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Interests behind the Development of the Hungarian Railway Network During the Habsburg Empire Period Up to 1867

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Abstract: *The first steam-powered public railway in the Kingdom of Hungary, then part of the Habsburg Empire, was inaugurated in 1846. Initially connecting Pest and Vác, this line was extended to link the capitals of Vienna and Pest by 1850. The development of this railway was significantly shaped by Austrian imperial objectives, with the primary driving forces rooted in the Empire's political, economic, and social interests, despite the line being constructed by a private company pursuing its own economic goals. Over time, the motivations behind Hungarian railway development grew increasingly complex, influenced not only by the Empire's political, economic, and military interests but also by individual ambitions (political and personal prestige) and a range of territorial factors (imperial/Austrian, national/state, regional, county, and local). In the years leading up to the Austro–Hungarian Compromise of 1867, regional, county, and local interests began to influence the construction and routing of Hungarian railway lines significantly, despite the initial dominance of Vienna's centralization policies—particularly after the imperial economic crisis of 1854. However, imperial/Austrian interests, especially military considerations, remained predominant throughout this period, becoming increasingly influential from the 1850s onward. This study seeks to categorize the various interests that shaped the development of Hungarian railway lines leading up to the Compromise and to present the partial development of the Kingdom of Hungary's main fixed-track railway network. The findings suggest that these developments resulted from a complex interplay of multiple factors rather than any single dominant interest. Given the lack of existing theoretical frameworks from this perspective, the analysis is grounded in Hungarian and Austrian literature, supported by contemporary press sources, relevant published documents, and archival materials.*

Key words: Hungarian Kingdom, Habsburg Empire, Railway Development, Interests, Centralization

Introduction

The idea of constructing a public railway first emerged in the Stockton-on-Tees (England) town hall in 1810, spurred by the transportation challenges of rapidly industrializing England. In 1821, representatives presented a proposal to the English

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Parliament to construct a railway between Stockton, a coal-rich town, and Darlington, located on a natural transportation route.¹ This proposal offered an excellent alternative to the fastest mode of passenger transport at the time – the horse-drawn post – whose limitations, due to the stamina and endurance of the animals, were well known.² Finally, the first steam railway, 39 kilometers in length, was inaugurated on September 27, 1825, primarily serving the interests of local mine owners.³ While the line's main purpose was coal transport, it also marked the first time in history that people could travel by railway. Recognizing its significance, the English Parliament granted construction permits for other sections, including the line between Liverpool and Manchester.⁴ This was the world's first public railway designed exclusively for steam operation, with its ceremonial opening on September 15, 1830. The primary motivation for constructing this railway was to connect Liverpool, one of England's most important seaports, with Manchester, a city with numerous industrial estates. The economic interests of both cities had long sought to link the two regions. The railway proved highly efficient and reliable for freight and passenger transport, gradually sparking broader interest in railway enterprises.⁵

This new mode of transport spread rapidly across Europe, reaching Hungary after a brief delay. The Transylvanian writer, translator, and traveler Sándor Bölöni Farkas was the first to document his personal experiences with railway travel in 1831, during a visit to Western Europe, specifically regarding the journey between Liverpool and Manchester.⁶ Shortly thereafter, István Széchenyi also tested the new means of transport and recorded his impressions in his *Diary*.⁷ Széchenyi returned to Hungary with a firm conviction about the need for a national railway system. He then worked diligently to ensure that Hungary would have its own railway system as soon as possible. This need became more pressing as the industrialization of Western and Central Europe in the early 19th century expanded the market for Hungarian agricultural, forestry, and food products. Participation in this favorable European economy became ever more urgent, with the construction of a relatively inexpensive transportation network being a fundamental requirement for success.⁸

This study aims to uncover the interests that influenced the development of Hungary's steam-powered, standard gauge railway network from the inauguration of the first line in 1846 to the signing of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867. In doing so, it seeks to fill a gap in the research concerning the relationship between

¹ Cottrell & Ottley, 1975.

² Verdier, 2008.

³ Cottrell & Ottley, 1975: 86.

⁴ Simmons, 1980.

⁵ Czére, 1989: 37-42.

⁶ Bölöni Farkas, 2008: 207-208.

⁷ Széchenyi, 1978: 725.

⁸ Katus, 1983: 183.

complex economic and political factors and the development of railways in Hungary. During this period, the Kingdom of Hungary was part of the Habsburg Empire and was largely shaped by the centralization policies of the court in Vienna. This study seeks to answer several key questions. They are:

1. What interests guided the development of the Hungarian railway network during this era?
2. To what extent did Austrian centralization alone dictate the early phases of railway construction in Hungary?
3. Who were the individuals and groups behind the railway projects, and what motivated their involvement?
4. In what broader context can these various interests be understood?

Inspired by a theoretical approach, this study is grounded in various sources. Primarily, it draws upon both foreign and Hungarian-language literature that addresses the history of Hungarian railway construction during the period, supplemented by data extracted from national and local press sources, archival materials, contemporary laws, and other printed source publications. This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject. As such, it does not attempt to catalog every Hungarian railway line – partly due to scope limitations – but rather focuses on describing broader trends from which the author derives conclusions. To date, no document has been produced that examines the various interests behind the development of the Hungarian railway network from this perspective, nor has it employed such comprehensive historical research methods.

Among the professional works relevant to this topic, two studies by the geographer Ferenc Erdősi are particularly noteworthy. In the first study, Erdősi examines Hungarian railway construction by summarizing various regional interest categories. This article, written in 1986 within the scientific framework of pre-regime change (Communist) Hungary, primarily adopts a geographical approach. The author categorizes the interests behind railway construction into imperial/Austrian, Hungarian state-wide/national, regional/large-scale, provincial, and local interests.⁹ Erdősi's other study focuses exclusively on railway development from a military perspective, providing an excellent foundation in this area.¹⁰ Related to this is a work by historian István Diószegi, which briefly examines the development of imperial strategic railway lines up until the 1880s.¹¹

Aside from these studies, only a few Hungarian monographs explore the individual elements of these categories, and even those do not address them within a broader

⁹ Erdősi, 1987.

¹⁰ Erdősi, 1986.

¹¹ Diószegi, 1992: 19-29.

context. These books typically discuss the history of Hungarian railways linearly, following traditional historical methodology. János Majdán specifically examined the significance of territorial interest categories in his two syntheses, addressing imperial, state, local, and regional developments, as well as economic, social, and military aspects separately.¹² Additionally, Béla Czére touches on imperial, state, and local interests in his work, which adopts a more technical historical approach.¹³ However, none of these authors have analyzed the interests by categorizing them from multiple perspectives.

