

Changes in administration, spatial structure, and demography in the Partium region since the Treaty of Trianon*

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Following the Trianon decision, the name Partium re-emerged, this time as the name of a major region. When the border was defined, the infrastructure track overrode the ethnic, catchment, historic, administrative, and terrain dividing lines in the region. The previously balanced ethnic structure of the region's population has changed to a Romanian majority. In terms of spatial structure, the former market line has become a periphery, where only a few gateway cities managed to remain economically successful due to logistical reasons.

The new frontier suddenly eliminated the competitive situations of some city-pairs (for example Debrecen–Oradea, Szeged–Arad), creating new ones instead (Timișoara–Arad, Oradea–Cluj, Satu Mare–Baia Mare). The large cities that found themselves on the Romanian side of the border could not compete for major developments because their positions were strategically difficult to defend. Therefore, a peripherization of the border region took place. The ethnic change in the cities took place before the fall of Communism, while the population change in the suburban areas is taking place today.

Keywords:

border region,
spatial structure,
territorial-administrative system,
demographic change

Introduction

Partium is a geographic area located on the eastern edge of the Hungarian Great Plain, in the Romanian-Hungarian border region. The name originates in a times past political concept (1570–1860), referring to those ‘parts’ of Hungary outside Transylvania that formed together with Transylvania proper the Transylvanian Principality (later Grand Duchy). In the centuries before the Ottoman occupation, this area was one of the prosperous centres of the Kingdom of Hungary. The

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market line of Eastern Hungary was formed along the relief contact areas, and the flood-free plain had one of the densest settlement networks in the medieval kingdom (Süli-Zakar–Csüllög 2000, 2003). While the periphery of the Great Plain was considered a socio-economic centre, the eastern highlands existed for a significant time as an inner periphery. At the same time, the river valleys Someş (Hungarian: *Szamos*), Crişul Repede (*Sebes-Körös*), and Mureş (*Maros*) that cross Hungary from east to west functioned as significant interregional transport corridors between the East Pannonian (Danube–Tisza) and Transylvanian basins (Kocsis 2018). These transport corridors still constitute the main spatial lines of the area. In the west, they run perpendicular to the north-south market line, while in the valley, gates forming the points of intersection shaped the economic and administrative centres of the region in an early historical period: Oradea (*Nagyvárad*) in the Crişul-Repede valley, Arad in the Mureş valley, and Satu Mare (*Szatmárnémeti*) on the two sides of the river Someş.

The modern concept of Partium is rooted in the Paris peace treaties that ended the First World War; as a result of the Trianon decision, the eastern parts of the Hungarian Kingdom were annexed to Romania. This decision not only allocated the historic Transylvania region and most of the Banat region to Romania, but also a rather large (almost 30,000 km²) strip of land from eastern Tiszántúl (Szilágyi 2019b); today this area is called the Partium region. In Romanian, it is called Crişana, Crişana-Maramureş, Western Parts (*Părţile Vestice* – Pop 1997), while in a historical context, it is referred to as the ‘Hungarian Parts’ (*Părţile Ungureşti*¹). With its current size, the Partium region accounts for nearly 10% of the Carpathian Basin and 13% of the present-day territory of Romania. According to the current interpretation, as a geographical macro-region in Romania, it includes the areas covered by Bihor (*Bihar*), Arad, Satu Mare, Sălaj (*Szilágy*), and Maramureş (*Máramaros*) counties (Szilágyi 2019b) (Figure 1).

¹ For example: Duica (2018) <https://tudorduica-transsylvanica.ro/transilvania/cum-traiau-romanii-din-transilvania-partile-unguresti-si-banat-intre-anii-1867-1914/>

Figure 1

**The NUTS2 regions of Romania (coloured) and
the studied counties (shaded)**



Source: Szilágyi (2019a).

