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To cite this article: Vassilis Petsinis (13 Jun 2025): The Ethnic Hungarian Minority in Serbia: Between Ethnopolitics and European Politics, Ethnopolitics, DOI: [10.1080/17449057.2025.2516930](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2025.2516930)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2025.2516930>



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Published online: 13 Jun 2025.



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The Ethnic Hungarian Minority in Serbia: Between Ethnopolitics and European Politics

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on Serbia's largest minority group, the ethnic Hungarians, and the party of the Alliance of Vojvodina's Hungarians/VMSZ. VMSZ emerges as an ethnic minority party that has developed a distinctly (right-wing) ideological profile. This profile appropriates and combines elements from Hungarian 'illiberal democracy' and Serbian 'stabilitocracy'. VMSZ aligns with its larger partners' (the Serbian Progressive Party/SNS and the Civic Democratic Union/FIDESZ) willingness for Serbia to join the EU under the condition that the EU 'reforms' towards a more conservative and sovereigntist direction so that it can also accommodate governments with 'divergent' outlooks on liberal democracy (e.g. stabilitocratic Serbia).

This article focuses on Serbia's largest minority group, the ethnic Hungarians.¹ The main question is: How has the improvement of bilateral relations between Serbia and Hungary, since the mid-2010s, affected the political representation of the ethnic Hungarian minority at the regional (the autonomous province of Vojvodina), national (Serbia), and international (Serbian-Hungarian relations and European politics) levels?

Of particular interest is to assess how influential minority parties (here, the Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina/VMSZ) engage with the prerogatives of their larger political partners, at home (here, the Serbian Progressive Party/SNS) and in the kin-state (here, the Civic Democratic Union/FIDESZ). Furthermore, it is an innovative endeavour to study how and why ethno-nationalism can intercede with new catalysts such as Euroscepticism and *illiberalism*.

This enquiry has relied on a qualitative content analysis (Hermann, 2008; Schreier, 2012) of official documents such as legal texts, programmes, declarations, and public statements issued by selected political actors and institutions in Serbia and Hungary. Other sources such as policymaking reports, public surveys, and articles from the international press have been of complementary importance. This piece incorporates a set of research

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interviews conducted in Serbia (November 2018) as part of a Marie Skłodowska-Curie research project (project ID: 749400-MERWBKBS). VMSZ is a party that operates in Serbia and issues manifestos, programmes, and declarations in both Hungarian and Serbian. This study has relied on the Serbian-language version of selected policymaking documents published by the party on its official website.

The thrust of argumentation unfolds as follows. Throughout the last decade, VMSZ has developed a distinctly (right-wing) ideological profile. This profile appropriates and combines elements from Hungarian illiberal democracy and Serbian stabilitocracy. VMSZ appears to align with and endorse its larger partners' willingness for Serbia to join the EU under the condition that the EU 'reforms' towards a socially conservative and sovereigntist direction so that it can also accommodate governments with 'divergent' or critical outlooks on liberal democracy (e.g. stabilitocratic Serbia).

VMSZ's gradual transformation appears to be as much ideological as it is pragmatic. Apart from macro-politics on the EU-level and debates over the EU's identity, it is largely in the interest of VMSZ to have both Serbia and Hungary in the same supranational institutions (the EU) where they can be friendly neighbours. Under the FIDESZ-led and SNS-led apparatuses, this can provide VMSZ with a status quo via which to keep on negotiating for political and economic support at home and across the border. This explains why and how, an ideological and simultaneously pragmatic, VMSZ would choose to be both stabilitocratic (regarding the prolongation of the status quo in Serbian and Hungarian politics) and illiberal (socially conservative and sovereigntist), in response to the emergence of an illiberal and Eurosceptic spectrum of politics across Central and Southeastern Europe and beyond.

Conceptual Frames

Ideology and Pragmatism in Politics

Due to word-limit considerations, attention is paid to Sartori's treatise of *ideology* (Sartori, 1979). According to the author, one needs to distinguish between 'ideology' as a *doctrine* (a fixed/given belief system, endowed with a universal 'truth-value', according to which individuals 'navigate in the sea of politics') and 'ideology' as a *mentality* (a functional dimension that revolves around a commitment to and perpetuation of this fixed/given belief system by political actors and their supporters) (pp. 92–93, 95). Sartori argues that ideological mentality (or 'ideologism') tends to focus on 'ends' rather than 'means' (pp. 99–100). Nevertheless, both interpretations of ideology appear to converge along the ultimate objective of political actors to legitimize their authority and mobilize certain groups of people (p. 113).

Sartori draws a distinction between ideological and pragmatic patterns of engaging into politics. According to the author, whereas ideology is 'a belief system based on fixed elements and characterized by a strong affect and a closed cognitive structure', *pragmatism* is 'a belief system based on flexible elements and characterized by a weak affect and an open cognitive structure' (p. 103). Conversely, whereas for ideological actors the 'logic of interest' in politics combines (or must combine) with a 'logic of principles,' pragmatists tend to comprehend political behaviour primarily through interests and the conflict of interests (p. 111). Due to their higher flexibility and lower attachment to fixed elements with a more universal 'truth-value', pragmatists are more likely to enter, however temporary, alliances and other forms of cooperation with diverse political actors (p. 110).

This discussion is necessary to single out the qualitative differences between (more ideological) illiberal democracy and (more pragmatic) stabilitocracy, as well as their points of convergence, and clarify how VMSZ combines selected elements from both concepts. This helps comprehend VMSZ's transformation into a political actor that legitimizes its authority no longer exclusively along the pragmatic objective to advance the collective interests of a minority group, but also along a further-reaching desire to *reform* European politics towards a more sovereigntist and socially conservative direction.

Ethnic Minorities Inside Triadic/Quadratic Nexuses and Amid Multiple Memberships

Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker, 1995, p. 109; 2002) has coined the *triadic nexus* theory. According to the author, nationalism in multi-ethnic societies is often a dynamic interaction between the 'nationalizing state', an ethnic minority living in that state, and the minority's kin-state. A 'nationalizing state' is one that subtly promotes the culture, language, and political primacy of the titular nation within the state through governing institutions. Each of these actors is not a static entity but a 'variably configured and continuously contested political field'. The interaction among these actors depends upon the relations and balances within each of them. Within this framework, the minorities' frequent response to the policies of the 'nationalizing state' is to push for more cultural or territorial autonomy and resist actual or perceived policies of discrimination. The kin-state's role is to monitor the situation of their co-ethnics in the state in question, protest alleged violations of their rights and assert the right, even the obligation, to defend their interests (Waterbury, 2021, p. 41).