Works by foreign language specialists on the railway history of the Habsburg Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy have not comprehensively analyzed the various intersecting interests involved in Hungarian railway construction. Hermann Strach's seven-volume, detailed edited work from 1898 is informative but adopts a more descriptive and technical-historical approach, lacking contextual analysis and discussion of underlying interests.¹⁴ Karl Bachinger's 1973 work is more historical and analytical, examining railway construction from an Austrian imperial perspective, organized chronologically along state and private economic interests.¹⁵ Upon reviewing the studies mentioned above, it can be concluded that the diverse interests driving Hungarian railway construction – marked by significant interaction and overlap – have yet to be systematically categorized and synthesized into a coherent and comprehensive framework.

I hypothesize that the interests driving the construction of the Hungarian railway and determining its routes cannot be adequately understood through a unidimensional analytical model. Instead, these interests reflect a complex interplay of multiple overlapping factors. Recognizing the potential for significant overlaps among the various factors, considerations, and interest groups involved, I have categorized these interests into three broad categories, each supported by relevant specialist literature:

1. **Interests behind the operation of the Empire/state:** This includes political interests (decisions made to achieve and maintain power and to satisfy social and economic needs),¹⁶ economic/commercial interests (facilitating the production, distribution, and

¹² Majdán, 1987, 2014.

¹³ Czére, 1989.

¹⁴ Strach, 1898.

¹⁵ Bachinger, 1973.

¹⁶ A comprehensive English-language monograph explores the politically motivated groups involved in the railway sector and the corresponding government interests in 19th-century United Kingdom. The author concludes that politics, and therefore the reigning government, consistently proved to be the most influential force, even in the operations of private railway companies. As this topic has not been previously examined in such depth, the monograph serves as an excellent theoretical starting point. See: Alderman, 1973.

consumption of goods and services to meet various needs), and military interests (national defense and imperial ambitions).

2. **Human interests:** These involve social interests (enabling faster and longer-distance transportation for purposes such as shopping, selling, tourism – including religious tourism – work, entertainment, and education) and personal interests (prestige, personal economic gain, recognition, influence, and the enhancement of social status).¹⁷
3. **Territorial interests:** These encompass imperial/Austrian interests (serving Austrian or national power and economic objectives), national/state interests (national economy and Hungarian nation-building),¹⁸ regional interests (involving routes that cross counties or regions), county interests (favoring routes that connect the most settlements within a county or promote county-centric railway network development), and local interests (addressing the economic and social needs of cities, villages, large estates, companies, and private individuals).

It is clear that significant overlaps and interactions likely exist between the interests categorized within these three criteria.

The Interests Driving Railway Construction During the Reform Era

During the examined period, the Kingdom of Hungary operated within the framework of the Habsburg Empire. Historiography refers to the years between 1830 and 1848 as the Reform Era, during which the Hungarian political elite sought to implement civil transformation gradually and constitutionally through parliamentary legislation.¹⁹ The first standard-gauge, steam-powered railway in Hungary began operation during this period. Simultaneously, the first steam railway in the more developed part of the Empire was inaugurated in Austria in 1837, connecting Floridsdorf and Deutsch-Wagram. This project, known as the Emperor Ferdinand Northern Railway (*K. K. Privilegierte Kaiser Ferdinands-Nordbahn*),²⁰ was initiated and funded by the banker Salomon Mayer von Rothschild, with the ultimate goal of establishing a connection between Vienna and the Galician salt mines.²¹ The company's main lines later extended from Vienna via Lundenburg (now Břeclav,

¹⁷ In his monograph, Alderman discusses the interest groups involved in the creation of the railway, noting that their primary goal was to protect, strengthen, or enhance the personal and collective interests of their members. These groups often wielded significant political power. A notable example is the rise of railway directors who, by becoming heads of the boards of established railway companies, gained substantial local, national, and political influence, as well as prestige, in 19th-century UK. Additionally, economic stakeholders in areas affected by the railway – such as mine owners, breweries, ship owners, and steel manufacturers – were included in the councils, allowing them to advance their personal economic interests. See: Alderman, 1973: 10, 227.

¹⁸ The study most relevant to this topic: Majdán, 2010: 9-19.

¹⁹ Katus, 2021: 230.

²⁰ Emperor Ferdinand Northern Railway Company was established in 1836. See: Somogyi, 1879: 308.

²¹ Bachinger, 1973: 278.

Czech Republic) to Brünn (now Brno, Czech Republik), Oderberg (now Bohumín, Czech Republik), and Krakau (now Kraków, Poland) towards Bohemia, Silesia and Galicia. The Gänserndorf-Marchegg railway also began operations in 1848.²²

As early as 1835, Rothschild proposed the construction of a steam-powered railway from Vienna to the salt mines in Bochnia to Ferdinand V. The fact that the company bore the name of Emperor Ferdinand played a significant role in obtaining the necessary permissions. The financial backing of the joint-stock company's members – Barons Eskeles, Geymüller, and Sina – along with the Rothschild family itself ensured the capital required for construction. The first section of the line was finally opened in November 1837, and construction continued under the railway company's patronage.²³ From this, it can be concluded that the first imperial railway line was established through a private initiative driven by a group of entrepreneurs. While imperial, economic, commercial, and social interests played an indirect and long-term role, the immediate motivation was economic profit. Nevertheless, the project required the highest level of political approval – the emperor's will – for its realization.

The earliest plans for Hungarian railway lines deliberately bypassed the economic and cultural center of Pest-Buda, instead channeling the transportation of Hungarian agricultural products toward Vienna and Trieste. However, the Viennese court could only maintain and pursue this objective for a short time, as it had limited influence over the construction routes of the privately owned railways.²⁴ In Austria, the state railway system, conceived and developed by Baron Karl Friedrich von Kübeck, president of the Court Chamber, was implemented in 1841.²⁵ Under this system, the state began constructing the designated four trunk lines and nationalizing private railways.²⁶ Despite significant technical and financial challenges, Austria's railway network developed relatively quickly (even if it lagged behind Western European countries). The imperial railway network increasingly reflected Vienna's centralizing influence during this period.²⁷

As early as 1836, a plan was proposed to construct a railway to support shipping on the Danube River and facilitate the grain trade with Austria. The proposed route would run from Vienna through Sopron and Bruck an der Leitha to Győr and from there to Gönyű. The idea originated from György Simon Sina, a Viennese baron, banker, and merchant of Greek-Macedonian descent,²⁸ who also held shares in the First Danube Steamship Company (*Erste k. k. priv. Donau-Dampfschiffahrts-Gesellschaft*).

²² Berend, 2003: 151; Majdán, 1987: 11.

