**Early childhood education and care for the Hungarian national minority in Vojvodina, Serbia**

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**bstract**

Vojvodina is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Europe where, according to the latest census in 2011, Hungarians are the largest non-Serb national minority group. In recent decades, this northern province of Serbia has faced continuous depopulation, forcing schools and nurseries to face an uncertain future. We argue that despite the decreasing population in general, the nature of Serbia’s minority rights regime currently produces social inequality, as policies that seek harmony by accepting ethnic separation may give rise to future conflict. In these challenging times, we focus on the political culture that is currently functioning in Serbia, in which the Hungarian national minority is (re)positioning itself to secure its own identity. In this paper, we will cover the history and function of the nurseries (bölcsőde) and kindergartens (óvoda) of the Hungarian national minority in Serbia. We will cover the early years curriculum and qualification requirements of the early childhood workforce. Furthermore, we will explain the influence of educational and cultural traditions and values through early childhood education and care (ECEC), giving specific attention to the usage of the native language that is fundamental to cultural identity.

Keywords: [Hungarian national minority](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Hungarian%2BNational%2BMinority), [Vojvodina](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Vojvodina), [childhood](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Childhood), [(de)population](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/%5C%28de%5C%29population)

**Context of the study**

In order to contextualise the ideas discussed in this paper, this section provides an explanation of the terminology used in order to describe the ways in which early childhood education and care (ECEC) functions in the territory of current Vojvodina. In the former Yugoslav federal constitution of 1974, the term ethnic minority was not used to describe ethnic minorities, but distinction was made, between ‘nations’ and ‘nationalities’ or ‘national minorities’ (Varady [1997](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). Nations are, for example, the Serbs whose motherland is Serbia, and national minorities are those ethnic groups who have a state outside of Serbia, such as the Hungarians who call Hungary the *anyaország* – motherland. Therefore, to describe the Hungarian population in Vojvodina, who are Serbian citizens, the term *national minority* is used here.

Our research focuses on kindergarten and kindergarten age children; however, it is important to state that the early childhood provision in Vojvodina (Serbia) is divided between *bölcsőde* (nursery), services from six months to three years old, and *óvoda* or *napközi* (kindergarten), from three to six or seven year old children (Kamenov [1987](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This binary approach to ECEC was introduced in the late 1940s in Serbia, where both institutions were financed either by the Serbian state or by the local authority except for the religious nurseries, which were financed by the church. Half-day attendance at the nursery is a very popular choice for many parents. Therefore, the terms half-day care (4 h), and full-day care (8 h) reflect the attendance of children at nurseries. Traditionally, children in the nursery were cared for and educated by the *kisgyermeknevelő* (infant and early childhood educator), while in the kindergartens this role has been undertaken by the *óvónő* (female pre-primary pedagogue), or *óvodapedagógus*(pre-primary pedagogue) (Korintus [2017](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). Both titles in the kindergartens are interchangeably used as there is no difference between them in terms of qualification level. We opted to use the term ‘pre-primary pedagogue’ as this includes both male and female workers. Korintus ([2017](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) points out that the ‘translation of ‘Pre-primary Pedagogue’ does not indicate a school-type approach in kindergartens’.

Qualification requirements – from the 1970s to work with kindergarten age children required a childcare certificate (upper secondary vocational level, level 3). From 1993 the minimum qualification was changed to a foundation degree (level 5). Since 2008, the minimum qualification required to become a pre-primary pedagogue is a BA level course (Pálinkas [1984](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). the same as in Hungary (Korintus 2017). In Vojvodina, up until 1993 there was only one institution, in Ùjvidék (Novi Sad – current capital of Vojvodina), where students were able to complete their degree in the Hungarian language. Language is one of the most significant markers of the national identification especially in a minority environment where the sense of identity and language retention are closely connected (Vukov Raffai [2012](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). From 1993, a new institution opened in Szabadka (Subotica – a town in north Vojvodina) where the foundation degree programme was taught, and from 2008 at the ‘University of Novi Sad, Hungarian Language Teacher Training Faculty in Subotica’ a new degree was introduced at BA and MA level in the Hungarian language. This was an important factor for employability purposes as only those graduates who spoke the Hungarian language were employed to work with children of the Hungarian national minority. The academic programme in these two institutions was very similar to the equivalent course in the Serbian language, with the addition of subjects, such as Hungarian grammar, Hungarian literature and Hungarian history.

