

ROMANIAN ACADEMIC SOCIETY (SAR)

POLICY REPORT ON THE HUNGARIAN MINORITY IN SZEKELY LAND

The Hungarian minority in Székely Land

The Euroreg¹ project examines how EU regional economic policies in EU member states and human rights and minority protection policies in CESE accession states affect patterns of political participation and economic activity of ethnic minorities, as well as their relations with national majorities, political parties and state administration.

The Romanian case study focuses on the Hungarian minority within the Central Development Region of Romania (DR 7)². This area has 34,099.4 sq. km. or 14.3% from the Romanian territory and numbers a total population of 2,523,021. The region borders the Southern, Western and Eastern Carpathians, covering the main part of the historical Transylvania and includes six counties having a mixed ethnic structure (Harghita, Covasna, Brasov, Sibiu, Alba and Mures). The minorities count 35% from the entire population of the area, while in Harghita and Covasna counties, the Hungarians are in majority with 85%, respectively 74%³. Thus this study focuses on the three counties with the largest Hungarian population: Mures, Harghita and Covasna.

The three counties are also known as **Székely Land** (Hungarian: *Székelyföld*; Romanian: *Ținutul Secuiesc*), designating a cultural-ethnographic unit inhabited by the Székelys, a Hungarian minority. During the first decades of communism the minority topic was erased from the political agendas both in Romania and in Hungary, since Marxist-Leninist ideology and Stalin's theory on nationalities considered nationalism as a malady of bourgeois capitalism. Under Soviet pressure the government created in 1951 the Autonomous Hungarian Region encompassing the three counties mentioned above, which lasted until 1960. In 1965 Ceaușescu's rise to power toughened the Romanian authorities' approach to minorities and the industrialization led to an increase of the Romanian population in regions with Hungarian majority (Mures, Harghita and Covasna

¹ EUROREG studies the links between European economic integration and ethnic minority mobilisation. It explores the effects of European integration on territorially concentrated ethnic minorities and their politics, as well as on their relations with national majorities and the state. More at <http://www.eliamep.gr/eliamep/content/Folder.aspx?d=11&rd=5565300&f=1320&rf=1728296600&m=-1&rm=0&l=1>

² The Development Regions were created on the basis of 151/1998 law and they correspond to the European level NUTS II. They represent the frame for implementing the regional development policy.

³ <http://www.insse.ro/rpl2002rezgen/14.pdf>

counties). In December 1989, at the fall of the Ceausescu regime, *the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania* (DAHR) was established, and took upon itself the interest protection and political representation of Romania's ethnic Hungarians. DAHR is made up of several markedly different interest groups and platforms representing various ideologies. It preserved its formal unity until 2003 when politicians who left DAHR established the Hungarian Civic Alliance, the Hungarian National Council in Transylvania, and the Szekler National Council. These organizations initiated a process of attaining regional autonomy for the Székely Land, within similar boundaries to those of Romania's Hungarian Autonomous Region. Most Romanians, however, oppose this idea and it is rather doubtful whether the present constitution of Romania (which defines the country as a unitary nation-state) could accommodate any autonomous regions based on ethnicity.

The EUROREG study on Székely Land

The research highlighted the existence of still deep divides between majority and minority along several ethno-political issues: territorial autonomy for the compact Hungarian communities living in the Székely Land, cultural autonomy for the Romanian Hungarians who live outside the compact area, the re-establishment of an all-Hungarian language state-university, amending the first article of the constitution which defines Romania as a nation-state, making Hungarian a second official language. These issues cut across the two ethnic communities, as they have always done, and the European accession had little influence on this phenomenon. If anything, Hungarian demands to move for territorial autonomy have become stronger since the start of accession. Even the Minorities Status law proposed by the Hungarian party suggested a constitutional modification to state that communities, not individuals, are the constituents of the state.

