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**Rodrigo Duterte’s “independent” foreign policy: The Philippines’
evolving external relations in the geostrategic context of the Asian
and Pacific regions**

Theses of doctoral dissertation

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1. Introduction, formulation and timeliness of the scientific problem

After the Cold War, in the emerging multipolar world system, the classic geopolitical rivalry between the major powers had long been seen to be the past, but today we are seeing the opposite. The revisionist powers from Europe to Asia (Russia, the People's Republic of China¹) call into question the power of the United States, and the regions concerned are once again becoming a stage for great power competition. At the same time, a new world order is being created, in which smaller states reposition themselves in accordance with their own interests, while at the same time adapting to the changing circumstances of power.

As a unique scientific project in Hungary, the dissertation examines the geopolitical processes in Southeast Asia, and in particular the Philippines' foreign policy shift, which could have serious consequences for the future of the region, not to mention the development of the Chinese–US geostrategic competition. Events in the Far East provide several lessons for Central European countries as well, without the knowledge of which, the Asia policies of our country and neighbouring states cannot be complete. This research paper is therefore intended to draw attention to all geopolitical processes in the region, which define the global political and economic trends of the 21st century.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the transformation of the balance of power has already begun, leading to a gradual rise in China's position vis-à-vis the United States. The countries of Southeast Asia are also playing an important role in this process, and among these, the Philippines' foreign policy shift has recently gained the greatest importance.

The island nation used to be the main regional ally of the US in the Cold War, since it committed itself to the US in political, military and economic terms, but the effectiveness of this has been called into question by now. After his presidential election victory in May 2016, Rodrigo Duterte started to form his new, admittedly “independent” Philippine foreign policy, immediately after his inauguration (June 30). The new President immediately recognized the need for a shift in the Philippines' foreign policy, as despite the fact that the US is the Philippines' third largest trading partner, the country cannot afford losing the advantages of close economic cooperation with China (Klemensits, 2018b). In spite of his campaign promises, a significant political turn could hardly have been expected, still, in the past 4 years Duterte – in contrast with his predecessor, President Benigno Aquino – has totally redefined the country's foreign policy and security policy strategy, the most striking aspect of which is its turning from

¹ Hereinafter referred to as “China”.

the United States and the opening toward China. Similarly to the previous President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010), Duterte also tries to establish good relations with both the rivalry major powers, but unlike his predecessor - at least in communication – he is the first to take actual steps to the separation from the US (De Castro, 2016). Duterte would not like to relinquish the US investments either, but whereas these have not been able to meet even the infrastructural needs, it is clear that there is a need to look for new partners, such as China or Russia. The Filipino President’s “independent” foreign policy is a perfect example of the changing world order in which the countries of Southeast Asia try to take advantage of this opportunity and seek to establish equal relations with both the US and China. The change of direction of Duterte could also have a decisive influence on the geostrategic struggle between the Americas and the Pacific. In order to understand the Philippines’ potential position in the new world order, a detailed examination of Duterte’s external policy and geopolitical objectives is necessary.

The doctoral dissertation examines the listed issues divided into six chapters. After presenting the general features of the research, the second chapter analyses the place of the Philippines in the international system (basic concepts, key features of the country, foreign policy concepts and strategies). The third chapter seeks to present the relationship between Rodrigo Duterte’s presidency and the “independent” foreign policy he proclaims, proving that the president’s domestic policy cannot be separated from foreign policy goals. In fact, the two complement each other. The fourth chapter details the transformation of foreign relations under Duterte’s presidency, first the policy of opening up to China and then the transforming system of relations with the United States, along with relations with old and new allies. The fifth chapter places the previously presented Filipino foreign policy in the context of the transforming Asia-Pacific geostrategic environment, addressing the increased importance of the region and then the Sino-US rivalry that greatly influences the Southeast Asian geostrategic environment. The sixth chapter, which includes conclusion and summary, focuses on the evaluation of scientific findings, listing the specific responses to each hypothesis.

2. The objectives of the research, hypotheses

The main objectives of the scientific project can be summarized in three points:

1. In view of the above, defining the essential elements of the “independent” foreign policy pursued by Duterte.

2. Presenting the ambivalent relationship of the new Filipino leadership with the United States and the challenges of the policy shift toward China.

