
ETHNIC RELATIONS IN ROMANIA

THE PROSPECTS FOR A NEW ACCOMMODATION

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Throughout the post-Communist era, the management of ethnic relations has been a top political priority in Romania. Different governments have applied different mediums, some of them with greater and others with lesser success. Nevertheless, the accommodation of ethnic relations in Romania still remains a question that is open to various interpretations and recommendations. In this article, I will focus specifically on the relations between the national majority and Romania's most politicized minority group, the ethnic Hungarians. My focus will be cast on the post-Communist era, with an emphasis on the developments that have occurred over the last nine years. Particular attention will be paid to: a) the impact of the politics of identity in Romanian political discourse; b) the grass-roots dimension and the outlooks of Romanians and Hungarians on each other.

In the early '90s, the inter-group tension between Romanians and Hungarians reached its zenith with violent manifestations such as those that occurred in the Transylvanian town of Targu-Mures (March 1990). On that occasion, an attack on the headquarters of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) triggered a series of clashes between Romanians and ethnic Hungarians. The troubles ended with 5 dead and 278 injured¹. Nevertheless, such incidents have not been repeated since. What will be demonstrated in this article is that the politics of interest seem to have gained precedence over the politics of identity. Prior to this, a reference to the constitutional provisions for national minorities, as well as a short overview of Romania's ethnic landscape under Communism, should be made.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL PROVISIONS

Romanian policymakers have been keen on a classical liberal approach to minority issues. Minority rights do not constitute a different category from other civic rights

¹ For a full account of the ethnic troubles in Targu-Mures, see Romania, Human Rights Developments, Human Rights Watch World Report for the Year 1990 at: <http://www.hrw.org>.

and are allocated on an individual basis within a unitary state's structure. According to the *Constitution of Romania* (1991), minorities are granted the right to 'preserve, develop and express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities' (Article 6.1)². Nevertheless, the measures of protection are restricted by Articles 6.2 and 16.1 which dictate that no positive discrimination should be applied on the grounds of ethnic affiliation. Article 32.3 concedes minorities the right to education in their mother tongue but, at the same time, the only language enjoying official status is Romanian (Article 13)³. Nevertheless, the 2003 constitutional revision has authorized '...the public use of national minorities' languages in those local communities inhabited by national minorities, as dictated by organic law' (Article 120.2). This organic law is *Lege 215* on local administration, adopted by the Romanian parliament on April 23rd, 2001.

In all of this, it should be born in mind that the notion of collective rights for national minorities has not been clearly defined within the Romanian constitutional and legal framework. The terminology used, with respect to minority rights, is rights of 'persons belonging to national minorities' (e.g. Article 6). As will be demonstrated later in this article, the Romanian policymakers' insistence on the state's unitary structure and the allocation of minority rights on an individual basis have often provided a source of tension between the Romanian and the ethnic Hungarian elites.

ETHNIC RELATIONS UNDER COMMUNISM

After the end of the Second World War, the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) sought to reach a *modus vivendi* with the ethnic Hungarian Communist elites. As part of this process, the medium of ethno-territorial autonomy was applied for this part of the country where the ethnic Hungarian concentration is particularly dense. Consequently, in 1952, the 'Hungarian Autonomous Region' was formed, comprising the so-called 'Szekely region' (i.e. the modern-day counties of Harghita, Covasna and Mures in the Central Carpathian Basin). Through this arrangement, the system of local administration in the 'Hungarian Autonomous Region' was placed under the jurisdiction of the ethnic Hungarian PCR officials. At the same time, ethnic Hungarians enjoyed extensive autonomy in the fields of education and culture.

² On this issue see *Constitution of Romania* (1991), at: <http://ccr.ro>.

³ In addition to this, Article 148 forbids a constitutional revision, as far as the state's official language is concerned, and Article 1.1 defines Romania as a unitary national state.