**Methodology**

In a review of ECEC provision for the Hungarian national minority in Vojvodina, we discovered that no official research had been conducted which summarises the history of ECEC provision, curriculum and policies. Our secondary data analysis forms part of a larger research study on the current provision of ECEC for the Hungarian population in Vojvodina. We used Serbian and Hungarian state policy documents, the old and the current early years curriculum, statistical data and photographic evidence. Photographs, and the narratives attached to them were taken from the previous ethnographic research conducted between 2005 and 2013 (Raffai [2014](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)).

**Hungarian national minority in Vojvodina**

The Hungarian population is the largest national minority group in Vojvodina. Approximately 63% are mostly clustered in the northern towns towards the Hungarian border, while the remaining 37% are scattered in communities throughout the whole region of Vojvodina (Badis [2011](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). One of the characteristics of the region is that for centuries, Vojvodina has been linguistically and culturally heterogenic due to processes of internal and external migrations. These migrations were mainly a result of the often-changing state borders that have influenced the changing nature of relationships between the Hungarian national minority in Serbia and their motherland in Hungary (Pichler et al. [2011](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This process has meant that the indigenous Hungarian population, who lived in the region for centuries, became citizens of several newly formed and reclaimed countries (Kocsis and Kocsis-Hodosi [1998](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This is an important aspect in understanding the region’s education system (Figure [1](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682#F0001)).

Figure 1. Map of Vojvodina in Central Europe.



Due to the lack of clear guidance and principles about the rights of minorities in Serbia (Varady [1997](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682); Beretka and Széke [2016](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) the Hungarian national minority enjoy cultural autonomy by being able to educate their children in their native language. After the two world wars, due to the change of the border, this ethnic group was cut off from its motherland. By being an indigenous population, however, they influenced the regional education policy as they managed to secure their rights to have formal and informal education provided in their mother tongue (Forray [1998](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This move secured the continuity of the work of Hungarian language provision for groups of Hungarian language children within the mixed language educational institutions. This process was not unique to the Hungarian national minority; other minorities enjoyed this rule beyond the border of Serbia, such as the Serbians living in Hungary (Herczeghné Orbán 2014). However, in the last two decades, due to economic and political turbulence, the region’s population has been in sharp decline (Stojšin [2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). Such decline is affecting the identity consciousness of the Hungarian national minority, as their numbers have fallen faster than the Serbs. The exposure of the Hungarian national minority to linguistic and cultural assimilation is rapid, especially those who live in settlements where they are in the minority. Research by Kocsis and Kocsis-Hodosi ([1998](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) and Badis ([2011](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) found that 44% of Hungarian nationals live in small settlements, where assimilation and depopulation is more rapid than in bigger settlements.

In 2001, there were 290,207 registered Hungarians living in Vojvodina, but, the last census (2011) showed a sharp decline of 13% since that time. Due to this decline, a considerable number of Hungarian language schools and kindergartens face an uncertain future. In post-Milošević Serbia, therefore, the Hungarian national minority started to (re)position itself to secure its own identity. Our aims are to introduce and to discuss current strategies that have been developed at government level, both by the Hungarian and Serbian states, to tackle the issues of erosion of the regional culture, depopulation and assimilation that had, and continue to have, a detrimental effect on the region’s educational services. Drawing on the political trend of the Hungarian state which ‘has undertaken an ambitious effort in drafting a form of model legislation on the protection of minorities’ (Council of Europe [2001, 2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) we reviewed the history of ECEC in Vojvodina. By examining past changes we are able to understand the current ECEC practices. From the diachronic perspective, we would like to draw attention to the (future) impact of the new policies that will affect the use of Hungarian language and the educational rights of Hungarian children.