3. Assessing the results and consequences of the changed Philippine foreign policy trend for the shifting power balance in the Asia-Pacific.

In order to achieve the research objective, I have drawn up the following hypotheses, which I am seeking to justify throughout my work:

Hypothesis 1:

Duterte's foreign policy shift was well-founded, as, in line with the changed geostrategic environment, balancing between the US and China provides the best chance to assert the Philippines' interests.

Hypothesis 2:

China's growing regional political and economic influence means that there is no alternative to opening up to Beijing, but there are serious geopolitical risks involved that the Duterte Cabinet was prepared to take on.

Hypothesis 3:

Under Donald Trump's Presidency, the tense US-Filipino relations have been restored, but the two countries' close partnership prior to 2016 will not return during Duterte's term of office.

Hypothesis 4:

The new foreign policy stance of the Philippines has an impact on the behaviour of other countries in Southeast Asia as well, while it also helps to build Chinese dominance in the region.

3. The sources and methodology of the research

Due to the complexity of the subject, I considered it appropriate to use a variety of scientific methods in the course of research. The most important was the collection and analysis (secondary analysis) of relevant literature from monographs, study volumes, scientific journals, periodicals and online media. I consulted primarily English literature but also Chinese, French and Russian sources to a lesser extent (around 300 items in total). In addition to literature, the processing of primary resources was of at least the same importance, which means primarily the use of government documents (protocols, contracts, laws, regulations, etc.) as well as political declarations, speeches, interview transcripts. The analysis of statistical data was of

particular importance for assessing the effectiveness of the Filipino external policy and for analysing the Chinese strategy. This included mainly a study of data from the Philippine, Chinese and American statistical offices, institutes and international organizations (World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Economic Forum, ASEAN, Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, ASEANstats, OEC). Of course, the use of databases was not indispensable for assessing the balance of power and analysing the Philippine defence policy: SIPRI, IISS, Rand Corporation, Janes, Global Firepower. Originally, the research would have included a short study trip to the Philippines and China, during which personal interviews with researchers and politicians in the region would have been carried out, but unfortunately, as a result of the Covid-19 epidemic, the visit could not take place; I had to content myself with online contacts and previous interviews. The opinions learned during the discussions served as a useful addition to the interpretation of my resources and the development and final arrangement of new theories.

Given the timeliness of the subject matter, we can conclude that there have been so far only few monographs that examined Duterte's policy and the Philippines' changed position in the international system in detail. The 2016 special edition of the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, with the Mark Thompson's introduction, provides very useful information about Duterte's election and the initial period of his Presidency (Thompson, 2016). The President's coming to power is also dealt with by Richard Javad Heydarian's work, while the study volume edited by Nicole Curato is an essential source of the foreign and domestic political motives of the new administration and the political system which was created (Heydarian, 2017; Curato, 2017). In the summer of 2018, the first biography of Duterte was written by Jonathan Miller, which, of course, also provides useful information on foreign policy (Miller, 2018). Also in 2018, a series of studies edited by Mark Thompson and Vincent Batalla on the Philippine political system was published, which, in addition to providing analyses of the Philippines' relations with the United States, China and Japan, also contains the basic periodization of Philippine foreign policy (Thompson & Batalla, 2018). Among Filipino researchers, the work of Renato Cruz de Castro and the late Aileen Baviera deserves special attention, who have examined several aspects of the foreign and defence policy over the years and whose work has been published in international scientific journals (De Castro, 2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; 2018; 2019a, 2019b 2020; Baviera, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018, 2020). Aaron Jed Rabena has provided useful analyses about the role of the Philippines in the BRI (Pitlo & Rabena, 2018, Rabena, 2019) and the neo-classic realistic approach of the Filipino foreign policy is best discussed in Michael Intal Magcamit's study (Magcamit, 2018).

