the schools was already justified by the national policy before the First World War: *'Before the war the government wanted to achieve primarily national goals with the*

⁴ ROMSICS, *Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció* 224–225.

⁵ The Hungarian Creed was written by *Szeréna Székely* (*Elemérné Papp-Vár*). This short poem became an unofficial national creed of Hungary in the *Horthy*-Era, it emphasized the mood of the nation after the losses of Trianon: 'I believe in one God, I believe in one homeland, I believe in one divine eternal truth, I believe in the rise of Hungary, amen.'

⁶ FEHÉR, *Oktatásügy* 461.

⁷ See UJVÁRY, *Klebensberg Kuno tudománypolitikája*.

⁸ Quote from *Klebensberg* in: HUSZTI, *Gróf Klebensberg Kunó életműve* 242.

⁹ ROMSICS, *Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció* 211.; FEHÉR, *Oktatásügy* 460.

*elementary schools, and therefore the state elementary schools in particular were predominantly organized in the now separated area.*¹⁰

2. Maintenance of the Schools from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy until the Horthy-Era

After the First World War, the ministers of religion and public education also took measures to restore the school system. The important question was that who would cover the costs of maintaining the schools. In his public education bill of 1848, *József Eötvös*, Minister of Religion and Public Education, focused on common schools, which would be maintained by the local communities. However, based on the Public Education Act of 1868 - due to the strong opposition of the churches - denominational schools were left operating, although main state supervision was determined over them, and the establishment of common state schools was put into perspective in addition to that. The reason behind the establishment of common schools – besides the thought of separating church and school – was that they tried to compensate for the backwardness of denominational schools by using state support.¹¹ The establishment of state schools continued until the end of the century, in which *Gyula Wlassics*, Minister of Religion and Public Education, had a prominent role, by starting the organizational work at the turn of the century.¹² Despite this, many denominational schools survived, as it was financially more favourable for the municipalities to contribute to the maintenance of the denominational school, than to establish and maintain their own schools.

Regarding public education institutions, the system set up by the Public Education Act of 1868 was primal at the beginning of *Klebelberg's* ministry, so the state, municipalities, associations, and private individuals could maintain schools, but at the same time, the right of denominations to establish and maintain schools was not revoked. In the academic year of 1924/25, just before the school building program, there were a total of 6.241 public schools, of which 1.724 were maintained by state and municipalities, and 4.517 by denominations (including 2,814 Roman Catholic schools).¹³

The state's contribution to school expenses reached a turning point during the *Horthy-Era*: not only state and municipal schools were supported, but denominational ones as well, so regardless of the nature of the school, the state supported public education institutions. The churches supported the Christian-national education, that formed the basis of the cultural policy of the era, so their role in education increased through religious-moral education.¹⁴ From the point of view of the relationship with denominations, it is worth mentioning that *Klebelberg* specifically emphasized that he does not insist on the state school type, but *'where there is sufficient willingness to sacrifice, I am ready to support our historical churches in establishing new denominational schools.'*¹⁵

¹⁰ 1926. évi VII. törvény cikk indokolása a mezőgazdasági népesség érdekeit szolgáló népiskolák létesítéséről és fenntartásáról <https://uj.jogtar.hu/#doc/db/77/id/92600007.TVI/>.

¹¹ CSIZMADIA, A magyar állam és az egyházak jogi kapcsolatainak kialakulása és gyakorlata a Horthy-korszakban 125.

¹² See: NIKLAI, Die Modernisierung des Volksunterrichts in Ungarn 231–235.

¹³ CSIZMADIA, A magyar állam és az egyházak jogi kapcsolatainak kialakulása és gyakorlata a Horthy-korszakban 125–126.

¹⁴ See: NIKLAI, Hungarian Cultural and Educational Policy 61–65.

¹⁵ KLEBELSBERG, Falusi népiskoláink kiépítése 2.