**The geopolitical impact and spatial-structural effect of the
Treaty of Trianon on Partium**

As a result of the Trianon decision, the spatial structure of the region changed only slightly at first, but its geopolitical characteristics changed radically. In terms of spatial structure, the region preserved its dual nature. The presence of the double-relief contact area (in a north-south direction) and the river valleys (interregional corridors) that perpendicularly intersect them (from east to west) are determining factors in this respect (Süli-Zakar–Szilágyi 2015a). The north-south spatial direction corresponds to the urbanization axis, while the east-west corridors map the main transport routes. The points of intersection represent the main attraction centres (Oradea, Arad, and Satu Mare) taking shape at the contact between the lowlands and highlands. These became multiple nodes due to the infrastructure developments carried out prior to the Trianon decision. For strategic reasons, during the peace negotiations, the railway linking the local junctions of the market line became the main border-generating factor from Halmeu (*Halmi*) through Satu Mare, Oradea, and Arad to Timișoara (*Temesvár*). Also, for strategic reasons, in the foreground of major cities, several settlement lanes were left as

buffers between the cities annexed to Romania and the new border; however, in many places, the border directly follows the railway line. When the border was defined, the infrastructure track overrode the ethnic, catchment, historic, administrative and terrain dividing lines in the region. This also resulted in a spatial structure paradox, according to which the eastern and southern (internal) borders of the Partium region are marked by Transylvania's historic border (or in the case of a softer administrative interpretation, the closest current county boundary); however, the western (external) borders were defined by infrastructures of strategic importance (Figure 2). Another consequence of this aspect is that the internal border runs along the peripheries in the traditional sense (so there is no state border, but a natural dividing line – Figure 3 Szilágyi 2019b). On the western and northern sides, the new state border cut off the former regional centre lane at the eastern edge of the Great Plain and gradually transformed it into periphery, without any actual physical barriers along the line. This peripheralization obviously had less impact on the points of intersection of those big cities that rose to gateway function in Romania, especially in the case of Arad and Oradea (Szilágyi 2013a).

Before the new frontier was defined, there was intense competition between the major cities in the Partium region and the centres in the East Great Plain with regard to regional roles. A typical example of this is the competition between Oradea and Debrecen. With its 64,000 inhabitants, Oradea was the ninth most populous city in Hungary in 1910, while Debrecen was the fourth most populous city with more than 90,000 inhabitants (HCSO 1912). At the same time, after Budapest, Oradea was one of the most important financial centres of the Kingdom of Hungary (Gál 1996)². The regional functions were performed in such a way that they complemented each other. Arad was partly in a similar situation with Szeged and Timisoara, while Satu Mare competed with the rapidly growing Nyíregyháza. The new frontier suddenly eliminated these competitive situations, creating instead new ones. The large cities that found themselves on the Romanian side of the border could not compete for major developments because their positions were strategically difficult to defend. The main targets of the 20th century developments were Timisoara instead of Arad and Cluj-Napoca (*Kolozsvár*) instead of Oradea. Satu Mare got an artificially inflated competitor, Baia Mare (*Nagybánya*), a formerly small town. In these inner centres, the Hungarian proportion of the population was also lower (Szilágyi 2009). Following the Trianon decision, the name Partium re-emerged, this time as the name of a major region. The bulk of the Partium, a former Hungarian political entity with a changing extent (including a fragment of modern

² Variations in the population size can be partly explained by the difference in the city areas (Debrecen 957 km², Oradea only 48 km² [HCSO 1912]). In the case of Debrecen, they can also be explained by the high population of their outlying areas (Debrecen had a total population of 92,729 in 1910, of which 35,004 lived in 64 outlying settlements; in Oradea, 364 lived in two outlying settlements [HCSO 1913]).

Hungary) has been interpreted with modifications subsequent to the 1920 Trianon Treaty as a geographical region of Romania.

Figure 2

Administration after the Trianon decision



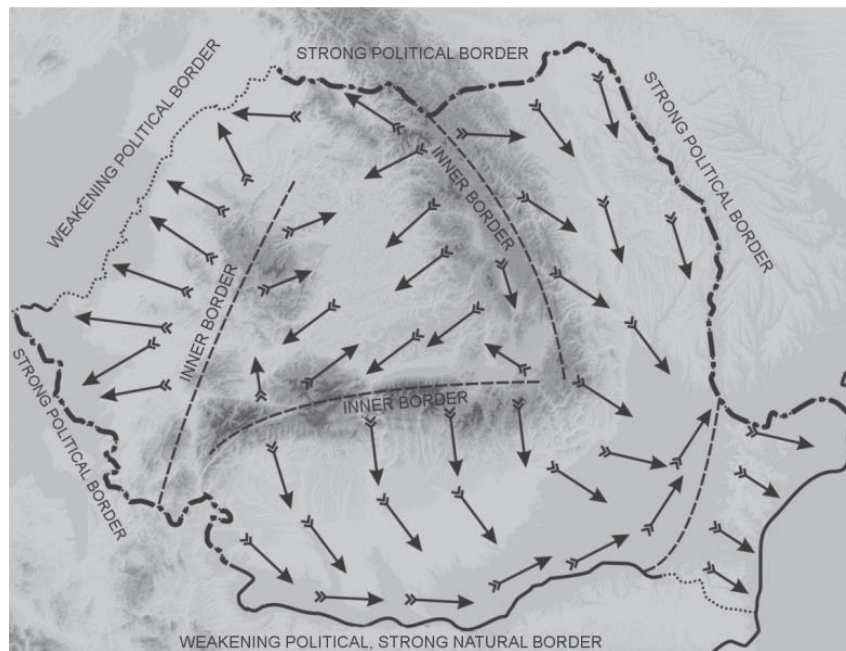
Note: The new border (red) follows the railway line (black).

