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The Princely Council in the Age of Gábor Bethlen*

The princely council of Transylvania was an advisory body of twelve members with no authority to decide. After the accession of Gábor Bethlen (1613–1629) with Ottoman support, the Transylvanian estates tried to limit his authority by enlarging the powers enjoyed by the council: in matters of great political and diplomatic importance, of appointment to the chief offices, and the granting of major estates the prince could only decide in cooperation with the council. The first part of the present study analyzes the methods by which the prince gradually altered the council in accordance with his own interests, mainly by increasing and changing its personnel. The second part examines the characteristics of the council in terms of the origins, social position, religion, age, qualifications and functions of its members. The Transylvanian political elite was fairly open throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and especially so during the reign of Bethlen, mainly because of the loss in human lives caused by the wars and internal conflicts between 1598 and 1612. Thanks to the princely religious policies pursued in the past forty years, the council was confessionally mixed, with a Catholic dominance and a strong Unitarian presence.

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Very few information is available about one of the most important government organs of the Principality of Transylvania, the princely council, due in part to the limited number of sources.¹ The little continuity in the council's functioning, as well as that body's differing profile and political weight during the reigns of each subsequent ruler, all present a particular challenge.

The forerunner of the institution in any event must be sought in the royal council of János Szapolyai (1526–1540). The sixteenth-century royal council, carrying forward medieval traditions, was a large body in which the ecclesiastical and secular dignities (*praelati et barones*), common or lesser nobles delegated

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1 Zsolt Trócsányi, *Erdély központi kormányzata 1540–1690* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1980), 19–99; Győző Ember, *Az újkor magyar közigazgatás története Mobáctól a török kiűzéséig* (Budapest: Magyar Országos Levéltár, 1946), 441–46; Vencel Bíró, *Az erdélyi fejedelmi hatalom fejlődése. 1542–1690* (Kolozsvár: Stief, 1917), 56, 83–89.

by the diet, as well as the confidants of the ruler all received seats by virtue of their offices. The changed circumstances after Szapolyai's death placed the development of the council on a new path. The composition of the body had to conform to the unique social structure of Transylvania, which formed the core of the emerging state. Accordingly, in March 1542 alongside the regent a twenty-five-member council was set up, in which the three nations were represented by seven members each; they were joined by the vicar of the Bishopric of Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia, Romania) or one of the canons of the cathedral chapter.²

The year 1548 is an important one in the evolution of the princely council: this is the date when it broke with its medieval antecedents. It was at this time that the membership began to decrease, and ecclesiastical figures could no longer take part on the council by right of their ecclesiastical office. This deviated not only from medieval traditions but also from the practice in contemporary Royal Hungary as well. The Diet of 1559 is once again a significant milestone: the estates conferred the right to choose councilors on Isabella and John Sigismund.³ From this time on the council can no longer be regarded as the representative organ of the estates. Its composition depended on the ruler, and it was primarily to him that the council lords were accountable. The ruler could convene the council at his pleasure, and the opinion of the councilors was not binding. The body functioned in two basic ways: the members expounded their views in person at the council meeting, or the prince could request an opinion in writing (*censura, votum*) from those not present.

Despite the fact that the council's opinion was not binding, the body did not become unimportant. In the consensus between the reigning prince and the estates the role of the council was always fixed, and the country's most important leading officials received seats on that body at all times: the supreme commander of the army, the president of the diet, the chancellor, the treasurer and other regional leaders. So great was the council's social prestige that the members of the Transylvanian political elite regarded gaining a seat on that body as their most important aim.

Gábor Bethlen's accession to the throne (October 23, 1613) brought about changes in both the competence and the practical working of the princely

2 Sándor Szilágyi, ed., *Erdélyi Országgyűlési Emlékek*, vol. 1 (Budapest: MTA, 1875), 84–86 (hereafter cited as *EOE*), and Ember, *Az újkori magyar közigazgatás*, 392, 393.

3 *EOE*, vol 2, 8, 111, and Ember, *Az újkori magyar közigazgatás*, 408.

council.⁴ Because Bethlen had gained the princely title with Ottoman backing, the estates attempted to confine his power within limits by making his election dependent on accepting tougher conditions than before. They sought to reduce the prince's authority and establish control over Bethlen's policy through the council, and thus, in order to protect the body and its members, the estates had the rights and duties of the council incorporated into the conditions of the election and the princely oath.⁵ The estates strove to ensure their right of *libera vox*: no councilor could suffer any kind of disadvantage merely for having formed an opinion contrary to the ruler's on a given question. In addition to this, it was established that when there was a change of ruler a councilor could retain his office or resign from it as he wished. Henceforth the ruler could not dismiss a councilor of his own will, and only with compelling reasons, via legal means and with the cooperation of the diet could he remove them from the body. The prince also had to pledge to choose his councilors from among the "true native patriots" and maintain the council at full strength.

Under these circumstances, the kind of council Gábor Bethlen would be able to form became extremely important, as did the extent to which that body would be able to constrain the prince's will.

The Restructuring of the Princely Council

In light of changes in personnel and its political role, the functioning of the council can be divided into three periods. The first lasted from Bethlen's election as prince in October 1613 until 1616; the second falls between the years 1616 and 1622; and the last seven of his reign form the third period. The greatest number of changes in the size and composition of the body occurred during the first two phases. In Bethlen's initial years behind every replacement there was a conscious political decision, whereas in the second and third periods (apart from one instance, the removal of Chancellor Simon Péchi) the changes resulted from external circumstances, namely the death of the councilors.

4 On the circumstances of his accession to the throne, see Teréz Oborni, *Erdély fejedelmei* (Budapest: Pannonica, 2002), 92–105; Dénes Harai, *Gabriel Bethlen, prince de Transylvanie et roi élu de Hongrie (1580–1629)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013), 48–57.

5 Sándor Kolosvári and Kelemen Óvári, trans. and ed., *Approbatæ Constitutiones*, Pars II, Titulus I, Articulus III, *Magyar Törvénytár 1540–1848. évi erdélyi törvények*, with notes by Dezső Márkus (Budapest: Franklin, 1900), pt. 2, 29–30.

From the point of view of the council's formation, therefore, the most intriguing period is the first three years of Bethlen's reign. In contrast to previous custom, two points in Bethlen's conditions of election dealt with the council's authority. According to this, all three political nations (Hungarians, Szeklers and Saxons) were to receive seats on the body, though without stipulating the ratios. The new prince was obligated not to act in matters concerning domestic political decisions of great import, diplomatic measures, larger grants of land or the appointment of chief officials without the council's knowledge. The councilors were guaranteed the right to speak freely with impunity, but at the same time the prince was also authorized to impose, after an appropriate investigation, the severest punishment on those of his councilors who endangered and deliberately harmed the country.⁶

On the basis of the conditions Gábor Bethlen set about reforming the council without delay. At the same diet which elected him as prince, a law was passed regarding the punishment of the "evil and false" councilors of the previous ruler, Gábor Báthory, because of whose harmful advice the principality had fallen "into this terrible peril."⁷ This was a victory for Bethlen because he thus received an opportunity to set aside councilors undesirable to him under a strictly controlled legal framework. By the fall of 1613 there remained only seven of the councilors inherited from Gábor Báthory who survived the events and were not stripped of their office: Ferenc Rhédey, the Kamuthy brothers, Farkas and Balázs, István Erdélyi, Farkas Alia, Pál Keresztessy and István Wesselényi.

Yet their presence by no means represented an unacceptable compromise to Bethlen. Ferenc Rhédey was Bethlen's brother-in-law, and although he remained faithful to Gábor Báthory until the end, he continued to belong to the most intimate circle of kin and confidants. Farkas Kamuthy was considered a relative of the prince, albeit not a particularly close one, and moreover, after the death of Mózes Székely (1603) they had endured the years of Turkish exile together. But nor did the five politicians who entered the council in 1612, that is, after Gábor Bethlen's emigration, have to seriously worry either. Farkas Alia and Pál Keresztessy had attained their political positions by virtue of their accomplishments in the military sphere, and at numerous points their careers had progressed together with Bethlen's; nor had their activity as councilors compromised them either. Balázs Kamuthy likewise had previously belonged to

6 *Approbatae Constitutiones*, 29–30.