The Hungarian revolution of 1956 was a watershed. Many Transylvanian Hungarians expressed sympathy with the cause of the dissident elites in Budapest and this alarmed the PCR leadership. Meanwhile, a greater emphasis on Romanian nationalism had started to supersede proletarian internationalism among the Party's high ranks. Nicolae Ceausescu would consolidate this novel approach, as a means of legitimizing his rule in the eyes of the Romanian masses. In line with these developments, the jurisdiction of the 'Hungarian Autonomous Region' would be constantly restricted until its final dissolution in 1968. Moreover, after the late '60s, it was not always possible to attend Hungarian-language classes at the secondary education level. The restrictions on Hungarian-language education reached their zenith in the mid-'80s. Until 1989, Ceausescu employed a virulent anti-Hungarian rhetoric as a last resort in the legitimization of his regime. This rhetoric was basically levied against Hungary and the '...crypto-nationalist and irredentist campaign' that Budapest had allegedly launched against Romania. Nevertheless, in the long term, these policies resulted in the alienation of the Hungarian minority from the Romanian state.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND THEIR IMPACT ON ROMANIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Before proceeding to the empirical discussion, it is necessary to introduce the notions 'politics of identity' and 'politics of interest'. In this context, I am using these two terms in direct relation with the function of politics within ethnically diverse environments. Specific attention is paid to the decision-making of political parties that represent minority groups. 'Politics of identity' denote a state of affairs whereby the politicization of ethnic identity provides the essential basis for decision-making within a minority party. The frequent response of the mainstream elites to the politicization of a minority's identity is to counter-propose a classical liberal framework within which the rights of an ethnic minority cannot gain priority over the rights of the (political) majority. 'Politics of interest' refer to a course of political action whereby greater importance is attached to the rational calculation and balancing of trends in the mainstream political arena. Within the bounds of such an approach, lesser emphasis is added to catalysts such as ethnicity or religion. In those cases where the 'politics of interest' is the steering wheel behind a minority party's decision-making, the prospects for a compromise with the mainstream elites are more evident.

The period that followed the collapse of Ceausescu's regime was marked by a renegotiation process between the Romanian state and the ethnic Hungarian elites. In the beginning, the UDMR stood firm in their intention to secure the Hungarian minority's collective status within Romania's constitutional and legal framework. To this end, they lobbied for the concession of separate self-government and educational institutions. Their project soon clashed with the Romanian elites' emphasis on the unitary character of the Romanian *national* state. Consequently, the friction between ethnic Hungarians and Romanians escalated. The UDMR concretized their proposals for the institutionalization of the Hungarian minority's collective status in the *Cluj Declaration* (25 October 1992). This document calls for the concession of personal autonomy and regional self-administration to Romania's ethnic Hungarian community and to this day remains the stepping stone of the party's decision-making (at least to a formal degree). Personal autonomy addresses the fields of culture, education and public information with the aim to preserve the ethno-cultural identity of the Hungarian minority. Regional self-administration refers to the self-government of the counties where the Hungarian concentration is particularly dense (e.g. the Szekely region in the Central Carpathian basin)⁴. As a matter of fact, the UDMR's demands for ethno-territorial autonomy have often constituted a source of tension between the party and Romania's mainstream elites.

Political tensions have run parallel with the symbolic competition between Romanians and ethnic Hungarians at Transylvania's regional level. Interest groups, originating from both communities, have sought to reaffirm the Romanian and/or Hungarian 'historical presence' in Transylvania through symbolic activities such as ritual public events, national celebrations and commemorations, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. Perhaps the most noteworthy example was the controversy over the permanent decoration of Cluj-Napoca's main streets and squares with the Romanian tricolor during most of the '90s. This was a decision taken by Georghe Funar, Cluj-Napoca's former mayor and an avid nationalist. The local Hungarians' reaction was to emphatically parade their own national symbols in the course of their national celebrations (e.g. the commemorations of the 1848 Hungarian revolution). With the exception of the political mobilization in the early '90s, this symbolic competition has not resulted in violence or the threat of violence.

⁴ For more on this issue see UDMR, Memorandum on Romania's Admission to the Council of Europe, Cluj-Napoca (1993), p18.

Nevertheless, since the late '90s, the politics of interest have gradually sidelined the politics of identity in Romanian political discourse. This development was subject to the impact of two kinds of catalysts, internal as well as external. With regard to the internal catalysts, the chronic state of instability in Romanian politics has often urged Romania's larger parties to form coalitions with smaller political actors. In other words, the popular mistrust towards the main parties' agendas has often hindered these parties from forming a majority government in their own right. Meanwhile, Romania's ethnic Hungarians have rallied almost uniformly behind UDMR's banner. The combination of these two factors has often rendered the UDMR an eligible partner for a political coalition to the eyes of Romania's mainstream elites. This option has also been facilitated by the declining popularity of nationalist parties (e.g. Vadim Tudor's Greater Romania Party). Similarly, the UDMR leadership have regarded their entrance into the halls of power as a good opportunity to promote, at least, their main standpoints. At this given moment, for instance, the UDMR participates in a government coalition together with a number of mainstream Romanian parties. As part of this political bargaining, the Romanian elites have watered down their insistence on Romania's unitary structure and made certain concessions in the field of Hungarian-language education. For example, in those counties which are inhabited predominantly by ethnic Hungarians (e.g. the Harghita and Covasna counties), ethnic Hungarian pupils can attend classes in the Hungarian language from the elementary to high (or technical) school level. At the same time, the ethnic Hungarian elites have given up quite a few of their prerogatives with regard to ethno-territorial autonomy and started focusing on educational and cultural issues instead.