Source: Szilágyi (2009).

After 1920, a new axis of development located further away from the border was selected and built in Romania for geopolitical reasons (Szilágyi 2009). Thus, instead of the former lowland border market line, the north-western part of Romania was developed along the Baia Mare – Zalău (*Zilab*) – Cluj-Napoca – Turda (*Torda*) – Câmpia-Turzii (*Aranyosgyéres*) – Alba-Iulia (*Gyulafehérvár*) – Deva (*Déva*) – Hunedoara (*Vajdahunyad*) axis (Figure 4), which clearly disadvantaged the Partium area and transformed it into a periphery. This means that the main contact zone was no longer on the edge of the Great Plain and the highlands, but on the foothills, and the main development axis was largely removed from the territory of Partium. This concept is still largely shared by the Romanian authorities, as illustrated by the fact that the regional system established in 1996 merged the historic Partium into the Northwest region and made Cluj the centre of the region (Szilágyi 2008).

Figure 3

**Characteristic features of the Romanian borders and
the main gravitational directions**



Source: Szilágyi (2019b).

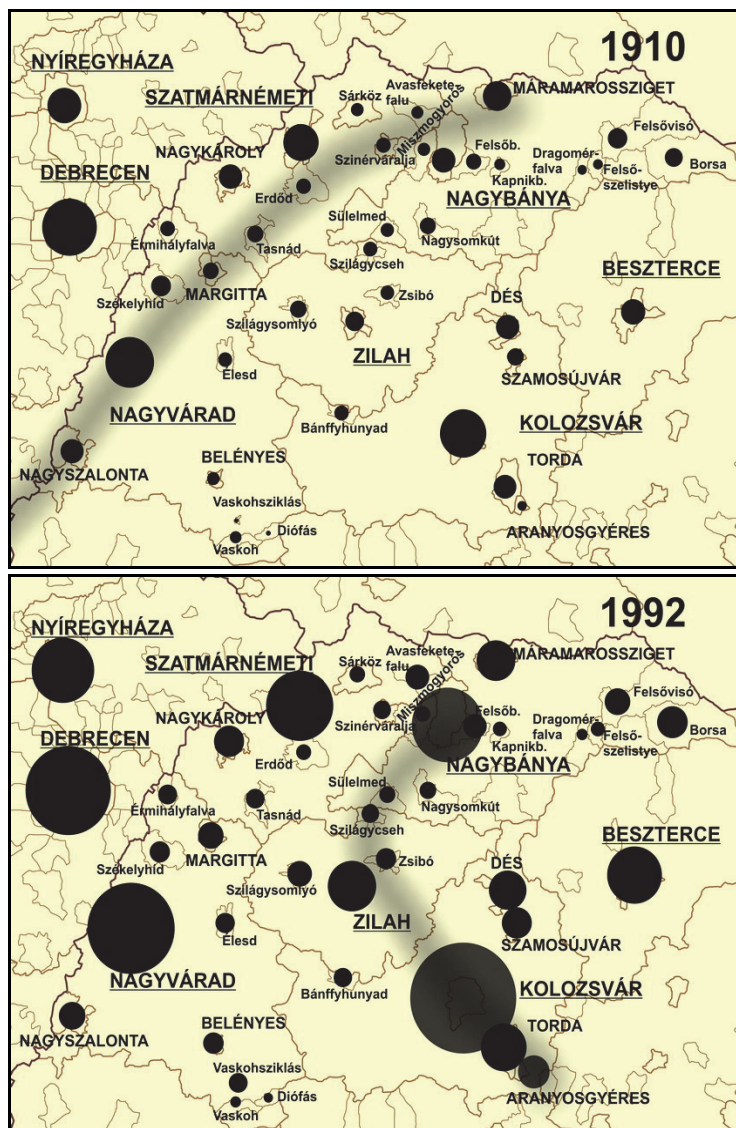
The peripherization of the border region took several steps. The first step was isolation, the establishment of a strong administrative border, followed by cutting the organic links to the west (for example, the removal of railway lines in Oradea, Satu Mare, and Arad³), and the closure of nearly 80 roads (Szilágyi 2013a). In parallel, the artificial integration (and change in the direction of diffusion) in the east and the transformation of flourishing commercial centres into simple gateway cities began. In the second step, heavy industry was brought onto the inner artificial spatial line, huge housing estates were built, and, in a few decades, certain small towns were transformed into new cities and medium-sized towns (like Baia Mare, Zalău, Turda – Câmpia-Turzii). At the time of the fall of Communism, the situation somewhat changed and the border gateway towns returned to a favourable position due to the slow changes in the nature of the border, while the socialist big cities located on the inner spatial line found themselves facing a structural crisis. After the