7 Article 18 of the diet held at Kolozsvár between October 21 and 29, 1613, in *EOE*, vol. 6, 362.

Bethlen's circle.⁸ The situation of the remaining two councilors, István Erdélyi and István Wesselényi, was unique because it was unequivocally the economic and social clout of their families, and not their political role, that had landed them on the council. István Erdélyi had not been a figure of note during Gábor Báthory's final months. As for Wesselényi, deliberately remaining absent from the Transylvanian infighting, after 1612 he resided for the most part on his estates in Hungary (having divided the family fortune with his younger brother, after 1614 he moved to estates in Hungary and Poland for good).⁹

Since no conflict emerged between Bethlen and the remaining councilors, the resolution on the councilors' responsibility was detailed at the next diet. The examination was not to apply generally and extend to every councilor but only to persons to be named by the prince or the estates. The modification was also made possible by the fact that Gábor Báthory had been murdered in the meantime and the interpretation of the events between 1610 and 1612 thus changed, with the weight of responsibility shifted from the councilors to the slain prince. Accordingly, Bethlen used this law only two years later, then applying it not to the inherited councilors but rather to the lords who had been removed from the council back in 1610, from amongst whom his opposition had begun to take shape by 1615.

The conditions of election also prescribed that the council was to be maintained at its full strength. The practice of twelve permanent members had begun to consolidate by the late sixteenth century, though this was not established by law. Thus, nothing tied Bethlen's hands on this issue, and thus in the fall of 1613 the sources mention a 15-member council. Because the estates wanted a strong council as a counterweight to the prince, a potentially larger membership seemingly favored them. We know from the diary of one of the Saxon envoys that the council still had only 12 members at the diet assembled to elect the prince.¹⁰ On the basis of the names and titles contained in Gábor Bethlen's

8 For information on their careers and the lives and activities of every subsequent councilor, see Ildikó Horn, "A fejedelmi tanácsosok adattára," in *Erdélyi méltóságviselők Bethlen Gábor korában*, vol. 1, *Fejedelmi tanácsosok, főispánok, székegy főtisztok*, ed. Judit Balogh and Ildikó Horn (Budapest: L'Harmattan-TÉTÉ, 2013), forthcoming.

9 Farkas Deák, *A Wesselényi család őseiről*, *Értekezések a történettudományok köréből* 7 (Budapest: MTA, 1878), 33–42.

10 Andreas Hegyes noted in his diary that during the election ceremony Iskender Pasha bestowed kaftans on twelve councilors. He, however, did not name anyone apart from the Saxon Johannes Benkner; Andreas Hegyes, "Diarium des Andreas Hegyes," in *Quellen zur Geschichte der Stadt Kronstadt*, vol. 5, *Chroniken und Tagebücher*, vol. 2 (Braşov: Zeidner, 1909), 479.

deeds of gift and diplomatic documents dating from November and December 1613, it is possible to indentify the council lords: 1. Ferenc Rhédey;¹¹ 2. István Kákonyi;¹² 3. Farkas Bethlen Búni;¹³ 4. János Gyerőffy;¹⁴ 5. István Kassai;¹⁵ 6. Ferenc Balássy;¹⁶ 7. Boldizsár Kemény;¹⁷ 8. Zsigmond Sarmasághy;¹⁸ 9. Farkas Kamuthy; 10. Balázs Kamuthy; 11. Pál Keresztessy; and 12. Johannes Benkner.¹⁹

However, missing from this body were three of the councilors inherited from Gábor Báthory (Alia, Erdélyi and Wesselényi). Because it was not yet possible to know at this time whether they had stayed away simply due to other engagements or out of caution, or whether their absence stemmed from explicitly political antagonisms, their seats were filled immediately. This was needed by the prince and the estates alike. Bethlen wanted to demonstrate his legitimacy, and the estates their independence, to the Turks. However, as the bypassed former councilors also assured Bethlen of their loyalty not long afterward, their appointment remained in effect; with them the council now increased to 15 members. Bethlen thus kept all 15 councilors in their office while bestowing on them grants of land and even expanded the council with additional new members.

11 Ferenc Rhédey, councilor, knight of the Golden Spur, lord-lieutenant of Bihar County, and captain general of Nagyvárád, December 14, 1613: Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, Budapest, F 1, Gyulafehérvári Káptalan Országos Levéltára, Libri regii, vol. 10, 49–50 (National Archives of Hungary, National Archive of the Chapter of Gyulafehérvár, hereafter cited as MNL OL F 1 LR).

12 István Kákonyi's name is followed only the title of inner councilor at the first known mention of him, December 6, 1613; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 21.

13 Councilor Farkas Bethlen is first mentioned with the titles captain general of the court army and lord-lieutenant of Küküllő on December 2, 1613; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 80–81.

14 János Gyerőffy first appears as councilor and lord-lieutenant of Kolozs County on December 1, 1613; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 16–17.

15 In addition to his post as *fiscalis director*, István Kassai received the rank of councilor; the first known mention of him is dated November 12, 1613; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 34.

16 Zsolt Trócsányi dated Ferenc Balássy's first mention as councilor to October 29, 1613 on the basis of a letter seen in the Bethlen family archive in Keresd, lacking a precise citation; Trócsányi, *Erdély központi kormányzata*, 100, n. 27.

17 Boldizsár Kemény, November 1610; *ibid.*, 105, n. 247.

18 Likewise addressed as councilor on November 11, 1613 Zsigmond Sarmasághy was a member of the delegation sent to the Hungarian king Matthias II in Vienna. What makes this intriguing is that officially he was still exiled from Transylvania at this time, since the verdicts of treason brought against him in 1610 and 1612 were only lifted by the diet of February 1614. *EOE*, vol. 6, 381.

19 An excellent treatment of Johannes Benkner's career as councilor is in Zsuzsanna Cziráki, *Autonóm közösség és központi hatalom. Udvar, fejedelem és város viszonya a Bethlen-kori Brassóban* (Budapest: ELTE–TETE, 2011).

It was thus that Simon Péchi, who in April 1614 already bore the title of inner councilor and chancellor,²⁰ entered the council and, after the diet of February 1614, Farkas Cserényi, István Kendy, Zsigmond Kornis and Boldizsár Szilvássy, against whom the condemnatory sentences passed in 1610 and 1612, declaring their banishment, were nullified at this time.²¹ In early 1615 Bethlen appointed two additional council members, János Mikola and the Saxon Koloman Gotzmeister. With this the size of the council by 1615 rose to twenty-two members, or rather in reality only twenty-one, because by this time István Wesselényi had resigned from his posts and had moved out to his estates located in the Kingdom of Hungary.²²

Within the council we find two clearly distinguishable groups. One of these, completely homogenous with respect to their religious and political views, was formed by the Catholic lords (István Kendy, Zsigmond Sarmasághy, Boldizsár Szilvássy²³ and Zsigmond Kornis).²⁴ Representatives of the young Catholic nobility educated by Zsigmond Báthory, they were characterized by a strong religious commitment that was rather intolerant of the other denominations, and by an unshakable pro-Habsburg sentiment. They had earlier formed the opposition to István Bocskai but had been forced out of the country at that time. Under the terms of the Peace of Vienna they received pardons and attained key positions around 1607–1608. However, their political commitment did not change, and thus in 1610 they became the first to turn against Gábor Báthory's policies. Not only had Gábor Bethlen played a leading role in their removal at that time, but he had also acquired a significant share of their estates. Despite this it was Bethlen who, guided by well-considered political interests, helped his former opponents back into power.

In the fall of 1613 Bethlen urgently needed the support of the Catholic aristocrats who had fled to Hungary, since among the Transylvanian politicians

20 Simon Péchi as inner councilor, chancellor and princely commissioner on April 8, 1614; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 225–28.

21 *EOE*, vol. 6, 416–18.

22 The appointment of his brother, Pál Wesselényi, as lord-lieutenant of Közép-Szolnok County in his stead occurred on May 14, 1614: MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 185. For the distribution of the estates: MNL OL Magyar Kamara Archivuma, E 148 Neoregestrata acta, fasc. 754, nr. 28.

23 For information on their careers, see Horn, “A fejedelmi tanácsosok adattára.”

24 Zsigmond Kornis's situation was special in that he was not yet a major protagonist in the events of 1610, but he inherited the place and role of his older brothers (the executed Boldizsár and György, shot dead during the assassination attempt in Szék). Angelika T. Orgona, *A göncruszakai Kornisok. Két generáció túlélési stratégiái az erdélyi elitben* (Budapest: L'Harmattan–TÉTÉ, 2013), 143–48.

they alone enjoyed the confidence of the Habsburg court. Matthias II greeted the Turkish-backed Bethlen's princely aspirations with hostility; indeed, the idea of an armed intervention was raised once again. Bethlen recognized that if he wished to have himself accepted by the Habsburg court, it would be practical for him to win over the émigré Catholic aristocrats, who, though financially supported by the Viennese court, were living in Hungary under quite unworthy and impoverished circumstances compared to their previous living standards. Bethlen had established contact with them already before his election, and he was the one who made the offer of complete political rehabilitation. The compact was soon reached: Bethlen would grant the exiles complete amnesty, create for them the opportunity to repossess and reacquire their confiscated estates and movable assets, and compensate them for their other losses as well. In return, they would help Bethlen gain acceptance at the Habsburg court and in the public opinion in the kingdom.²⁵ Between October 1613 and February 1614 Zsigmond Kornis, Zsigmond Sarvasághy and Sándor Sennyey (taking over for his father, Pongrácz Sennyey, who had since died) conducted truly enormous propaganda work on Bethlen's behalf.²⁶ The two sides therefore reached a political compromise that in the longer term could have equally culminated in lasting cooperation or further confrontation.

