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Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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Contested Self-Governance: Dilemmas of Security in Western Hungary (1867-1918)

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I. The Topic of the Dissertation, Background, and Objectives of the Research

The dissertation, titled "Contested Self-Governance: Dilemmas of Security in Western Hungary (1867-1918)," examines the security dilemmas of historical Western Hungary – the counties of Vas, Sopron, and Moson, as well as the free royal cities of Sopron, Kismarton, Ruszt, and Kőszeg – during the era of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, between 1867 and 1918. The central thesis of the dissertation is that although the region appeared stable and peaceful on the surface during this period, underlying tensions indirectly contributed to the Austria-Hungary territorial conflict and the creation of the province of Burgenland following World War I. The work analyzes the complex interplay of political conflicts surrounding identity formation, modernization, and public administration through the concept of "contested self-governance" in a region and era that has typically been overlooked in broader historical narratives.

The research originated from the observation that the disintegration of Western Hungary after World War I is often presented as an unexpected event in historiography, even though the apparent stability of the region during pre-war peacetime concealed deeper problems. From the mid-19th century onwards, the Habsburg Monarchy increasingly became a realm of instability and uncertainty due to the threat posed by strengthening national movements. The multi-ethnic border regions of the empire were often governed

neglectfully by the Habsburg elites, as they were perceived as potentially endangered by ethnic or social conflicts. By the end of the century, the rise of liberalism and nationalism raised a whole series of internal and external security issues that fundamentally shaped the politics and social structures of the late Habsburg Monarchy. This research examines the effects of these modernization processes at the regional level (in this case, an internal borderland). The work also addresses the concept of "national indifference," which suggests that the devastation of World War I and the subsequent political upheaval were what destabilized multi-ethnic societies. However, delving deeper, the research also investigated whether the unintended consequences of nation-state building and modernization contributed to later political and social disintegration through the triggering of various security concerns even before the war.

The main objective of the dissertation is to demonstrate that the post-World War I disintegration of Western Hungary was not a spontaneous event but the consequence of complex processes that began decades earlier. The fundamental hypothesis of the research is that the historical region comprising the three counties and four free royal cities can be considered a special regional entity in a cultural-social sense, even if not politically, and that the period between 1867 and 1918 represents a distinct era in its history. The work aims to explore how modernization – particularly modern nationalism and nation-state building – created and escalated security

problems at local and regional levels. Through this, the modern-era challenges affecting the entire Habsburg Monarchy also become more understandable.

The research primarily sought answers to two main questions: (1) Which security concepts were dominant during the Dualism era that influenced Western Hungary? (2) What security narratives were held and what measures were implemented by the competing national, regional, and local elites during this period? The dissertation aims to determine whether various securitization processes led to increasing insecurity in the region before the Great War, thereby preparing the ground for the region's post-war disintegration. Furthermore, the work also aimed to demonstrate the theoretical and methodological applicability of historical security studies research through a specific late Habsburg-era case study.

II. Theoretical Background and Methodology of the Research, Sources, Temporal and Spatial Extent of the Research, and Structure of the Dissertation

Exploring the security history of Western Hungary during the era of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1867-1914) necessitated a deeper understanding of the historical and philosophical evolution of security. The dissertation therefore relied primarily on the theoretical and methodological guidance of historical security studies. By examining the contemporary concept of security, as understood and experienced by actors of the time, it became possible to uncover the

complex processes that shaped the political dynamics of the late Habsburg era in the given region. Although the traditions of Hungarian historiography are not theory-oriented, this dissertation was created through a co-tutelle arrangement between a German and a Hungarian university. The integration of the strengths of these two academic traditions, which differ in many respects, provided a shared intellectual history foundation for the research, allowing for the interpretation of the continuously changing concept of security in a historical context. Instead of historicizing present-day security concepts, the work aimed to reconstruct the interpretations and narratives of security that originated from the history of European political thought and which contemporary actors could also identify with.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation was provided by historical security studies. This approach focuses on examining the concept of security in historical context, taking into account its social constructedness and changing meanings. The work reviewed the major schools of security thought (classical liberalism, realism, neorealism, neoliberalism, constructivism, critical security studies) and their historical relevance. It particularly relied on the social constructivist approach of the so-called Copenhagen School and the concept of "securitization." The latter denotes the discursive process whereby a political actor (securitizing actor) portrays a given issue as an existential threat to a referent object (e.g., state, nation), and if this is accepted by the relevant audience, it allows for the application

of extraordinary security measures. The dissertation applied this theory critically to the historical context, taking into account the limitations of the "speech act" theory in the analysis of historical sources and the specificities of multilingual societies. The analysis also considered the five sectors of security (military, environmental, economic, societal, political), as defined by the Copenhagen School, but adapted them to the characteristics of the historical era. The theoretical framework of the dissertation also integrated relevant elements of German conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte) and the Cambridge School of the history of political thought (Skinner, Pocock).