Inside this nexus, ethnic minority parties claim to speak in the name of a given group. They tend to make good use of the historical background, collective myths, as well as an array of socio-psychological catalysts, to cement intra-group cohesion (or *groupness*) (Brubaker, 2002, pp. 163–189). Framing an incident as a 'pogrom' or a 'riot' is not just a matter of external interpretation but an act of definition that can have important consequences (Brubaker et al., 2004, pp. 37 and 47). The more an ethnic minority party succeeds in constituting a conflict as ethnic or interpreting a governmental decision as detrimental to the group that it claims to represent, the more it succeeds in forging intra-group cohesion. This success acquires a higher significance if the party manages to internationalize its standpoints. Rogers Brubaker's theoretical matrix became highly topical inside the background of numerous disputes over the collective statuses of ethnic minorities across Central and Southeastern Europe during the 1990s (e.g. the case of the ethnic Hungarians in Romania, Brubaker et al., 2008).

Following the increasing significance of international institutions/organizations, and supranational processes in Central and Eastern Europe, the prospect of EU-membership started functioning as a powerful pole of attraction for most post-Communist states. This enhanced the EU's soft power diplomacy vis-à-vis the candidate states. Soft power refers to the aggregate of the formal and informal mechanisms that the EU employed to promote the candidate states' compliance with membership conditions (Haughton, 2007). This development prompted several academic experts to reformulate Brubaker's triadic nexus into a *quadratic* one, considering the EU's eastward enlargement, and add the EU as a fourth actor inside the nexus (Pettai, 2006; Smith, 2002).

Slightly amending Brubaker's terminology, Smith argues that 'Europeanization can be regarded as a variably configured and continuously contested political field in which

different states, organizations, parties, movements or individual political entrepreneurs vie to impose their own particular political agenda' (Smith, 2002, p. 11). The author contends that it was the impact of the EU as a 'fourth pillar' that spurred the transition from 'nationalizing statehoods' to multiple 'integration strategies' for ethnic minorities across Central and Eastern Europe since the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. in Estonia, Smith, 2003).

Moreover, the accession processes of post-Communist states to the EU bolstered cross-border cooperation and mobility schemes. These schemes highlighted the realities of what Myra Waterbury conceptualizes as 'multiple membership' for individuals belonging to minority groups. Meanwhile, the current borderline, that separates states belonging to the EU from those that do not, erects one more internal barrier within the minority communities themselves (e.g. ethnic Hungarians living in Romania and Slovakia vis-à-vis those based in Serbia and Ukraine).

Multiple membership addresses those sociopolitical circumstances when individuals belonging to minority groups frequently have to:

navigate membership in multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing political and cultural communities, which include their home-state community, their minority community, the kin-state community, and a broader transnational or supranational space, primarily the community tied to EU membership of their home and/or kin-state. (Waterbury, 2021, p. 42)

According to Waterbury, multiple membership can provide individuals belonging to ethnic minorities with a series of benefits such as cross-border mobility, access to financial resources and employment opportunities in the kin-state, and political rights (Waterbury, 2017). The third set of benefits is of particular significance because it enables those individuals to claim the same legal protection, vote in the parliamentary elections, and access a similar degree of mobility as those resident members of the kin-state community (e.g. within the EU-space) (Pogonyi, 2017; Waterbury, 2021, p. 43).

Legal documents and other provisions granting special benefits to certain minorities (e.g. the *Karta Polaka*' Polish Card' ID that the Polish government makes available to ethnic Poles resident in Belarus and Ukraine) epitomise this fluidity of identity and mobility across borders. National governments legitimize the promulgation of such legal provisions along the lines of 'kin-state activism'. This notion can be comprehended as the international and cross-border engagement of 'a country in which significant political actors, usually representatives of the state, express an avowed commitment to the well-being of residents in other states on the basis of perceived (ethno-cultural) kinship' (Albertie, 2003, pp. 979–980; Huber & Mickey, 1999, pp. 22–24; Liebich, 2017, p. 4).

This overview is highly relevant to the empirical objectives of this study. On the one hand, the *quadratic* nexus concept can help illustrate why and how the common interests between SNS and FIDESZ, on 'reforming' the EU, influence politics within the triad that consists of the Serbian and Hungarian governments and VMSZ as a crucial link between them. Meanwhile, the discussion of 'multiple membership' demonstrates how the interaction among these three actors can become complicated due to the expectations of the minority group concerned (i.e. the ethnic Hungarians) on the grassroots level. Hence, the necessity for SNS, VMSZ, and FIDESZ to manoeuvre accordingly in such a way that meets the expectations and demands of Serbia's ethnic Hungarian community.

Euroscepticism: General Features

Schematically, Euroscepticism is the ‘outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration’ (Taggart, 1998, pp. 365–366). Hard Euroscepticism consists of a principled opposition to the EU and may even demand the withdrawal of given states from the EU or object to their prospects of EU membership (Kopecky & Mudde, 2002; Taggart & Szcznerbiak, 2002, p. 4). Soft Euroscepticism does not unconditionally oppose the EU but centres on policy areas where a divergence between the ‘national interest’ and the EU trajectory is perceived (Taggart & Szcznerbiak, 2008). Both variants of Euroscepticism can be found inside as well as outside the EU.

The Euroscepticism of political parties is dependent upon ideology, political and socioeconomic circumstances, and the distinction between domestic and foreign policy. Christopher Flood proposes an analytical classification of party-based Euroscepticism that comprises the revisionist, reformist, gradualist, maximalist, minimalist, and rejectionist categories (Flood, 2002, p. 5). The revisionist category opts for a return to the situation prior to a major EU treaty whereas the reformist desires the modification of one or more existing EU institutions and practices. Gradualist Eurosceptics formally endorse the European integration process albeit at a slower pace and with greater care. Maximalists are in favour of pushing forward with the existing process as rapidly as is practicable towards higher levels of integration whereas minimalists tend to accept the status quo but resist further integration. Lastly, rejectionist parties adamantly oppose participation in the EU.

Euroscepticism ‘Inside the EU’ in Central Europe: Hungary

Following a string of groundbreaking developments throughout the last decade (e.g. the migrant crisis of 2015/2016 and the rule of law controversies between the European Commission and the then Hungarian and Polish governments), the brands of Euroscepticism among certain right-wing parties across the Continent have undergone a qualitative transformation. They are no longer focused on negotiating a compromise over the terms of a state’s membership of the EU but, rather, harbour ambitions to revise the EU’s configurations and reform its institutions and practices from within.

In parts of Central Europe, the dominant patterns of Euroscepticism possess ideological underpinnings. Especially in Hungary, Euroscepticism appears to be anchored into the promotion of illiberal democracy, by PM Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ, as an ‘alternative’ model with a greater stress on national and Christian values as well as a more centralized and leader-centred pattern of governance (Brubaker, 2017; Palonen, 2018). This outlook has been shared by former Polish PM Jarosław Kaczyński and the party of Law and Justice/PiS.