For Bethlen, it was vitally important to prevent the advisory body, strengthened with the arrival of the Catholic émigrés, from checking his ambitions. It was for this reason that he formed within the council a group representing the counterweight. It was possible to join this through kinship with Bethlen or by having shared a common past with him. A common past meant common activity on the side of Mózes Székely in the pro-Turkish policy emerging after 1602: the Battle of Brassó (Braşov, Romania) (July 17, 1602), followed by Turkish emigration, and finally the shared experience of István Bocskai's movement. To this circle of confidants belonged his brother-in-law, Ferenc Rhédey, the Kamuthy brothers, the husbands of two of his second cousins: Ferenc Balássy and Simon Péchi, János Mikola, Pál Keresztessy and the three Farkas: Bethlen, Cserényi and Alia.

25 On the compact, see Pongrácz Sennyey to András Dóczy. Szatmár, January 4, 1613, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvtárának Kézirattára, Budapest [hereafter cited as MTAKK]; Veress Endre-gyűjtemény, Sennyey család levéltára, ms 426, fols. 500–1; Gábor Bethlen to Zsigmond Kornis, Kolozsvár, October 17, 1613: MTAKK Kornis család levéltára, ms 425/2, fols. 901–3.

26 Zsigmond Kornis to András Dóczy, Nagyszeben, December 14, 1613: MTAKK Kornis lvt, ms 425/2, fols. 913–15.

Thus, it can clearly be seen that within Gábor Bethlen's council those two political currents were once again straining against one another, whose bloody antagonism had defined political life in Transylvania since 1603, and neither István Bocskai, nor Zsigmond Rákóczi nor Gábor Báthory had been able to steer them into a common channel. Into the gap between the two groups Bethlen placed either figures of great prestige but neutral allegiance (János Gyerőffy, István Erdélyi, István Wesselényi), or persons of modest background striving upward explicitly through their expertise (István Kassai, István Kákonyi); to the latter the prince made it absolutely clear that they could rise to truly high positions only through loyalty and service to him.

Significantly increased in size by 1615, the composition of the princely council thus now favored Bethlen in the prospective political battles and decisions. In fact, this was the same method that Bethlen used in connection with the diets also, where he succeeded in pushing through his will likewise by creating his own majority. Once again he operated by increasing the number of members; thus, in addition to the members of the diet who had to attend and had to be invited, Bethlen invited so many regalists by princely invitation letter (in this no law of any kind restricted him) that he managed to create simple numerical majorities in the diets, thus allowing his will to prevail.²⁷ Between 1613 and 1616 this same thing also occurred through the swelling of the princely council. Through skillful political tactics Bethlen sidestepped established customs, without, however, violating written law. The estates, meanwhile, had no other grounds to protest, since with the conditions of election it was they who had increased the council's authority with the intention of controlling and constraining the new prince.

A Special Factor in the Makeup of the Council: the Role of the Partium

Mastering the balance of power within the council was of vital importance to Bethlen, because the outrage and discontent over the circumstances of his election had strengthened the internal opposition, substantial in any case, while he had to confront the unresolved Saxon question and also had to settle diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Hungary.²⁸ Still other factors influenced his

27 Zsolt Trócsányi, *Az Erdélyi Fejedelemség korának országgyűlései. (Adalék az erdélyi rendiség történetéhez)* Értekezések a történeti tudományok köréből, n.s. 76 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976), 24–27.

28 For details on all this see Zsuzsanna Cziráki, “Brassó és az erdélyi szászok szerepe Bethlen Gábor fejedelem trónfoglalásában (1611–1613),” *Századok* 144, no. 4 (2011): 847–75; and Teréz Oborni, “Bethlen

personal policy, among which the most important were the political situation that evolved in the *Partes adnexae* or Partium, and the unfavorable distribution of landed property. After Gábor Báthory's death, Matthias II regarded the Treaty of Pozsony concluded in April 1613 invalid and tried to exploit the situation, once again uncertain because of the change on the Transylvanian throne, to reannex the Partium to the Kingdom of Hungary. As a first step, the garrisons manning the Transylvanian border castles were successfully made to swear their loyalty to the king, and the struggle for political influence over Nagyvárad (Oradea, Romania) as well as the four counties of the Partium (Máramaros, Közép-Szolnok, Kraszna and Bihar) commenced.

Regarding the control of the counties, Bihar was in the safest hands, where the captain general of várad, Ferenc Rhédey performed the duties of lord-lieutenant (Hungarian: *főispán*; Latin: *comes*). Máramaros was headed by the largely unknown József Bornemissza of Ungvár, whose loyalty Bethlen sought to ensure at all costs: he appointed him captain general of Huszt (Хуст, Ukraine), granted him substantial properties, ordered one hundred households of tenants for his wife as well, and mortgaged to him the town of Técső (Тячів, Ukraine).²⁹ Of the two other imperiled counties, Kraszna was headed by Zsigmond Prépostváry, who had reverted to loyalty to Matthias II, while the office of lord-lieutenant of Közép-Szolnok County was held by the very same István Wesselényi who had then been residing for an extended period of time on his estates in the territory of the kingdom.³⁰

An even more worrisome situation developed for Bethlen with respect to the distribution of estates in the Partium, as the attached map shows. In the north the fate of the Kővár (Chioar, Romania) district became dubious since, after they had reacquired it from Bálint Drugeth of Homonna, the estates had placed it in Gábor Báthory's possession at the diet of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, Romania) in September 1608, with the right of inheritance within the family or by will, under the condition that it could not be alienated from the country.³¹ Under the terms of this, after the prince's death Kővár and its environs would have passed to his half-brother, András Báthory, as well as his female relatives;

Gábor és a nagyszombati szerződés (1615),” *Századok* 144, no. 4 (2011): 877–914, and see the article of Teréz Oborni in this issue, *The Hungarian Historical Review* 2, no. 4 (2013).

29 Diploma of Gábor Bethlen bestowing title and office, Nagyszeben, November 4, 1613; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 20–21.

30 For details on the lives and careers of the lord-lieutenants, see Ildikó Horn, “Főispánok adattára,” in *Erdélyi méltóságviselők*.

31 EOE, vol. 6, 13 (Article 12), and Imre Lukinich, *Erdély területi változásai a török bódítás korában 1541–1711* (Budapest: MTA, 1918), 350.

yet Bethlen and the Transylvanian estates would have liked to transform it once again into a crown land, while Matthias II for his part attempted to annex it to the kingdom. Complicating the situation was the fact that Báthory had utilized the estates belonging to Kővár to retain his dwindling number of adherents and had thus given away or mortgaged several of them.

In Máramaros the estate of Huszt was held by the niece of the murdered prince, Kata Török of Enying. Besides this, in the county we find one more large block of lands, which, however, was in the possession of János Imreffy's widow, Kata Iffjú, who was also Gábor Báthory's aunt.³² Two families, completely blended and almost inseparable because of multiple marriages, shared much of Kraszna County: the Báthorys and the Bánffys of Losoncz. In the fall of 1613 this meant first and foremost the brother of Gábor Báthory, András Báthory the younger, and his sister, Anna Báthory, the widow of Dénes Bánffy.³³

Nor was the situation in Közép-Szolnok any more favorable from Bethlen's point of view. Of the county's two vitally important estates, Hadad (Hodod, Romania) was held by István Wesselényi and Csehi (Ceheiu, Romania) by Sámuel Gyulaffy; the latter, still a minor, was the stepson and ward of the previously mentioned lord-lieutenant of Kraszna County who had abandoned Bethlen, Zsigmond Prépostváry. For Bethlen, all this meant no small risk as the year 1613 turned into 1614. The absence of István Wesselényi was likewise an element of uncertainty. In addition to these, there were two other substantial blocks of landed estates in the county: Zsigmond Sarmaşághy's estate in Kövesd (Chiesd, Romania), and the twelve villages owned by Kata Török of Enying.³⁴ Although Sarmaşághy, as a participant in the political bargain described earlier, had left on an embassy to Vienna and Linz on Bethlen's behalf, the prince even then still did not trust the eminent Catholic aristocrat.