Methodologically, the dissertation primarily employs qualitative methods, operating at the mezzo-level of political history, with a perspective spanning a longer period (approximately half a century). A central element of the research is the analysis of contemporary political discourses and narratives related to the concept of security, with particular attention to county and city-level debates and decision-making processes. The analysis extended to questions of political representation (e.g., local elections) and the role of various political, ethnic, and social groups in the region. Qualitative research is supplemented by quantitative analyses that utilize demographic and cultural data (e.g., census data, literacy, religious distribution, occupational structure) to examine regional identity and social changes. The aim of the work was not to write a traditional, textbook-like regional history, but to demonstrate the application of

the historical security studies approach through a specific case study that opens up new perspectives for understanding the region's general history as well. The methodology emphasizes the importance of historical context and the reconstruction of contemporary concepts, avoiding the pitfall of projecting present-day values and social expectations onto the past.

The research is based on a broad range of sources. As primary sources, it utilizes archival materials preserved in various institutions of the Hungarian National Archives: in the National Archives, relevant documents of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Interior; in the Győr-Moson-Sopron County Archives (Moson and Sopron branches), documents of the lord-lieutenants, vice-lieutenants, and general assemblies of Moson and Sopron counties, as well as the archive of the city of Sopron; in the Vas County Archives, documents of the lord-lieutenants, vice-lieutenants, and general assembly of Vas county, as well as the archive of the city of Kőszeg. Additionally, it utilized relevant documents from the Kismarton archive located in the Burgenland Provincial Archives (Landesarchiv Burgenland), as well as the archive of the city of Rust. Archival sources are supplemented by relevant contemporary Hungarian and German language local and national press (e.g., *Mosonvármegye*, *Sopronvármegye*, *Vasvármegye*, *Kőszeg és Vidéke*, *Ödenburger Zeitung*, *Pesti Napló*, *Budapesti Hírlap*). Secondary sources include extensive Hungarian, German, and English language literature related to the topic,

including monographs and studies dealing with the history of the Habsburg Monarchy, Hungary during the Dualism era, Western Hungary/Burgenland, as well as security and nationalism studies.

The primary temporal focus of the research is the Dualist era of the Habsburg Monarchy, from the Compromise of 1867 to the end of World War I in 1918. However, to understand the antecedents, the study also touches upon the transitional period between 1848 and 1867 (revolution, neo-absolutism, provisional period). Post-war developments (1918-1921) are discussed in Chapter V, which presents the path leading to the region's disintegration. The spatial extent of the research is the region of historical Western Hungary. The dissertation defines this region as the collective area of the counties of Vas, Sopron, and Moson, and the four free royal cities located within their territory and closely connected to them – Sopron (Ödenburg), Kőszeg (Güns), Kismarton (Eisenstadt), and Ruszt (Rust). The region was an internal borderland of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy between Austria (Cisleithania) and Hungary (Transleithania), and as such, functioned as a historical-geographical link connecting the two parts of the empire.

The dissertation consists of six main chapters, plus an introduction, conclusion, bibliography, and appendix.

I. Introduction: Presents the research context, research questions, and hypotheses, reviews relevant literature, elaborates on the theoretical framework (with particular emphasis on the history of the concept of

security and securitization theory), and describes the methodological approach.

II. Concepts of Security in Late Habsburg Hungary: Analyzes Hungarian political language and the discourse on security, explores the security-relevant impact and legacy of the period between 1848 and 1867, examines the security aspects of the Compromise (1867), and analyzes the perceptions of security related to the defense debate and the "happy peacetime".

III. Contested Self-Governance: The "County Question" as a Security Issue: Examines whether Western Hungary existed as a region, analyzes the "county question" in Hungary and its security implications, explores the power aspirations of local and national elites in the three western counties, and analyzes urban policy in Western Hungary during the Dualism era.

IV. Dilemmas of Security in Western Hungary (1867-1914): This chapter discusses five case studies in detail: the issue of public safety and the "betyár crisis," the security aspects of antisemitism and the politicization of religion, national elections as a security risk (using the example of the 1905 Kőszeg election), the local and regional dimensions of the 1905-1906 domestic political crisis, and the nationality question in the case of the German and Slovene minorities in Western Hungary.

V. Towards the Disintegration of Historical Western Hungary (1914-1921): Presents the impact of World War I and wartime hardships on the region, and analyzes the path from national indifference to the post-war border conflict.

VI. Conclusion: Summarizes the main findings of the research, emphasizing the significance of the historical security studies approach in understanding the region's history.