These political actors converge along their prerogatives that the EU must ‘return’ to fundamental norms and values that have been allegedly forgotten or betrayed and the ambition to juxtapose the Visegrad Four as a geopolitical and sociocultural ‘anti-model’ to Brussels and the ‘EU centre’. In this light, the prevalent brand of party-based Euroscepticism in Hungary can be categorized as an ideologically (right-wing) *conservative* one that fluctuates along the ‘hard-soft’ continuum and comprises *revisionist* and *reformist* components.

Euroscepticism ‘Outside the EU’ in Southeastern Europe: Serbia

By contrast to Hungary, a soft version of *gradualist* Euroscepticism with a predominantly geopolitical profile appears to have consolidated among the governing ranks in Serbia (Petsinis, 2020a, p. 145). One might argue that the geopolitical Euroscepticism, encountered among the policymakers of ruling SNS, is anchored in the concept of global *multi-polarity*. This consists of a constant endeavour to balance between Western (EU, NATO, and the US) and ‘alternative’ (Russia and China) partners in global politics, extracting as many gains as possible from Serbia’s oscillation between the two poles (e.g. on trade and energy), and a subtle preference for a multipolar international system where global actors such as Russia and China enjoy an invigorated status vis-à-vis the US and the EU (Petsinis, 2022, p. 214).

One might contend that SNS inherited aspects from the programme of the ‘old’ Serbian Radical Party/SRS (SRS, 2009, pp. 28–30), out of which it evolved, on Serbia’s global neutrality and modified them along the lines of conditional endorsement to the EU accession process. This gradualist approach seems to correlate with the declining appeal of EU membership within the Serbian society, since 2014, and the long-term impact of ‘EU conditionality fatigue’ (Ministarstvo za Evropske Integracije, 2018, pp. 6, 25; 2019, p. 6; 2022, pp. 6, 12). Nevertheless, this variant of geopolitical Euroscepticism also forms component of the malleable and situationally adaptive, yet tactical and pragmatic, concept of *stabilitocracy* as a guiding principle for legitimizing the governing party’s patterns of policy-making in Serbia and abroad.

Hungarian Illiberal Democracy and Serbian Stabilitocracy

If merely on the grounds of official rhetoric, illiberal democracy appears to be a concept with rather solid ideological foundations. In addition to its preference for a centralized and leader-centred pattern of governance, the concept of illiberal democracy in Hungary comprises a powerful sociocultural component (Biro-Nagy, 2017, pp. 36–41; Wodak, 2019). Apart from an emphasis on ‘Christian values’, this latter aspect places a great stress on nativism (Pappas, 2018) and the necessity to safeguard ‘naturally ascribed gender norms’ and oppose ‘gender ideology’ (Fodor, 2022; Sata, 2014).

In the realms of foreign affairs and European politics, the concept of illiberal democracy tends to demarcate perceived ‘external competitors and adversaries’, depending on the prevailing circumstances (e.g. the European Commission, the IMF, George Soros, etc.) (Adam, 2023). It visualizes Hungary as a sovereign actor in its multilateral engagement inside a *multipolar* international system and opts for the *reformation* of the EU and its institutions, as well as the *revision* of the EU’s guiding principles and treaties, towards a more socially conservative direction (Csehi & Zgut, 2021; Huszka, 2020).

Meanwhile, *stabilitocracy* is a concept coined by political scientists with an expertise in Southeastern Europe (Bieber, 2018; Pavlović, 2016, 2017). According to Bieber:

a stabilitocracy is a regime that includes considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance yet enjoys external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability. (Bieber, 2018, p. 179)

Although fitting inside the wider continuum of illiberal systems of governance in contemporary Europe, it is the external legitimacy that they enjoy by powerful external actors (e.g.

the EU) that renders stabilitocracies rather idiosyncratic (pp. 178–179). Domestically, although displaying quasi-autocratic inclinations, stabilitocracies are rather flexible and generally do not undertake constitutional and/or legislative reforms to curtail independent institutions—as it occurred, for instance, in Hungary and Poland during the 2010s (p. 182). The formation of clientelistic networks has been of crucial importance for the operation of stabilitocracies (p. 184).

Some examples of stabilitocracies across Southeastern Europe are Albania under Edi Rama, Montenegro under Milo Đukanović, and Northern Macedonia under Nikola Gruevski (Kmezić, 2019; Pavlović, 2017). In Serbia, the utilization of stabilitocracy, by the SNS-led apparatus, aims at legitimizing themselves as the main guarantor for stability not solely in domestic politics but also regarding Serbia's accession process to the EU—as viewed by external agents such as the European Commission.

Serbian stabilitocracy appears to embed weaker ideological underpinnings than illiberal democracy in Hungary and a tactical, as well as situationally adaptive, pattern of engagement in domestic and international politics. For instance, neither a clear demarcation of 'external adversaries' nor a standard commitment to overarching sociocultural principles (e.g. the nexus between nativism and the alleged safeguarding of Christian values during the migrant crisis of 2015/2016 in Hungary and Poland) seems to be present here (European Commission, 2018; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung-Serbia, 2016, pp. 7–8 and 20–21; HCIT, 2017, pp. 33–34). Nevertheless, two points of convergence between Hungarian illiberal democracy and Serbian stabilitocracy are their mutual preference for a leader-centred pattern of governance and autonomy in the multilateral engagement of their respective states as sovereign actors inside a multipolar international system (Lutovac, 2020; Zawadewicz, 2023).

Apart from these affinities, the quest for regional partnerships must have functioned as another, more pragmatic, catalyst for the rapprochement between the two leaderships. Furthermore, political analysts have accused President Vučić and PM Orbán of being inclined towards serving their, short-term, private interests instead of aiming at resolving any outstanding historical differences and achieving a genuine and long-lasting reconciliation between the two nations (Milošević, 2018). Nevertheless, it remains a valid assertion that the alleviation of interethnic cleavages within Vojvodina, especially the one between ethnic Hungarians and the Serbian majority, substantially facilitated this rapprochement process from a 'bottom-up' angle.

Here, attention is paid to how and why VMSZ selectively appropriates and capitalizes on the main areas of compatibility (if not convergence) between Serbian stabilitocracy and Hungarian illiberal democracy: their shared belief in a leader-centred government, as a guarantee for 'stability' in domestic politics, and the ensuing conviction that the EU needs to 'reform' towards a direction that places greater importance on the sovereignty of member states.

