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From Possibility To Reality: The Vajdaság Economic Development Program In The Service Of Rural Development

Abstract: As a national political goal, the prosperity of the Hungarian communities living as a minority in their homeland, i.e., in areas beyond the borders of the motherland is as old as the greatest tragedy in the history of the Hungarian nation, the division of the country caused by the peace decree ending the Great War, as a result of which Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and one-third of its population. The unique contribution of this study lies in the fact that it approaches 'homeland prosperity' not from the point of view of the territory of current Hungary, but, in fact, from without the borders, considering homeland as the territories where Hungarians live within the borders of another state. The Territorial and Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan of the Hungarian Communities of Vajdaság was formulated with the participation of nearly 30 experts, starting 2012 and eventually completed in 2015. In 2016, the Hungarian government launched an economic development program in the Carpathian Basin for the prosperity of fellow countrymen. The Vajdaság Economic Development Program (VEDP) is currently Hungary's largest cross-border economic development program, a pioneer in the field of implementing economic development programs abroad; it serves as a model for similar actions abroad. During its 7.5-year existence, to date, the Prosperitati Foundation has published 55 calls for tenders in 10 tender rounds in the fields of agriculture, tourism, village house purchase and business development. Summing up the figures of small, medium and high-value projects, the total value of the projects so far is more than HUF 177.43 billion (RSD 61.71 billion, €526.16 million). The value of the awarded non-refundable aid is nearly HUF 83.16 billion (RSD 29.14 billion, €248.4 million). The purpose of the study is to examine the ability of municipalities in Vajdaság to raise funds, with particular regard to the proportion of the population of the Hungarian community.

Key words: economy, agriculture, development, (local) economic development

JEL classification: O21, O38, O43, R10, R11

<https://doi.org/10.32976/stratfuz.2023.26>

Introduction

As a national political goal, the prosperity of the Hungarian communities living as a minority in their homeland, i.e., in areas beyond the borders of the motherland is as old as the greatest tragedy in the history of the Hungarian nation, the division of the country caused by the peace decree ending the Great War, as a result of which Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and one-third of its population. Hungarian communities that woke up to (through no fault of their own) redrawn borders outside of their mutilated Motherland have been searching for ways to prosper in the altered conditions in their homeland ever since the trauma of Trianon. The pillars of preserving national identity and thriving as a Hungarian in the homeland are, by default, the church, education, language use, information, and culture (nurturing tradition). Hungarians living outside the borders faced considerable challenges caused by the changed conditions not only in the areas listed above, but also in terms of their livelihood, i.e., economic prosperity. To support this statement, it is sufficient to examine the railway network map of historical Hungary, clearly showing a single center, i.e., Budapest, thus the commercial routes of the entire country gravitated to that center, creating a strong economic dependence over the centuries. When this connection was severed without any transition, it left the agriculture and economy of the detached areas in a vacuum.

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The lessons of the last hundred years, which the Hungarian people of Vajdaság have conveyed more and more emphatically in the past decade to the representatives of the largest interest representation organization of the Vajdaság Hungarian community, the Alliance of Vajdaság's Hungarians (VMSZ), are that in addition to the symbolic elements (education, language use, information, culture), the pragmatic, pressing questions also significantly influence people's decision to remain or move. It is difficult to imagine prosperity in one's homeland without economic empowerment. The new president of the VMSZ, elected first in 2007, was the first to formulate project-based politicking as the basis for realizing the community's goals. The conscious use of local resources available in Serbia and Vajdaság was one of the cornerstones of the approach (Hungarians in Vajdaság are Serbian taxpayers, therefore Serbian and Vajdaság resources must also be put to the service of community development), while the other one was the continuous and precise exploration of problems, solution options and methods for achieving solutions. The subsequent key step in the matter of remedying the economic and living difficulties affecting the community members' lives was devising a strategy. Namely, the Hungarian Association of Vajdaság and its president István Pásztor enlisted the help of professors Sándor Somogyi and Imre Nagy in 2012 to prepare a strategy addressing this question. Under their leadership and with the participation of nearly 30 professionals, the Territorial and Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan of the Vajdaság Hungarian Communities was prepared between 2012 and 2015. The primary objective of the strategic document, and the eventual program implemented as a result of it, was the development of economic life in Vajdaság, the Vajdaság region, the municipalities belonging to it, and the companies and farms operating in them.