As far as the external catalysts are concerned, the most crucial of them has been the impact of the 'EU factor'. At this point, I will focus specifically on the UDMR and the Hungarian Civic Alliance (UCM)⁵: As a matter of fact, the ethnic Hungarian elites have viewed Romania's accession to the EU as a development that can only affect the country's Hungarian minority in a beneficial manner. One of the main expectations among ethnic Hungarian policymakers is that the EU funds for regional reconstruction will have a positive impact towards the improvement of the local infrastructure in those peripheries where most ethnic Hungarians reside (e.g. the Central Carpathian Basin). Besides, it is expected that a greater number of

⁵ The Hungarian Civic Alliance evolved from a splinter-group within the UDMR in 2001 and was formally registered as a political party on March 14th, 2008. This party positions itself as an alternative to the UDMR and equally adheres to the concept of ethno-territorial autonomy for Romania's ethnic Hungarians.

ethnic Hungarian private entrepreneurs (engaged in educational as well as cultural activities) will be enabled to apply for funding to EU sub-organizations that focus on the protection of minority languages and cultures. In all of this, the role of the EU as such, in releasing the tensions between Romanians and Hungarians, has been critical.

At this point, a crucial detail should be set in context: As a matter of fact, resulting from the absence of a regulatory mechanism for EU institutions in the area of minority rights, the protection of minorities is regarded as an *internal issue for member-states*. This absence of a unified framework and a coordinated strategy, at the 'European' level, is to account, amongst others, for the lack of a regulatory mechanism for the precise definition of the relations between kin-states and kin minorities (e.g. in this case, Romania's ethnic Hungarians and Hungary). In spite of these institutional deficiencies, however, some notable progress has taken place 'in the field'. EU advisers held a series of joint sessions with representatives of both the ethnic Hungarian elites and Romania's main parties. In the course of these sessions, the EU advisers highlighted to their interlocutors Romania's benefits from entering the EU. They also clarified how EU's provisions for minority identities can improve the situation of the ethnic Hungarian community without, at the same time, jeopardising its relations with the Romanian state.

The alleviation in the tension between Romanian and ethnic Hungarian elites has been reflected in the field of inter-state relations. An early but significant indication was the agreement on a 'Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Hungary and the Government of Romania Concerning the Law on Hungarians Living in Neighbouring Countries and Other Issues of Bilateral Cooperation', reached in Budapest on December 22nd, 2001. One of the Memorandum's clauses was that the Republic of Hungary would not provide any kind of support to the Hungarian political groupings in Romania unless it had previously informed the Romanian authorities and obtained their consent (Section I, Article 10)⁶.

THE GRASS-ROOTS DIMENSION

The state of competition, both at the political macro-level and at Transylvania's regional level, has often taken its toll upon inter-communal relations between

⁶ For a full-text version of the memorandum see Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad at the Hungarian Government, <http://www.htmh.hu>.

Romanians and ethnic Hungarians. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in a variety of public surveys, some additional catalysts seem to have reduced the ethnic distance between the two communities. These are, namely: a) social mobility (which has relaxed the barriers of residential and socioeconomic segmentation); b) the absence of ethnic discrimination on the part of public institutions (e.g. the systems of public and financial administration, the social welfare services) and c) the increasing number of mixed marriages⁷. Public surveys carried out in Transylvania over the past 9 years hint that Transylvanians (Romanians and Hungarians alike) believe that instances of ethnic discrimination in the employment sector are rare. Moreover, catalysts such as coexistence in the same workplace or neighbourhood seem to take precedence over ethno-cultural or religious cleavages. Finally, most Transylvanian Romanians do not seem to object to the cooperation between ethnic Hungarian institutions and their counterparts in Hungary over educational and cultural issues⁸. Indeed, the contacts between ethnic Hungarian interest groups with state agencies (e.g. the Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad at the Hungarian Government) as well as private entrepreneurs in Hungary have steadily increased over the last few years.