VII. Bibliography and VIII. Appendix: Contains the utilized archival sources, press materials, and literature, as well as supplementary tables, maps, and a trilingual (English, German, Hungarian) summary of the dissertation.

III. Main Findings of the Dissertation

The dissertation argues that incorporating historical security perspectives is essential for a deeper understanding of the history of the Habsburg Monarchy. Security is not merely a military and political concept, but one shaped, debated, and constructed by social, economic, and cultural factors. The processes of modernization and nation-state building, while aiming for progress, paradoxically created new security risks and dilemmas that contributed to the disintegration of the old order.

The concept of security was already intensely debated in this era, and therefore changed dynamically. Political actors – including the dynasty, the imperial, national, regional, and local elites – often

invoked perceived or real existential threats (i.e., securitized certain issues) in order to strengthen their own positions, legitimize their policies, and undermine their opponents. Although the arguments and actions of political actors invoking security (the securitization process) served to preserve and strengthen their own positions, they often, and in the longer term, undermined social cohesion, to which the contemporary rise of modern mass media (printed press) also contributed significantly. Beneath the surface of apparent peace, stability, and security, deep tensions existed in the society of the time even before World War I, which were only exacerbated by the political conflicts of the era. These processes raised numerous security dilemmas at national, regional, and local levels alike. The conclusions drawn from the analysis of these issues constitute the most important findings of the dissertation.

Public Security: Maintaining public order posed a serious challenge at the beginning of the Dualist era, particularly in relation to the so-called "betyár crisis." Similar to the betyárs, the nomadic Roma population was also often treated as a security risk by the authorities and public opinion. The establishment of centralized law enforcement agencies (gendarmerie) in 1881 was a response to these challenges, but social prejudices against marginalized social groups persisted.

Administration and Self-Governance: The administrative reforms of the Dualism era, aimed at modernization and strengthening central state power, significantly reduced the historically developed

autonomy of the counties and cities. This process, the so-called "county question," led to fierce political debates between centralists and municipalists (supporters of autonomy). The debate also had a security dimension, as proponents of centralism argued for centralization by invoking the dangers inherent in the nationality question, while their opponents saw the latent centralization as an infringement of national and communal liberties. The case studies of the Western Hungarian counties and cities demonstrate the local reception and conflicts related to these reforms (e.g., the failure of the institution of city lord-lieutenant, and the enforced integration of Kőszeg, Kismarton, and Ruszt into the counties).

Antisemitism and Religious Politics: The strengthening political antisemitism from the 1880s onwards, fueled by the Tiszaeszlár blood libel trial, also appeared in Western Hungary in the form of violent incidents. From then on, the Jewish community was treated as a security risk, and influenced by certain extremist political actors, antisemitism remained a constant element of public debates. The church policy debates of the 1890s (separation of state and church, introduction of civil marriage) further deepened the ideological division between liberal modernizers and Catholic traditionalists, leading to the creation of the Catholic People's Party, which also utilized antisemitic rhetoric. The government also treated political Catholicism as a potential internal threat.

Elections and Domestic Political Crisis: The limited nature of the electoral system (restricted suffrage) and the frequent corruption and

violence during campaigns themselves posed a security risk, well exemplified by the violent events of the 1905 Kőszeg election campaign (e.g., the "revolver incident"). The outcome of the 1905 national elections (the victory of the opposition) led to a serious domestic political crisis, during which a constitutional struggle unfolded between the government and the opposing counties ("county resistance"). The counties of Western Hungary (particularly Sopron and Moson) actively participated in this resistance, which was based on historical county rights and the traditions of passive resistance, bringing to the surface the internal fragility of the Dualist system.

Nationality Question: The concept of a "unified, undivided Hungarian political nation" held by the Hungarian political elite and the accompanying magyarization efforts (e.g., school policy, magyarization of place names and personal names, support for Hungarian cultural associations) created tension and frustration among nationality movements. In Western Hungary, in the case of the German minority, Pan-German propaganda posed a potential security risk in the eyes of the Hungarian authorities, particularly after the turn of the century (e.g., Patry pamphlet, Popovici plan). In the case of the Slovene minority, magyarization efforts ("Vend action"), the Pan-Slav movement, and external influences of Slovene national awakening (e.g., Saint Mohor Society) clashed, which local Hungarian authorities and elites sought to counter with various methods, often invoking security arguments.