The detailed review of domestic and international literature dealing with the field of economic development revealed that there was no well-summarized, generally accepted definition of local economic development, which in itself was not astounding, given that local economic development is a complex process characterized by countless factors and a wide range of tools. In the sea of different theories and trends, Mezei (2006) managed to identify two fundamental concepts: development was defined as strictly an intervention resulting in quality improvement, while economic development referred to a conscious intervention that was intended to influence the direction of economic processes and the extent of economic changes. Local economic development is separated from the concepts of area, settlement, regional, local, community and rural development, recognizing that territorial or functional overlaps occur between the key concepts related to development. Spatial development means the conscious management of the use of space, so it consists of spatial policy, regulatory, organizational/institutional and tool subsystems, similar to management systems. The consistency of the subsystems is an essential condition for the efficient operation of the system (Fargó 1994). Settlement development is "in a narrower sense, the assessment and implementation of the effects of investments that are more significant in terms of the life of the population" (Enyedi 2000, cited in: Farkas 2006), and in a broader sense, "the totality of concept creation, planning and implementation activities aimed at influencing settlement processes" (Farkas 2006). Regional development is the set of efforts aimed at mitigating unequal development between regions, in this sense it forms the segment of territorial policy for a single territorial level (Fargó 2001).

From the point of view of regional resources, regional development interventions can be planned using two basic approaches. In one case, the missing resources are replenished from the outside, i.e., investors are settled in the area, or significant subsidies are provided for development. In the other case, the aim is to uncover the region's own resources and try to utilize these resources as effectively as possible, "enabling" the local actors to do so. It is obvious that the needs of the population are increasingly served by local businesses. In regional development practice, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. The correct solution is to apply the optimal combination of these two logics for the given area. The local economy is a set of coordinated actions/activities, people, institutions, materials, resources and procedures that are motivated by

the specific characteristics of a settlement, micro- or micro-region, use these characteristics in a sustainable manner, and are operated by mobilizing its internal resources (Czene 2010).

The territorial and economic development of Vajdaság as a region is based to an equal degree on exogenous and endogenous forms of development. Endogenous development is a specific form of economic development that primarily builds on the internal resources of an area. These include natural resources and raw materials, skills, know-how and innovation capacity, specific local products (agriculture, forestry, handicrafts, local production), as well as the economy serving the residential function and attractive factors for tourism (weather conditions, natural and cultural heritage, attractive landscape and other comfort factors). In this case, exogenous development complements endogenous development, which is based on investments by foreign companies (from another state or region).

The idea of regional sustainability, i.e., local economic development, strengthening regional autonomy and advocating the flow of information, energy, money, products and raw materials within the region for as long as possible, is apparently at odds with another, much-pronounced European aspiration of regional development, namely, strengthening the competitiveness of regions. However, the contradiction is only apparent. Properly understood regional competitiveness means that each region finds its own, unique competitiveness factor. The (partially or fully) autonomously organized local economy based on internal resources can play a key role in this, and can be a considerable factor in competitiveness. (Czene 2010)

It is a matter of concern for many, under what conditions and to what extent (Kallio et al. 2010) regional economic development programs (cross-border) are able to achieve their goals and how they can be used in the local economy (Alpek-Oláh 2021; Farkas-Kovács 2018), taking into account their absorption capacity (Jucevicius et al. 2017).

Material and methodology

In 2016, the Hungarian government launched an economic development program in the Carpathian Basin for the preservation of foreign nationalities. The Vajdaság Economic Development Program (VEDP) is currently Hungary's largest cross-border economic development program, which is a pioneer in the implementation of economic development programs abroad and serves as a model for the implementation of similar programs abroad. The on-site implementation of the program is coordinated and supervised by the Prosperitati Foundation established specifically for this purpose. The purpose of the Vajdaság program is to support developments that will enable as many people as possible to find their footing, ensure their livelihood in their homeland and plan their future in Vajdaság.