Serbia, Hungary, the EU, and the Ethnic Hungarian Minority in Vojvodina (1990s and 2000s)

VMSZ and its Interaction with the Dominant Parties in Serbia

Throughout the 1990s, the state of interethnic relations in Vojvodina and the bilateral relations between Serbia and Hungary were strained. Since the termination of Vojvodina's

autonomy (1989), the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia/SPS commenced a ‘re-nationalization’ project that manifested through irregularities in the implementation of the provisions on education and the public use of minority languages and cases of discrimination against ethnic minorities in employment (Korhecz, 1998; United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1996). This state of affairs hints at a tense triadic nexus, as formulated by Brubaker (1995, p. 109), that comprised Hungary, Serbia, and the ethnic Hungarian minority.

Throughout that decade, the ethnic Hungarian community had been represented by the Democratic Community of Hungarians in Vojvodina/VMDK (established in 1990) and VMSZ (set up in 1994 as the evolution of a splinter group from VMDK). *Tripartite* autonomy, comprising the areas of personal²/territorial³ autonomy and self-administration,⁴ became a policymaking stepping stone for both parties (VMDK, 1992; VMSZ, 1996, Section IV, Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, and Section V, Paragraphs A and B). However, their bilateral relations with the larger Serbian parties emerged as a crucial difference between VMDK and VMSZ.

VMDK refrained from cooperating with the Serbian democratic opposition and concentrated their efforts on internationalizing their grievances in the European forums (e.g. the Council of Europe and the OSCE) aided by a series of governments in Budapest (Arpasy, 1996, pp. 65–66). By contrast, VMSZ interlinked Hungarian ethno-territorial autonomy with the restitution of legislative competencies (e.g. on education and culture) to the assembly of the autonomous province of Vojvodina (VMSZ, 1996; Section III, Paragraph II.1). Moreover, this party established, since 1996, a communication channel with regionalist (e.g. the Reformist Party of Vojvodina) and other opposition parties in the province (Petsinis, 2020b, pp. 152–153). This rapprochement process, championed by VMSZ, resulted in the participation of both ethnic Hungarian parties in the Serbian Democratic Opposition/DOS coalition that defeated Slobodan Milošević and SPS in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 5 October 2000.

Since 2000, the engagement of VMSZ centred on a preference to the politics of consensus over the politics of confrontation. The party capitalized on the state of fragmentation in Serbian politics that persisted after the fall of Slobodan Milošević and before the consolidation of SNS as the dominant political actor during the mid-2010s. VMSZ participated in a series of governing coalitions with larger Serbian parties both on the republican and the regional level of Vojvodina. This pattern of engagement facilitated VMSZ to promote their standpoints and demands on minority rights from within the halls of power. At the same time, although this principle retains its symbolic value, VMSZ started to place a secondary importance on the *tripartite* concept of ethno-territorial autonomy as the compass for the party’s policymaking activities (VMSZ, 2004, Section IV).

VMSZ Between Serbian Domestic Politics and Hungarian ‘Kin-State Activism’

On 19 June 2001, the Hungarian parliament promulgated the *Hungarian Status Law* (or ‘Act LXII of 2001 on Hungarians Living Abroad’).⁵ Its adoption was legitimized based on ‘kin-state activism’ (Article 6 of the Hungarian Constitution). This sub-section summarizes the main prerogatives of this law on the educational, cultural, and other activities (e.g. economic entrepreneurship) of the ethnic Hungarians resident in Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, and Ukraine (Article 1).

The law specifies that:

assistance in the area of education that will be provided as direct support to establishments and organizations of accredited Hungarian higher education institutions in neighbouring countries needs the formal consent of the Home-State. (Articles 4 and 9)

Furthermore, it provides for the preservation and fostering of the Hungarian language, literature, culture, and folk arts (Article 18, paragraph 2b); financial incentives for the support of rural tourism, especially in less developed settlements with an ethnic Hungarian population (paragraph 2e); and employment opportunities in Hungary through the acquisition of work permits and the 'Hungarian ID card' (Article 15).

In December 2002, the European Commission objected to the potential creation of a 'political bond' between Hungary and the Hungarian minorities in its neighbourhood (Albertie, 2003, p. 999). Consequently, on 18 December 2002, the Hungarian government pleaded to revise the law and conceded that all kinds of support to the ethnic Hungarian communities would be granted after negotiation with the authorities of the home-states. Furthermore, no legal or political connections would be established between Hungary and the ethnic Hungarian minorities (p. 1000; Deets & Stroschein, 2005, p. 301).

The *Hungarian Status Law* was promulgated inside a *quadratic* nexus that comprised Hungary, the EU, the ethnic Hungarian communities, and the neighbouring states where they reside. Along the lines of 'multiple membership', it aimed at establishing a closer link between the Hungarian minorities and the kin-state, without any irredentist implications, inside the process of EU-enlargement. Nevertheless, it might not be an exaggeration to argue that, throughout the first half of the 2000s, Hungary's kin-state activism was viewed with mistrust by its neighbours. These suspicions intensified with the (failed) Hungarian referendum of 5 December 2004 and its provisions for extending 'dual citizenship' to the ethnic Hungarians resident across the Danube basin (Kovács, 2006, pp. 441–443).

In the case of Serbia, the steadier coordination between Belgrade and Budapest (e.g. the 2003 inter-state Agreement for the Protection of National Minority Rights, including the appointment of an inter-governmental, Hungarian-Serbian, committee) helped alleviate friction (Beretka & Korhecz, 2019, pp. 310–312). In the longer run, VMSZ took advantage of the *Hungarian Status Law* and more recent kin-state provisions by Hungary (e.g. the *Prosperitati* programme, 2016) to evolve into a prominent actor in the politics of Vojvodina and a crucial link between the Serbian and the Hungarian apparatuses.

Serbia, Hungary, and the Ethnic Hungarian Minority in Vojvodina: Political Representation and the 'Bridging Process' Between VMSZ and SNS (2010s)

Serbia's Legal Framework on Minority Rights: Between Demographic Realities and Political Leverage

The period since the 2010s has witnessed a shift in the modes of political engagement among ethnic Hungarian parties across the Danube basin. A new strategy appears to consist in a lesser emphasis on the various concepts of ethno-territorial autonomy and a higher stress on cooperation with the larger political actors in each state (e.g. the case of the *Most-Híd*/'Bridge' party in Slovakia). These developments hint that the varying

pattern of tensions inside the triadic nexus that comprised Serbia, Hungary, and the ethnic Hungarian minority (1990s/early 2000s) also started to soften in the mid-2000s and was drastically alleviated by the mid-2010s onwards. This was the combined outcome of realignments in both domestic and inter-state politics.

According to the conditionality for Serbia's accession process to the EU, the 'Action Plan for the Materialization of Minority Rights' came into being in 2016.⁶ This document provides for the operation of the national minorities' councils, education in minority languages, political participation, the public use of minority languages, and the prohibition of ethnic discrimination. The most noteworthy provision is the authorization for the formation of the national minorities' councils at the *Skupština* (national assembly) in Belgrade and the assembly of the autonomous province of Vojvodina in Novi Sad. National minority councils are appointed via separate elections and recognized as a *pravno ličel* 'legal entity'.