Regarding maintenance costs, the Ministry of Religion and Public Education covered part of the teachers' salaries, as well as a significant part of the building costs of schools and teachers' accommodations, including denominational schools. According to *Klebelsberg*, the ideological justification for this is that *'the nurturing of the religious and moral powers of the nation is primarily entrusted to the hands of our historic churches.'*¹⁶ By the end of the 1920's, support for these denominational schools exceeded the amount spent on other types of schools, for example in 1927/28, the state spent 13.889.620 pengő on state schools and 15.872.889 pengő on denominational schools.¹⁷

3. Ensuring Compulsory Schooling as a Ground for the Development of the Institutional System

The reason for the building of schools was that the country did not have an acceptable number of public education institutions, and even the condition of the existing schools was not satisfactory in several cases, and all of this could not serve the ideal of national education appropriately to the era. Compulsory schooling (ages 6-12) was already introduced in Hungary by the Public Education Act of 1868, however, its practical implementation and control was not resolved. *Klebelsberg* respected the work of *Eötvös*, his ancestor in the Ministry because of prescribing compulsory education in the law, but at the same time he added practical considerations: if the provisions of the Public Education Act are to be implemented decades later, a greater amount of involvement of the state is necessary.¹⁸ The lack of implementation is clear, since – based on the contemporary data – every sixth child did not go to school.¹⁹ This included, on the one hand, the fact that in autumn and spring children were needed by the family, mainly during agricultural work, and in winter there was not enough money for suitable warm clothes, and on the other hand, the national distribution of schools was uneven compared to compulsory education. In the cities, there were not enough places in the schools, there were fewer teachers and classrooms available than needed, on average there were 60, but in some cases 150 children per teacher, who had to be crowded into one room. Besides that, in the countryside in several places there was no school within reach at all.²⁰ During the organization of the schools, the most significant difficulty appeared in rural areas, at the farms in the eastern part of the country, however the population in the Transdanubian (located at the western side of the river Danube) villages lived mostly sporadically as well; there were a large number of small villages in the Transdanubian area that could not maintain a school, and the religious distribution of the population can also be regarded as an aggravating circumstance, since more religious denominations existed there next to each other and they insisted on their own schools, even if they could have bear the costs more effectively by maintaining them together.²¹

Klebelsberg also recognized these circumstances, in his study published in the *Teachers' Journal* titled 'Establishment of our village schools', he highlighted that the general compulsory

¹⁶ CSIZMADIA, A magyar állam és az egyházak jogi kapcsolatainak kialakulása és gyakorlata a Horthy-korszakban 125.

¹⁷ CSIZMADIA, A magyar állam és az egyházak jogi kapcsolatainak kialakulása és gyakorlata a Horthy-korszakban 125–126.

¹⁸ See: HUSZTI, Gróf Klebelsberg Kunó életműve 239–240.

¹⁹ ROMSICS, Ellenforradalom és konszolidáció 222.

²⁰ About this problem in the following years see: NIKLAI, A nyolcosztályos népiskolai oktatás bevezetésének hatása 101–110.

²¹ HUSZTI, Gróf Klebelsberg Kunó életműve 248–249.

schooling is incompletely implemented, and 1/8 of the population over the age of six are analphabets. He also partly saw the reason for this in the children's labour, but he believed that the inadequacy of the institutional system is a bigger problem. *'The general compulsory education will remain a mere theoretical requirement until we make it possible for everyone to fulfil their compulsory education by establishing schools. And here's the catch. Today, our school network is still so incomplete that it is physically impossible for many parents to send their children to school. There are two reasons for this, one is our previous public education policy, and the other is the particular tendency of the Hungarian nation to settle. Hungary was a nation state, almost half of its population consisted of foreign-speaking citizens. The Hungarianisation of these was not the goal of the official Hungarian cultural policy, but the effort to give our non-Hungarian compatriots the opportunity to learn the state language did seem completely legitimate. In this way, a whole network of public schools was built up in the ethnic regions, while the Hungarian language area was rather ignored. As a result of the Treaty of Trianon, we also lost most of our public schools with the ethnic regions, and now we stand here with pure Hungarian areas which have been ignored regarding public schools.'* Here Klebelsberg on the one hand emphasized the effect of territorial losses, and on the other hand, in connection with the *'particular tendency of the Hungarian nation to settle'*, he meant the farm world of the so-called *Alföld* (Great Hungarian Plain) and the villages with smaller population in the rest of the country. He explained that this distribution of the population simply does not allow it to effectively use the workforce of teachers and maintain a school.²² He summarized the same reasons in his opening speech at the national meeting of school inspectors, drawing the attention of the school inspectors to the fact that *'the cause of the problems must be found in Hungary's settlement conditions. (...) the real problem is the dispersion of settlements.'* Based on this problem, he detailed the essence of his bill: *'we have farms that do not have a sufficient number of compulsory school children. These farms must be merged into a larger school district and a special Hungarian type must be constructed from these districts, namely the farm school.'*²³