The most tangled property relations evolved in Bihar County, a consequence of the scattering of the enormous Bocskai inheritance. In addition to the lord-lieutenant, Ferenc Rhédey, the two largest landowners were the two aforementioned widows, Anna Báthory, wife of Dénes Bánffy, and Kata Iffjú, wife of János Imreffy. Lawsuits were pursued over the ownership rights to the rest of the properties, primarily by Zsigmond Kornis, returned from exile, the previously mentioned Zsigmond Prépostváry and Miklós Bocskai, in an attempt to assert their previous or perceived ownership rights. In addition to the abovementioned

32 MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 7, 215–16.

33 Mór Petri, *Szilágys vármegye monographiája* (Zilah: Szilágys vármegye, 1901), pt. 2, 193–223.

34 Lukinich, *Erdély területi változásai*, 348–49.

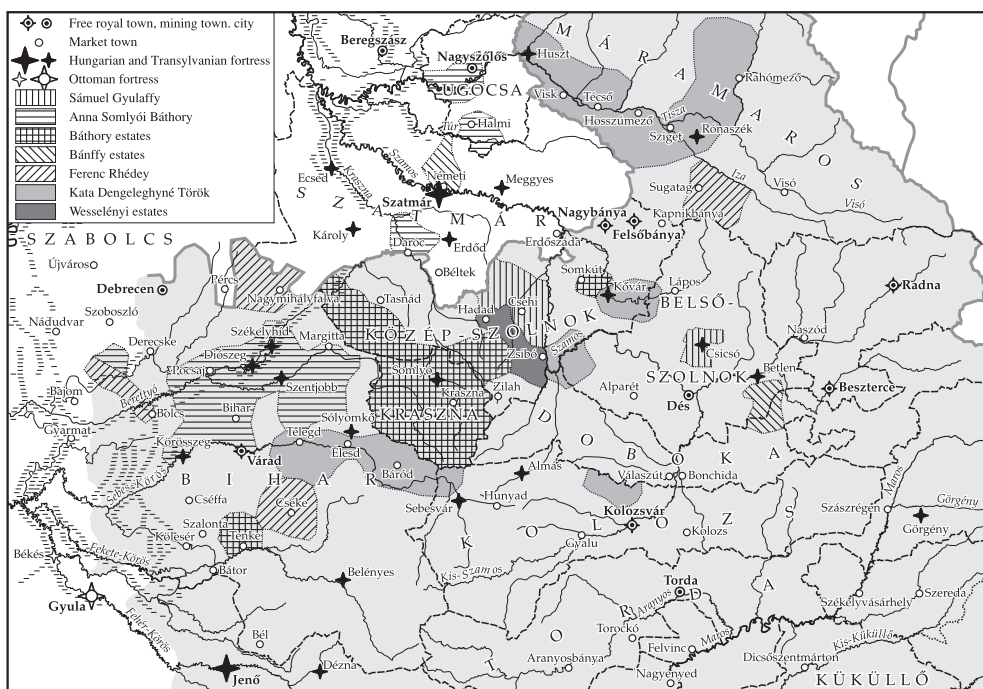


Figure 1. Distribution of Landed Estates in the Partium in the Fall of 1613³⁵

four counties, in the other parts of the Partium and the principality's southwestern areas also there were large estates, the possession of which could in the future strongly influence the territory's geographical and political orientation.³⁶

Already during the reign of John Sigismund, at the time of the northeastern castle wars it became manifest that the defection of the owners of contiguous large blocks of estates might bring in its wake a redrawing of the borders as well. Gábor Bethlen was also precisely aware of all this, and already beginning in November 1613 he was quite visibly working on changing the power and property relations in the Partium in his own favor. He attempted to place the government of the counties in the hands of his own most trusted men. After the death of József Bornemissza in the spring of 1614, he gave the office of lord-lieutenant of Máramaros (as a perpetual lord-lieutenancy) to his younger brother, István Bethlen, who already from the fall of 1613 had been the lord-lieutenant of Hunyad (Hunedoara, Romania), representing one of the

35 Only the larger, contiguous estates have been marked. The map was prepared by István János Varga, whose help I hereby gratefully acknowledge.

36 Ibid., 355–56, 363.

important rear defenses of the Partium.³⁷ In Bihar County he confirmed the rule of his brother-in-law, Ferenc Rhédey, even appointing him once again as captain general of the castle of várads in November 1613.³⁸ In Közép-Szolnok County, meanwhile, he replaced István Wesselényi as lord-lieutenant with the latter's younger brother Pál. Kraszna, on the other hand, slipped from his grasp; there he succeeded in appointing Pál Rhédey, another of his relatives, to replace Prépostváry as lord-lieutenant only in 1616. At the head of Szörény County, gradually diminishing because of the incessant Ottoman expansion, he placed his nephew, Péter Bethlen, while in Zaránd County he confirmed the lord-lieutenancy of his adherent, István Petneházy.³⁹ Between November 1613 and May 1614 Bethlen managed to stabilize the situation: at the heads of the imperiled Partium territories he placed his own relatives and trusted confidants. Following a similar principle, the prince set about without delay rearranging the distribution of landed estates in the Partium as well, allocating lands to his new officials and closer relations, either through marriages initiated by him or land grants.⁴⁰

In the four counties exposed to the most intense attacks, Bethlen wanted to get his hands on primarily the properties belonging to the Báthory inheritance. This was not merely a question of acquiring the territory and its revenues. The real danger lay in the fact that the majority of the estates were concentrated in the hands of widowed ladies, and the prince recognized the political danger the remarriage of the Báthory female relatives might pose to him. His concern soon became a real threat, and even a serious risk factor, when in early 1614 one of Sarmašághy's stepsons, Zsigmond Jósika, took Anna Báthory as his wife. At the same time, Gábor Báthory's widow, Anna Horváth Palocsai, was engaged to István Kendy.

Bethlen assumed a great, albeit necessary, risk in allowing his political opponents of many decades back into the country, and moreover, explicitly into positions of power. Accordingly he monitored their every move with suspicion and was immediately spurred to action when he saw that Kendy's faction was using the Báthory female relatives in an attempt partly to align Gábor Báthory's

37 MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 188–90; cf. also Imre Hajnik, *Az örökös főispánság a magyar alkotmánytörténetben, Értekezések a történelmi tudományok köréből* 10 (Budapest: MTA, 1888), 64.

38 The diploma of appointment was dated Nagyszeben (Sibiu, Romania), December 14, 1613; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 49–50.

39 The first mention of him with this title is from 1608, followed by several subsequent mentions (1615, 1619, 1624, 1627); MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 8, 113; vol 11, 108; vol. 12, 127; vol. 13, 41; vol. 15, 105–6.

40 Lukinich, *Erdély területi változásai*, 361–63.

still sizable following with themselves, and partly to acquire key territories in the Partium. In immediate response Ferenc Rhédey seized Anna Báthory's manor in Nagykereki, disguising his punitive action as a simple trespass.⁴¹

The true elegance of the struggle between Bethlen and the former Catholic émigrés was that it was fought on several "battlegrounds," partially in secret and partially disguised as something completely different. Neither side could afford to show its cards. For it was at this time that the compromise negotiations were proceeding between the prince and King Matthias II, to which Bethlen recruited both Kendy and Sarmasághy as envoys to influence the Viennese court. Thus, the prince could not touch his opponents, though he did attempt to narrow their room to maneuver. The Báthory women, who could have served as dangerous chess pieces in the game, fell victim to this aspiration. The prince sought to prevent them from remarrying as Anna Báthory had. But provided a marriage did not violate the law (i.e., it was not contracted between close relatives), legally there were no grounds for interfering in the question of who married whom. Bethlen was thus left with no other option but to make the widows' lives impossible. In the name of his trusted adherents he had them attacked with property lawsuits, deploying accusations especially effective against women: infidelity, the dubious legitimacy of their children and witchcraft. Kata Török Dengeleghy and Kata Ifjú Imreffy, as the alleged lovers of Gábor Báthory, were thus brought to trial on charges of witchcraft and adultery; the latter was even convicted.⁴²

The prince therefore managed to find the means of keeping his adversaries away from the Báthory inheritance. Because he was also able to link the trials to the person of his predecessor, Bethlen not only succeeded in humiliating Báthory's female kin and depriving them of their political value but also attacked Gábor Báthory's still living popularity as well. As early as the spring of 1614 he distributed most of the confiscated estates among his adherents and the relatives of those sentenced, fearful and therefore cooperating with Bethlen.⁴³ In the meantime, of course, Kendy and his allies were not idle either: as the prince's

41 Jósika fled to the kingdom together with his wife; István Kendy to Radu Șerban, Homonna, July 5, 1614, in *EOE*, vol. 6, 539–40.