From a methodological point of view, this study is primarily based on literature review and the examination of statistical data. The methodology and indicators used in the study require the collection and management of a significant quantity and quality of data. For the purposes of this study, the author relied on a number of databases, but primarily consulted the available Prosperitati Foundation databases focusing on the program implementation and development cycle between 2016 and 2023, broken down into municipal territorial units and calls for tenders. In order to examine the results of the VEDP and the effects on the overall community, Vojvodina's Hungarian entrepreneurs and producers, their development, competitiveness, and prosperity in the homeland, relevant demographic data are necessary. This research work used data on the population and population ratio of the Hungarian community in Vajdaság divided into local government units from the database of the Serbian Statistical Office for the 2022 census.

The research area overlapped with the program area of the VEDP, limited to the territory of Vajdaság, which is also a geographical region and a regional administrative unit of the same name. Hungarian is one of the six languages in official use in the region, so I use the Hungarian equivalent of the geographical names in the study. On the one hand, the target areas of the Hungarian communities in Vajdaság were North Bácska and the banks of the Tisza, which form the block area of the Hungarian communities within Vajdaság, as well as the numerous

Hungarian enclaves of North and Central Bánát. On the other hand, the scattered large cities (Újvidék, Zombor, Versec) and the smaller settlements, where Hungarians live (Doroszló, Maradék, Székelykeve, Ürményháza, etc.), were also included. Vajdaság Autonomous Province is the northern province of Serbia, enveloping the Pannon region, it is also a region of East-Central Europe and along the Danube, a multi-ethnic region with wide-ranging economic activity that maintains relations between the Carpathian Basin and the Balkans (Southeastern Europe).

The examined territorial unit is located in the northern part of Serbia (Mayers, 1980), which (partly) belongs to Central Europe, covering an estimated 21,500 km². Its seat is Újvidék. Its territory is divided by the Danube, the Tisza and the Sava into three geographical units: Bácska, Bánát and Szerémség. Bácska and West-Bánát are sandy plains filled by rivers, the continuation of the Hungarian Great Plain. The large rivers of the Carpathian Basin converge here. Bácska is a flat region, the southward continuation of the Hungarian Great Plain, with some hilly areas (Telecska Hills), featuring an average height of 90m above sea level. Most of it is made up of top-quality arable land, so-called black soil. It is surrounded by natural borders of the Danube on the south and west and by the Tisza on the east. The major part of Bánát, the Temesköz (large part of it in Romania), is a flat region belonging to the Hungarian Great Plain, while the south-eastern part of the area is covered by the Bánát Mountains (Romania). The soil in this territory is saline, thus animal husbandry and medicinal plants are more common here. Bánát is home to the highest point of the province, Kudrici-tető (641 m), which is the peak of the Versec Mountains, connected to the Krassó-Szörény Mountains in Romania. Szerémség is a mountainous-hilly area covered with forests. The Tarcal Mountains (Fruška Gora) rise here, where the world-famous Tarcal wine, King Matthias's favorite drink with special privileges, was produced. The mountains divert the Danube to the east.

In terms of public administration, the Vajdaság Autonomous Province has its own statute and a directly elected House of Representatives consisting of 120 representatives (its highest body), and the Provincial Government, operating with 12 ministries (regional ministries, in local terms a 'secretariat'). These two institutions hold the powers guaranteed by the constitution and deal with delegated tasks. The House of Representatives of Vajdaság is the highest body of the Vajdaság Autonomous Province (Vajdaság AT), which performs legislative and other tasks in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, laws and the Statute of Vajdaság. The ethnic composition of Vajdaság is mixed, consisting of 25 different nations. In the work of the House of Representatives of Vajdaság AT, the Hungarian, Slovak, Croatian, Romanian and Ruthenian languages and scripts are in official use on a par with the Serbian language and Cyrillic script, in accordance with the law. In order to emphasize these characteristics, it is also referred to as a mini-European Union. The region is the VII. (along the Danube) and through the Helsinki corridors marked X.b it communicates with the neighboring states, East-Central and Western Europe, as well as Southeastern Europe and the Middle East, but more recently, transactions in the regions of the Carpathian Basin and the Western Balkans (Romania and Croatia) also take place through Vajdaság. The province shares borders with Hungary in the north (174.4 km), Romania in the east (319 km), Croatia in the west (259.3 km), and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the southwest (33 km) (Nagy I., 2015).