To date, the best analyses of the conflict in the South China Sea, including the Philippines' position is associated with Leszek Buszynski and Christopher Roberts, and the internationally renowned scientist Wu Shicun, who represents the Chinese position the most markedly (Buszynski & Robert, 2015; Shicun, 2013). And Bill Hayton's work provides a useful summary on the geopolitical aspect of the conflict (Hayton, 2014). In addition to the classic works of Graham Allison and Michael Pillsbury (Allison, 2017; Pillsbury, 2015), Peter Navarro's, Humphrey Hawksley's, Michael Fabey's and Anders Corr's latest publications provide an excellent summary on the US–China geostrategic conflict and the background to the rivalry (Navarro, 2015; Hawksley, 2018; Fabey, 2018; Corr, 2018). Regarding, the changed nature of the USA and its allies, and the parallels between Central Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, Jakub Grygiel's and Wess Mitchell's book, also published in Hungarian, is relevant (Grygiel & Mitchell 2018). As for the Chinese Belt and Road initiative, as well as Beijing's strategy, the works of Bruno Macaes, Peter Frankopan, Kent E. Calder and Zhao Jianglin can be considered to be fundamental (Macaes, 2019; Frankopan, 2018; Calder, 2019; Jianglin, 2020).

Although most of the above-described literature on the Philippines looks carefully and impartially at the reasons for Duterte's foreign policy shift and its expected consequences, they essentially focus only on the events of 2016-19. For this reason, the results of the new foreign policy could not be evaluated scientifically. In order to understand the potential position of the Philippines in the emerging new world, Duterte's foreign policy and geopolitical objectives needed to be examined in detail in the geostrategic context of the region as a whole, with special attention to transforming relations with China and the USA, the development of the South China Sea conflict and the Washington–Beijing competition.

In addition to monographs and studies in scientific journals, the monitoring of the Filipino press (e.g., *The Philippine Star*, *Rappler* etc.), the analysis of the writings published in the most important international daily newspapers (e.g., *Financial Times*), international journals (e.g., *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*) and online magazines dealing with international relations in the region (e.g., *The Diplomat*, *New Mandala*) has also proved extremely useful. As for the internet sources, the public video-sharing sites (e.g., Rodrigo Duterte's speeches on YouTube) or social media pages (e.g., Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin's Twitter messages) should be mentioned.

Overall, the doctoral dissertation closes a six-year-long research project, as a result of which, it includes the scientific results of all publications that have been written by the author over the years. Given the topical relevance of the subject, it should be noted that the collection of source material was completed in October 2020, so subsequent events are not part of the evaluation.

4. Summary of scientific results

The dissertation aims to present a topical issue which is significant on the international scene and has no research history in Hungary. On the one hand, this has facilitated work, as it has facilitated the creation of new scientific results and, on the other hand, the lack of research history has made the author's task difficult since without the results of the Hungarian scientific community, the current state of international research could provide him with the appropriate starting point and references. Naturally, physical distance and the huge amount of multilingual resources available has not allowed a comprehensive and very detailed analysis of the subject, however, this is not possible in terms of the limitations of the PhD dissertation either; only the justification of the author's hypotheses and thus the achievement of the research objectives were viable. It should also be stressed that the dissertation examines an ongoing process, which makes it difficult to draw overall conclusions (taking into account current and future events), although the conclusions explored also allow for a number of future projections, while their results contribute to a new approach of a 21st-century scientific interpretation of Southeast Asian international relations. In addition, the new scientific findings include the presentation of the main problems of the power balance in the Asia-Pacific, while the review of the BRI, which represent a new type of partnership between China and Southeast Asian countries, reveals information which will contribute in the long term to an objective assessment of the controversial partnership between Beijing and the global South.

In relation to the hypotheses described at the beginning of the dissertation, I have come to the following results:

Hypothesis 1

Duterte's foreign policy shift was well-founded, as, in line with the changed geostrategic environment, balancing between the US and China provides the best chance to assert the Philippines' interests.