²³ Strach, 1898: 134-147.

²⁴ Erdösi, 1987: 52.

²⁵ Taylor, 1990: 97.

²⁶ Blum, 1943: 32.

²⁷ Jaworski, 1991: 110-114.

²⁸ Horváth, 2018: 33.

This shipping company had a vested interest in the export of Hungarian grain to the West.²⁹ Founded in 1829 by significant economic and political figures of the Habsburg Empire, the company focused on commercial shipping between Vienna and Zimony (now Zemun, Serbia), extending down to the mouth of the Danube and eventually to Constantinople (now Istanbul, Türkiye), with a return route to Győr. Sina's goal was to overcome the shipping obstacles – such as siltation – from Gönyű to Vienna, thereby ensuring a steady grain trade to Austria. This railway would have served as a continuation of the line leading to Pest and then to Debrecen, connecting the fertile Hungarian Great Plain with Vienna and significantly increasing traffic for the new mode of transport. The plan sparked considerable debate among those involved,³⁰ and the idea of a railway between Vienna and Pest remained a topic of discussion from that time onward.³¹

It didn't take long for the first railway law to be ratified. After heated debates, Parliament temporarily accepted Article XXV of 1836, titled *On Private Companies Enhancing the Public Goods and Trade of the Country*, until the next Diet.³² This law designated thirteen routes for railway construction, with the planned network connecting the most important production and consumption districts of the emerging national market and establishing export and import corridors. The law permitted anyone to build railway lines along these main routes. Although the monarch had twice refused to confirm the bill, Parliament bypassed this obstacle by granting the law temporary status.³³ Despite its provisional nature, the law itself strongly reflected Hungarian national interests.

Around the same time, Hungarian wholesaler and banker Móric Ullmann began preliminary work on a railway line along the left bank of the Danube at Bratislava (now Slovakia), connecting to Pest.³⁴ This line eventually connected to the Northern Railway, part of the Rothschild financial group.³⁵ Ullmann first submitted his application for a license on October 25, 1837, which was quickly approved by the Hungarian Royal Council of Governors.³⁶ Ullmann aimed to build a railway

²⁹ Nagy, 1999: 88.

³⁰ *Hasznos Mulatságok*, 1836 (no. 39): 305-310.

³¹ *Társalkodó*, 1836 (no. 26): 101-104.

³² 1836. évi XXV.

³³ Majdán, 2014: 34.

³⁴ Czére, 1989: 78.

³⁵ *Hazai 's Külföldi Tudósítások*, 1838 (no. 29): 221; *Hírnök*, 1838 (no. 31): 123.

³⁶ The body began its operation in 1724 and was the first truly modern government institution in Hungary, functioning according to the principles of modern bureaucracy. It served as the highest and most comprehensive organ of internal government until 1848, and in practice, until the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. The body had jurisdiction over all areas of internal public administration, including the implementation of laws and royal decrees. It supervised counties, schools, and various foundations, and was responsible for religious and church matters, as well as health and social issues. Its role in economic matters was particularly significant, including oversight of railway affairs. Meanwhile, the Austrian Court Chancellery acted at the imperial level for the Austrian hereditary provinces, and in

running from Marchegg through Pest to Debrecen. From this point onward, he became a significant competitor to György Sina's project, gaining increasing support.³⁷ After the establishment of the Hungarian Central Railway Company,³⁸ Ullmann hired Carl-Friedrich Zimpel, a German engineer with experience in American railway construction, who, in 1839, published his concept, including detailed blueprints for the Pest-Vác line and proposals for further development.³⁹

In support of the Sina group, the government enacted the 1840 XL Act, which extended the concessions provided by the 1836 XXV Act to include a railway line from Vienna through Hungary to Trieste.⁴⁰ The section between Vienna and Wiener Neustadt was opened to traffic a year later. However, following the Austrian financial crisis, Sina and his partners abandoned their plans to build a railway in Hungary, citing a lack of capital, the failure of several companies and banks involved in the project,⁴¹ unresolved issues, unclear governmental support, and competition on the left bank of the Danube.⁴² Instead, Sina chose to continue the construction of the Wiener Neustadt line to Gloggnitz and then – bypassing Hungary – onward to Trieste, where greater traffic and revenue were anticipated. Concurrently, public opinion also shifted away from Sina's group and their proposed railway line on the left bank of the Danube,⁴³ giving higher priority to the Hungarian Central Railway.⁴⁴

In 1844, the Council of Governors and the King authorized the Hungarian Central Railway to build a line on the left bank of the Danube, extending from Debrecen to Pest and from Pest to the Austrian border. However, this authorization was not codified into law, as King Ferdinand V did not agree to the 5% interest insurance approved by the Diet in Bratislava.⁴⁵ The first steam-powered Hungarian public railway, a 33.6-kilometer line between Pest and Vác, finally opened in 1846 with the involvement of the House of Rothschild and financing from the Pesti Hungarian Commercial Bank, founded by Ullmann under the aegis of this company.⁴⁶ Despite being marred by significant maladministration and nepotism, the section built by this interest group became the first segment of the Vienna-Bratislava-Pest line, connecting

the case of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Vienna-based Hungarian Court Chancellery served as a mediator between the monarch and the estates, providing commentary and proposals for the monarch's decisions. Additionally, customs-related matters required the approval of the Imperial Court Chamber. See: Katus, 2021: 63-64; Ujhely, 1910: 47-59.

³⁷ *Társalkodó*, 1838 (no. 29): 111.

³⁸ Fenyvessy, 1883: 59.

³⁹ Szitányi Ullmann, 1839: 1-2.

⁴⁰ 1840. évi XL.

⁴¹ Ujhely, 1910: 49.

⁴² Fenyvessy, 1883: 94.

⁴³ *Századunk*, 1841 (no. 90): 697-700.

⁴⁴ *Pesti Hírlap*, 1841 (no. 62): 517.

⁴⁵ Nagy, 1999: 89; Majdán, 2014: 37-38; Ujhely, 1910: 58-59.

⁴⁶ Kalla-Bishop, 1973: 23.

the two capitals on the left bank of the Danube in 1850.⁴⁷ Ullmann regarded this railway as his personal enterprise, as evidenced by sources showing that most of the board members of the railway company and construction contractors were his relatives.⁴⁸ Thus, the management of Móric Ullmann's affairs and the construction of the first Hungarian line were largely handled by his family. From the outset, passenger trains also operated on this line, demonstrating that they played a significant role in the movement of people, thereby serving social interests as well.⁴⁹

In summary, the first Hungarian railway line was established through the initiative of the private railway company founded by Móric Ullmann. The primary driving force behind its creation was the anticipated private economic benefits, although the project also required the political support of the emperor. Additionally, the railway served economic, commercial, social, and imperial/Austrian territorial interests. Hungarian national interests were not a significant factor at this stage, as the Austrian government's Vienna-centered approach dominated the early phases of railway construction. Although not explicitly stated, it was evident that Ullmann's interests played a role, as both he and his family stood to gain economically and in terms of prestige from the project. The construction of the first steam-powered Hungarian railway line thus held considerable prestige value as well.