³ The following railway lines were closed: Oradea – Debrecen, Oradea – Szeghalom, Satu Mare – Mátészalka, Satu Mare – Fehérgyarmat, Ciomeghiu (*Illye*) – Szeghalom, Gyula – Satu Nou (*Simonyifalva*), Kétegyháza – Chişineu-Criş (*Kisjenő*), Arad-Mezőhegyes (MÁV 1915).

fall of Communism, such towns and cities suffered serious population losses (e.g. Baia Mare, Zalău).

Figure 4

**Cities and the main urbanization axes in the Partium region
in 1910 and 1992**



Source: Szilágyi (2009).

Frontier towns and cities successfully benefited from a combination of poor infrastructure and low wage levels typical of the Romanian state, as many investors avoided the inland areas and companies were established near the western border. The labour-intensive sectors were attracted to the border towns, where Hungary's more developed infrastructure was easily accessible, while they could keep wage costs down. Consequently, low unemployment rates and low average wage levels became prevalent in the north-western counties after the turn of the millennium. Gateway cities also experienced serious declines in population, but they were less severe than those in heavy industry cities. Satu Mare could not fully transition to a gateway city and was proportionally more affected by the negative processes (Páthy 2017). At the same time, it can be stated for both groups that by the turn of the millennium, the former ethnic, denominational, and cultural image of these cities had irreversibly changed.

Changes in the centre-periphery relationships affected more than the cities. The settlements of the Great Plain, along which the border was artificially drawn, became isolated over the last century, experiencing population declines and a lack of investment. The transit traffic ceased to operate, and the dwindling middle class was in part replaced by Gypsy communities (Szilágyi 2016), which at that time had lower social standing (about the situation of the Hungarian side of the border see Péntes et al. 2018). The border cities that slowly got under way and developed around the turn of the millennium are becoming successful islands in the connected peripheral belt.

The territorial-administrative consequences of the Trianon Treaty in the Partium region

Following the border demarcation, the Romanian government also submitted its territorial-administrative system to the national and state policy objectives (Szilágyi 2019b). The stabilization of the new border and the rapid establishment of the Romanian administration were the top priorities, so there were no changes in the administrative division in the first few years (Szilágyi 2013b, Elekes 2016). The only major change was that the communes of Ugocsa and Csanád counties that had been annexed to Romania were immediately merged into Satu Mare and Arad counties. The communes of Ugocsa established an independent district within Satu Mare county. Administrative names were rapidly translated into Romanian, and the names of many settlements without any Romanian inhabitants were phonetically transcribed into Romanian. The settlement name reform did not take place until the mid-twenties, when many settlements were given better sounding Romanian names, although these names had no historical tradition (Szilágyi 2009).

Figure 5

Territorial administration before and during World War II



Source: Szilágyi (2009).