**ECEC provisions in Vojvodina**

Beside the division between *bölcsőde* and *óvoda*, children were further divided by their age, within the kindergarten into ‘small’ groups: 3–5 years old, ‘middle’ groups: 5–6 years old, and ‘big’ groups: 6–7 years old. Children attending the middle and big groups follow the ‘school readiness’ programme (Kopas-Vukašinović [2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):59–60). Since 2004, it is a statutory requirement for children to attend nursery from the age of five for a minimum of four hours a day for a minimum of six months. This rule reflects the official record of attendance specified by The Magyar Nemzeti Tanács (MNT) (The National Council of the Hungarian National Minority) ([2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):10) in 2014/15 there were 71 Hungarian language groups in the nurseries with 1369 children attending full-day care, and 121 groups with 2041 children attending half-day care settings. Only 176 Hungarian children attended *bölcsőde.* This data clearly indicates that half-day care settings were more popular amongst Hungarian parents/carers. Data also showed that those children who live outside the cities attend half-day care as it suits the life rhythm of their families; while for Hungarian children who live in the cities full day care was more favoured.

**The establishment of the nursery network in Vojvodina as part of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1843–1918)**

The establishment of the first Hungarian language nursery in Vojvodina can be accredited to Countess Teréz Brunszvik who opened the first kindergarten in 1828 named ‘Angyalkert’ (Garden of Angels) in Budapest, Hungary. The educational approach mirrored the principles set by the Englishman, Samuel Wilderspin, whose work ‘On the Importance of Educating the Infant Poor’ became increasingly popular amongst Hungarian scholars (Pukánszky and Németh [1997](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). Many of Wilderspin’s ideas and practices have had a greater influence on infant education in this part of the world than in the UK.

In 1836, the Hungarian Society for the Promotion of Infant Schools was founded, resulting in an increase in the number of infant schools in the country. This movement influenced the opening of the first kindergarten in Vojvodina in 1843, by Makk György from Szabadka. Although this was a private setting, its funding was substantially supported by the town. Gavrilović (Гaвpилoвић 2001) writes that ‘Its equipment provides a good idea about the early work with children; it consisted of ‘six benches made from beech, one breakfast table, one hat stand, one table with chairs, two Hungarian alphabets, one German alphabet, fifty pictures in colour, and one hundred counting frames – abacus’. By 1858 an additional four mainstream kindergartens were opened and by 1890 there were eight in total in the province, all financed by the Szabadka City Council. The opening of the kindergartens was an important moment not only for the development of the city, but for the ECEC movement in the region (Pálinkas [1984](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). With the development of the kindergartens came an awareness of the need for the employment of skilled pre-primary pedagogues and as a result the city invested in the up-skilling of two local teachers (Iványi [1892](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This was a significant step, marking recognition of the need for a skilled ECEC workforce (Figure [2](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682#F0002)).

Figure 2. The first kindergarten in Szabadka, where a kindergarten still exists today, named Makk György to commemorate the founder of the first free-time kindergarten.



Despite considerable developments in formalising ECEC, it was only in 1891 that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy introduced their first ECEC legislation which covered and defined the role of the state, local authorities, the church, and the ways in which ECEC was to be governed. This was the time when teacher training was officially introduced to cover 3 to 6 or 7 year old children. Although the law gave rights to people from other minorities to be trained as nursery pedagogues in their own language, knowledge of Hungarian language was compulsory as it was the official national language (Act [1891](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)article XV). It was not surprising, therefore, that although at the turn of the twentieth century the majority of the population (72%) was not Hungarian (Mirnics [2000](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):27), the use of Hungarian language in ECEC provision had strengthened. Statistical data shows the predominance of Hungarian language kindergartens; for example, in the school year of 1907/1908, 255 kindergartens in the territory of today’s Vojvodina had Hungarian as the language of activities, whereas only 15 used another language, mostly Serbian or German (Pálinkas [1984](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This shows that the state exercised its power by implementing a nationalistic approach to early education; by enforcing the Hungarian language, not only was the need to educate children of other national minorities in their mother tongue disregarded but the selection of pre-primary pedagogues was also limited.