Results

The population processes provide decisive information about the human resources capacity of each territorial unit, which determine the innovation capacity of the given area (Káposzta-Lőrinc-Urbáné, 2020). According to the 2022 census data, 182,321 people declared themselves to be Hungarian in Vajdaság, another 2,121 live outside the region, thus a total of 184,442 Hungarians live in Serbia, which means that 2.77 per cent of the Serbian population is Hungarian, while in Vajdaság this proportion is 10.48 per cent. The Hungarian population processes in Vajdaság have been studied by many researchers over the past years. At the beginning of the 20th century, on the territory of today's Vajdaság there were 378,634

Hungarians (Gábrity Molnár, 2005a). According to the official census data, the population showed an increasing trend until 1961 (having experienced the period of the two great wars), when the number of Hungarians reached 442,561. After that, their number decreased continuously, taking into account both absolute and relative values.

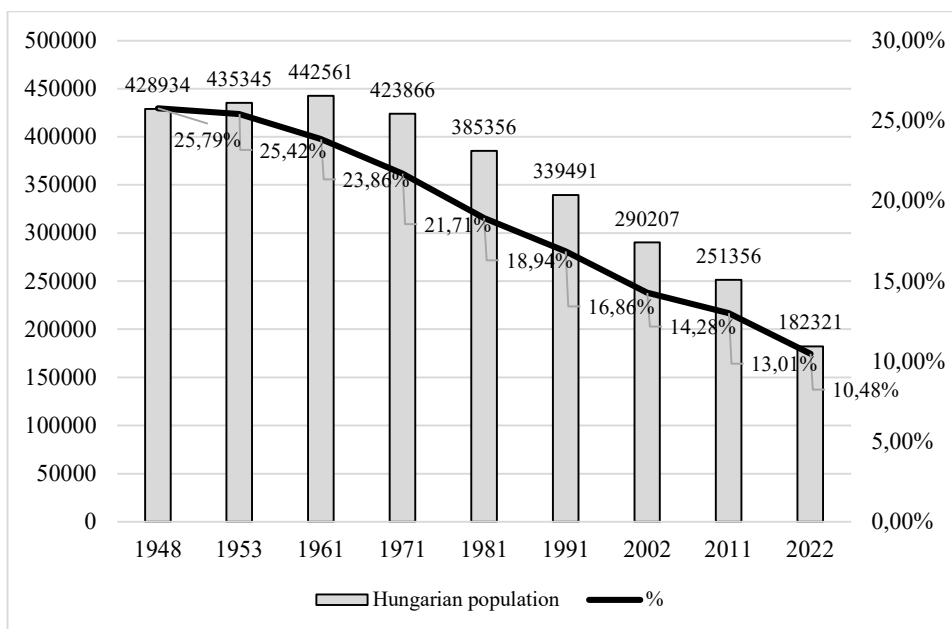


Figure 1: Tracing the Hungarian population in Vajdaság 1948–2022

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2023), author's editing

The number of Hungarians decreases by about 7,000 every year - as a result of negative natural reproduction, emigration and other negative demographic changes affecting the minority community. This figure corresponds to the population of two average villages. Sociologists define the Hungarian community in Vajdaság as an aging and shrinking community (Badis, 2017). The main causes of weight loss are, among others, natural weight loss (the number of deaths exceeding the number of births), migration (Hungarian families moving to the Motherland or abroad), and assimilation (in mixed marriages, the processes in matters of religion, language usage and education are typically unfavorable from the Hungarian community's point of view). Gábrity Molnár (2005 b) articulated additional reasons, highlighting the economic factor as a crucial issue. Apart from Vajdaság, the wider regions of Central and Eastern Europe also feature numerous similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics, which affect the aging of the population and relations between generations. These include adverse mortality trends, especially male excess mortality in some countries (shortening of life expectancy and unfavorable trends in gender ratio), a combination of natural population declines and net emigration. In these countries, rapid demographic change coincided with political, economic and social transformations (Botev, 2012).