If we look at the history of the Philippine foreign policy, the political culture of the country, its post-independence history and Aquino's foreign policy, we see that the 2010-2016 foreign policy strategy had not delivered the necessary results, and, moreover, the policy of counterbalancing China and of supporting the US rebalance concept was not only contrary to economic interests but also to historical traditions, and therefore changes were absolutely

necessary. The transformation of the external geostrategic environment has proved that, for the countries of Southeast Asia, balancing between the US and China is the successful foreign policy strategy essentially, but, of course, there are differences between the states in terms of geographical, political, historical, and cultural background. While in terms of security, maintaining the US influence in the region is still desirable, the economic weight of China cannot be by-passed, and cooperation offers many advantages. It can therefore be stated that President Duterte has rightly recognized the need for a new orientation in the Philippine foreign policy; the best interests of the country is it tries to balance between the US and China – as had already been the case during Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s Presidency – while trying to maximize the support provided by the two rival power powers.

Hypothesis 2

China’s growing regional political and economic influence means that there is no alternative to opening up to Beijing, but there are serious geopolitical risks involved that the Duterte Cabinet was prepared to take on.

The research fully confirmed that there is no alternative to opening up to China for the countries of Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, while the increasing rivalry between China and the US entails a number of geopolitical risks that the states concerned must address. As a party with demands in the South China Sea conflict, the problem for the Philippines is even more serious than for some of its neighbours, and the Duterte administration has been faced by this from the outset. The practical results of the “independent” foreign policy clearly demonstrated that Duterte’s Cabinet of is willing to make certain geopolitical concessions (joint exploration of raw material resources in the South China Sea) to China in return for geoeconomic benefits (infrastructure developments); while it is also willing to demonstrate a certain level of commitment to the USA in the field of security to maintain a proper balance (maintaining of the VFA agreement). Of course, both the balancing between the major powers and the opening up to China present serious risks in themselves, which the President is aware of, and it is therefore not excessive to say that Duterte has essentially no choice if he wants to sustain the effectiveness of his foreign policy, which means that he is forced to undertake risks during the negotiation with the rival great powers. For the time being, Duterte’s firmness of appears to be strong and the delicate situations have been successfully addressed, so risking is expected to continue to form a part of his foreign policy.

Hypothesis 3

Under Donald Trump's Presidency, the tense US-Filipino relations have been restored, but the two countries' close partnership prior to 2016 will not return during Duterte's term of office.

In the dissertation the deterioration in relations between the Philippines and the USA during the Obama administration was explained in detail, as well as all the factors that required a re-calibration of relations later during the incoming Trump government. The investigation then focused on the efforts of the Trump and Duterte administrations to settle the relationship, which also provided a positive response to the hypothesis set out above. Based on their strategic interests, Duterte and Trump both considered it important to strengthen the military alliance and the economic partnership of the two countries and were willing to compromise to that end. Duterte suspended his anti-US rhetoric and ensured continued smooth security cooperation; in exchange for this, Trump did not force human rights issues (mostly related to the anti-drug war), and also provided additional security guarantees pertaining to the South China Sea. Trump is fully aware of the geostrategic importance of the Philippines to the US, but is apparently satisfied with the strengthening of security cooperation, and is not able to compete with in terms of economy, and therefore implicitly accepts Duterte's approaching stance to China as long as it does not directly violate the interests of the US. This has given Duterte some room for manoeuvre, but also limits the policy of opening up to China, with negative consequences in some cases for the deepening of the Chinese-Philippine partnership. As things stand now, relations have been restored, but both sides are guided by their own pragmatic goals, and the harmonious partnership of the former period, most notably the Aquino-Obama period, has not yet returned, neither is it expected in the near future.

Hypothesis 4

The new foreign policy stance of the Philippines has an impact on the behaviour of other countries in Southeast Asia as well, while it also helps to build Chinese dominance in the region.

In the present case, my hypothesis was only partially justified. It is a fact that the behaviour of Southeast Asian countries vis-à-vis China shows displays certain identical features – e.g., they do not dispute China's regional economic dominance, and therefore they try to exploit this during building their relations according to their own interests (BRI) –, however, the foreign policies of individual ASEAN Member States do not influence other states as much as I originally assumed. The balancing of the various Southeast Asian states between the major

powers is a common feature, but due to the differences, this considerably varies in practice in shaping their foreign policy, which is largely due to different geographical, geostrategic, economic and cultural contexts. It is not difficult to see that the Philippines' foreign policy shift, in itself, has little impact on the other states' role in the international environment, although there is no doubt that some lessons can be adopted by neighbouring nations in the long term. In our case, therefore, there is no evidence that the Duterte-style policy would have helped to bring about a similar change in another ASEAN Member State or would have been followed. Therefore, fears that the Philippines will soon be followed by other countries in turning to China have proved unfounded.