**The first ECEC curriculum in the period of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1919–1929) and the State of Yugoslavia (1929–1941)**

Due to changes in the border, Vojvodina became part of a newly established country, following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. When the administration of the province changed from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, a dramatic change in population followed. Systemic colonisation of the newly formed State, mainly by Serbs, resulted in their population increasing. During the First World War (1914–1918), however, changes in the borders meant that the proportion of Hungarians in the province dropped by 5%, mainly as people moved to the territory of what was at the time Hungary (Szondi [2005](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). The protection of religious and minority rights had become a concern and the subject of discussion. In 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference, the Supreme Council established ‘The Committee on New States and for The Protection of Minorities’ and the newly formed independent state was compelled to sign the ‘Minority Treaties’ as a precondition of diplomatic recognition. A new international body, called the League of Nations, was created to protect and safeguard the rights of minorities and to monitor the situation. This treaty included references to ECEC, stating that ‘everyone has a right to be educated in their own language’ (Kopas-Vukašinović [2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):45). Therefore, the treaty proposed that the education of minorities in their own language was to be financed by the Serbian state (Horváth [1997](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). Despite this effort, during the period of 1919–1941, there was a ‘sharp decline in the number of kindergartens and children attending, with there being 87 fewer than 21 years before’ (Димић [1997](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):182).

This period also marks when the pre-school programmes were developed by the state (Kopas-Vukašinović [2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). The ‘Program i Način Rada u Zabavištu’ (The ECEC Curriculum and the Programme for Nursery Practice) was implemented by the end of 1940. According to this curriculum, the state intended to regulate kindergarten work following a Fröbel and Montessori approach to ECEC. Despite this effort, the main role of kindergartens was to ‘prepare children for school readiness’ (Kopas-Vukašinović [2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):59) which meant that each child would be taught how to speak the official language – Serbian. Even in mainly Hungarian speaking settlements, Serbian language was compulsory. This was related to the kindergarten report produced for the Szabadka City Council, which stated that because there were a significant number of children who did not speak the official language, the main role of kindergartens was to teach them Serbian, which would ready the children for primary school education. For this reason, [the Council] introduced new educational rules and regulations (Srdić and Mačković [2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)).

In 1921 Svetozar Pribičević, the Education Minister, introduced a new rule called ‘Névelemzési Rendelet’ (Regulation based on Names) that targeted national minorities. The method chosen to decide a person’s nationality was simply to infer it from their surname (Horváth [1997](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This proved problematic for various reasons: firstly, because women of Hungarian nationality could have taken a non-Hungarian surname through marriage; secondly, the State altered records of minorities to make their names more Slavic, for example, by simply adding the ‘-ić’ suffix at the end of a name. This practice defined the education system for minorities in Serbia up until the Second World War, and led to the reduction of Hungarian-language education (Pálinkas [1984](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) which was monitored directly by the centralistic government. Additionally, from 1922, there were also Hungarians who were Jewish which meant they had a Jewish surname, and were therefore denied access to kindergarten education in Hungarian language. This therefore meant that a significant proportion of Hungarian children were denied access to Hungarian language kindergartens (Димић [1997](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)).

**Working conditions**

Generally, the working conditions of pre-primary pedagogues were poor, as on average, the staff: children ratio for 4–5 year old children was 1:100. Employment of kindergarten workers (called Master and Madam) was based on their knowledge of the Serbian language and on the oath of allegiance to the Yugoslav State and the King rather than on their level of education. The use of the Hungarian language by ECEC workers was permitted only to make it easier for them to teach Serbian to Hungarian children (Srdić and Mačković [2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). This meant that very few Hungarian children enjoyed education in their own language (Figure [3](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682#F0003)).

Figure 3. In Szabadka, Karađorđe Kindergarten, 1939.