In 1847, the Hungarian Central Railway Company inaugurated another line between Pest and Szolnok, allowing quick access to Pest from the surrounding settlements. Shortly thereafter, under the chairmanship of István Széchenyi and at the instigation of Pál Esterházy, the chief county government commissioner of Sopron County, a group of primarily landowners from the Sopron area was formed to promote the construction of a railway.⁵⁰ The driving force behind this initiative was to stimulate the long-established trade relations of landowners in northwestern Transdanubia. The company received a construction permit from the Council of Governors in 1845. Two years later, on August 20, 1847, the 27-kilometer section between Sopron and Wiener Neustadt – financed by Baron Sina – was commissioned. The following year, another section was completed in the kingdom: the 17-kilometer line between Bratislava and Marchegg, connected to the railway line to Kraków, was completed by August 20, 1848. The 176-kilometer steam-hauled railway, built before the revolution, significantly contributed to civilian transformation, albeit entirely from private capital.⁵¹

One of the greatest minds of the Reform Era, István Széchenyi, developed his own concept for railway development. As head of the Transport Committee of the Governor's Council from 1845, he fully recognized the importance of railways

⁴⁷ Nagy, 1999: 90.

⁴⁸ *Hetilap*, 1846 (no. 6): 131-132.

⁴⁹ Czére, 1989: 83.

⁵⁰ Majdán, 1987: 34-35.

⁵¹ Kalla-Bishop, 1973: 24; Majdán, 1987: 36-37.

and accurately assessed the need for a fixed-track transport system. He advocated for the earliest possible national construction of the railway network.⁵² A cornerstone of his transport policy was his work titled *Proposal for the Settlement of Hungarian Transport Affairs (Javaslat a Magyar közlekedésügy rendezéséről)*, which he submitted to the national authorities on January 25, 1848. In his view, the railway was the most suitable means of boosting national trade among all available forms of transport. He was a proponent of a central network, believing that all roads should lead to the capital, and he strongly supported the close connection of ethnic regions with the Great Plain.⁵³ Széchenyi preferred a state-managed railway system and, therefore, aimed for the lines within Hungary to be held or managed by the state as soon as possible. He was also the first to differentiate between main, secondary, and branch lines,⁵⁴ outlining four main lines⁵⁵ (six with branches) in his proposal.⁵⁶ Széchenyi's concept prioritized the Hungarian state and national interests – a hallmark of his railway career [Fig. 1].

From the beginning until the outbreak of the 1848-1849 Revolution and War of Independence, railway developments in Hungary were primarily driven by private initiatives proposed by various interest groups and serving economic and commercial interests. Although the Hungarian Royal Council of Governors, as a political entity, and the monarch, as the executive power, made the final decisions when authorizing a line – often based on imperial and Austrian interests from political, social, and territorial perspectives – their influence on the routing of private railways was limited. In these cases, the routes were often shaped by the interests of counties, regions, and local areas, reflecting personal economic and territorial considerations, even if indirectly.

The 1848-1849 Revolution and War of Independence

In 1848, an unprecedented wave of revolutions swept across Europe, reigniting the issue of Hungary's civil transformation. Revolutionary movements in Vienna quickly gave momentum to events in Hungary, leading to the outbreak of revolution on March 15, 1848. Two days later, with the verbal authorization of Ferdinand V, the Palatine (Hungarian: *nádor*), the highest-ranking official in Hungary who acted as

⁵² Filesz, 1936: 121.

⁵³ Széchenyi, 1848: 13-22.

⁵⁴ Majdán, 2010: 18.

⁵⁵ 1st: Starting from Pest-Buda on the left bank of the Danube, through Bratislava to the Austrian Northern Railway; 2nd: starting from Pest-Buda through Székesfehérvár on the southern shore of Lake Balaton via Károlyváros (now Karlovac, Croatia) to Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia); 3rd: starting from Pest-Buda through Szolnok to Arad and via Debrecen to Szatmár (with a future connection through Transylvania to the east); 4th: starting from Pest-Buda through Miskolc to Kassa (connection to Galicia) and to Tokaj. See: Széchenyi, 1848: 57.

⁵⁶ Széchenyi, 1848: 54-60.

the King's representative, appointed Lajos Batthyány as Prime Minister. On April 7, the King appointed the members of Hungary's first government that was responsible to the Parliament, marking a shift towards greater accountability and constitutional governance. The April Laws, approved on April 11, established equality before the law and public accountability, among other things.⁵⁷ Until then, the nobility and the church, which controlled most of the land, had been exempt from contributing to the state treasury. However, these new laws required them to pay taxes, providing revenue for the civil state.

István Széchenyi was appointed Minister of Public Works and Transport. In this role, he submitted a draft law to establish a transport network for a modern, civil Hungary based on his preferred proposals. Széchenyi considered the construction of railway lines a state responsibility, identifying freight traffic – contrary to prevailing views at the time – as the primary long-term source of revenue for the railway.⁵⁸ Parliament ultimately approved his proposal as Article 30 of 1848,⁵⁹ repealing the previous railway laws of 1836 and 1840.⁶⁰ Concerning the railway network centered on Pest-Buda, the representatives authorized the government to take out a loan of 8 million HUF. This loan was intended to support the financially struggling Hungarian Central Railway while allowing the government to increase its influence over the private company. The majority of the loan was allocated for the construction of main lines. Széchenyi sought the representatives' support for the network's construction, stating at a meeting in early September, "In the railway network, I never saw a city, a village, a count, or the smallest provincial interest, but always just the motherland".⁶¹ Following his speech, the representatives allocated a significant sum for railway construction and the expansion of the port of Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia). The importance of this coastal connection was underscored by the fact that engineers began laying out the railway from Pest. However, the work progressing toward Székesfehérvár had to be abandoned due to the outbreak of the War of Independence.⁶²

During this brief period of civil governance, no actual railway construction occurred in Hungary. However, the political developments clearly outlined the future direction for Hungarian railway development and the national economic interests driving them. Unfortunately, the failure of the struggle for independence hindered these plans, postponing major railway development until the period following the end of the War of Independence.

⁵⁷ Katus, 2021: 285-289.

⁵⁸ Majdán, 1987: 48-49.