The War and Disintegration: World War I acted as a catalyst, bringing to the surface and intensifying the latent tensions of the Dualism era. The hardships of the war (human losses, economic difficulties, supply problems, refugee crisis) undermined social cohesion and loyalty to the Monarchy, particularly among the nationalities. The military defeat and the collapse of the Monarchy (1918) opened the way for territorial disputes. Austrian claims to the German-inhabited areas of Western Hungary, the political chaos in Hungary (Aster Revolution, Hungarian Soviet Republic, counter-revolution), and the decisions of the great powers (Treaties of Saint-Germain and Trianon) ultimately led to the division of the region. The process was further complicated by the Western Hungarian Uprising and the attempts by King Charles IV to return (1921). The Sopron plebiscite, although it favored Hungary regarding Sopron and its surroundings, finalized the region's division and the formation of the province of Burgenland in Austria.

One of the main conclusions of the dissertation relates to the traditional historiographical approach to the Dualism-era administrative and county question. Until now, the complex relationship between regional administration and local identities, intertwined with the nationality question, has not really been considered a key disintegrative force in the literature dealing with the Dualism era. Traditional interpretations of the transformation of Hungary's territorial administration have primarily depicted the issue as a linear development, an inevitable concomitant of modernization

and nation-state building. The concept of "contested self-governance" challenges this view by interpreting the loss of historical forms of autonomy as a security issue. The research findings show that the decline of centuries-old structures and the creation of their modern counterparts posed a great challenge even for those who supported the modernizing transition, not to mention those who were forced to suffer the changes. The organically developed organization of a city, a region, or a country is not merely a matter of structure or administration, but also a matter of culture and identity, which historically strongly shape the given organization. The geographical-political superstructure formed from counties, districts, free royal cities, etc., was not merely the structure of historical Hungary, but its essential characteristic. These units all became integral parts of specific local, regional, and national identities; therefore, a thorough examination of this issue necessarily raises the need for the analysis of securitization processes.

Another main conclusion of the dissertation nuances the history of the post-World War I disintegration of Western Hungary. The western borderland of Hungary underwent a triple collapse after the World War: its own fragmentation was compounded by the simultaneous disintegration of the Habsburg Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. Although this is a relatively well-researched topic, the post-war Austria-Hungary border conflict generally appears in the literature as if it erupted rather unexpectedly in the autumn of 1918. Indeed, unlike other regions of Central-Eastern

Europe, Western Hungary seemed relatively stable and secure before the war, with little significant political or social unrest, at least on the surface. However, the research findings show that the disintegration of this region was not a sudden break, but the culmination of a complex, prolonged process with roots reaching back decades before the actual border conflict. While recent research has pointed to the devastation of the war and the resulting political turmoil as significant destabilizing factors, this dissertation draws attention to the consequences of pre-war modernization and nation-state building. By examining long-term historical processes, the complex factors that shape national, regional, and local identities, and which contribute to political and social upheavals, become better understood.

The third main conclusion of the dissertation is that historical security studies can offer a valuable contribution to Hungarian historiography, in this case, the study of the late Habsburg Empire. The second half of the 19th century marked a significant turning point from a security perspective. The once mighty Habsburg Empire was fundamentally shaken in the mid-century by the rise of liberalism and nationalism. The new era raised numerous internal and external security issues that could not have even arisen in the early modern period. The reason for this can be sought in the dramatically accelerated social changes of the era. Unlike before, the state faced increasing pressure to guarantee the security of the people. Winning or avoiding armed conflicts was no longer sufficient

in the eyes of the public; peace at most guaranteed people's physical safety but not necessarily their sense of security. The modernizing state took on increasingly more tasks while attempting to bring various spheres of society under its control. By the end of the 19th century, increasingly bureaucratic states like the Habsburg Monarchy had created the new institutions, procedures, and power mechanisms that were the main technical preconditions for security measures. At the same time, politics broke out of the narrow circle of rulers and their advisors, as the masses became a political factor through the expansion of suffrage. Influencing them proved crucial, leading to the growing role of propaganda and the media. Political actors discovered that instilling fear was at least as effective a tool for mobilizing voters as guaranteeing their security.

IV. Publications Related to the Dissertation Topic

Székely, Tamás: Az 1905-1906. évi belpolitikai válság és vármegyei ellenállás Nyugat-Magyarországon, In: Cser Kovács, Ágnes; Mátay, Mónika; Pók, Attila; Sümegi, István (szerk.) Tetté vált gondolatok: Számvetés és jövőkép az első évtized végén Budapest, Magyarország, Kőszeg, Magyarország: Gondolat, Felsőbbfokú Tanulmányok Intézete (2024) 458 p. pp. 328-339., 12 p.

Székely, Tamás: "Vend akció", avagy a nemzetiségi kérdés mint biztonsági probléma a századforduló Nyugat-Magyarországán In: Murber, Ibolya; Nagy, Adrienn (szerk.) Kerülőutakon: Az osztrák-magyar határ 20. századi története, Pécs, Magyarország: Kronosz Kiadó (2024) 415 p. pp. 73-96., 24 p.

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