The developments were primarily aimed at farms and villages without schools, *'because in these places no cultural work can begin before the school is established'*. At the same time, overcrowding in cities was also not a negligible aspect, so of course this direction also appeared among the aspirations. Klebelsberg drew attention to these circumstances as well: *'everyone knows that there are great shortages in the world of farms, but that the small number and inadequate condition of inner schools and classrooms has created such overcrowding in many places that effective teaching is almost impossible, it was barely noticed. In 1921-22, when the temporary decrease in the number of compulsory school children due to the war had barely felt its effect, in 916 elementary schools the number of students per teacher exceeded eighty, in 270 over one hundred and in 28 over one hundred and fifty.'* The Public Education Act of 1868 maximized the number of students per teacher at 80 children, but between the two world wars, this number was set at 60 – still not ideal, but feasible solution given the shortages.²⁴

The construction of teachers' apartments was equally important as that of educational institutions, Klebelsberg justified this by saying that otherwise *'the teacher cannot get an appropriate apartment out on the farm, and if we want the teacher to stay on the farm anyway, then we have to provide them with humane accommodation there.'*²⁵ Territorial losses also caused a problem regarding the distribution

²² KLEBELSBERG, Falusi népiskoláink kiépítése 1–2.

²³ KLEBELSBERG, Országos tanfelügyelői értekezéslet 1–2.

²⁴ 1926. évi VII. törvénycikk indokolása a mezőgazdasági népesség érdekeit szolgáló népiskolák létesítéséről és fenntartásáról <https://uj.jogtar.hu/#doc/db/77/id/92600007.TVI/>.

²⁵ KLEBELSBERG, Gróf Klebelsberg Kunó expozéja 4.

of teachers. As *Klebelberg* summarized it, only 31.2% of state-employed teachers worked in the remaining area at the time of the collapse of the Monarchy, but a significant number of teachers from the separated areas were placed in the existing schools within the new country borders, employing two teachers in one classroom with alternating teaching method. Based on the statistics of the 1923/24. school year, there were a total of 4376 teachers in state schools, so 1377 more compared to the 3099 persons in 1918, and 185 former state-employed teachers were assigned to other, non-state elementary schools. The organization of new positions for teachers did not solve the problem, it only alleviated it, however, further steps were necessary with the development of the infrastructure, since *'the number of classrooms and teachers' apartments barely increased and the 235 new elementary schools that were established in the last five years were also temporary, forced to start their operations in premises that barely met even the most modest needs.*²⁶

Klebelberg also held a lecture at the University of Berlin entitled 'Hungarian cultural policy after the war', which was published in the November 1, 1925, issue of the 'Teachers' Journal. In his presentation he covered most areas of cultural policy, including what he called the cause of the problems, so the settlement tendency and farm schools, as well as the reform of public schools. He highlighted that *'right now a bill is awaiting parliamentary discussion, which, on the one hand, provides for a school building fund that is bankrolled by the state with 2½ million gold crowns every year, on the other hand, it obliges local interests, primarily large estates, to contribute to the costs associated with the construction of school buildings and to transport children from distant farms and manors to school and back home by carriage. (...) Here, therefore, almost invincible difficulties must be solved, and if I manage to implement the general attendance of schools as planned, I will see in it the greatest reward of my role in public life.'*²⁷