⁵⁹ 1848. évi XXX.

⁶⁰ Czére, 1989: 88.

⁶¹ Zichy, 1887: 619.

⁶² Majdán, 1987: 49-50.

The Era of Neo-Absolutism and the Path to Compromise

The outdated order across the Habsburg Empire collapsed in 1848, leading to a wave of civil transformation. The Empire transitioned into a constitutional monarchy, reaffirming the social achievements of the civil revolution, including the emancipation of serfs, equal rights for citizens, personal freedom, and public accountability. However, following Hungary's rebellion, Vienna declared that Hungary had forfeited its right to even limited state independence. As a result, Hungary was divided and incorporated into the Austrian Empire as crown provinces. The Schwarzenberg government gradually abandoned constitutionalism in favor of a more modern form of absolutism. By 1851, the ruler had assumed legislative and executive power, establishing a centralized absolutist control over the Empire.⁶³

Emperor Franz Josef aimed to create internal imperial unity, and the construction of the railway network played a crucial role in advancing centralization efforts. The Viennese court initiated the expansion of state-controlled railways when the agricultural boom promised significant revenues for the treasury. Despite the partial successes of the civil revolution, including the emancipation of serfs, land ownership conditions remained largely unchanged. Certain landlord prerogatives – such as the rights to mining, operating mills, and distilling spirits – persisted, and the widespread poverty limited the internal market. During this period, a key feature of the economic strategy was the influx of foreign, primarily Austrian, bank capital into Hungary, significantly influencing railway transport. Although capitalist development in Hungary was expanding, it lagged behind that of other independent countries due to these constraints. Consequently, Hungary's transport development remained closely aligned with Austrian interests. The expansion of the transport network, including railways, was integrated into the broader imperial system centered in Vienna and primarily served to facilitate the import of Austrian manufactured goods into Hungary and the export of Hungarian raw materials to Austria.⁶⁴ Consequently, the Imperial and Royal Ministry of Trade and National Economy (*Cs. Kir. Kereskedelmi és Nemzetgazdasági Minisztérium*) played a key role in the planning and construction of railway lines.⁶⁵

Following the end of hostilities, the Austrian government continued railway construction, primarily funded by a consumption tax from the dual customs system. This system, established in 1788 and extended to the hereditary provinces in 1829 (with Hungary and Transylvania permanently excluded), provided crucial financial support. From 1850, direct taxes (such as land, house, commercial, and income taxes)

⁶³ Katus, 2021: 311-313.

⁶⁴ Kalla-Bishop, 1973: 26; Czére, 1989: 88-89.

⁶⁵ This can also be proven in the case of the Győr–Pápa–Sümege–Keszthely line planned in 1862; MNL OL, K 173. 1867-9-1488. f. 13945.

and indirect taxes (including consumer taxes, monopolies, customs, and fees) provided additional revenue.⁶⁶ Moreover, the French and Belgian capital influx into the Empire contributed to railway construction. However, military expenses and the reorganization of the disintegrated economy absorbed a significant portion of these funds.⁶⁷

During neo-absolutism, railway development strategies affecting Hungary underwent significant changes. The Vienna government remained a strong proponent of state-controlled railway construction.⁶⁸ Unlike the previous era, which relied on private capital, this period saw railway construction financed primarily with state funds due to the centralization measures in place.⁶⁹ The Austrian government's absolutist policies after 1849 included taking control of previously completed Hungarian railway lines. The Austrian government took over the financially troubled Hungarian Central Railway in 1850. At the same time, the 264-kilometer railway connecting the two capitals, Vienna and Pest-Buda, was completed. Military interests played a key role in its rapid implementation, as the railway enabled the swift movement of military formations. Additionally, it facilitated the rapid transmission of decisions from the court in Vienna. However, it soon became evident that the railway was intended primarily as a transit line to transport goods from the Great Plain to the imperial capital.⁷⁰ The travel time between the two capitals was reduced to 11 hours by train, compared to the approximately 24-hour journey by steamboat.⁷¹ Vienna also financed the construction of the railway between Cegléd and Szeged, reaching the trade and storage center on the banks of the Tisza in 1854.

These significant economic investments in Hungary aimed to capitalize on the European economic boom that followed 1849. The continent's post-war demand for food was met with the expansion of financial institutions over the next two decades. The integration of Hungarian agricultural production into continental and imperial markets played a crucial role in mitigating food shortages brought on by urbanization and the expanding industrial workforce. Expanding the transport network and pre-financing commercial traffic were crucial factors in this integration. In the Austrian Empire, the expanding railway network increasingly emphasized Vienna's central role, a fact reflected in the name of the state railways,⁷² which became known as the Southeastern State Railway (*k. k. Südöstliche Staatsbahn*).⁷³

⁶⁶ Komlos, 1983: 25; Kövér, 1997: 249-250.

⁶⁷ Majdán, 1987: 53-54.

⁶⁸ Horváth, 1996: 128.

⁶⁹ Kaposi, 2002: 187.

⁷⁰ Majdán, 1987: 54-55.

⁷¹ Travel and transport from Buda to Vienna previously took 30 hours by express post and 57 hours by wagon. See: *Pesti Napló*, 1850 (no. 55): 4, 1850 (no. 243): 4; Czére, 1966: 892.

⁷² Majdán, 2014: 48.

⁷³ Strach, 1898: 286.

The two most significant railway network development concepts of the era – both favoring the interests of the entire Empire – were Karl von Ghega’s 1851–52 plan as head of the Austrian Central Railway Construction Directorate and Karl von Bruck’s 1851 concept as Austrian Minister of Trade and Public Works. These plans faithfully reflected the Empire’s economic, political, commercial, and military interests. Although these concepts influenced the construction of Hungary’s domestic railway network, Hungary was managed at the provincial level, abandoning the previously accepted main directions.⁷⁴

As mentioned earlier, there were proponents of the state railway system even before 1848, with István Széchenyi being a notable example. Széchenyi advocated for state control and management, prioritizing the interests of the entire population, ensuring geographic balance, fostering international relations, and supporting national defense. It was widely recognized – and proven by experience – that private railways were primarily driven by profit.⁷⁵ Thus, on a theoretical level, Austrian financing concepts aligned with earlier Hungarian ideas but quickly faded into the background. The planned network was not completed until 1854. The existing lines (2,617 kilometers) did not connect the economic centers and were unprofitable.⁷⁶ Austrian military actions and non-revenue-generating investments led to a deficit in public finances, compounded by existing debts, which necessitated a reorganization of state economic policy in 1854, including changes in transport management.⁷⁷

One key element of this reorganization was facilitating foreign capital inflow and stimulating economic recovery by encouraging investment. The new Licensing Act, released on September 14, 1854, shifted railway construction from the state to private companies. Lines previously built, taken over, and operated by the state could now be transferred to private companies in exchange for compensation.⁷⁸ Anyone could apply for a preliminary work permit and prepare plans and budgets based on it. Simultaneously, the Prussian-modeled interest insurance system⁷⁹ was implemented to construct the Vienna-centered imperial railway network.⁸⁰ A state license required approval from the Ministry of Transport and Public Works, the Ministry of the Interior,

⁷⁴ Horváth, 1996: 128-130.