42 László Nagy, *Erdélyi boszorkányperek* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1988); András Kiss, ed., *Boszorkányok, keuruzslók, szálmakoszorús paráznák* (Bucharest–Kolozsvár: Kriterion, 1998), 35–43.

43 The most important land grants: Mihály Imreffy received a share of Kata Ifjú's estates; apart from him András Kapy, who later joined the council as well, received a part of the domain in Solyomkő (Șoimeni, Romania). MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 223–24. Zilah became Ferenc Rhédey's property; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 100–1; most of the estates in Bihar went to István Bethlen. MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 10, 162–64.

representatives they protected his interests at official negotiations, arguing and debating, while in intimate circles they made plans in secret chambers to topple Bethlen. For this they also recruited the Transylvanian opposition, certain Saxon politicians, the Wallachian voivode Radu Șerban and one of the prominent lords of the kingdom, György Drugeth of Homonna, who was always ready to strike.⁴⁴

The first half of the game brought success for Gábor Bethlen, since in May 1615 the Treaty of Nagyszombat was ratified.⁴⁵ Because this represented for both sides above all a compromise serving to gain time and gather strength, the struggle soon continued with the attack in 1616 by György Drugeth of Homonna, which brought about the ultimate fall of those members of the former Catholic emigration who joined it (Kendy, Sarmasághy and Szilvássy), and who, needless to say, dropped out of the princely council as well. But it was even more important in the long term that the prince won the game in the Partium as well. It was in the Partium that the strength and hinterland of István Bocskai and Gábor Báthory—through their estates and their enormous circle of relatives embedded there—had lain. Thus it was precisely this territory that became a vulnerable point for Bethlen. Through several years of systematic work, however, he managed to make the *Partes adnexae* not a burden to be defended but rather a resource and reserve for himself. By 1618, by granting lands to his family members and adherents also drawn into his circle of kinship, he succeeded in forming a strong power base here that his successor György I Rákóczi would have to dismantle and smash a decade and a half later at the cost of similarly bitter struggles.

Personnel Changes on the Council

At the Diet of Segesvár (Sighișoara, Romania) in late October 1616, proceedings were launched against six councilors (Johannes Benkner, Farkas Kamuthy, Boldizsár Szilvássy, Zsigmond Kornis, along with István Kendy and Zsigmond Sarmasághy, then residing in the kingdom), which examined their role and culpability in the conspiracy against the prince. The investigation ended in a complete acquittal only for Farkas Kamuthy and Zsigmond Kornis, with the return of their previously stripped offices and seized estates. The others, though they were ultimately

44 Cziráki, *Autonóm közösség*, 88–103, 134–43; Manfred Stoy, “Radu Șerban, Fürst der Walachei 1602–1611, und die Habsburger. Eine Fallstudie,” *Südost-Forschungen* 54 (1995): 49–103.

45 Oborni, “Bethlen Gábor és a nagyszombati szerződés,” 877–914, and see Oborni’s article in this issue.

pardoned, lost a substantial part of their fortunes, their ranks and their posts, and were excluded from not only the princely council but also Transylvanian political life.⁴⁶ By forcing the Habsburg orientation to the background, the prince succeeded in eliminating the duality with which his predecessors had struggled since the beginning of the century and which had forced Transylvanian domestic politics up till then to run aground time and again.

By late 1616, with the removal of Benkner, Szilvássy, Kendy and Sarmasághy, 17 of the previous 21 members on the princely council remained and this situation would not change for two years. The purge of the council altered the composition of that body in Gábor Bethlen's favor, and thus there was no longer any sense in maintaining the previously inflated size by appointing new councilors. Between 1618 and 1621, however, no fewer than six council lords died, and one resigned from his post.⁴⁷ To the list of losses we must also add Chancellor Simon Péchi, whom Gábor Bethlen removed from the council and against whom he initiated proceedings, officially because of his Sabbatarian religion, but in reality because of his secret political connections.

All this meant that by early 1622 the size of the princely council had shrunk to a mere nine members. The large wave of mortality had natural causes and did not occur during epidemics or Bethlen's military campaigns. That the deaths of so many principal figures were thus concentrated into a few years may be explained by the councilors' relatively advanced ages and the series of traumas that affected the entire generation. Although the exact age of the deceased councilors is not known in every case, it is a typical piece of data that the doyen of the councilors, Ferenc Balássy, was 80 or 81 years of age at the time of his death. However, it speaks volumes that, as the key figure in diplomacy with the Porte, he remained active up until the last moment, and death also overtook him in Istanbul while carrying out his functions as ambassador.⁴⁸ Based on indirect information we may put the age at death of the other great deceased personality

46 EOE, vol. 7, 62–63.

47 Farkas Bethlen passed away on April 13, 1618, János Gyerőffy in early 1619, Ferenc Balássy on January 4, 1621, Ferenc Rhédey that April, Farkas Alia likewise in that same year, and István Kákonyi in late 1622. István Fráter, whom the prince made councilor just prior to the negotiations at Nikolsburg, stepped down after the conclusion of the peace treaty, probably because of his serious, though ultimately non-fatal illness.

48 Gábor Bethlen also recalled him in his letter of February 6, 1621: "Our father Balássi has died, he drinks sherbet no more." Szilágyi Sándor, *Bethlen Gábor fejedelem kiadatlan politikai levelei* (Budapest: MTA, 1879), 94. On Balássy's (Balássi's) activity at the Porte in detail, see Sándor Papp, "Bethlen Gábor, a Magyar Királyság és a Porta (1619–1629)," *Századok* 144, no. 4 (2011): 915–74.

on the council, János Gyerőffy, between 75 and 80 years. Farkas Alia and Ferenc Rhédey, both in their seventies, were barely a couple of years younger than him. Thus, the departure of the four of them can by no means be regarded as either surprising or unexpected. The exact age at death of the other four councilors we cannot give for lack of data. What is certain is that all of them had already passed the age of 58, though they could not have been older than 65. In light of the fact that the estimated average life expectancy in the first third of the seventeenth century was much lower than this, their deaths are also acceptable and by no means may be called premature.

The devastation caused by the bloody events of the turn of the century is clearly reflected in the change in the councilors' average age. Under normal circumstances, given a normal age pyramid, either stagnation or the slow senescence of the body can be observed over time. By contrast, in the year of Gábor Bethlen's death, 1629, the council was much younger than the body shaped by him in 1613. The age of the councilors ranged between 38 and 53 years, with an average age of 46, 12 years younger than the average age of the council in 1613.

The prince died at the age of 49, thus his councilors came for the most part from his age group. At the same time, this is not necessarily evidence of the prince's good relationship with his own generation, but rather stemmed largely from necessity. The generation above Bethlen practically disappeared, some of them dying during the period of hostilities between 1599 and 1606, and the others dropping out during epidemics or through natural death. Thus, after 1622 even if he had wanted to, Gábor Bethlen could not have assembled his council selectively from old, experienced, and at the same time well-suited, councilors. Even his own age cohort as well as the fifty-year-olds offered only a poor selection. The prince therefore could draw only from a quite narrow basis, and it was much rather this, and not his own personal decisions, that led to the council's juvenescence.

For Bethlen, the deaths of the aforementioned half dozen councilors represented a serious bloodletting, and not only in terms of the extent of the loss. As noted above, several among the deceased were his close relatives. The change in power relations is shown by the fact that the majority of new members on the princely council no longer came from Bethlen's kin. In place of the three kinsmen only one arrived, in the person of his cousin, Ferenc Mikó.⁴⁹ The rest

49 The primary source for Ferenc Mikó's life is his own diary: Gábor Kazinczy, ed., *Gr. Illésbázy István nádor feljegyzései 1592–1603. és Hidvégi Mikó Ferencz históriája 1595–1613. Bíró Sámuel folytatásával*, Monumenta Hungariae Historica 2, Scriptorum 7 (Pest: MTA, 1863), 133–304; the most detailed biography is János Nagy, "Hidvégi Mikó Ferenc életrajza," *Keresztény Magvető* 15 (1875): 1–44.

of the newly inducted council members were not directly related to the prince by blood, though all were indebted to Bethlen, or as the prince put it, were his “creatures.” Closely tied to Gábor Bethlen, for example, was István Kovacsóczy, who was the son of Chancellor Farkas Kovacsóczy, executed in 1594. The orphaned youth was supported by Bethlen, among others, and beginning in 1608 it was the prince alone who guided his career. It is therefore unsurprising that following Simon Péchi’s dismissal Kovacsóczy was appointed chancellor and given a seat on the council, for which he was perfectly qualified having spent the better part of his career in the Transylvanian chancellery. In 1625 Bethlen appointed him captain general of Háromszék and lord-lieutenant of Torda County as well.⁵⁰ The third newly selected councilor was András Kapy; about his life we know little, but every known moment of this common noble’s Transylvanian career, who began as the son of the deputy lord-lieutenant (Hungarian: *alispán*; Latin: *vicecomes*) of Sáros County, is likewise linked to Gábor Bethlen. In the summer of 1612 it was allegedly he who had spirited Bethlen out of the princely palace, for which Gábor Báthory had him arrested, and the diet of Kolozsvár later sentenced him to loss of property.⁵¹ He achieved his successes in the financial and diplomatic fields, and the two highpoints of his career were his induction into the princely council, then two years later, in 1624, his elevation to the rank of *magnificus*, by which he entered into the Transylvanian aristocracy.⁵² Because the prince no longer chose other councilors to replace the deceased members, by 1622 the customary order in the principality was restored, that is, the council once again had 12 members and would remain that way throughout the remaining years of Bethlen’s rule. In the final period the two personnel changes that occurred due to deaths, however, did not bring about any change in the political direction of the council.