By 1926 the territorial administrative reform was also accomplished. The aim was not to have any counties in the border region where the 1930 census, which was already being prepared, would show a Hungarian majority⁴. The task was solved by drastically expanding Sălaj county; having a stable Romanian majority, it was

⁴ According to the last Hungarian census data of 1910 (HCSO 1912), without modification, Satu Mare county would have had a Hungarian majority in 1930, and the Romanian and Hungarian communities represented almost the same proportion as in the Bihar county attached to Romania.

extended to the Hungarian-Romanian border by attaching the Hungarian-majority Valea lui Mihai (*Érmihályfalva*) district, formerly part of Bihor county, the Carei (*Nagykároly*) district, and the Hungarian-populated town of Carei, which formerly belonged to Satu Mare county. To maintain a stable Romanian majority in Sălaj county, it was supplemented in the east with villages having pure Romanian populations (Szilágyi 2009). Some compromises and catchment area anomalies also had to be accepted during the implementation:

- The town of Zalău, with just over 8,000 inhabitants, was more than one hundred kilometres away from the border towns, while these were only 40-60 kilometres away from the traditional and more populous centres (Oradea, Satu Mare).
- In 1930, the population in the Zalău county seat was half the size of the population of the town of Carei, which was annexed to Sălaj county and only 10 years earlier had been the seat of Satu Mare county.
- The shortest route from the Valea lui Mihai district to the county seat was via the Marghita (*Margitta*) district, which remained part of Bihor.

Figure 6

New settlements in the Partium region in the 20th century



Source: Szilágyi (2009).

Other steps were also taken:

- Removing the Carei district was not enough to secure a majority of Romanians in Satu Mare county. The Copalnic-Mănăştur (*Kápolnokmonostor*)

- district, with a pure Romanian population, also had to be attached to it in the east.
- Also in the twenties, the settling of Romanian colonists in villages established for them began with the expropriation of large estates in the border region (Blomqvist 2014). These occurred only sporadically in Bihor, but appeared as almost continuous belts in certain border sections of Satu Mare county (Szilágyi 2009) (Figure 6)⁵.
 - The remnants of the districts truncated by the new frontiers were merged, while some new districts were also created. Moreover, new district centres were designated to assist with the urbanization of some Romanian settlements.

During Hungarian rule, which was resumed in Northern Transylvania and the Partium in 1940, there was a return to the former territorial-administrative division (Szilágyi 2009, Elekes 2011). Satu Mare, Sălaj, and Maramureş counties were returned to Hungary; although Bihor remained a divided county, at that time the majority of it became Hungarian, while Arad county remained part of Romania.

The Romanian administration returned definitively by 1947, and the former Romanian administration was also temporarily restored. In 1950, the entire administrative system was reformed, and a Soviet-type province system was introduced. This new system was difficult to stabilize; provinces and districts were redrawn four times over the course of 18 years, with continually increasing unit sizes (Szilágyi 2009).

The main aim of the reform was to establish regional centres. In Western Romania, this primarily served the interests of Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara, and Oradea and supported the growth of Baia Mare, one of the period's favoured cities (in Hungary, a similar process took place, see: Kőszegfalvi 2020, Bartke 2020). By contrast, Arad and Satu Mare became neglected cities. Small towns, with the exception of a few new heavy industry centres, were rather stagnant (Szilágyi 2012).

Another reform took place in 1968, resulting in a return to the traditional county system. The word 'traditional' can also be used in the sense that the units' historical names were restored. In the Partium region, mid-level units were re-established bearing the names Arad, Bihor, Sălaj, Satu Mare, and Maramureş, although undoubtedly in a territorially transformed form (LAW 2/1968). The commune system that still exists today was also finalized at that time (JUDEȚELE 1969). Its peculiarity in Romania is that several settlements form one (production) unit, referred to as a commune (comună). Although this system existed previously, beginning in 1968 unit sizes increased, and several villages were merged to reach an average population of 3,000 inhabitants. Later, plans were made to introduce an even larger unit size. The main political programme of the Romanian Communist

⁵ The second wave of new settlements appeared in the 1950s (Szilágyi 2013b).

Party included a plan to restructure the entire settlement network. The planned settlement system would have consisted almost exclusively of cities, and the rural settlements would have been wound up (village demolition or Systematisation-plan). Obviously, just as in the case of any previous urbanization programme, minorities would have been adversely affected. The authorities used every settlement development project to reduce the proportion of minorities. The village demolition plan would also have been a means of eliminating settlements with Hungarian majority populations; thus, it was a source of dissatisfaction and, indirectly, one of the causes of the 1989 uprising. The plan was not implemented due to the fall of Communism (1989).