The needs of the institutional system were summarized by *Klebelberg* as follows: *'80 new classrooms would be needed in state elementary schools and 402 in non-state elementary schools instead of the current rooms, which do not meet the goals of teaching at all; 537 classrooms are to be built in state elementary schools and 832 in non-state elementary schools to end alternating teaching; finally, to discontinue overcrowding, it will be necessary to build 508 classrooms and to organize the same number of teaching positions in non-state elementary schools. (...) In the whole territory of Hungary, in the inner and outer areas of municipalities, 3338 new classrooms and about half as many teachers' apartments should therefore be built. This number does not include the classrooms that can be used but are more or less mistreated and need a renovation, the number of which is very large, because since the beginning of the war, the maintenance of school buildings has been very abandoned. This number also does not include the need for classrooms, which will arise due to the schooling of compulsory school children who are still avoiding school today and the increase in the number of compulsory school children from the next academic year: taking this into account, even according to a careful calculation, the number of classrooms to be built will be at least 3500.'*²⁸

²⁶ 1926. évi VII. törvénycikk indokolása a mezőgazdasági népesség érdekeit szolgáló népiskolák létesítéséről és fenntartásáról <https://uj.jogtar.hu/#doc/db/77/id/92600007.TVI/>.

²⁷ KLEBELSBERG, Magyar kultúrpolitika a háború után 10.

²⁸ 1926. évi VII. törvénycikk indokolása a mezőgazdasági népesség érdekeit szolgáló népiskolák létesítéséről és fenntartásáról <https://uj.jogtar.hu/#doc/db/77/id/92600007.TVI/>.

4. Act VII of 1926 on the Establishment and Maintenance of Village Schools

Based on the cited considerations, the aim of the Act VII of 1926 on the Establishment and Maintenance of Village Schools²⁹ was to raise the cultural level of the Hungarian nation, for this purpose *‘primarily for the agricultural population, especially for the children of the farm residents of the Alföld, schools will be established and (classrooms and teachers’ apartments) will be built.’* Klebelsberg summarized the essence of his cultural policy in the detailed justification attached to this aim: *‘this goal is to maintain and strengthen the cultural supremacy of the Hungarian nation, which we need all the more, the more we want to place our constitution on a democratic basis, because political democracy is only possible where it is preceded and ensured by cultural democracy.’*³⁰ The schools were ordered to be established *‘in an area (district) with a radius of at least one and a half kilometres and at most four kilometres, scattered or concentrated, based on the average of the last three years, at least 20 families or 30 daily compulsory school children live and there is no other school within the district capable of accommodating all compulsory school children.’* Besides this, on those areas, where compulsory school children cannot be gathered appropriately based on the dispersion of farms, the unfavorable traffic conditions, or any other reasons, a boarding school or a day-care must be established to ensure schooling.

Klebelsberg also highlighted in the justification of the act that the state budget is in a difficult situation, so other forms of financing must be used. This was the aim of the measure, which assigned the costs of establishment and maintenance primarily to the interested individuals of the area, who were interested in the establishment of schools. The interested had to contribute to the establishment of the school (acquisition of land, construction, equipment) with the costs of acquiring the land and the necessary materials, as well as manual labour and cash (4. §). If this was not at all or only partially capable of covering the costs, the municipality had to assist secondly. Where the population of the district mainly belonged to one religious denomination, this denomination could also cover the costs. In addition to these, the state also contributed to the costs of the establishment of schools by law within the framework of available loans (1. §). The ‘National Elementary School Construction Fund’ was founded in order to cover the share of the State (2. §), from which also municipalities and interests could benefit in the form of state aid if necessary. The practice of building schools with the help of the ‘National Elementary School Construction Fund’ culminated in the time of *Bálint Hóman*, Minister of Religion and Public Education.³¹ It is important to note that the state may have contributed to the establishment of the school, but its further maintenance was in all cases the responsibility of the interested; for the costs of this, they could only use state aid for teacher salaries.³² The stipulation of the state aid was the use of the type-construction plans issued by the Ministry, which were created with a principle of

²⁹ 1926. évi VII. törvény a falusi népiskolák létesítéséről és fenntartásáról: <https://net.jogtar.hu/ezer-ev-torveny?docid=92600007.TV&searchUrl=/ezer-ev-torvenyei%3Fpagenum%3D39>.