⁷⁵ Czére, 1947: 442.

⁷⁶ Berend, 2003: 151.

⁷⁷ Majdán, 1987: 56-57.

⁷⁸ Bachinger, 1973: 282-283.

⁷⁹ The interest insurance system is characterized by the state’s guarantee to cover the annual difference between the actual income and the agreed-upon interest amount for shareholders in exchange for constructing a new railway line. The focus was not on the income itself but on the difference between the income and the costs – the profit. The parties pre-determined the interest rate, which was sometimes paid by the treasury even if no trains were operating on the line. Generally, the state committed to supplementing the net profit to ensure a 5% return. However, this system led to most private railways becoming unprofitable, relying heavily on state interest insurance. This guarantee system was adopted by the Vienna government from the existing practices of the Prussian railways. See: Majdán, 1987: 58.

⁸⁰ Strach, 1898: 379.

and the Ministry of War, with the final building permit issued by the ruler after considering these opinions.⁸¹

From a military standpoint, the direction of railway tracks was critical to the Austrian General Staff. The Austrian army anticipated needing railways for two types of military engagements: first, to suppress uprisings within Hungary or other peripheral regions of the Empire, and second, to be prepared for potential conflicts with neighboring countries, which were regarded as potential enemies despite momentarily good relations. Therefore, it was essential to facilitate the rapid movement of troops and equipment in all directions and their transport, exchange, and supply, even during peacetime military exercises.⁸² From the 1850s, military considerations increasingly influenced the construction of main roads in the empire, particularly those leading toward Italy and Prussia. The defeats in the 1859 and 1866 wars underscored the critical role of railways in mobilization, prompting politicians and military leaders in many countries to become “railway maniacs”. Security began to be measured by the existence of strategic railway lines.⁸³

In Hungary, during the period following the defeat in the War of Independence, radical changes occurred in the interests driving railway development, even within a short time frame. Vienna developed its railway network across the Empire, prioritizing imperial, Austrian, economic, commercial, and military interests and using state resources. This focus is evident in how Hungarian lines extended from Vienna like tentacles. As a result, Hungarian national and state interests were completely overshadowed. However, the combination of international debt, military expenses, and modernization costs strained the budget, forcing the court to reorganize its economic policy in 1854. This reorganization marked the end of the state-controlled railway development system, paving the way for the emergence of new interests [Fig. 2].

In 1855, Austria shifted its railway policy, transitioning to a fully private railway system.⁸⁴ Although this change altered financing methods, the offered incentives had a stimulating effect on railway construction. Austrian and Western capitalist groups began to make significant inroads into Hungarian economic life, and the private railway system also became dominant in Hungary.⁸⁵ Three major companies started building important railway sections between 1855 and 1856, all driven by long-term strategic and profit-oriented economic goals:

⁸¹ In the case of the Győr–Pápa–Sümege–Keszthely line, sources confirm that the Royal and Imperial Ministry of Defence also supported it due to military interests; MNL OL, K 173. 1867-9-1488. f. 57895.

⁸² Erdősi, 1986: 577.

⁸³ Diószegi, 1992: 19-20.

⁸⁴ Czéze, 1989: 89.

⁸⁵ Pammer, 1998: 156-157.

1. **The Austrian State Railway (*K. K. Privilegierte Österreichische Staatseisenbahn-Gesellschaft*):** Formed by the acquisition of the Northern Railway and Southeastern Railway – with backing from the French financial group *Société Générale du Crédit Mobilier* – this company operated as a private entity despite its name. It received a 5.2% interest rate guarantee and various tax and customs benefits for expanding its network in Hungary.⁸⁶ In 1856, the company completed the Bruck an der Leitha-Győr-Újszöny railway line, making the large fortress in Komárom accessible.⁸⁷
2. **The Southern Railway (*K. K. Privilegierte Lombardisch-Venetianische und Central-Italienische Eisenbahn-Gesellschaft*):** Established in 1859 through the merger of several railways, this company received a Hungarian railway construction concession and became the largest private enterprise in the later Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.⁸⁸ Initially based in Vienna and later in Budapest from 1880, the company created the integrated railway network of Transdanubia. Its primary purpose was to transport agricultural products from the region abroad.⁸⁹ The transportation of surplus grain from the Great Plain to Fiume and beyond played a major role in railway development after 1850. By the 1860s, the railway network effectively connected this area with Vienna and Trieste. The opening of the Buda–Pragerhof line significantly boosted Hungarian exports to Trieste, bringing high-quality domestic wheat to the European market.⁹⁰ However, Vienna increasingly became the main destination for Hungarian grain as markets outside the Empire narrowed with the influx of cheaper Russian and American grain.⁹¹ As a private railway company, economic considerations were paramount. This focus is evident in the decision to open the Sopron–Nagykanizsa line in 1865, bypassing Zalaegerszeg, the capital of Zala County. The city had declined to cover the extra construction costs due to unfavorable terrain, and local artisans viewed the easier availability of goods from Szombathely as competition. This decision, later recognized as a mistake, left the main railway line 7 kilometers from the settlement.⁹²
3. **The Tisza District Railway Company (*K. K. Privilegierte Theiss-Eisenbahn*):** Founded in 1856 with the support of Austrian capitalists and domestic shareholders, this company operated the Cegléd-Szolnok line, which it purchased from the Austrian State Railway.⁹³ The company continued to expand its network in the Great Plain. By 1860, with the opening of the Miskolc-Kassa (now Košice, Slovakia) section, it was possible to travel from Cegléd through Szolnok and Debrecen to Kassa. The shareholders were

⁸⁶ Bachinger, 1973: 284.

⁸⁷ *Budapesti Hírlap*, 1856 (no. 186): 47.

⁸⁸ Since its establishment in 1859, the railway company was initially known as the Royal and Imperial Patented Southern Lombard–Venetian and Central Italian Railway Company (*K. K. Privilegierte Südliche Lombardisch-Venetianische und Central-Italienische Eisenbahn-Gesellschaft*). In 1876, it was renamed the Imperial and Royal Patented Southern Railway Company (*K. K. Privilegierte Südbahn-Gesellschaft*); Bachinger, 1973: 284; Nagy, 1995: 20; The company is commonly abbreviated as the Southern Railway in scientific works, and I will use this term hereafter.