As for the Hungarian community from Székely Land, the research found a slow process of politic and economic mobilization taking advantage of European accession, involving various institutional actors, both on governmental and civil society side. Europe is perceived positively mostly on account of freedom of travel. No economic benefits of accession are perceived yet. Hungarians resent the low level of economic development of the Székely Land region, but tend to attribute it to discrimination rather than to real economic factors. Ethnic issues are blamed when respondents try to explain why there is so little investment. Local Hungarian authorities block the attempt of

bringing non-Hungarian investors in the area – declares one Romanian local official. The violent ethnic clash that took place in the area in 1990 inhibited foreign capital penetration, argue others. Bad infrastructure of the region has also a negative impact on business development. Both groups fear that the others stand to win more of European accession, despite the lack of evidence in this respect.

The respondents confessed that Hungarian culture and civil society are strongly supported from Hungary. A Hungarian community developer considers that organizations got too used to the idea that money are coming from Hungary; the EU integration will bring a new environment in which an organization will not receive funds anymore just because it is Hungarian.

In spite of the good political positions negotiated by its single representative party DAHR the local political elites are **skeptical concerning the opportunities given by EU integration**. Meanwhile, numerous **Hungarian community leaders in Romania view ‘Europe’ as a means to advance the quest of self government** for their group, as the assertion of their separate national identity and of the need to shape government along linguistic lines remains their chief concern.

The **impact of European accession** as an opportunity for cultural mobilization, political representation and institutional participation at the supranational, national and regional-local levels in Romania **is strong** and shown not only in political mobilization, but also in the concrete achievements of these years by the Hungarian minority, such as the Hungarian language use in public institutions or the generalization of bilingual signs.

There is a **lack of confidence in the fairness of EU funds' distribution**, stronger among Hungarians than among Romanians; the visible results achieved in the field of minority protection tend to be neglected or minimized by minority actors interviewed.

The idea of **creating a Hungarian Székely Land development region** is seen as the main solution to the Hungarian community's problems within EU context. However, intellectual elite and younger generation, grouped around civil society actors, have a proactive approach and a more positive **vision** on the future of the region, in terms of opportunities given by regionalization and localization.

Thus the **demands for self-government** of the ethnic minority parties, as well as of a larger share of EU regional aid **have also increased** since the start of EU accession, put forward by both moderates and radicals. Although they conflict with the mainstream

majority approach, these claims are well covered by the media, both Romanian and Hungarian, and thus have become part of normal public debate.

The public discourse on autonomy, self determination and decentralization is still very politicized in Romania, while the financial restrictions and **unclarified legal frame of local autonomy** are weaknesses that affect directly the self-determination claims of Hungarians from Romania. Empirical research confirmed that ethnic Romanian interviewees were suspicious concerning the concept of autonomy. As a Romanian governmental official put it: "Decentralization? Yes! Autonomy: No." Eventually, the EU pressures catalyze the process of decentralization in Romania, which converges with the interests and will of the Hungarian community, as described in key programatic documents on autonomy.

Patterns of conflict seem stronger than those of co-operation between local minority and majority representatives in sub-national government, within the region under study. While in Covasna and Harghita Hungarians are represented with more than 80% on county level and get through their own local interests, in Mures County there are tough negotiations between the two communities. Cooperation is seen as necessary and inevitable, more like a wish than a fact, although the dominant perception is that Hungarians and Romanians are living in **parallel societies**.

Identity affirmation through local autonomy is a constant request of the Szekler community in Transylvania. But no Hungarian party defines clearly what administrative and financial autonomy means. Local elites usually claim that the underdevelopment in the region is due to the current system of administration, practicing on a language of illusions on the wealth of the Szekler Region and the potential of this area. Thus one of the local leaders felt discontented that the taxes collected from the Szekler Region go to other poor areas of Romania and do not return to the Szeklers. On the other hand, from the central level it is said that there should be national solidarity and equal development for all Romanian regions.

However if we take a better look, national statistics show that actually the two Hungarian counties of Harghita and Covasna are below the national average on most indicators of development and above the national average in terms of transfers from the central budget.