Table 1: The number and proportion of the Hungarian community in Vajdaság and in municipalities where they live

	Municipality	Overall population	Hungarians	Percentage of Hungarians
1.	Vajdaság	1,740,230	182,321	10.48
2.	Szabadka	123,952	37,200	30.01
3.	Magyarkanizsa	20,141	16,740	83.11
4.	Topolya	26,228	14,599	55.66
5.	Zenta	17,953	13,590	75.70
6.	Óbecse	30,681	12,482	40.68
7.	Ada	13,293	9,666	72.71
8.	Nagybecskerek	105,722	8,174	7.73
9.	Zombor	70,818	6,539	9.23
10.	Temerin	25,780	5,607	21.75
11.	Kishegyes	9,983	5,174	51.83
12.	Nagykikinda	49,326	4,856	9.84
13.	Csóka	8,556	3,835	44.82
14.	Törökbecse	19,886	2,915	14.66
15.	Kúla	35,592	2,660	7.47
16.	Szenttamás	14,357	2,609	18.17
17.	Begaszentgyörgy	13,412	2,286	17.04
18.	Törökkanizsa	8,627	1,956	22.67
19.	Magyarcsernye	8,147	1,247	15.31
20.	Torontálszécsány	10,544	1,143	10.84

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Census 2022., author's editing

The Hungarian community in Vajdaság created the institutional system and mechanisms necessary for the implementation of the program announced on November 18, 2015 and launched on January 31, 2016, in the period between the two dates. The Serbian legal entity that created, implemented and supervised the program was registered, and the regional offices handling the acceptance of applications were defined. Initially, Information centers and customer service points were opened in 8 settlements: Szabadka, covering close to a fifth of Vajdaság's Hungarian population, and Topolya, gravitating towards the geographical center of Vajdaság, Magyarkanizsa and Zenta located on the banks of the river Tisza, Zombor in West-Bácska, Óbecse and Temerin in South-Bácska, and Nagybecskerek in Central-Bánság, with further offices established later in Pancsova in South-Bánság.

support) was available from the third tender round. Accordingly, the grants can be divided into three groups based on the total cost of the projects:

- a) small grants - the total cost of the projects usually does not exceed the counter value of €50,000.00 in RSD, the highest amount of the non-refundable grant was between €10,000.00 and €20,000.00, the minimum share required for the implementation of the projects is 25%
- b) medium-scale grants - the total net cost of the projects was between €50,000.00 and €500,000.00 in RSD, the projects were realized using a deductible (at least 25%), a loan (at least 40%) and non-refundable support (up to 35%) and the loans were provided by commercial banks based in Serbia cooperating with the Prosperitati Foundation
- c) large-scale grants - the total net cost of the projects exceeds the equivalent of €500,000.00 in RSD, the projects' co-payment (at least 25%), loans (at least 30-40% - agriculture/industrial activity) and non-refundable support (at most 35-45% - agriculture/industrial activity), the loans were provided by commercial banks based in Serbia cooperating with the Prosperitati Foundation

Table 2: Summary of the Vajdaság Economic Development Program results

#	Type of call for tenders	Number of supported projects	Grant awarded (million RSD)	Total value of projects (million RSD)
1	Large-scale projects	82	13,258.90	30,516.01
2	Medium-scale projects	251	2,551.88	6,903.09
3	Support for the purchase of a village house	1,163	1,367.4	1,699.6
4	Support for company equipment purchase and implementation of standards	1,947	1,803	2,755.5
5	Support of ongoing businesses	669	569.5	601.5
6	Small-scale grants in tourism	131	148.34	186.1
7	Small-scale grants in agriculture			
7.1	<i>Crop production in arable field and in a closed system</i>	385	447.9	662.3
7.2	<i>Purchase of breeding stock and bees</i>	1,021	1,228	1,739.6
7.3	<i>Purchase of ice protection nets</i>	6	3.4	4.4
7.4	<i>Purchase of agricultural machinery</i>	6,896	5,789.6	8,991
7.5	<i>Purchase of irrigation systems</i>	114	64.9	94.8
7.6	<i>Development of multi-year plantations</i>	392	382.7	531.4
7.7	<i>Products with greater added value (production of local products)</i>	157	134.3	185.6
8	Land purchase	1,058	1,548.2	5,834.8
	In total:	14,272	29,298.02	60,705.7