Nevertheless, the way that this legal infrastructure on minority rights affects the political representation on minority groups across Serbia has been subject to the intersection between legal prerogatives and specificities on the social micro-level. About the former aspect, the *Law on Political Parties* grants ethnic minority parties a decisive leverage vis-à-vis the state authorities (Bašić, 2018, p. 73) by designating them as 'political parties particularly aimed at the representation of and advocacy for the interest of a national minority and improvement of the rights of the national minority's members' (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 36/2009⁷). On the latter aspect, there is empirical evidence that those minority groups with a dense and homogeneous concentration in specific geographic areas (e.g. the ethnic Hungarians of northern Bačka and northern Banat in Vojvodina) tend to lobby more efficiently for the protection of their collective rights via the existing legal framework (Bašić, 2018, pp. 69, 75, and 80).

Political parties that aspire to lobby for smaller minority groups (e.g. ethnic Albanians and the ethnic Bosnjaks of Sandžak) have also been represented at the *Skupština*. However, it is only VMSZ that can boast an incessant parliamentary representation as well as participation in a series of governing coalitions, since the early 2000s. A noteworthy complication is that the *Law on the National Minority Councils*⁸ does not adequately regulate the leverage granted to ethnic minority parties and their political influence by the *Law on Political Parties* (Bašić, 2018, p. 76). Correspondingly, this 'partocratic' arrangement has, since the 2010s, encouraged the promotion of minority party interests, and extension of their political influence among the electorate, through public bodies such as the national minority councils (p. 94). Apart from its 'bridging process' with SNS and the gradual marginalization of VMDK, VMSZ also succeeded in consolidating its prominent status within Vojvodina via using this legal and institutional framework towards its advantage.

The 'SNS-VMSZ Condominium' in Vojvodina: The Early Phase

The consolidation of SNS as the dominant actor in Serbian politics did not generate remarkable repercussions on the management of interethnic relations in Vojvodina. The political programme of SNS subscribes to safeguarding the collective rights and freedoms of ethnic minorities as these are stipulated in the state legislation (education, political representation, the public use of minority languages, and cross-border links to kin-states) (SNS, 2011, pp. 44–45). The programme regards the existence of ethnic minorities as a 'strength and wealth of Serbia' and judges that:

the violation of the constitutional and legal arrangements on the individual and collective rights of ethnic minorities represents a direct threat to the Serbian national interest. (p. 43)

Furthermore, the endeavour by Hungarian-based ethno-nationalist and irredentist actors, such as the far-right party of Jobbik/Movement for a Better Hungary, to expand its bases of support among Vojvodina's Hungarians, between 2012 and 2014, was not fruitful (Pogonyi, 2017, pp. 104–105).⁹ In January 2014, the late István Pásztor (1956–2023), former VMSZ-leader, warned Jobbik, on its attempt to open a representation office in Subotica, that:

we do not need anyone, not a single one, who comes from Hungary to ignite fire with their irresponsible behaviour and then go home. Vojvodina's Hungarians have never been and will never become protagonists in either Serbian or Hungarian nationalism.¹⁰

Moreover, an estimated 90–95% of ethnic Hungarians from Vojvodina, with the right to vote in Hungary, voted for FIDESZ in the parliamentary elections of 2018 (Interview with MP of VMSZ at the Serbian parliament; 30 November 2018, Belgrade).¹¹ Following the results of the 2016 and the 2020 elections for the assembly of the autonomous province of Vojvodina, VMSZ worked together with the provincial SNS committee over a broad range of policymaking areas (Petsinis, 2022, pp. 142–143).¹² VMSZ garnered 2.5% of the vote and elected 10 deputies at the *Skupština* in the parliamentary elections of June 2020.

Serbia, Hungary, the EU, and the Ethnic Hungarian Minority in Vojvodina: Consolidation of Endogenous and Exogenous Realignments (2010s–Present Day)

Hungarian 'Kin-State Activism' Upgraded

Since the mid-2010s, Hungary has been a fervent advocate of Serbia in its candidacy for EU-membership. Meanwhile, the Hungarian government enhanced the provisions of the *Hungarian Status Law* for financial aid to ethnic Hungarian communities (Article 18, paragraph 2e) through the adoption of the *Prosperitati* programme in 2016. This programme provides financial aid towards entrepreneurial activities, undertaken by public and private legal entities under the assent of Serbian authorities, and not to explicitly political projects. According to Waterbury, the *Prosperitati* and other similar programmes form part of a larger-scale strategy, elaborated by FIDESZ, which centres on the Danube basin and:

has increased its funding for Hungarians in the region, re-establishing old and creating new patronage networks, to maintain support for FIDESZ throughout the Hungarian minority communities in neighbouring countries. (Waterbury, 2021, p. 47)

The Hungarian government earmarked 160 million euros for the *Prosperitati* programme, the majority of which were credits, to be appropriated to the ethnic Hungarian community in Vojvodina in consultation with VMSZ (Prokić, 2019, pp. 212–213). According to Prokić, this amount, that was designated for agricultural, tourist, sports, and local infrastructure projects in municipalities and localities with a dense ethnic Hungarian population

(e.g. northern Bačka) (Interview with the Vice-Secretary at the Provincial Secretariat for National Minorities, Autonomous Assembly of Vojvodina; 29 November 2018, Novi Sad) was additionally regarded as a measure that would facilitate the long-term recovery of Hungarian economy (p. 214). *Prosperitati* operates in conjunction with large, EU-funded, initiatives such as the Danube Region Strategy/DRS with the objective to support the sustainable development of all countries across the Danube basin (pp. 225–226; Csaszar, 2012, p. 77).

Apart from *Prosperitati*, the Hungarian government has, since 2010, upgraded several other kin-state policies. Simplified naturalization became possible for non-Hungarian citizens:

whose ascendants were Hungarian citizens or who are able to substantiate of being of Hungarian origin, if they prove that they are sufficiently proficient in the Hungarian language. (EMN, 2019, p. 3)

Simplified naturalization is non-residential in that:

no continuous residence in Hungary is requested and the applicant also does not need to have sufficient means of subsistence and a place of abode in Hungary.