The indicator for this investigation is the global income tax of the citizens working in a certain fiscal area. Starting from 1999, this indicator was also employed by the Ministry of Finances as an instrument for financial equilibrium at the national level. Thus, one of the most subsidized county is Harghita with an original figure of 58 euro/person, reaching 181 euro/person following the relocation process that takes place at the central level. Moreover, the other two counties discussed, Mures and Covasna, find themselves also under the national average of 92 euro/person, having 76 euro/ person, respectively 61 euro/person. It becomes obvious that this is not a matter of ethnic clivage in allocating funds at regional level and that the three counties still need to be subsidized⁴.

Unlike other similar European cases, what is unique and paradoxical in the Romanian case, is that not the rich regions ask for financial autonomy, but a poor one, based on the illusion of welfare induced by its politicians.

Main findings and recommendations

The presence of European Union, in all its forms, conditionality and funds, seem to have had more of a mediating effect, moderating or exacerbating preexisting tendencies, rather than a direct one. I would call it an ‘enzymatic’ effect. Enzymes are substances in the animal body which manage to influence decisively some physiological reaction between organic substances without being directly involved or transformed themselves in the process. This seems to have been largely the case on the influence of EU in these three countries on minorities and the minority-majority relation. Nationalists on the minority side, as well as moderates on both the minority and the majority side have used ‘Europe’ equally during accession years to advance their respective projects. The most important effects, as well as non-effects, are as follows:

1. The European environment empowered local moderates and liberals both on the majority and the minority side, contributing, in a hard to determine extent, to the emergence of an organic grown, step-by-step negotiated power-sharing arrangement, which has proved sustainable through several electoral cycles. Even if occasionally minority parties might miss a government cycle, it is likely their participation will remain regular.

⁴ See Sorin Ionita, “Autonomy and poorness in Szekely Land”, <http://www.sar.org.ro/index.php?page=articol&id=37>

2. The European context was used to further political mobilization by minority elites, as well as their designs for some form of territorial based self-government. Although these attempts did not meet much success, 'Europe' was rhetorically associated with such models.
3. The European identity offers an alternative 'cosmopolite' identity for minority members, who still identify reluctantly with their country. An 'ethnic' and a 'European' identity seem to coexist without any intermediation by a 'regional' identity.
4. Minorities do not feel empowered by European funds, even when their political representatives are in control of such funds. The reasons are related to the poor capacity of regional and local administration in these countries to design development strategies, attract and manage huge European funds, as well as of the limited period of enjoying significant funds. There is no effect of funds on the relation between majorities and minorities.

Two main recommendations arise from these findings:

1. As the model of majority-minority arrangements emerging from the Romanian case is original in a European context, but can be considered a fairly successful one, the European Commission should consider it best practice and encourage such developments in other neighborhood countries, for instance in Western Balkans, instead of promoting hard to sustain constitutional designs. I cannot but support Martin Brusis, who, reviewing also these three cases, came to the conclusion that 'consociational power-sharing arrangements are more compatible with liberal democratic principles than territorial autonomy arrangements. Ideas and norms supporting these arrangements could thus permeate into the minority protection policy of an enlarged EU'⁵

and

2. Although European funds are not designed to address inter-ethnic problems, the risk that the pushing of regions to accession countries might be used for

⁵ See Brusis, M. "The European Union and Interethnic Power-sharing Arrangements in Accession Countries" Issue 1/2003, EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MINORITY ISSUES (ECMI)
<http://www.ecmi.de>

nationalist mobilization can be controlled by introducing incentives for inter-ethnic cooperation in the evaluation process of such funds. In the same way that cross-border programs stimulate cooperation across borders, some of the new regions which have always experienced inter-ethnic tensions would greatly benefit from some cross-ethnic 'region-building', which would discourage parochialism and segregation along ethnic lines, making sure in the same time that some affirmative action principles are respected.