Source: Prosperitati Foundation, 2023., author's editing

Summing up the figures of small, medium and high-value projects, the total value of the projects so far has been more than HUF 177.43 billion (RSD 60.7 billion, €526.16 million). The value of the awarded non-refundable aid has been close to HUF 83.16 billion (29.29 billion RSD, €248.4 million). Highlights of the program include the purchase of 5,374 ha of agricultural land, creation of 1,110 new homes and 667 new businesses. In addition, it has contributed to the

development of more than 2,000 businesses and 5,600 agricultural producers, ensuring the livelihood of 12,500 workers. As a result, 2,262 suppliers from a total of 20 countries participated in the program.

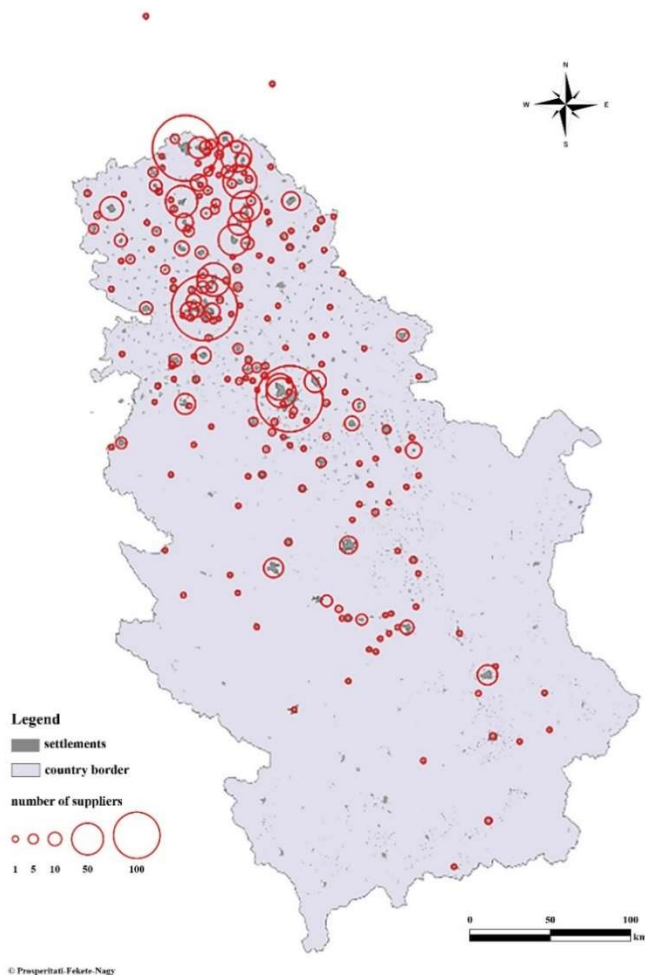


Figure 3: Territorial distribution of the suppliers of the winning applicants of the Prosperitati Foundation in Serbia

Source: Nagy, I. (2022)

The regional distribution of companies that supply businesses and farmers clearly demonstrates the regional impact of subsidies. A positive trade boom was felt throughout Serbia. The priority areas are primarily Szabadka, Újvidék and, in central Serbia, Belgrade as well as some settlements in southern Serbia. The calculation of how many Hungarians in Vojvodina had a direct impact on their lives from VEDP must take into account the following: number of family farms, businesses and natural persons that received support in the program, number of new businesses started within the framework of the program, number of employees of successful applicants, each one calculated as a single family. Conversely, the fact that, according to the 2022 census, the average number of members of Serbian families is 2.55, must also be considered. To sum up, this data leads to the conclusion that the program had a direct impact on the lives of approximately 60,000 Vojvodina Hungarians. This calculation does not include the secondary effects of the program on the supplier circles (enterprises, employees and their family

members), which cannot be limited either to the Vojvodina region or to the Hungarian community in Vojvodina.