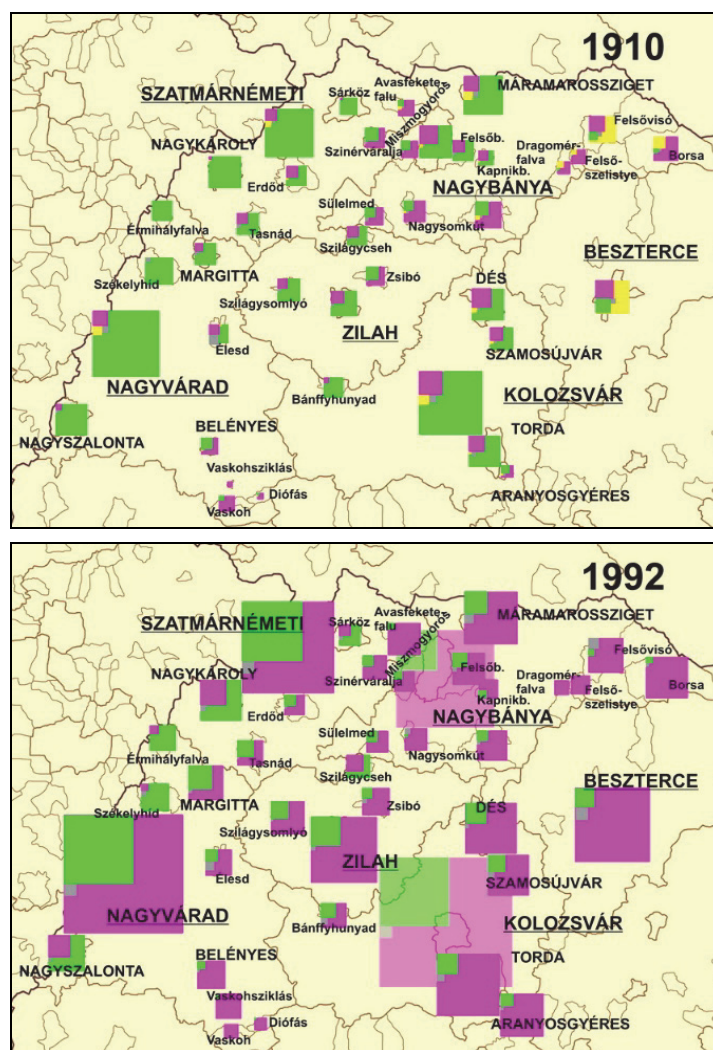
There have been no drastic changes in the territorial administration since 1990. County borders are the same as before the end of Communism, although there have been some changes at the local government level. The suburban municipality status was abolished after the fall of Communism. After the turn of the millennium, a settlement network development plan was adopted and a methodology for establishing new communes and granting municipal (town, city) charters was issued (LAW 350/2001). Previously, such changes had occurred only in exceptional cases; however, from the turn of the millennium until 2014, the classifications of many municipalities have changed. The NUTS system of regions (Brandmueller et al. 2017), created in 1996, has almost continuously been the subject of political discourse, but no practical improvements or modifications have been made at the regional level thus far (Benedek et al. 2018).

Demographic change

Prior to the Trianon decision, there was a balanced ethnic composition in the Partium region; Hungarian and Romanian communities were equally weighted, and complemented with some relatively large minority language communities (Swabian, Gypsy, Slovak, Serbian, etc.) (HCSO 1912). In the 20th century, homogenisation was already a characteristic process, and the ethnic balance was also broken. This process began immediately after the Trianon decision, when the regional centre of gravity shifted to the southeast; as Bihor, Satu Mare, and Arad became divided counties, villages with Hungarian populations were left in Hungary, while in the east, administrative reforms added villages with Romanian populations to the counties of this region. This overturned ethnic structure continued to shift in favour of the Romanians in later decades.

Figure 7

**Mother tongue in the cities and towns of the Partium region
in 1910 and 1992**



Notes: green – Hungarian, violet – Romanian, yellow – German.

Source: Szilágyi (2009).

The 20th century censuses used almost always different criteria and were sometimes politically motivated. Prior to the Trianon decision, the Hungarian censuses only referred to the mother tongue and the denominational structure of the population and the Jewish community was only identified as a religion. In contrast, in addition to the mother tongue, the Romanian censuses in 1930

introduced the concept of ethnicity. At the same time, there were some restrictions on data collection, since in 1930 there were hardly any records of ethnic Hungarian Greek Catholic populations, and categorizing those of the Israelite religion as an ethnic group also automatically limited their – self declared and hitherto overwhelmingly Hungarian – classification (Varga 1988). The Hungarian-speaking population of Swabian and Ruthenian origin could also not be counted as Hungarians. The Romanian and Hungarian censuses of 1941 can be considered ‘military’ censuses, and ethnic data must be treated with caution on both sides.