More importantly, it provides naturalized individuals with all civic rights available for resident Hungarian nationals, including the right to vote in the parliamentary elections (p. 18). The introduction of these measures boosted applications for non-residential Hungarian citizenship among ethnic Hungarians (and not exclusively) in Romania and, to a secondary extent, Serbia and Ukraine (Waterbury, 2021, pp. 45, 48).¹³

VMSZ and European Integration: The Management of Interethnic Relations and Political Links to Hungary

Since the mid-late 2010s, VMSZ has concretized a distinctly (right-wing) *ideological* profile that extends beyond the standard areas of engagement among ethnic minority parties in Central and Southeastern Europe. VMSZ has incorporated elements of *illiberal democracy* in its Hungarian version on sociopolitical norms and values, control of immigration, and the operation of EU institutions. VMSZ combines the aforementioned elements with the prerogatives of Serbian *stabilitocracy* on the preservation of the status quo in domestic politics. VMSZ's ideological profile appears to consist in an overarching anticipation that the EU can 'reform' towards a more sovereigntist and socially conservative direction; one that can also open its doors to governments with 'divergent' or critical outlooks on liberal democracy (e.g. stabilitocratic Serbia).

The 2004 programme of VMSZ underlines that:

VMSZ is particularly interested in Serbia becoming a member of the EU. For us, the process of European integration represents a trajectory for our reintegration (without the change of borders) into Europe where, we, Hungarians, have always belonged. (VMSZ, 2004, Section I)¹⁴

The 'Main Programmatic Aims for the Period between 2023 and 2027' (2023a) reiterate the paramount significance of Serbia's accession process to the EU and stress that

VMSZ ‘endorses all necessary reforms that can speed up the accession process’ (VMSZ, 2023a, p. 1; VMSZ, 2023b, Point 3). At the same time, though, the party leadership highlights that VMSZ stands for an internal *democratization* process within the EU that will help approach the European citizens and meet their direct needs more efficiently. Moreover, the party judges that every member-state of the EU, including the candidate states, must have an equal say in the decision-making processes inside the EU structures’ (VMSZ, 2023a, p. 1).

More emphatically, the current leader, Balint Pásztor, following the official launch of the ‘Patriots for Europe’ group under Viktor Orbán’s initiative in the European Parliament (8 July 2024), stated that:

this coalition is made up of parties that believe in the sovereign decision-making processes within the EU and stand for traditional values, fight against illegal immigration, and against (the EU’s) bureaucratization as well as the propagation of new values which are not the traditional European values.¹⁵

Pásztor went one step further and contended that the formation of this new group should serve as a guarantee to European citizens that ‘not everyone in Brussels promotes the LGBT lobby, war, or illegal immigration!’.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the VMSZ’s vice-president, Ana-Maria Viček, assessed that FIDESZ does not represent solely Hungary’s but also Serbia’s national interests in the European Parliament because ‘these are the two states that the Brussels-based bureaucrats attack more frequently’.¹⁷

In all this, the party leadership keeps drawing a linkage between Serbia’s accession trajectory to the EU and the individual, as well as collective, rights of the ethnic Hungarian community. On the one hand, the accommodation of the individual and collective rights of national minorities, as well as the precise definition of the jurisdiction of the national minorities’ councils inside Serbia’s legal and political system, forms component of the VMSZ’s ‘Main Programmatic Aims for the Period between 2023 and 2027’ (VMSZ, 2023a, p. 1). On the other hand, the ‘Agreement of Cooperation between VMSZ and SNS’ (2022) interlinks Serbia’s accession process to the EU with the systematic cross-border cooperation between Serbia (Vojvodina’s borderline municipalities, in particular) and Hungary within the framework of the EU. This addresses large, EU-financed, infrastructure projects such as the INTERREG (IPA) ‘Programme of Cross-border Cooperation between Serbia and Hungary (2021–2027)’ (VMSZ, 2022, p. 2).

This oscillation between the adoption of a *reformist* and *revisionist* (Flood, 2002) brand of soft Euroscepticism, on an ideological basis, and a more pragmatic approach to Serbia’s accession process to the EU, including the anticipated benefits for VMSZ, should be viewed as part of a longer trajectory. The situation of the ethnic Hungarian minorities across the Danube basin, and the extension of political rights to ethnic Hungarians from the neighbouring states who reside in Hungary, has formed a focal concern among a string of Hungarian governments and Hungary’s major parties. During the 2000s, the question of minority rights for ethnic Hungarians fomented tensions between Budapest and neighbouring governments (e.g. Hungary’s objections during Romania’s accession process to the EU and its opposition to the *Slovak Language Law* of 2009). Since the mid-2010s, though, the role of Hungary as the external homeland for the ethnic Hungarians in Serbia and elsewhere has been readjusted.

This is not to contend that the FIDESZ-led government lost its interest in the ethnic kin in Hungary's 'near abroad'. Nevertheless, the EU's apprehension over the state of democratic freedoms (e.g. the rule of law) in Hungary and Viktor Orbán's opposition to certain EU guidelines (e.g. the quotas arrangement for the redistribution of refugees within the EU, 2015/2016) shifted the lens of the Hungarian government's grievances from the neighbouring states towards Brussels.

VMSZ's closer alignment with the ideological prerogatives of FIDESZ on the EU and European politics is discussed more analytically later in this study. At this point, it is of greater significance to place into context how the cooperation between VMSZ and FIDESZ has been affecting identity politics in those districts of Vojvodina with a dense ethnic Hungarian population. Empirical research demonstrates that the last decade has witnessed the phenomenon of *self-segregation*, accompanied by a more powerful orientation towards Hungary without the necessary emergence of irredentism, among Vojvodina's ethnic Hungarians.

Self-segregation, inside ethnically diverse environments, can be defined as a 'decision pattern in which ethnic group(s) affirm their culture and identity, but deny the usefulness of positive intergroup relations' (Berry, 1974, p. 19). The situation 'on the ground' in Vojvodina appears to be more idiosyncratic in that the ethnic Hungarians and the other groups in multiethnic settlements have been 'diachronically' interested in a state of positive inter-ethnic relations on the grassroots level (Petsinis, 2022, pp. 155–157). Nevertheless, the provision of financial aid for domestic entrepreneurship, in combination with additional opportunities in Hungary (e.g. employment and student bursaries), has rendered many ethnic Hungarians more dependent on the political developments in Hungary than in Serbia. This appears to have facilitated the emergence of a peaceful, yet '*parallel*', pattern of cohabitation between ethnic Hungarians and the Serbian majority in the multi-ethnic districts of Vojvodina (Bašić, 2014, pp. 26, 28, 30–32; Prokić, 2019, pp. 176–177, 192–194, 200, 209).

Considering that, across Serbia, there seems to be a correlation between the dense territorial concentration of a minority group and its efficient political lobbying and representation, VMSZ's successful cross-border engagement with FIDESZ is a crucial catalyst that augments the support and cohesion of the party's bases of support on the regional level. Regarding elite-level politics, this joint engagement between VMSZ and FIDESZ enjoys the endorsement of ruling SNS as a 'third' partner inside the nexus.