The Social, Ethnic and Religious Structure of the Council

Already beginning in 1541 the Transylvanian elite was characterized by a high degree of openness, a strongly heterogeneous composition and continuous change and renewal. Because a strong local aristocracy did not emerge in the

50 The erroneous dates prevalent in the specialist literature have been corrected by Veronka Dáné, “*Az ő nagysága széki így deliberála*” *Torda vármegye fejedelemségkori bírósági gyakorlata*, Erdélyi Tudományos Füzetek 259 (Debrecen–Kolozsvár: EME, 2006), 45.

51 “Régi följegyzések,” pub. Károly Szabó, *Történelmi Tár* (1880): 793–94; MNL OL F 1, vol. 10, 31–32.

52 September 5, 1624; MNL OL F 1 LR, vol. 15, 5.

Middle Ages, some of the nobles fleeing there from the Turks were able to make a rapid career. Many succeeded in joining and climbing the ladder, but only few families managed to remain in the elite for the long term. There were a great many one-, maximum two-generation careers. Even in the case of families which did gain a foothold in the elite, the continuity in power and influence was often broken: one poor political decision or the premature, violent death of the head of the family could drop them out of the narrow policy-shaping leading stratum for one or even two generations.

In the Principality of Transylvania, where neither a strict system of true *barones regni* (*országbárák*) nor the practice of creating barons evolved, the categories of natural and titled barons could naturally not emerge, though István Báthory, as king of Poland, attempted to do this in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁵³ Instead, the bestowal of the title *magnificus* existed. This is comparable in essence and importance to the baronial title, but the rank applied only to a specific person and was not inheritable.⁵⁴

Only the ruler's closest relatives could possess the title automatically. In other cases it was the prince who decided to promote some of his politicians and elevate them to the rank of *magnificus*. However, they availed themselves of this opportunity relatively rarely, and so the system of making someone a *magnificus* was not devalued and became a quite important means of creating an elite in the hands of the rulers. Thus, at the apex of the elite stood the group of *magnifici*, who possessed great social prestige; they were followed by those holding the rank of *generosus*. The lowest stratum was formed by those bearing the title *egregius*; they, however, were members of the elite only temporarily, thanks to their given function.

At the head of the princely council stood the leader, called the first or chief councilor, and the body itself was divided into two sections: the members of the inner circle, referred to in the era as *consiliarius intimus* or inner councilor; and the group of councilors.⁵⁵ Appointment as a councilor did not in itself involve the dignity of *magnificus*, and so those bearing the titles *magnificus* and *generosus* are

53 On April 3, 1582 István Báthory elevated Ferenc Wesselényi to the rank of baron and Márton Berzeviczy on January 17, 1583. *A magyar arisztokrácia családi kapcsolatrendszere a 16–17. században*, database, accessed September 2, 2013, <http://archivum.piar.hu/arisztokrata/12rangemelesek.htm#B191>.

54 Géza Pálffy, *The Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Monarchy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 17–23; Veronka Dáné, “Die Bockkais in Siebenbürgen – Ungesetzliche Liber Barone?,” in “*Einigkeit und Frieden sollen auf seiten jeder Partei sein*”. *Die Friedensschlüsse von Wien (23. 06. 1606) und Zsitvatorok (15. 11. 1606)*, ed. János Barta et al. Debrecen: DE Történelmi Intézet, 2006, 95–103.

55 EOE, vol. 9, 74–75.

found equally in both categories, though in the inner council the ratio always tilted in favor of the *magnificus* category.

After this introduction, let us observe how Gábor Bethlen's princely council was divided according to ancestry and social prestige. Following the above definitions, in the following classification the *magnificus* and *generosus* groups form the "Transylvanian high nobility." By "Transylvanian nobles" I mean those politicians, classified mostly as *egregius*, whose ancestors also had lived in the Voivodate of Transylvania at the time of the unitary (late medieval) Kingdom of Hungary and belonged to the nobility. I have labeled as "second-generation" those whose parents had settled in Transylvania; they represented the second generation of their families in the elite as well. I have named "new beginners" those whose family or possibly they themselves had already possessed the title *magnificus*, or the rank of councilor, but in the course of political changes, wars or internal struggles had lost both their social status and their fortunes in their entirety and so had to rebuild their careers. The "settlers" are logically those who changed country as adults and established their new positions in the principality.

Summarizing the data from the above diagram, we can establish that in Bethlen's council alongside the 14 Transylvanian-born politicians there were four second-generation councilors, five "new beginners" and nine *homines novi*. The presence of the second generation, as well as the *homo novus* politicians, unequivocally indicates that the elite, and specifically the council, was still very much open in Bethlen's era. The five new beginners on the other hand clearly reflect the constantly changing, unsettled, internecine political conditions of

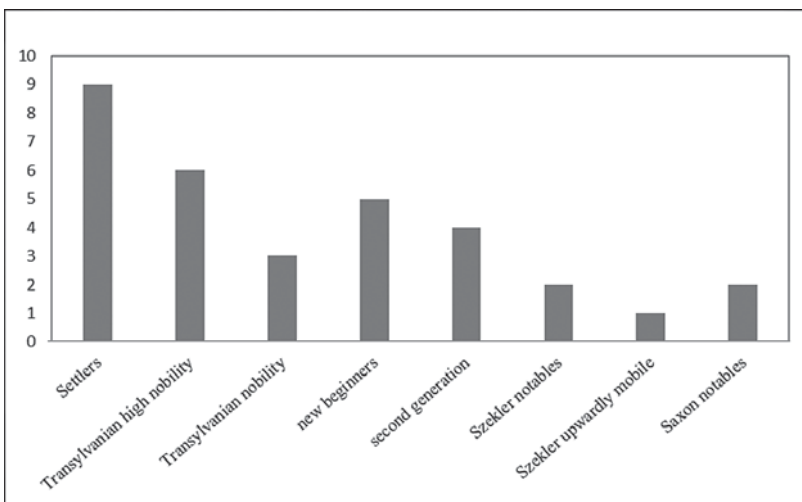


Figure 2. Distribution of council members according to ancestry

the decade and a half between 1598 and 1613. The high number of settlers, which previously had been typical of the early phase in the formation of the Transylvanian state as well as of the years between 1568 and 1573, during Gábor Bethlen's reign stands out once again and may be traced back to the devastation of the Fifteen Years' War, and specifically to the losses of life that particularly affected the elite guard of politicians. In the case of those resettling from the Kingdom of Hungary, it was not merely princely policy and the campaigns in Hungary but rather the favorable opportunities offered by the resultant vacuum that allowed them to make fine careers. However, as in every similar such situation, the majority of them could thank to some special expertise, primarily legal and financial skills or else their military talent, their integration and rise.

Bethlen's conditions of election stipulated that he was to choose the councilors from all three nations.⁵⁶ The ethnic composition of the membership nevertheless displays the already customary disproportion to the detriment of the Saxons and Szeklers. Four of the thirty-two councilors belonged to the Szekler nation and two to the Saxon.⁵⁷ Broken down by period, we can see that the council never had more than two Szekler members at the same time, while among the Saxons, apart from an overlap of 15 months, only one person at a time entered the body. Johannes Benkner and Koloman Gotzmeister's brief time together as councilors is nevertheless important, because it indicates that originally Bethlen probably conceived of the Szekler and Saxon representation on the council on a similar scale. Benkner, however, defected, and became the prime mover of the anti-Bethlen conspiracy on the Transylvanian front, leading to his arrest on the charge of treason in May 1616.⁵⁸ Although he was granted pardon half a year later, he was stripped of all his offices, and in the end the prince did not appoint a new Saxon councilor in his place.⁵⁹ Even so, Bethlen was the only ruler who at least formally ensured the continual presence of the Saxons in the political leadership of the principality. Before him, in the period beginning in 1556 Saxons had entered that body only sporadically, and nor was there a permanent Saxon representation during the longer reigns of his successors, the two György Rákóczi and Mihály Apafi, either.