It might therefore be argued that, as result of a long-term socialization process, groups with different origins have adopted common behavioural patterns as well as a shared system of values. In Transylvania, there may not exist an articulate notion of *regional identity*, as is the case, for instance, in the Romanian Banat or Vojvodina (Serbia). Nevertheless, a sense of a shared Transylvanian identity is still evident. It is this awareness of a shared *regional* heritage that establishes some common values and, by extension, provides a common cultural substratum for diverse ethnic groups. The part played by similar living conditions, historical links, as well as the common prospects for the future, should be taken into account as well. This is a social reality that remains visible up to date in Transylvania, irrespective of the role of regional elites in the amplification of ethnic conflict. Within this matrix, and in so far as it does not escalate to violent confrontation, the symbolic competition between Romanians and Hungarians operates as a medium through which different groups manage to preserve a sense of collective integrity in the course of their interaction with each other.

⁷ According to an independent estimation by the Centre for Research on Ethnic Relations (Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca), approximately 1/3 of Transylvanian Hungarians are married to Romanians.

⁸ For some information over the state of social interaction between Romanians and ethnic Hungarians, as well as the Romanian outlooks on the relations between ethnic Hungarians and Hungary, see: Research Centre for Interethnic Relations. Ethnobarometer: Interethnic Relations in Romania, EDRC: Cluj-Napoca (2000), pp 37-8, 57-8; Ethno-cultural Diversity Resource Center, Barometer of Ethnic Relations, EDRC: Cluj-Napoca (2002).

CONCLUSION

Since the late '90s, the politics of interest seems to have superseded the politics of identity in Romanian political discourse. This development has resulted from a combination of catalysts, internal as well as external. With regard to the former, the popular mistrust towards Romania's mainstream parties has often prevented these parties from forming a majority government in their own right. This has prompted their leaderships to assess the prospects for alliances with smaller political actors, including the ethnic Hungarian elites. Meanwhile, the ethnic Hungarian elites have started viewing their entrance into the halls of power as a good opportunity to realize at least their main aims. As part of the whole process, both sides have opted for a milder approach to the relations between the Romanian state and the Hungarian minority. As far as the external catalysts are concerned, the impact of Romania's entry to the EU has been critical upon releasing the tensions between Romanians and ethnic Hungarians. These processes, at the elite level, have been facilitated by certain social realities in these areas where Romanians and ethnic Hungarians coexist. In Transylvania, there may not exist an articulate notion of *regional identity*. Nevertheless, the awareness of a shared *regional* heritage seems to have established some common values and provided a common cultural substratum for Romanians and ethnic Hungarians. In an overall assessment, it would not be an exaggeration to speak, at least temporarily, of a 'Romanian success' in the field of managing ethnic relations.

TABLES

Table 1

Romanians' everyday interaction with Hungarians in Transylvania		
	False	True
I avoid the Hungarians	75.9 percent	20.9 percent
I know Hungarians by sight	36.3 percent	62.7 percent
I sometimes shop from a shop where the shop-assistant is Hungarian	59.5 percent	39.6 percent
I greet Hungarian neighbours	67.3 percent	32.3 percent
I have/had Hungarian workmates	51.8 percent	48.1 percent
I pay visits to Hungarians	71.6 percent	27.9 percent
I sometimes ask a Hungarian for help	72.5 percent	26.5 percent

I have Hungarian relatives	84.9 percent	15.0 percent
I often consult a Hungarian in personal problems	80.2 percent	18.4 percent
Hungarians' everyday interaction with Romanians in Transylvania		
	False	True
I avoid the Romanians	83.6 percent	15.2 percent
I know Romanians by sight	5.9 percent	93.8 percent
I sometimes shop from a store where the shop-assistant is Romanian	5.8 percent	93.8 percent
I greet Romanian neighbours	28.1 percent	71.5 percent
I have/had Romanian workmates	20.9 percent	70.9 percent
I pay visits to Romanians	42.5 percent	57.3 percent
I sometimes ask a Romanian for help	23.4 percent	76.4 percent
I have Romanian relatives	66.1 percent	33.7 percent
I often consult a Romanian in personal problems	65.3 percent	34.5 percent

Source: Research Center for Interethnic Relations 2000: 37-8.

Table 2: Where you live, do you think that nationality makes a difference in obtaining a job?

Romanians are...		
	Romanians from the Szekely region	Hungarians from the Szekely region
Advantaged	5.6 percent	15.7 percent
Disadvantaged	30.0 percent	9.4 percent
Nationality doesn't matter	47.0 percent	46.8 percent
It does not apply	13.9 percent	14.0 percent
Don't know	3.5 percent	14.0 percent
Hungarians are...		
	Romanians from the Szekely region	Hungarians from the Szekely region
Advantaged	33.4 percent	23.0 percent
Disadvantaged	2.1 percent	12.3 percent
Nationality doesn't matter	47.0 percent	44.7 percent
It does not apply	13.6 percent	8.9 percent
Don't know	3.8 percent	11.1 percent

Source: Ibid: 57-8.

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