The 'SNS-VMSZ-FIDESZ Triangle': Combining Stabilitocracy and Illiberal Democracy

Politically active individuals among Vojvodina's ethnic Hungarian community have spoken about an inter-personal *modus vivendi* between President Aleksandar Vučić and PM Viktor Orbán that has been developing since the mid-2010s. They underline that the former VMSZ-leader, István Pásztor, functioned as the key-mediator between the two leading statesmen (Interview with MP of VMSZ at the Serbian parliament, 30 November 2018, Belgrade; Interview with the Vice-Secretary at the Provincial Secretariat for National Minorities, Autonomous Assembly of Vojvodina, 29 November 2018, Novi Sad). Nevertheless, apart from any inter-personal affinities, the emerging triangle among SNS, VMSZ, and FIDESZ soon started acquiring distinct ideological features—especially as far as VMSZ is concerned. For instance, regarding the party's relations with its senior

partner in Hungary, VMSZ immediately subscribed to FIDESZ's platform against immigration from MENA towards Central Europe.

Consequently, VMSZ voiced its dissent to the *Skupština* over the concentration of refugees and other migrants in districts of Vojvodina with a dense ethnic Hungarian population (e.g. Kanjiža, Horgoš, and Subotica) during late 2015 and early 2016 (Interview with an MP of VMSZ at the Serbian parliament, 30 November 2018, Belgrade; Interview with the Director at the 'Centre for Regionalism' NGO, 16 November 2018, Novi Sad). More importantly, the requirements to guard Serbia's northern and southern borderlines more rigidly, police more efficiently those settlements in Vojvodina where migrants cross through and commence legal procedures against illegal immigrants stationed in Serbia, formed component of the 'Agreement of Cooperation between VMSZ and SNS' and VMSZ's programme for the 2023 parliamentary elections (VMSZ, 2022, p. 2; VMSZ, 2023b, Point 1).

In addition to alleged concerns over security and the well-being of the residents in municipalities along the Serbian-Hungarian borderline, VMSZ has urged not solely for a *revision* of the EU guidelines on immigration but also for the fully fledged *reformation* of the Union towards a more socially conservative direction, as prescribed by FIDESZ.¹⁸ More emphatically, Balint Pásztor stated on 8 July 2024 that:

I feel very sorry when someone uses the word 'right-wingers', and everyone thinks of the far right or some kind of fascists. One should not and ought not to be afraid of us, European sovereigntists! I hope that these (right-wing) trends across Europe will grow stronger and continue.¹⁹

Alongside this swing towards key principles of Hungarian *illiberal* democracy, about sociopolitical values and the operation of EU institutions, the VMSZ leadership tend to view President Vučić and SNS as the ultimate guarantors of stability in Serbian politics. As Balint Pásztor stated on 25 June 2024:

During the last ten years, our cooperation with SNS has brought about many positive outcomes for Serbia, Hungary, and us, Vojvodinian Hungarians. This is why we decided to prolong our bilateral cooperation ... apart from VMSZ and SNS, no other party in Vojvodina can manage the regional and municipal administration so efficiently.²⁰

According to empirical evidence, the 'triadic pact' among SNS, VMSZ, and FIDESZ has been endorsed by a considerable chunk of Vojvodina's ethnic Hungarian community (interview with an MP of VMSZ at the Serbian parliament, 30 November 2018, Belgrade; Prokić, 2019, pp. 211–212).

VMSZ's 'Ideological Turn': Conceptualizing the Transformation

VMSZ has succeeded in building a more articulate (right-wing) ideological profile that combines elements from Serbian *stabilitocracy* and Hungarian *illiberal democracy*. From a 'supply and demand' perspective, one might argue that VMSZ's convergence with SNS, along the lines of Serbia's *gradualist* accession strategy to the EU, additionally derives from the 'EU conditionality fatigue' which also affects the ethnic Hungarian

minority. Moreover, VMSZ appears to align with the SNS-led government's trust in the endorsement that Serbia receives from Budapest, on the level of European politics, along the country's lengthy and uneven trajectory to the EU. Nevertheless, in a similar vein as FIDESZ, VMSZ, if just subtly, expresses hopes that Serbia's acceptance into the EU can amount to one more step towards a socially conservative 'reformation' of the EU; one that can also accommodate governments with 'divergent' or critical outlooks on liberal democracy (e.g. stabilocratic Serbia).

At this point, the more pragmatic considerations by VMSZ (e.g. those linked to the management of the financial aid channelled by the Hungarian government) should not be overlooked either. From a wider angle, the operation of ethnic minority parties in Southeastern Europe has largely consisted in the maintenance of clientelistic/patronage networks (e.g. Crowther, 2017; and Stewart, 2019, on the ethnic Albanian parties in Northern Macedonia during the 2010s). Here, the formation of patronage networks, as part of SNS' stabilocratic practice in Serbia's interior (Bieber, 2018, p. 184), combines with the establishment of clientelistic networks by FIDESZ as part of its cross-border engagement among the ethnic Hungarian communities across the Danube basin (Waterbury, 2021, p. 47). At a first instance, VMSZ became a crucial component of both these clientelistic/patronage networks in the regional politics of Vojvodina. However, although not overlooking these pragmatic considerations, VMSZ has been evolving into something more than just a 'broker party' between SNS and FIDESZ.

In accordance with Sartori's treatise of ideology (Sartori, 1979, p. 113), it appears that the gradual adoption of an illiberal platform endows VMSZ with a more ideological, powerful, and further-reaching source of legitimacy than the merely pragmatic and tactical adjustments at the political micro-level. This argument acquires a greater significance in light of the consolidation of an internally varied, yet influential, spectrum of illiberal and Eurosceptic politics across Central and Southeastern Europe (e.g. SNS, FIDESZ, PiS, Slovakia's SMER-SD and Romania's AUR). Hence, the uniqueness of VMSZ as a political actor that has concretized a distinctly *ideological*, and simultaneously pragmatic, profile which extends beyond the representation of the collective interests of a given minority group by the more 'traditional' ethnic minority parties in Central and Southeastern Europe.

The empirical findings of this study 'contest' and simultaneously update the triadic nexus theory formulated by Brubaker. The 'SNS-VMSZ-FIDESZ triangle' hints at a rather idiosyncratic case in Central and Southeast European ethnopolitics whereby contemporary affinities in political ideology appear to supersede the essentialism of ethnicity, 'longstanding' cleavages between national majorities and ethnic minorities, and their 'traditional' politicization by mainstream and minority parties—at home and in the kin-state alike. This enquiry demonstrates that the framework of multiple membership does not merely trigger 'kin-state activism' or grant individuals belonging to ethnic minorities with legal and economic benefits from the kin-state. Under certain circumstances, it can also provide a fertile common ground for the formation of ideological alliances, across national borders, that comprise political representatives of both the minority group and the ruling establishments in the home-state as well as the kin-state.