The question arises whether the members of the Vajdaság Hungarian community participated in the development program with equal opportunities depending on their territorial distribution. At this point, it is inevitable to define the concepts of block and scattered Hungarian communities, i.e., enclaves. According to the definition of Gábrity Molnár (2005 b), the concept of scattered Hungarian communities generally refers to the stratum of Hungarians across the border that live in less than 30% of their settlements and micro-regions compared to the majority nations, who are in a disadvantaged linguistic, ethnic and religious situation, and are separated from the national body, are isolated, with a degraded institutional system, exposed to the constant danger of liquidation. Based on this, those Vajdaság municipalities are considered block Hungarian municipalities in which the Vajdaság Hungarian community is in the absolute majority or whose population reaches at least 30% and Hungarian representatives are actively involved in the municipality (Szabadka, Topolya, Kishegyes, Ada, Zenta, Magyararkanizsa, Csóka, Óbecse). The other municipalities are defined as enclaves. The examination of the distribution of settlements in relation to the successful applications reveals that 180 applicants living in settlements won support in the program, which covers 39 of the 45 municipalities in Vajdaság.

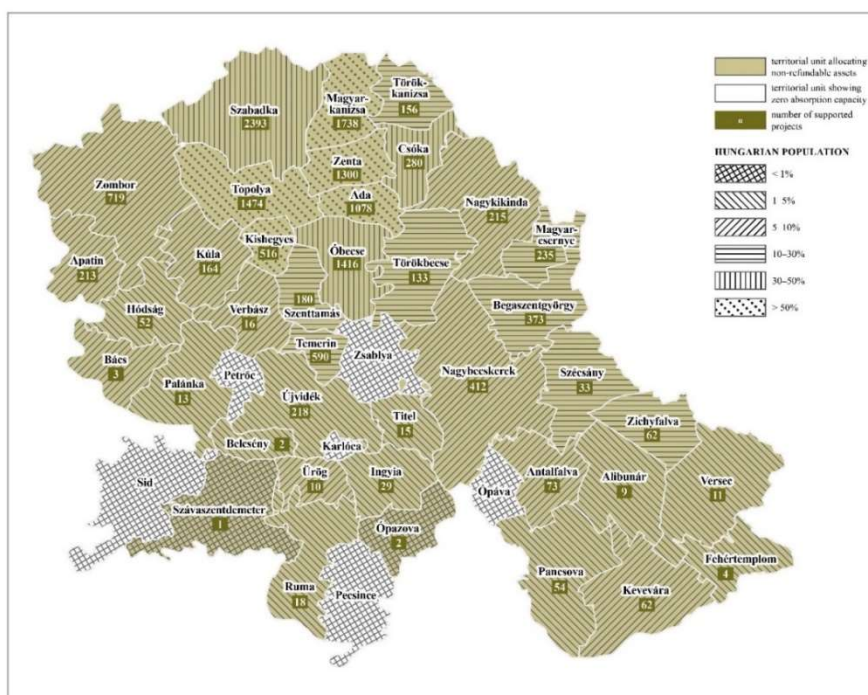


Figure 4: Number of supported projects in relation to the proportion of the Hungarian population

Source: Foundation Prosperitati (2023), author's editing

The six municipalities in which no development was implemented: Karlóca (Hungarian population ratio 1.85%), Ópáva (0.37%), Zsablya (0.80%), Pecsínce (0.10%), Petrőc (0.65 %) and Sid (0.47%). A total of 596 people of Hungarian nationality live in these municipalities, according to the census data, which is 0.33% of the Vajdaság Hungarian community. Based on these, it can be concluded that practically all Hungarian-inhabited parts of Vajdaság were developed. The greatest number of projects were implemented in Szabadka, Magyararkanizsa and Topolya. A deeper analysis requires the introduction of a new indicator to demonstrate how much development volume per Hungarian resident has been realized in the territory of the given

municipality. This indicator takes into account the development of the proportion of Hungarians in the area of each municipality and the size of the support source allocated to the given area.