The owner of this photograph, one of the children pictured, told us how this group of Hungarian children were taught in Serbian by the ‘Gospodin’ (Master), which is how they referred to the pre-primary pedagogue at the time:

The Master knew Hungarian, but would not use it. If one of the children made a mistake, they would be subject to physical punishment; this is why all the children have frowns in the photograph. The Master would have a stick in his hand at all times, ready to use on us. (*Memoir, 1*)

**Vojvodina as part of the Kingdom of Hungary during the Second World War (1941–1944)**

During this period, the Hungarian State was proactive in restoring kindergarten education to its pre-1920 state. During this time, the Hungarian pre-school pedagogy shifted towards a folk-nationalistic direction seen in the rise of musical nationalism that was one of the main characteristics of kindergarten education. Through traditional songs, dance, and national costume, the use of Hungarian and German language increased and, with it, the appreciation of a rich national heritage, disregarding the heritage of other minorities living in the region. Teachers and pre-primary pedagogues were transported to Vojvodina from the rest of Hungary to cover the shortage (A. Sajti [2010](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) (Figure [4](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682#F0004)).

Figure 4. Kirn, harvest celebration in 1942 in Hungarian national dress.



**Vojvodina as part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY)**

After the Second World War, Vojvodina under Marshall Josip Broz Tito was granted autonomy, allowing it to regulate its own ECEC practices. The religious and private kindergartens ceased to exist. The right to attend Hungarian language kindergartens was confirmed in the new Constitution of 1974 and the number of children attending pre-school education gradually increased: ‘in 1957, 49,793 children attended while in 1988 this number rose to 413,197’ (Božinović [1996](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):248). However, this level of increase was not proportional throughout Yugoslavia, as in ‘1978 21% of children in Vojvodina attended kindergartens as opposed to 16% in Serbia as a whole’ (Kamenov [1987](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):307). This higher proportion was a direct result of Vojvodina’s rich ECEC history.

**Social justice and the place of women in society**

The government re-organised the pre-school institutions according to the ideology of the USSR; the principle of universal equality and social justice was expressed in the collectivisation of everything, including children. Equal rights for all children to access the same education and upbringing was considered one of the most important achievements of socialism. Another important principle was the equality of women, including their participation in production and public life on an equal basis with men. Women tried to combine the raising of their children with work as, for most of them, participation in the life of society was equally important as the home and childcare. ECEC was accessible to every family as it was mainly state funded. All ECEC establishments worked on the basis of a ‘single approach’ that clearly distinguished age groups, clearly identifying the number and content of lessons necessary for each age group as well as norms for children’s physical and psychological development (what a child should know and be able to do at each age level). This included knowledge of the mother tongue (speaking skills), physical education, knowledge of the environment, fine arts, music and fundamentals of mathematics (Kopas-Vukašinović [2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)).

The memoir from one of the pre-primary pedagogue pictured in Figure [5](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682#F0005) states:

Children were divided into several groups in one nursery, according to their mother-tongue. There were no mixed language groups of children; however, they mixed up in free play and in outdoor activities with the aim to encourage them to learn each other’s languages. The compulsory part of education such as early maths, singing and language sessions took place separately*.* (*Memoir, 2*)

Figure 5. In Szabadka, once a Karađorđe Kindergarten, that was renamed Mókuska (Small squirrel) 1961.



In 1969, an official early education programme was introduced, coordinated by the Pedagogical Institute of Vojvodina. In addition to the already existing areas of development, dominant national minority language knowledge was added. The reasoning behind this was to create a good foundation for school readiness. In this context, dominant language refers to *the lingua franca* of the area of the kindergarten, for example, Hungarian was the dominant national minority language in Szabadka. However, there was no framework or guidance for pre-primary pedagogues to use when working with Hungarian children.

**Vojvodina during and after the Milošević era (1989–2000) and the current approach to ECEC**

Slobodan Milošević pursued Serbian nationalist policies that contributed to the breakup of the socialist Yugoslav federation. Milošević advocated for the federal government to restore ‘home rule’ over the autonomous province of Vojvodina and replaced the party leadership in Vojvodina with his own supporters. In 1990, Milošević pushed through changes to the Serbian constitution that curtailed the province’s autonomy. This had a major impact on ECEC as it was centralised and Vojvodina no longer had a say in its approach to early education. The new instructions about ECEC and teacher education were to come from Belgrade and were compulsory. New laws were enacted to streamline and make education in Serbia uniform. Education became compulsory and continued to be free for all children. Serbian was also the official language to be used in ECEC; however, there was a clause that allowed national minorities to be educated in their own languages if they wished. Although the majority of Hungarian national minority children continued to attend Hungarian language kindergartens, these changes introduced a ‘mixed group approach’ for children, encouraging them to speak both Hungarian and Serbian.