⁸⁹ Majdán, 1986: 448-449.

⁹⁰ Benda, 2006: 198.

⁹¹ Schulze, 2007: 206; Komlos, 1983: 63.

⁹² *Pesti Hírnök*, 1865 (no. 3): 4; Majdán, 1987: 134; Foki, 2011: 19.

⁹³ Majdán, 2018: 250.

motivated by personal interests rather than a comprehensive network, seeking direct connections with the livestock-keeping district of Tiszántúl and the wheat-growing landscape of Békés-Arad. The company's lines also met the needs of imperial and European markets.⁹⁴ Such was the first time producers resolved to improve their market position by taking over deliveries, ensuring that most of the profit remained within Hungary.⁹⁵ The outcome of this was evident in the case of the Debrecen-Nyíregyháza-Miskolc line, where Nyíregyháza, anticipating its own development, contributed 30,000 forints and offered free land for the railway station. As a result, contrary to the original plan, the line was routed through their town instead of Nagykálló, the capital of Szabolcs County.⁹⁶

In some cases, landowners successfully lobbied for railway routes that increased the value of their properties. For example, Count István Károlyi, a landowner from Szatmár, along with support from the cities of Debrecen and Szatmárnémeti (now Satu Mare, Romania),⁹⁷ influenced the construction of a railway from the salt mine area of Maramureş to Debrecen instead of Vásárosnamény, significantly boosting the value of his land.⁹⁸ These actions prioritized regional, county, local, and personal interests over broader imperial and economic goals.

The Mohács-Pécs Railway, the shortest line at 56 kilometers, opened for traffic in 1857. The primary motivation for its construction was the need to transport coal from Mecsek to the Danube, which was essential for the First Danube Steamship Company.⁹⁹ A unique aspect of this line was its hybrid nature. Although owned by the state, the operating company agreed to cover the construction costs, making it a combination of state and private investment. For the first two years, the line was used exclusively for freight traffic, highlighting that economic needs, particularly those driven by foreign capital, took precedence over social and local considerations in its development.¹⁰⁰

The Vienna-centered developments naturally faced opposition in Hungary, as the railway lines primarily served the interests of the Empire or Viennese private companies. While they facilitated the rapid transportation of raw materials, they did little to promote the development of the national market, pushing national economic ideas into the background. Given the political conditions of the time, a public debate on this issue was not yet possible.¹⁰¹ However, enthusiastic young professionals within the National Hungarian Economic Association began to publish their own ideas on

⁹⁴ Majdán, 1987: 70-71.

⁹⁵ Majdán, 2014: 52.

⁹⁶ Geduly, 1896: 14.

⁹⁷ *Politikai Újdonságok*, 1864 (no. 46): 554.

⁹⁸ Károlyi, 1858.

⁹⁹ Majdán, 1987: 71.

¹⁰⁰ Strach, 1898: 354-356.

¹⁰¹ Majdán, 1987: 73.

railway development.¹⁰² They observed that the expansion of the railway lines was driven solely by imperial considerations and initiated discussions about the viability of the previously accepted network centered on Pest-Buda.¹⁰³

After extensive discussions, they published their concept in 1862 under the title *Memorandum* in the *Budapesti Szemle*. In this publication, they asserted that “one of the most important questions for a country’s material development and national economic prosperity is in which direction and with what means the railway network should be built”.¹⁰⁴ They believed the nation’s rise depended on rapidly establishing a fixed-track transport network. According to them, “the lines were not built according to a consistent system and were not always constructed in a direction that particularly served the interests of the country”,¹⁰⁵ prompting them to outline their own theory. They based their concept on an earlier draft by Széchenyi, which proposed six main railway lines and planned to supplement this structure with secondary lines “created through private enterprises”.¹⁰⁶

The study had a positive impact on domestic politicians and professionals. The future minister, Imre Mikó, also considered it when developing the railway network after the Compromise [Fig. 3].¹⁰⁷

Despite the construction of 1,356 kilometers of railways in Hungary between 1855 and 1861, progress stalled until 1866 due to the decline in foreign capital investment following an economic downturn.¹⁰⁸ While the desired railway lines were nearly completed in Cisleithania by 1867, significant gaps remained in strategically and economically important lines in Transleithania.¹⁰⁹ It can be observed that the domestic railway network built up to the 1860s was connected to the radial system branching out from Vienna, primarily designed for military purposes. Additionally, it facilitated the food supply for the empire, including Austria, and met the coal needs of the railways.¹¹⁰ The main lines constructed by 1867 connected the Hungarian Great Plain with Vienna and, through it, with Western Europe and the port of Trieste.¹¹¹ In the two decades following the War of Independence, the railways, which largely passed through Pest-Buda, also served the military interests of the Viennese court, enabling access to fortified cities such as Temesvár (now Timișoara, Romania), Arad

¹⁰² Horváth, 1996: 131.

¹⁰³ Majdán, 1987: 73.

¹⁰⁴ *Budapesti Szemle*, 1862 (no. 15): 112.

¹⁰⁵ *Budapesti Szemle*, 1862 (no. 15): 114.

¹⁰⁶ *Budapesti Szemle*, 1862 (no. 15): 134.

¹⁰⁷ Horváth, 1996: 132.

¹⁰⁸ Bachinger, 1973: 287.

¹⁰⁹ Strach, 1898: 351.

¹¹⁰ Kóvér, 1982: 75.

¹¹¹ Katus, 1983: 191.

(now Romania), Gyulafehérvár (now Alba Iulia, Romania), Eszék (now Osijek, Croatia), Komárom, and others.¹¹²

On the eve of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, Hungary had a railway network of 2,153 kilometers, while the Empire had 6,430 kilometers.¹¹³ The fragmented layout of the lines and the overall network hindered the development of a unified national market.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, the expansion of the railways significantly transformed the country's transportation infrastructure, accelerating traffic and promoting capitalist development.¹¹⁵ Overall, it can be concluded that imperial, Austrian, economic, commercial, social, and military interests were the primary considerations in constructing new lines according to Vienna-centered principles from the defeat in the War of Independence to the Compromise, including in Hungary. However, with the emergence of the private railway system in 1854, particularly through the Tisza District Railway, established mainly by Hungarian owners, regional, county, and local interests began to play a more significant role. Additionally, personal interests were evident, as the success of the first railway founded predominantly by Hungarian owners also boosted the prestige of its initiators [Fig. 4].