However, the Duterte Government's strategy contributes to the strengthening of Beijing's regional dominance, albeit with small steps; although, considering the current situation of BRI in the Philippines and the stability of US security position, this is of relevance only in the longer term, with a limited impact on the current geostrategic balance.

5. Other possible directions of research

Since research on this subject is unprecedented in Hungary, it has become necessary to address a number of sub-themes which could not be explained in detail within the PhD framework, but would certainly deserve attention in further research, not only in Hungary but also abroad.

1. A more detailed analysis of the neoclassical geopolitical approach applied for the Philippines from the perspective of the theory of international relations could lead to more precise results in the future compared, for example, to other ASEAN States.
2. From the perspective of history and policy-making, it is interesting to examine how internal factors shaping foreign policy made an impact on the country's external policy after 1946, how much has changed after 2016, while a more thorough analysis of Duterte's internal policy could also better highlight the role of these factors.
3. A comparison of Duterte's "independent" foreign policy with similar concepts in other countries can also help to better assess it in an objective way in an international context.
4. The BRI and Indo-Pacific strategic concept also merit further investigation, and their collision implies a new set of knowledge to be addressed in geopolitical, military, economic, diplomatic terms in a multi-disciplinary research, which, in addition to the development of Asia research in Hungary, can gain an increased political significance due to its decision-making support role.

5. The US-Chinese geostrategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region is a major research area in the international military field, which has been analysed only briefly on the pages of this work; its further detailed research would also provide Hungarian geopolitical, security policy and military science research with sufficient “ammunition” for many years.

6. The applicability of the results

In addition to the topicality and relevance of the subject, the feasibility of the research and the scientific evidence, the practical usability is not an insignificant aspect, either. In my opinion, the scientific results which are considered new on an international level will be available for use in higher education, research, practical diplomacy and political decision-making.

As the subject is deemed to be pioneering in Hungary, it also promotes the development of domestic Asia research, security policy, international relations and earth sciences (geopolitics), while at the same time providing a starting point for further research.

7. List of publications in the topic

1. Zoltai A. – **Klemensits P.** (2020): What do China and the BRI Mean to ASEAN Economies? *Foreign Policy Review*, Vol 13, pp. 7-23.
2. **Klemensits, P.** (2020): *Az Egyesült Államok és a Fülöp-szigetek speciális kapcsolatrendszere.* In: Háda, Béla; Matura, Tamás (szerk.) *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok ázsiai kapcsolatai.* Budapest, Magyarország: Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, pp. 147-171.
3. **Klemensits, P.** (2020): *The Development Potential of the Philippines–South Korea Relations in Light of the Duterte Government’s “Independent” Foreign Policy.* In: Moldicz, Csaba; Bata-Balog, Amadea (szerk.) *External Relations of the Republic of Korea: The Present and The Past,* BGE Keleti Üzleti Akadémia Központ, Budapest, pp. 73-94.
4. **Klemensits P.** (2020): Az Új Tengeri Selyemút Délkelet-Ázsiában: A Fülöp-szigetek példája a Dutertenomics céljainak tükrében. *Geopolitikai Szemle*, 2. évf. 2. sz. No. 5. pp. 137-153.
5. **Klemensits P.** (2019): Rodrigo Duterte „független” külpolitikája – Az amerikai-filippínó szövetség geostratégiai kihívásai a 21. században, Közép-Európai

Közlemények, 12. évf. 2. sz. pp. 235-250.