**Local political and educational movements**

Despite having Hungarian language nurseries, kindergartens and educational institutions, the Hungarian national minority felt vulnerable as the Serbian nationalistic political movement was on a rise. This marked the mass migration of Serbian Hungarians to their motherland. Badis ([2012](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):32) reported that ‘tens of thousands of Hungarians moved abroad’. This migration continues even today. Unfortunately, we could not obtain valid statistical data to report the exact number of Hungarian emigrants. However, the social impact is felt throughout Vojvodina, mostly in the field of education as the size of kindergarten groups has continued to fall.

To protect Hungarian children’s rights, the Vojvodinian Hungarian Teachers’ Society was established in 1993, followed by the Vojvodinian Hungarian Pre-school Society in 2002. The National Council for the Hungarian Ethnic Minority (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács) started their activities in 1999, and in 2002 officially started to represent and to strengthen the rights of Hungarians living in Vojvodina. Currently, the Council is funded by the Hungarian and Serbian states. Beretka and Széke (2016:1) argue that the rise of these organisations was due to the absence of clear guidance on minorities living in Serbia as there is ‘no specific enumeration of minority groups, nor clear principles to be followed about how a minority should be recognized’. The lack of clear guidance resulted in a campaign for powerful political representation and for a formal strategy to maintain and protect the rights of the Hungarian national minority. However, this approach appeared to be precarious as Jenne ([2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):729) argued that ‘if a minority believes that it enjoys significant support from a powerful national homeland or other external actor, it radicalises its demands against the host state’.

In 1996, a new ECEC curriculum was introduced which is still in use, called ‘Osnove programa predškolskog vaspitanja 1996 (Early Years Curriculum for Preschool Children 1996). This was altered later to ‘Пpaвилник o oпштим ocнoвaмa пpeдшкoлcкoг пpoгpaмa [2006](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682).’ (Rules of the General Principles of Pre-school Curriculum, 2006). This curriculum includes two approaches, titled ‘A’ and ‘B’. It is up to the pre-primary pedagogue’s discretion which one to use. Approach ‘A’ is flexible and entrusts the teacher with creative control, whilst approach ‘B’ is based on positive reinforcement of children, highlighting their cognitive development. This second approach reinforces the holistic development of children with clear aims and carefully planned daily and weekly activities that focus on certain areas of development in order to enable children to achieve their full potential. With both approaches, the kindergarten itself has the freedom to develop an additional child centred approach which targets further needs (Пpaвилник o oпштим ocнoвaмa пpeдшкoлcкoг пpoгpaмa [2006](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682). However, the current curriculum disregards the language variation of many Hungarian children who are brought up and live in rural areas and who acquire and use the dialect spoken in the family. The question can be asked: under these circumstances, can the nursery network for Hungarian families be protected?

Local sociologist, Mirnics ([1998](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) investigated the available statistical data on Hungarian national minorities living in Vojvodina. He studied the birth and mortality rate, and average life expectancy, concluding that according to the 1991 census, the Hungarian national minority would be unable to maintain its numbers as these were decreasing by 1.5% annually (Badis 2012). In the last five years (2012–2017), this process has continued mainly due to economic migration to Western countries. The latest migration has had a devastating impact on nurseries as the number of enrolled children was lower than expected, forcing some nurseries and kindergartens to be closed, or to close Hungarian language groups within the setting. For example, in 2009/10, 9% fewer children had been enrolled than in previous years, and in 2014/15 this number was a further 5% less. In addition to migration, the number of Hungarian national minorities suffered a further decline of ‘approximately 500–600 per year’ (Badis 2012:35) due to assimilation and mixed marriages (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of 5–6 years old Hungarian minority children in compulsory education.