In the case of the Szekler nation, the picture is somewhat more complicated. Theoretically we could speak of up to seven Szekler councilors, since Farkas

56 *Approbatæ Constitutiones*, 29.

57 For data relating to their careers, see *Erdélyi méltóságviselők*.

58 Cziráki, *Autonóm közösség*, 134–43.

59 Rezső Lovas, "A szász kérdés Bethlen Gábor korában," *Századok* 78 (1944): 419–62.

Kamuthy, István Kovacsóczy and Farkas Alia also held leading Szekler offices, though in reality none of them belonged to the Szekler nation. Their appointments continued the earlier princely policy of trying to obtain and ensure influence among the Szeklers by installing his own confidants in at least some Szekler posts.⁶⁰ The four councilors who could actually be regarded as Szeklers were Ferenc Balássy and Simon Péchi, followed by Ferenc Mikó and Kelemen Béldi.

Among them Péchi was the only one who was not a born Szekler, but after András Eőssy adopted him and he managed to marry into the Kornis clan he became completely embedded in the Szekler community, with respect to his estates, circle of kin and network of ties, as well as his methods of self-enrichment. He also differed from his fellow councilors in that he held no Szekler post, though until his conviction in 1621 he had been active as chancellor. Before him only János Petki had managed to rise to such heights, becoming the first among the Szeklers to enter the princely council in 1605, and then Zsigmond Rákóczi's chancellor two years later. Petki, however, although he was allowed to retain his title as councilor until 1612, gradually withdrew to the background or was shunted there after the accession of Gábor Báthory to the throne.⁶¹ In addition to Péchi, the others did not sit on the council merely as the formal representatives of the Szekler nation either: Balássy and Mikó turned themselves into the key figures of diplomacy with the Porte, and Mikó was moreover lord steward, while Balássy and Béldi became supreme generals of the Szeklers.

Thus, compared to his predecessors, Bethlen's reign brought a new level and opened a new avenue in princely policy towards the Szeklers, because it was actually at this time that the native-born Szeklers entered the country's politics, whether on the council or in the other critical areas of political life. An explanation for this change of direction could be that, as mentioned earlier, kindred ties and the common memories of Turkish exile closely bound Bethlen to the Szekler politicians that he preferentially employed. The presence of the Szekler councilors thus to a large extent deviated from that of the Saxons: they had not been placed in virtual sinecures by the pressure of expectation;

60 Judit Balogh, "Der Szekleradel im Fürstentum Siebenbürgen," in *Die Szekler in Siebenbürgen. Von der privilegierten Sondergemeinschaft zur ethnischen Gruppe*, ed. Harald Roth (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2009), 172–94.

61 Róbert Dán, *Az erdélyi szombatosok és Péchi Simon* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1987), 120–40; Judit Balogh, "Karrieremöglichkeiten der Szekler Adligen in der Zeit von István Bocskai," in *Einigkeit und Frieden*, 103–11; Idem, "A székely társadalom Báthory Gábor korában," in *Báthory Gábor és kora*, ed. Klára Papp et al. (Debrecen: DE Történelmi Intézete, 2009), 164.

rather, they represented political capital and a source of loyalty to be boldly and continuously exploited.

The overwhelming majority of Bethlen's councilors, 26, belonged to the Hungarian nation. Nonetheless, we cannot speak of political homogeneity, because the "Hungarian" politicians also displayed a quite colorful picture. A total of 18 of them held the title of lord-lieutenant as well, 12 headed counties in Transylvania proper and six in the Partium. At the same time, this figure in itself does not allow us to draw any conclusions, since deaths played a large role in the changes. Yet if we look at the two territories' representation on the council broken down by the three demarcated periods, the picture becomes more realistic, as the following table illustrates.

Period	Member of the Hungarian nation	Title of Lord-Lieutenant	Head of a County in Transylvania	Head of a County in the Partium
1613–1616	19	12	8	4
1617–1622	16	11	9	2
1623–1629	16	11	8	3
1613–1629	26	18	12	6

Figure 3. Titles and nations of council members

The greater weight of the Transylvanian lord-lieutenants within the council can be demonstrated in other periods as well, if only because there were seven counties in Transylvania and only five outside of it.⁶² Yet we can find no example of such a shift in proportions under the previous princes, which shows that Bethlen saw his true political base in Transylvania proper. Accordingly, only those heads of the Partium counties belonging to the trusted inner circle, who at the same time administered the most important territories, Bihar and Máramaros, were admitted to the council: Bethlen's brother-in-law (Ferenc Rhédey) and younger brother (István Bethlen), as well as Zsigmond Kornis, who likewise can be included in the prince's wider kin. Although he numbered among the Catholic

62 The diet catalog prepared around 1607–08, the *Regestrum Regni Transylvaniae*, also lists twelve counties. "Regestrum Regni Transylvaniae," pub. Károly Hodor, *Történelmi Tár* 2 (1879): 393–94. Precisely for this reason I did not include in the examination the lord-lieutenants of Szörény County who were appointed during the time of Gábor Báthory and Bethlen because the remaining territory was actually placed under the administration of the region's military commander, the ban of Karánsebes. No lord-lieutenant was appointed to head Arad County, and the diet of May 1626 would ultimately attach the remnants of the county to Zaránd. *EOE*, vol. 8, 325, and Lukinich, *Erdély területi változásai*, 357.

émigrés granted pardon in early 1614, of this circle he alone, after a difficult start, having proven his loyalty several times in the end managed to preserve his place on the council. He received his appointment as lord-lieutenant, on the other hand, only quite late, eight years after his appointment to the council (true, at that time he was immediately placed at the head of the crucial Bihar County).⁶³

Because the title of councilor did not in every case entail a lord-lieutenancy or Szekler office, we must therefore also examine what other competences and activities Bethlen weighed when selecting someone for the council. Based on the councilors' activity and merits, in addition to the local governmental functions we can distinguish an additional three categories. Two of these were tied to a special expertise: first, in all of Bethlen's periods we find those active purely or at least mostly in bureaucratic careers; second, those fulfilling exclusively military duties. Among the bureaucrats we may list the financial expert István Kákonyi, the jurists István Kassai and István Fráter, as well as the two chancellors, Simon Péchi and István Kovacsóczy. Although the latter was leader of a Szekler seat from 1625 on, and lord-lieutenant from 1627 on, by that time he had been working on the council for years as chancellor, which he attained by gradually ascending within the chancellery's hierarchy. In the military sphere, in Bethlen's campaigns several stood out, such as Rhédey, Petneházy, Kornis, Alia or the Kamuthy brothers, but there were only two councilors who did not fill duties other than military ones: János Bornemisza, general of the field troops, and Pál Keresztessy, who had been forced to part with his previous title of lord-lieutenant of Szörény just as Bethlen succeeded to the throne, becoming instead captain of Lippa.

In addition to those possessing a certain expertise, we may list in a separate (third) category those councilors who, to use János Kemény's words, were invited onto the council "not for their minds."⁶⁴ Belonging to this category were the Catholic aristocrats returning from emigration in Hungary through the political bargain, already mentioned several times: István Kendy, Zsigmond Kornis, Boldizsár Szilvássy and Zsigmond Sarmasághy. Based on their abilities they might have gained seats on the council in any event, just as they (apart from Kornis) had previously. Rightly suspicious of them because of their previous political life Bethlen did not expect advice and support from them but

63 Orgona, *A göncruszékai Kornisok*, 160.

64 Kemény said these infamous words to a relative seeking his advice, Dávid Zólyomi, whose opponents tried to weaken by seeking to install him on the council instead of the post of captain of the rural and court armies. Éva V. Windisch, ed., *Kemény János önéletírása* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1959), 201.