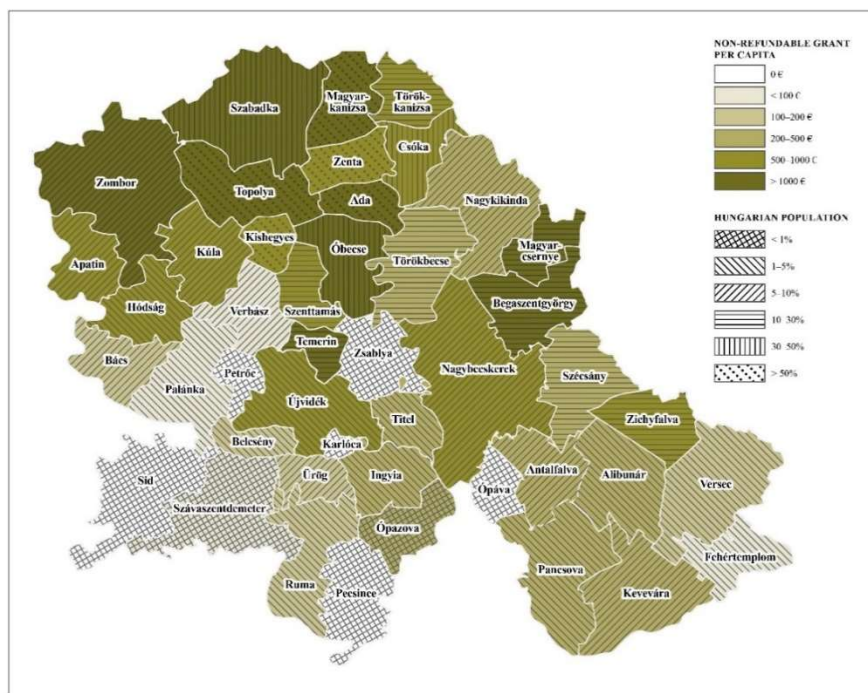


Figure 5: Non-refundable grant per capita in relation to the proportion of the Hungarian population

Source: Foundation Prosperitati (2023), author's editing

Examining the amount of support per capita shows that the municipalities with the highest subsidy amount exceeding €1,000 per capita (taking into account the number of Hungarian residents), i.e., the municipalities with the greatest ability to absorb funds) include Magyarkanizsa, Topolya and Ada, with an absolute Hungarian majority, moreover, Szabadka and Óbecs, which have a significant and organized but minority Hungarian community, and Magyarcsérnye, Begaszentgyörgy, Zombor and Temerin, which are enclaves. The analysis of the economic structure of the most successfully performing territorial units reveals that, apart from agriculture, industrial production was also supported. These figures underline that both the block and enclave communities participated in the tender processes with equal chances and similar efficiency.

Conclusions

The Vajdaság Economic Development Program is currently Hungary's largest cross-border economic development program, which is a pioneer in the implementation of economic development programs abroad and serves as a model for the implementation of similar programs abroad. Following the initial success of the Vajdaság program, economic development programs were launched in other regions outside the borders, using the experience of the Vajdaság model. First of all, in Transcarpathia, then in the Slovak Highland, Transylvania, Muravidék and Drávaszög. It can be stated that economic development has by now become a national political tool for promoting prosperity in the homeland.

Summing up the figures of small, medium and high-value projects, the total value of the projects so far is more than HUF 177.43 billion (RSD 60.7 billion, €526.16 million). The value of the

awarded non-refundable aid is nearly HUF 83.16 billion (RSD 29.29 billion, €248.4 million). With the realized investment value of more than €500 million, Hungary emerged as one of the most significant investors in Vajdaság. The winning tenders promote the strengthening of Vajdaság's regional role and the development of the economy of Serbia as a whole. Taking into account the territorial distribution of the financial support and the number of successful applications per applicant, one can conclude that the support was not only distributed evenly in terms of territory in Vajdaság, but also reached a large number of individual applicants, given that the number of applicants with one winning application is the highest among individual applicants.

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