Conclusions

The interests driving Hungarian railway construction cannot be easily classified into distinct hierarchical categories within the criteria framework applied in this study. Rather, each interest must be considered holistically and as part of a larger system. They each played a complex and interdependent role in the creation of each railway line, with routes often influenced by their interactions and natural features. Categorizing and separating these interests precisely for each era is challenging, as they frequently shifted based on the specific railway line, region, period, geographical conditions, and the economic state of the Empire or Hungary. Multiple interests frequently overlapped and influenced one another throughout the process.

Let us consider each group in the interest categorization. We can establish that the interests behind the operation of the empire/state – particularly the political element, which held the highest priority – were present in all railway construction efforts. A positive decision from the Hungarian Parliament (inactive between 1849 and 1865) or other relevant authorities, in consultation with the court and ultimately the ruler, was crucial for railroad construction, as specific power objectives guided these decisions. Economic and commercial interests were the primary driving forces behind railway transport from the outset, as the ability to quickly and cheaply transport

¹¹² Erdósi, 1986: 577.

¹¹³ Berend, 2003: 152.

¹¹⁴ Majdán, 1986: 449.

¹¹⁵ Czére, 1989: 90.

large quantities of goods over long distances led to an increasingly even distribution of products. Before 1867, these interests were most evident in the transport of Hungarian produce to Austria. After 1867, while this orientation was maintained, Hungarian national economic interests became important. The third category, military interests, emerged at the imperial level within the Austrian Empire in the 1850s when strategic and logistical considerations began to influence the construction and direction of the main lines. However, starting in 1854, the rise of private railways temporarily diminished the influence of military interests.

The next main category is human interests, with social interests playing a consistently significant role in railway construction. For public Hungarian railways, passenger transport was a primary focus. In selecting railway routes, a key consideration was ensuring they passed through as many important settlements as possible, allowing residents to use the railway for activities such as shopping, commerce, religious tourism, work, entertainment, and education. Personal (prestige) interests were the least visible in the creation of railways, and little professional research has been conducted on this aspect. However, available sources indicate that for individuals and interest groups involved in the licensing and construction of railways, the potential for financial gain was a key consideration. Additionally, the prestige associated with establishing a railway and the potential increase in political influence for the initiators were also factors that could be observed.

When examining the territorial interests of the first imperial factor, it is clear that until 1867, Austrian centralization and Vienna-centered developments dominated railway construction in Hungary, even though the court had varying degrees of influence over private railways. These developments simultaneously served Vienna's economic, commercial, and military interests. The second phase of railway development, which would have focused on national and state interests, could not be realized in the Kingdom of Hungary during this period, as the centralization policies of the court in Vienna prevailed, and private companies prioritized their own interests. Lower-level territorial interests – such as those at the county, regional, and local levels – became significant factors in Hungarian railway construction with the introduction of rail transport. This influence is evident from the fact that an important consideration in the construction of private railways was to route them through as many fertile regions and settlements as possible, thereby increasing profitability.

The main hypothesis of this paper – the construction of each railway line cannot be attributed to a single, well-defined interest – has been confirmed. Instead, these interests are complex and intertwined, with significant overlaps that must be carefully considered. The interests driving railway development in Hungary were complex, revealing intricate connections between political, economic, social, and territorial factors.

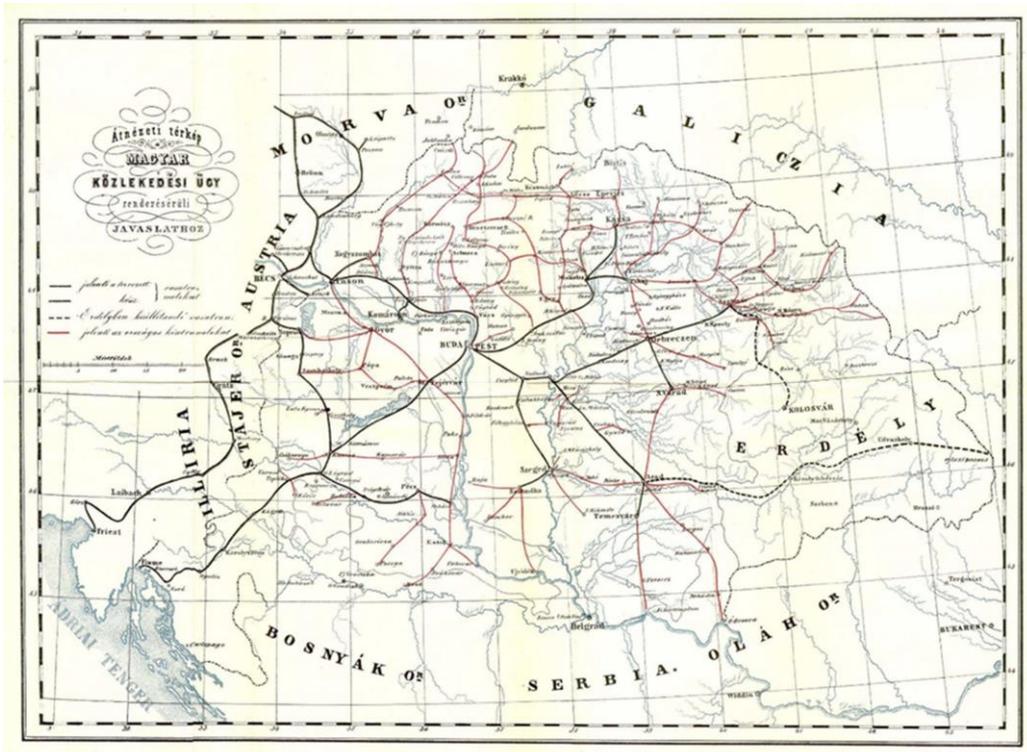


Fig. 1. The railway development concept of István Széchenyi (Source: Széchenyi, 1848: 137).



Fig. 2. The Hungarian railway network under construction in 1855 (Source: Horváth, 2018: 38).

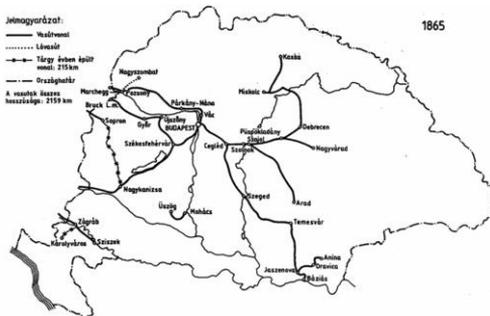


Fig. 3. The Hungarian railway network in 1865 (Source: Horváth, 2018: 41).



Fig. 4. Railway lines and planned railway map of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy from 1868. (Source: HIMT, B IX c 6).

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