**Bilingualism in kindergartens**

Limited data were available to determine why the parents of Hungarian children chose to enrol their children in Serbian language educational institutions. The Magyar Nemzeti Tanács (MNT) ([2010](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)Magyar Nemzeti Tanács (MNT). 2010. *Magyar Nemzeti Tanács Oktatásfejlesztési Stratégiája 2010–2016* [The National Council of the Hungarian National Minority]. Accessed March 5, 2017.<http://archiv.mnt.org.rs/10-Strategiak> [[Google Scholar]](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?hl=en&publication_year=2010&issue=3&author=Magyar+Nemzeti+Tan%C3%A1cs+%28MNT%29&title=Magyar+Nemzeti+Tan%C3%A1cs+Oktat%C3%A1sfejleszt%C3%A9si+Strat%C3%A9gi%C3%A1ja+2010%E2%80%932016+%5BThe+National+Council+of+the+Hungarian+National+Minority%5D&)) recorded that about 80% of Hungarian children were attending Hungarian provisions. The assumption about the remaining 20% was that they chose Serbian provisions as there were no Hungarian kindergartens available, or because parents believed that learning Serbian would expand their children’s future career opportunities. Badis ([2011](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) furthermore reported that the number of Hungarian children attending bilingual (mainly Serb-Hungarian) kindergartens was considerably higher. Due to this phenomenon local psycholinguistics researcher, such as Göncz ([1985, 2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) and Vukov Raffai ([2012](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) noted, that children who attend a kindergarten that is not taught in their mother-tongue could experience a negative impact on their language, communication and emotional development. Göncz ([2004](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):277) further stated that ‘if we were to examine the language from the minority’s perspective and if the spoken or dominant language is not the minority language the child might swap the mother tongue for the dominant language. The aim is to maintain the dominance of the mother tongue and therefore it is highly recommended for education to start with the language that is dominant for the child’. ‘Learning languages should start in pre-school’ states Mikes ([1976](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):4), who researched bilingualism and multilingualism in the region. She suggested that it was not necessary for a Hungarian child to attend a Serbian kindergarten with the sole reason to learn Serbian as it could harm the child’s cognitive and emotional development. If the child only spoke Hungarian before pre-school then the child’s education should continue in the Hungarian language. Children would learn Serbian anyway, due to the legal requirements that compulsory pre-school activities had to be provided in Serbian (being the official language) and ‘the aim is not to learn the language but to learn how to communicate through play’ (Mikes [2003](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):160).

These examples and recommendations unfortunately have not been followed throughout the history of ECEC in the region. ECEC provisions have been used as an educational apparatus through which the State enforced its preferred language. The child’s needs have been neglected as their education has been delivered solely through the language promoted by the state.

**The work of The National Council for the Hungarian Ethnic Minority (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács) with the state of Hungary**

According to the MNT, strategic plan of 2016–2020, in those local authorities where the Hungarian national minority is 50% or above, 80% of them chose to attend kindergartens that are in the Hungarian language. However, if the population is 50% or less the proportion, making this choice is considerably lower. Therefore, the MNT designed a strategic plan to support children of Hungarian nationality to attend Hungarian language settings by introducing certain measures. For example, one of their commitments was the ‘financing of Hungarian Speech and Language Therapists, Educational Psychologists and other early years professionals for early interventions’ (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács (MNT) [2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):35–36). They also introduced several new projects, among which was the implementation of the ‘Vackor óvodába indul projekt’ (Vackor starting nursery project) in 2011. This particular project was named after a popular Hungarian children’s book character, a bear cub. The main aim of the Vackor programme was to help and motivate Hungarian children and their parents, including mixed marriage families (marriages between Serbians and Hungarians) to enrol their children in Hungarian language provisions. The available leaflet about this project explains the positive impact of educating children in their mother tongue. At the same time, the state of Hungary introduced a project called ‘Szülőföldön magyarul projekt’ (Educating in Hungarian at my Birthplace) which encouraged Hungarian parents to enrol their children in Hungarian language provisions by offering 55 euros for each three year old child enrolled (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács (MNT) [2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). Additionally, in 2011 MNT introduced the ‘Diákbusz projekt’ (School bus project) which offered free transportation for Hungarian children who lived in segregated areas or in isolation from other Hungarian children in scattered villages, and where a Hungarian language group was not available (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács (MNT) [2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682):33). All these actions target the Hungarian national minority with the aim of stimulating and encouraging parents to enrol their children in Hungarian language provisions. However, the political and economic climate that currently operates in the country leaves the entire Serbian population with little or no future employment prospects. This is a major incentive, especially for ethnic minorities, to continue to migrate to Western countries.