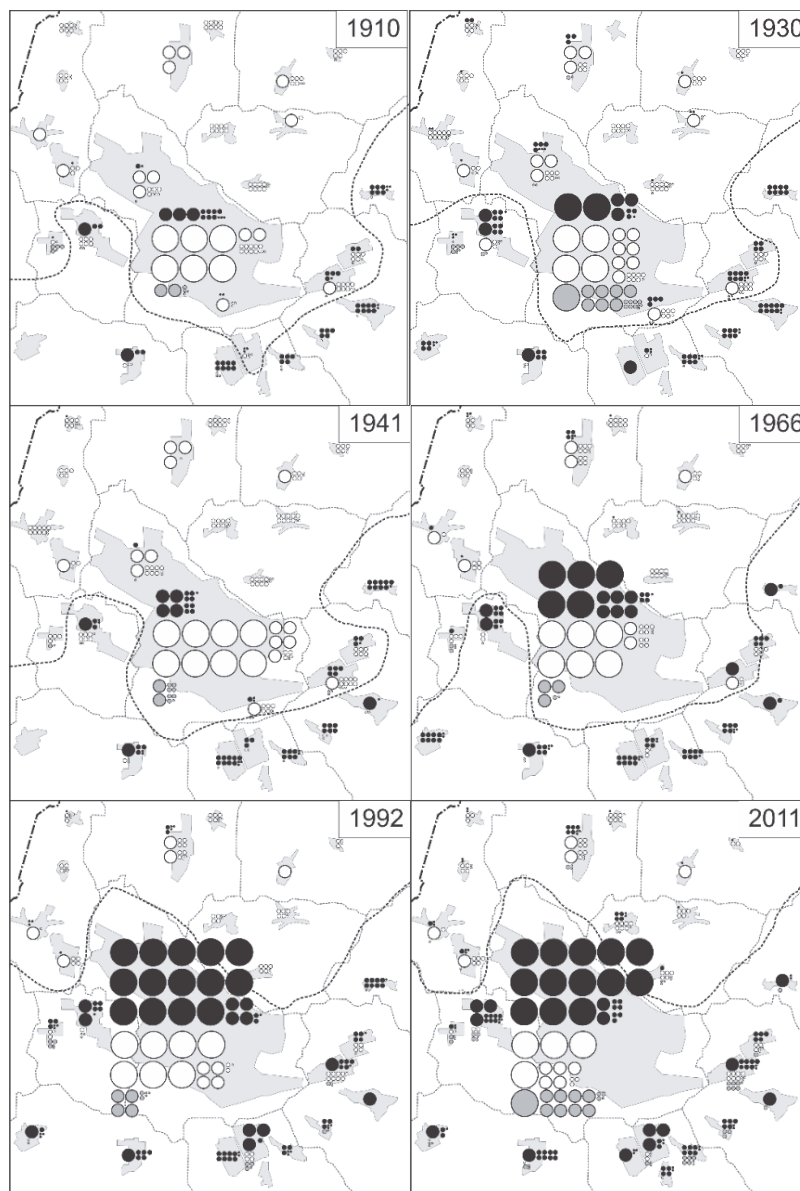
However, the Romanian censuses conducted during the decades of socialism also raise questions (e.g. Romanian majorities in cities where, after the fall of Communism, there is still a Hungarian majority or a suspiciously low number of Roma population). The number of Gypsies was underestimated by almost all censuses in the 20th century. Only after the change in the political system did their population begin to increase gradually at the statistical level, and some pulsating movements can also be observed (Szilágyi 2016).