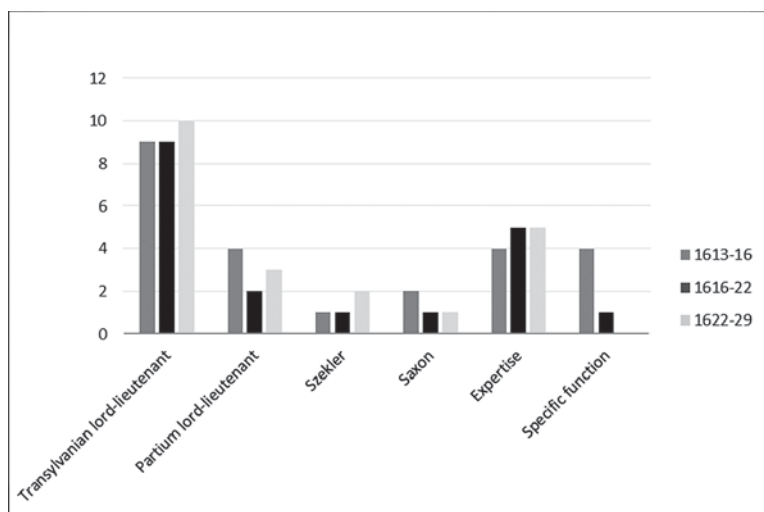


Figure 4. Distribution of councilors by representation and duties

instead assigned them, as previously mentioned, merely the task of assisting him in settling the relationship with the Kingdom of Hungary. Accordingly, with the exception of Kornis they were unable to retain their positions and were soon dropped from both the council and Transylvanian political life.⁶⁵

It can clearly be seen that, compared to the country's confessional ratios, Roman Catholic politicians are quite strongly over-represented. This is understandable in the first period, since this was when Bethlen was forced to welcome back the émigré Catholics. In the following period their number accordingly fell by almost half. The decrease, however, was caused not by deaths but by the removal of the aristocrats who turned against Bethlen and therefore were tried and convicted. Only a single Catholic, István Kovacsóczy, arrived in their stead. What may be surprising instead was that, by the last period, the number of Catholic councilors once again increased, thanks to István Haller and Kelemen Béldi. Yet they, like Kovacsóczy, acceded to that body not along denominational notions, but rather based on their family prestige, abilities and previous careers, completely deservedly.

The very high number of Catholic politicians was a result of the peaceful re-Catholicization that commenced under István Báthory and later of the more violent campaign characteristic of Zsigmond Báthory's reign, which targeted

65 Released from prison, Sarmasághy was still allotted a role in public: he was permitted to deliver the Latin oration at Zsuzsanna Károlyi's funeral, but this counted as his swan song, he received no more political assignments, and soon died; Gyula Mikó, "Mivel én is csak ember voltam." *Az Exequiae Principales és az Exequiarum Coeremonialium libri gyászbeszédei* (PhD diss., Debreceni Egyetem, 2007), 139, 150, accessed June 2, 2013, <http://ganymedes.lib.unideb.hu:8080/dea/bitstream/2437/5580/6/MikoGyulaErtekezes.pdf>.

above all the young members of the high nobility. It was precisely by this period that those converts who survived the years between 1599 and 1610 matured and reached the summit of their careers. Because this was from the start a carefully chosen and cultivated group that had partaken in high-level outstanding training, Bethlen and later György I Rákóczi could not afford either to exclude for religious reasons able politicians from an elite which had already contracted because of the casualties. Gábor Bethlen therefore was not exaggerating when he wrote to Pázmány that “I have so many papist servants that I do not even know the number, but [they are] not the fewest, because hitherto I have not despised anyone because of his religion.”⁶⁶ Apart from the first couple of years, Bethlen did not assume too great a risk by placing so many Catholics in the front rank, because he could hold them firmly in his hands. He made it clear that their religion and good connections in the kingdom could be turned against them at any time. Thanks to this the political attitude of the Catholic lords also changed thoroughly; they became much more easily handled and cautious, which of course did not prevent them from striving to increase their room to maneuver if they saw an opportunity to do so, as they did after Bethlen’s death for example. But we may boldly state that from the mid-1620s on the concepts of Catholicism and Habsburg orientation could no longer be automatically linked in Transylvania.

Period	Catholic	Reformed	Unitarian	Evangelical	Sabbatarian	Total
1613–1616	10	6	4	2	1	23
1617–1622	6	6	5	1	1	19
1623–1629	8	6	3	2	0	19
1613–1629	13	9	6	3	1	32

Figure 5. The distribution of councilors by religion

In addition to them, however, as the above diagram also shows, we see a few other councilors who held the title of lord-lieutenant but were not able to gain admittance to the body through their personal abilities or previous career, but explicitly on account of their family’s social prestige. Such were, for example, István Wesselényi and István Erdélyi, inherited from Gábor Báthory, as well as János Gyerőffy, already in his seventies but who was invited onto the council by Bethlen. Of the latter, previously neglected in comparison to his age and

66 Gábor Bethlen to Péter Pázmány, Vásárhely (Târgu Mureș, Romania), July 14, 1625, Vilmos Frankl, ed., *Pázmány Péter levelezése* (Budapest: Eggenberger, 1873), 445; József Barcza, *Bethlen Gábor, a református fejedelem* (Budapest: Magyarországi Református Egyház Sajtó Osztálya, 1980), 193.

social rank, the prince expected nothing more than loyalty and an increase in his prestige, and in this he would not be disappointed. Among the councilors it was likewise probably mostly social prestige and family tradition that delegated István Haller, the youngest but only relatively young to the princely council; he, however, amply proved his aptitude, particularly during the reign of György I Rákóczi.⁶⁷ The lack of homogeneity within the council showed up in other areas as well. The most striking is the religious split and the heavy distortion of denominational ratios; this, however, did not characterize Bethlen's religious policy but is rather a phenomenon traceable from the beginning of the century until the death of György I Rákóczi (1648). Fig. 5 depicts the situation in Gábor Bethlen's era.

The presence of the Calvinists in the council shows a balanced picture, and in every period six members belonged to this denomination. To sum up, of Bethlen's thirty-two councilors nine were Calvinist, which means that they did not attain even a one-third ratio. In addition, of the nine Calvinist councilors six were also *homines novi*, numbering among those recently settling in Transylvania, and thus actually cannot be regarded as representatives of the Transylvanian Calvinists. This is interesting particularly considering the fact that, beginning with Bocskai, Gábor Bethlen was the fourth Calvinist prince leading Transylvania and wanting to do something for his religion. The impact of this, however, would be seen only later. In the first third of the century a great religious reshuffling within the high nobility was underway, during which to a lesser extent Catholic and to a larger extent Unitarian nobles (especially minors living in mixed-denominational families who had lost their fathers or had been completely orphaned) converted to the Calvinist faith. This phenomenon can be detected in the council as well: of the three Transylvanian-born Calvinist politicians, it is known that István Bethlen and Boldizsár Kemény left the Unitarian Church while still young, though already as adults.

This slow but certain decline appeared in the number of Unitarian councilors as well. They suffered their first great losses during the Counter-Reformation of the Báthory era, then the slow but uninterrupted wave of desertions that began in the early seventeenth century built on these, which soon led to their political marginalization. That six of them could join the ranks of the councilors they owed not least to their kinship with the prince and the cohesive force of the

67 András Péter Szabó, "A magyar Hallerek nemzetségek könyve – egy különleges forrás társadalomtörténeti háttere," *Századok* 142, no. 4 (2008): 897–942.

years of Turkish emigration they weathered together. All of them belonged to the radical wing of the church, and even if they did not identify themselves with the teachings of the lone Sabbatarian councilor, Simon Péchi, they did not fight against him either. Finally, turning to the council's Lutherans, here we find no surprises. In addition to the two Saxon politicians, András Kapy, resettling from the middle nobility of Upper Hungary, represented this denomination.

Summary

From the above it can clearly be seen that Gábor Bethlen reshaped in a very brief time the council according to his own notions through considered, tactical moves. The members of the body who remained after 1616 and the newly entering figures could not, but nor did they want to, enforce the estates' original restrictive intention. In fact, they explicitly formed the most reliable core of Bethlen's political base. Regardless of this, throughout his reign Bethlen made certain that apart from him no one person would be capable of completely understanding the political events and plans in Transylvania. He did not ignore any member of the council; in fact, he thoroughly burdened each of them with partial tasks and ambassadorial commissions. He developed the working method of designating one or two of his councilors for certain areas (e.g., relations with the Porte, military affairs, educational questions). After immersing themselves in the problems of the given subject, the latter were able to assist the prince with truly expert and reliable suggestions, though they remained unfamiliar with the other areas of government and did not actually take part in the decision-making process. The most active, most ambitious councilors Bethlen frequently entrusted with diplomatic tasks that were rather symbolic embassies or demonstrative events. By doing this, several times he removed them from domestic political life for long months, preventing their continual presence, potential dissension and conspiring. At the same time, those involved saw in their assignments not caution and exclusion but their own importance and the prince's confidence. All this made it possible for Bethlen to pursue his political agenda freely and calmly for most of his reign.

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