6. **Klemensits P.** (2019): Economic Development or Environmental Protection? The Dilemmas of the Developing Countries through the Case of the Philippines. In: *European Journal of Sustainable Development*. Vol 8, No. 1, pp. 281-289.
7. **Klemensits P.** (2019): *Rodrigo Duterte "független" külpolitikája és az amerikai-filippínó szövetség alakulása Donald Trump hivatalba lépését követően*. In: Salát, Gergely; Szakáli, Máté; Szilágyi, Zsolt (szerk.) *Veszélyes vizeken: Konfliktusok és biztonsági fenyegetések a Távol-Keleten*. Budapest, Magyarország: Typotex, pp. 267-277.
8. **Klemensits P.** (2018): *Az ázsiai és a csendes-óceáni hatalmi egyensúly átalakulása közép-európai perspektívából: a Fülöp-szigetek példája*. In: Bernek Ágnes (szerk.) *Közép- és Kelet-Európa a XXI. század többpólusú világában*, Magyar Földrajzi Társaság, Budapest, pp. 121-129.
9. **Klemensits, P.** (2018): Geopolitical Consequences of the 21st Century New Maritime Silk Road for the Southeast Asian Countries. In: *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations*, Vol 4, No. 1, pp. 107-138.
10. **Klemensits, P.** (2017): *Defence Reform and Military Modernization in the Philippines in the Perspectives in the South China Sea Conflict*. In: Tomasz, Kamiński (edit.) *Overcoming Controversies in East Asia*, Lodz University Press, Lodz, pp. 87-103.
11. Eszterhai V. – **Klemensits P.** (2017): Aszimmetrikussá váló hatalmi erőviszonyok Délkelet-Ázsiában. Játékelméleti megközelítés. In: *Külügyi Szemle*, 16. évf. 4. sz., pp. 46-63.
12. **Klemensits P.** (2017): *Fülöp-szigetek*. In: Csicsmann László – Rácz Gábor – Salát Gergely (Szerk.): *Politikai rendszerek Dél- és Kelet-Ázsiában*. Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem Nemzetközi Tanulmányok Intézet, Budapest, pp. 37-54.
13. **Klemensits, P.** (2017): *Military Reform and Army Modernization through the 2015 Chinese Defense White Paper: The People's Liberation Army in the 21st Century*. In: Hamar, Imre; Besenyő, János (szerk.) *Kína a globális kihívások tükrében – China in the Light of Global Challenges*. ELTE Konfuciusz Intézet, Budapest, pp. 40-51.
14. **Klemensits P.,** Hajdú F., Sárhidai Gy. (2017): A kínai WU-14 Dong Feng-21D nagy hatótávolságú hajó elleni ballisztikus rakéta és a csendes-óceáni erőegyensúly átalakulása. In: *Haditechnika*, LI. évf. 1. sz. pp. 20-27.
15. **Klemensits P.** (2016): *A második világháború öröksége és a japán-filippínó biztonsági kapcsolatok fejlődésének perspektívái*. In: Salát, Gergely (szerk.) *Traumák és*

tanulmányok. Budapest, Magyarország: Typotex Kiadó, pp. 168-180.

16. **Klemensits P.** (2016): Kína építkezései a Spratley-szigeteken. A dél-kínai-tengeri konfliktus egy újabb fejezete. In: *Honvédségi Szemle*, 144. évf. 4. sz. pp. 56-63.
17. **Klemensits P.**, Hajdú F., Sárhidai Gy. (2016): Hadseregreform és katonai modernizáció Kínában: A népi felszabadító hadsereg a 21. században. IV. In: *Haditechnika*, L évf. 2. sz. pp. 7-12.
18. **Klemensits P.** (2016): Védelmi reform és hadseregfejlesztés a Fülöp-szigeteken. In: *Honvédségi Szemle*, 2016. 144. évf. 2. sz. 13-22.
19. **Klemensits P.**, Hajdú F., Sárhidai Gy. (2016): Hadseregreform és katonai modernizáció Kínában: A népi felszabadító hadsereg a 21. században. III. In: *Haditechnika*, L évf. 1. sz. pp. 14-18.
20. **Klemensits P.**, Hajdú F., Sárhidai Gy. (2015): Hadseregreform és katonai modernizáció Kínában: A népi felszabadító hadsereg a 21. században. II. In: *Haditechnika*, XLIX évf. 6. sz. pp. 6-12.
21. **Klemensits P.**, Hajdú F., Sárhidai Gy. (2015): Hadseregreform és katonai modernizáció Kínában: A népi felszabadító hadsereg a 21. században. I. In: *Haditechnika*, XLIX évf. 5. sz. pp. 5-9.