As a result of these factors, there is a noticeable dramatic decrease in the Hungarian community proportion since 1930. Initially, along with the Romanians, the number of other nationalities increased, also at the expense of the Hungarians, a sign that the censuses were specifically aimed at eroding the Hungarian community. Later, however, the other communities gradually almost completely disappeared. The initial steps in this process were a decrease in population and the migration caused by World War II and the Holocaust. Then, during the communist period, the Jewish and German population was allowed to leave Romania, and a kind of a valve effect also came into being in the case of Hungarians. During the 20th century, Hungarians left the country in several waves. The World War II period is a separate chapter of this, when the young population of the Hungarian villages in southern Partium (which remained in Romania) fled northwards, and the Hungarian villages in southern Partium were never able to recover from this population loss (see Ginta (*Gyanta*), Tămașda (*Tamáshida*), Ant, etc.). Population loss (Kulcsár–Brown 2017) through assimilation was also causing constant ethnic attrition, especially in mixed population areas. The Hungarian-speaking Greek-Catholic population, which predominantly lives in Satu Mare county, has been significantly affected by the assimilation process (Szilágyi 2003). The borders of the Hungarian majority areas have considerably shifted in Satu Mare county. Here, much of the county has become a zone of ethnic interference, and the Hungarian-majority belt is now discontinuously sticking to the state border. This dissolution transformed the Hungarian population of Sălaj county into an ethnic island, which is surprisingly still stable. Of the geographically divided Hungarian ethnic enclave of Sălaj county, only the forcibly industrialized towns of Sălaj county have become Romanian-dominated, while the Hungarian rural community has remained strong. In the case of the peripheral villages, there are a few instances of reverse ethnic change, with the majority of some mixed settlements (e.g. Coșeiu [*Kusaly*]) becoming Hungarian due to the departure of the Romanian population. Of course, the most

significant loss for Hungarians is the change in the ethnic structure of the large cities (Figure 7). This process was described in detail in 2015 in our joint research with István Süli-Zakar (See: Süli-Zakar–Szilágyi 2015b) (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Changes in the linguistic composition of Oradea between 1910 and 2011



Notes: white – Hungarian, black – Romanians, grey – others; size scale 10.000, 1.000, 100.

Between 1950 and 1989, there was a demographic explosion in Romania. This also affected the Hungarian community, and there was a period (1982–1989) when worldwide, the number of Hungarians probably grew significantly only in Transylvania and Transcarpathia. The Hungarian population decreased dramatically after the 1989 revolution. The Germans were even more affected by this period, when the Partium region lost its last major German-speaking communities. Paradoxically, the Partium region became the most important area for the Germans, as only the Hungarian-speaking Swabians around Carei remained in a greater number in Romania. The Romanian emigration became (also globally) significant after the turn of the millennium and stabilized the proportion of Hungarians in the Partium region (Recensamant 2011). Today, the most significant changes are caused by the process of suburbanization. Residents moving out of towns invade settlements in the metropolitan periphery (Süli-Zakar–Szilágyi 2015b). Thus, the ethnic change in the big cities took place before the fall of Communism, but the population change in the suburban areas is taking place today.

Conclusions

Following the Trianon decision, the name Partium re-emerged, this time as the name of a major region. The bulk of the Partium, a former Hungarian political entity with a changing area (including a fragment of modern Hungary) from the c. mid-C16 to the mid-C19 west to and associated with Transylvania, has been interpreted with modifications subsequent to the 1920 Trianon Treaty as a geographical region of Romania. In the 20th century, its territory shifted to the southeast, which also led to ethnic, linguistic, and denominational changes. The previously balanced ethnic structure of the region's population has changed to a Romanian majority. Besides the drastic decrease in the proportion of the Hungarian population in the 20th century, smaller ethnic communities have almost completely disappeared. However, this finding does not apply to the Gypsy population, which has increased in number in the villages of the border area and today have a share of almost 50% in some settlements.

In terms of spatial structure, the former market line has become a periphery (Egri–Tánczos 2018), where only a few gateway cities managed to remain economically successful. Hungarian settlements in the border area gradually fell behind in terms of their economy, and this process accelerated especially after 2010. According to a 2019 study, with four exceptions, the local school or municipality is the largest employer in the northern Hungarian majority communes of Bihor county (Szilágyi–Debrenti 2019).

The most important questions in contemporary research on the Partium region:

- How does the nature of the border change (weakening, Schengen accession, virtualization)?
- What happens to artificial dead-end villages?
- Will there be a continuous infrastructure and socio-economic network on the weakening border?
- What impact will this process have on the populous Gypsy communities in the dead-end villages?
- What are big cities in the border region going to do with their asymmetrical catchment areas?
- What will be the result of the competitions between competing city-pairs (e.g. Debrecen-Oradea; airport debate; will cooperation be decisive or competitive)?
- What is going to happen to the Hungarians in the Partium region? How does the motherland regard this community? What is the main objective (survival or demographic reserve)? What kind of institutional network are they assigned to?

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