³⁰ 1926. évi VII. törvénycikk indokolása a mezőgazdasági népesség érdekeit szolgáló népiskolák létesítéséről és fenntartásáról <https://uj.jogtar.hu/#doc/db/77/id/92600007.TVI/>.

³¹ See: NIKLAI, Die Volksunterrichtspolitik von Bálint Hóman 249–259.

³² 1926. évi VII. törvénycikk indokolása a mezőgazdasági népesség érdekeit szolgáló népiskolák létesítéséről és fenntartásáról <https://uj.jogtar.hu/#doc/db/77/id/92600007.TVI/>.

uniformization and also took into account artistic aspects in order to ensure that the population finds the new school buildings worthy of fulfilling their purpose.³³

As *Klebelberg* also highlighted in the quoted speech in Berlin, they also tried to take care of the transport of compulsory school children to ensure that every child could reach the schools that were further away in some cases. According to the act: *In order to ensure the obligation to attend school, the administrative committee can, if necessary, oblige the residents of the district with carrying device to transport children to and from school* (9. §).

Klebelberg deemed necessary to regulate the construction work of the schools in the law. The procedure of establishment of schools was the following: The Minister of Religion and Public Education gave detailed instructions to the state architectural offices regarding the constructions to be built based on the act, he made plans and budgets available to them. In addition to the professional work of the state architectural office, the county administrative committees played an important role in the preparation of the establishment of the schools. The Minister of Religion and Public Education sent to them the places where it seemed necessary to establish a school. After that, several authorities were involved in the process, so the assigned member of the administrative committee, the head of the state architecture office and the royal school inspector all had their part. Based on the legal political intention, the task of the royal school inspector was to manage the negotiations from the aspect of cultural- and educational policy, the head of the state architecture office to study the location from the point of view of construction, and the assigned member of the administrative committee was needed because he was the one who knew the local conditions best from other points of view. All together they consulted with the local participants – including representatives of the relevant denominational authorities – during an inspection, addressing the following questions: *‘1. do the local conditions make it necessary to establish a school in the area, specified in the aforementioned work? 2. should it be established as a state, municipal, interest-based or denominational school? 3. which areas’ children should be sent to the school, and if the establishment of an interest-based school seems appropriate, how should the school’s district be determined? 4. at which spot should the school building be?’* Based on the results of the discussion, the administrative committee decides, and divides the proposed schools into two groups according to whether their maintainers are able to build the school with their own financial resources or only with the use of state aid or loans (5. §).

5. Summary

On May 11, 1926, *Klebelberg* gave a report to the National Assembly. In the field of public education, he highlighted that *‘perhaps since 1867 no such work has been started as currently in the villages’*.³⁴ With this statement, he probably referred to the preparatory works of the Public Education Act of 1868.

Overcrowding in cities and the lack of schools in the countryside were serious problems, making the implementation of compulsory schooling impossible, and this fact not only did not help, but actually hindered the realization of cultural supremacy. As a result of these, it was

³³ T. MOLNÁR, *Klebelberg Kuno reformjai a közoktatásban*. http://acta.bibl.u-szeged.hu/28877/1/modszertani_048_001_003-010.pdf

³⁴ KLEBELSBERG, Gróf Klebelberg Kunó expozéja 4.

necessary to develop the institutional system, which *Klebelsberg* also recognized and started the development with an unprecedented level of financial expenses and organizational work, since the aim of his act was to ensure the complete creation of the school network.

The Public Education Act of 1926 provided the construction of 3.500 new classrooms and around 1500 teachers' apartments until 1930, setting up a sequence as necessary: firstly, schools must be set up in farm districts without schools, secondly in villages without schools, and thirdly, overcrowded classes must be divided into more classes by building new classrooms. The implementation of this plan was successful, a total of 5.000 new classrooms and teachers' apartments were completed by the appointed deadline.³⁵ The costs of this were mostly covered by the state, while the rest fell on the municipalities and denominations as school maintainers. The development is certainly to be appreciated, but we must add that the foundation of cultural supremacy with this as a cultural policy goal is more debatable.

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³⁵ MANN, Magyar oktatáspolitikusok 113.

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