Additionally, in the last decade, the state of Hungary made a political decision to further support Hungarians living outside the motherland. Firstly, they pronounced the year 2012 as ‘the year of Hungarian nurseries operating beyond the country’s borders’. For this reason, an amendment of the ECEC curriculum was introduced that focused on Hungarian culture, language and heritage including further education of the pre-primary pedagogue. This lifelong learning opportunity was optional for the pre-primary pedagogue to adopt, which fitted well with the existing A and B versions of the curriculum. Secondly, between 2017 and 2018 the state of Hungary made further announcements to finance the building of six purpose built kindergartens in Vojvodina spending over 1.5 million euros. Additionally, they plan to refurbish and furnish 19 kindergartens and provide 129 ECEC provisions with new resources (mainly to maintain the heritage of the Hungarian minority). Sixty-three kindergartens will receive new playgrounds fulfilling European Union requirements and regulations, which was an interesting move as Vojvodina is not yet part of the European Union.

Besides all these investments further professional and financial help was offered by the Department of the Hungarian State Secretary for National Policies, that aimed to support and encourage current pre-primary pedagogues to engage in lifelong learning (Mihályi [2017](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). These initiatives were widely extended to other countries to support Hungarian children in Romania, Ukraine, Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia (Pichler et al. [2011](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)). These initiatives were welcomed by the Hungarian national minority in Vojvodina, and by the Serbian state.

**Summary and conclusion**

This article has summarised the history of Hungarian ECEC in Vojvodina from 1843 to the present. For clarity, in Table 2 we have mapped the regional nursery education and care between Serbia and Hungary, which includes the change of the border from 1843 to the current date.

Table 2. Kindergarten education and care: comparison between Serbia and Hungary.

Table 2 reflects the period when ECEC provisions were used as a platform for tightening nationalistic strategies. The table also shows that after the Second World War and during the Milošević government, minority children enjoyed their right to attend nurseries and kindergartens in their mother tongue. Therefore, the region’s depopulation is not purely the effect of nationalistic policies but shows that using only the mother tongue in early years was not enough to ensure the survival of minorities living outside the motherland.

Due to migration and assimilation, the Hungarian national minority of Vojvodina is in decline and it is too early to evaluate the possible impact of the Hungarian government’s rapid intervention and investment and the work of Magyar Nemzeti Tanács (MNT) ([2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1479682)) in Vojvodina. The evaluation of these efforts is for a future study; however, this will be a complex task as the current initiatives focus on preserving the language with no clear indication of what the targets are: targeting the process of assimilation, preserving the legacy of minorities, or ensuring equal opportunities for Hungarians. For this reason, only by examining the statistical data available to us, and by investigating the current early years curriculum, can we determine the ways in which children of Hungarian national minority receive ECEC.

What is evident is that currently the main purpose of the kindergartens for Hungarian children is to maintain the Hungarian identity through the knowledge of Hungarian language. However, there has been no formal recognition of the use of different dialects, or the historical and cultural impact of shaping this identity. The Serbian government’s passive attitude towards the provision of ECEC for national minorities living in the country indicates their lack of interest in investing in and preserving their culture. However, if the rate of depopulation of the region is not reduced, the rich cultural and educational legacy of ECEC in Vojvodina may be lost. Furthermore, it is hard to predict any inequalities that the interventions of Hungary may cause among other ethnic nationalities living in Serbia who are perhaps not in the same position as the Hungarians. Since these investments are targeted to strengthen Hungarian national identity, Serbia may need to re-visit its strategy on minorities to include development of ECEC. Further study is needed to investigate the impact of these projects on children, their families, the workforce and the population in general.

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