More emphatically, the 'SNS-VMSZ-FIDESZ triangle' comes across as a rather idiosyncratic case whereby cross-border cooperation schemes in Central and Eastern

Europe, as a trajectory towards facilitating the process of European integration across this region, appear to have become inverted, if not, to a certain extent, ‘backfire’. In other words, at an early stage, VMSZ took advantage of both Hungary’s kin-state policies and cross-border cooperation schemes, under the umbrella of the EU, to consolidate its dominant status within the ethnic Hungarian minority at the regional level of Vojvodina. In the longer run, although formally subscribing to the EU’s enlargement to Serbia and the Western Balkans, VMSZ developed a critical stance vis-à-vis the EU which rests on the ideological premises of Hungarian illiberal democracy—its reformist and revisionist Euroscepticism, in particular. In this light, the empirical findings of this study can also provide some material towards reconsidering and updating the quadratic nexus theory (Smith, 2002) amidst the powerful emergence of Eurosceptic trends and their subsequent endorsement by both majority and minority actors across Central and Eastern Europe.

The empirical findings of this article can encourage a more systematic collaboration between experts in ethnopolitics and academic specialists in Euroscepticism and illiberalism with a regional focus on Central and Southeastern Europe. This endeavour becomes particularly relevant at a time when the ‘cross-border cooperation’ between political actors with varying illiberal and Eurosceptic profiles (e.g. FIDESZ’s informal ‘pact’ with Slovakia’s governing SMER-SD since 2023/2024) appears to efface the significance of societal cleavages rooted in domestic ethnopolitics and disputes over ethnic minorities. It is of great interest to assess whether other influential minority parties (e.g. Slovakia’s *Most-Híd* and/or the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania/UDMR) have been, like VMSZ, shifting towards a more ideological direction or, on the contrary, insist on primarily pragmatic patterns of policymaking inside their national contexts.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. According to the 2022 census, a total of 184,442 ethnic Hungarians resided in Serbia; the bulk of which in Vojvodina (<https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3104020102>) (accessed 25 March 2024).
2. Personal autonomy addresses the collective legal subjectivity of the Hungarian minority—a partner-like relation to the Serbian government and the assembly of the autonomous province of Vojvodina.
3. Territorial autonomy refers to the self-government of those municipalities in the north of Vojvodina where the Hungarian concentration is particularly dense.
4. Local self-administration would be exercised in communities with a predominantly Hungarian population, along the Serbian-Hungarian border. VMSZ’s political programme designated nine municipalities (Ada, Bačka Topola, Bečej, Čoka, Kanjiža, Mali Idoš, Subotica, Kneževac, and Senta) that would constitute the ‘Hungarian Self-Governing District’ (Section V, Paragraph Aa).
5. A full text-version of *Act LXII of 2001 on Hungarians Living in Neighbouring Countries* (2002) can be accessed at: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2002/en/31753> (accessed 3 April 2024).
6. A full text-version of the *Action Plan for the Realization of the Rights of National Minorities*, January 2016 is available at: http://www.puma.vojvodina.gov.rs/dokumenti/Engleski/pravni_akti/Action%20Plan%20for%20National%20Minorities.PDF (accessed 16 November 2024).
7. <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/national-assembly/national-assembly-in-numbers/acts-published-in-the-official-gazette-of-the-republic-of-serbia.2073.html> (accessed 16 July 2024).

8. A full-text version of the Serbian Law on the National Minority Councils can be accessed at: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2009/72/20/reg> (accessed 3 April 2024).
9. Between 2014 and 2016, Jobbik MPs based in Hungary (namely, István Szávay) had been engaged in attempts to open offices for the party, first in Subotica and later in Senta (northern Bačka) (Petsinis, 2020b, p. 219).
10. 'Pastor Jobiku: Ne vršljaj po Vojvodini!' 25 January 2014: <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/377296/Pastor-Jobiku-Ne-vrsljaj-po-Vojvodini> (accessed 28 February 2023).
11. Since the late 2010s, FIDESZ has succeeded in claiming the lion's share of the party preferences among those ethnic Hungarians eligible to vote in the Hungarian national elections throughout the Danube basin (Pogonyi, 2017, pp. 104–105).
12. István Pásztor served as president at the executive council of the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (22 June 2012–30 October 2023).
13. In 2018, a total number of 17,073 third-country nationals acquired Hungarian citizenship. Serbia featured among the top 10 countries of former citizenships (EMN, 2019, p. 18).
14. <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/o-nama/dokumenti/program> (accessed 10 July 2024).
15. 'Sada Svi Orbana Moraju Ozbiljno da Shvate, a Evropa Će Čuti i Glas—Srbije!' 8 July 2024: <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/novosti/pregled-stampe/sada-svi-orbana-moraju-ozbiljno-da-shvate-evropa-ce-cuti-i-glas-srbije> (accessed 10 July 2024).
16. 'Sada Svi Orbana Moraju Ozbiljno da Shvate, a Evropa Će Čuti i Glas—Srbije!' 8 July 2024: <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/novosti/pregled-stampe/sada-svi-orbana-moraju-ozbiljno-da-shvate-evropa-ce-cuti-i-glas-srbije> (accessed 10 July 2024).
17. 'Sada Svi Orbana Moraju Ozbiljno da Shvate, a Evropa Će Čuti i Glas—Srbije!' 8 July 2024: <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/novosti/pregled-stampe/sada-svi-orbana-moraju-ozbiljno-da-shvate-evropa-ce-cuti-i-glas-srbije> (accessed 10 July 2024).
18. 'Sada Svi Orbana Moraju Ozbiljno da Shvate, a Evropa Će Čuti i Glas—Srbije!' 8 July 2024: <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/novosti/pregled-stampe/sada-svi-orbana-moraju-ozbiljno-da-shvate-evropa-ce-cuti-i-glas-srbije> (accessed 10 July 2024).
19. 'Sada Svi Orbana Moraju Ozbiljno da Shvate, a Evropa Će Čuti i Glas—Srbije!' 8 July 2024: <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/novosti/pregled-stampe/sada-svi-orbana-moraju-ozbiljno-da-shvate-evropa-ce-cuti-i-glas-srbije> (accessed 10 July 2024).
20. 'Dr Balint Pastor: Saradnja SVM-a i SNS-a Korisna i Za Srbiju, i Za Mađarsku i Za Vojvodanske Mađare', 25 June 2024: <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/novosti/pregled-stampe/dr-balint-pastor-saradnja-svm-i-sns-korisna-i-za-srbiju-i-za-madarsku-i-za> (accessed 11 July 2024).

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