

Policy report on the Hungarian minority in Slovakia

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Introduction

This report examines the influence of European integration on the political and economic status of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. It is based on the case study report that has been produced within the EUROREG project. The main research question of the case study was to understand the ways in which the EU shaped, directed and determined change in majority—minority (Slovak – ethnic Hungarians) relations in Slovakia. This report aims to grasp and assess the effects of European integration on this ethnic issue. It also addresses the extent to which the EU funded projects triggered changes in the regional economic situation of a given region inhabited by the minority, and its influence on the majority-minority relation pattern. The study analyzed empirical research carried out in the course of 2005-2006. This consisted of 31 in-depth interviews carried out with representatives from six different socio-professional categories: elected representatives at regional and local level; minority politicians at the national level; civil society representatives; development public officials; businesspeople or representatives of commerce chambers and main projects beneficiaries. Interviews were conducted mainly at the regional level (Košice region) although a few included key minority leaders at the national level. Additionally, we collected data, official documents and academic studies. The case study report is available on the EUROREG web page: http://www.eliamep.gr/eliamep/files/Slovakia_case_study.pdf.

The research focused on the relations of Slovaks with the Hungarian minority because historically they have been the most turbulent in the region of present-day Slovakia.

The Hungarian minority occupies approximately 50 km of a broad strip along the state border with Hungary. The inhabitants of some parts of this territory have been citizens of six different states without moving, namely, Hungarian, Czechoslovak and Slovak alternately. The shifting of the border was almost exclusively a consequence of broader world conflicts (World Wars). Even today, memories of the region's unsettled history fuel nationalism.

The Košice region is one of five border regions in Slovakia that are inhabited by the Hungarian minority. Additionally, the socioeconomic situation of the region is one of the worst among EU regions. The GDP per capita has not reached even 50% of the EU average and as a result the Košice region is eligible for the EU structural support according to Objective 1 criterion. The Košice region was seen by the authors as a promising field for studying the possible impact of the EU funds on the minority-majority relations at the regional level.

The first part of our policy brief presents policy-relevant findings and the second part sketches the emerging policy recommendations.

Main findings

Character of the minority-majority relationship

The most important characteristic of the Slovak – ethnic Hungarians relationship is that it is not violent. The ethnically mixed areas are characterized by peaceful coexistence without ethnically driven violence, unrests or demonstrations, despite the fact that the Slovak and Hungarian nations have been at war with each other in the past. A possible explanation is the long lasting power sharing model and the absence of “pillarization.”¹ The majority population of the ethnically mixed areas is bilingual, and mixed marriages are not uncommon. The political representation at the mixed areas in southern Slovakia has been characterized by the participation of both ethnic communities in local and regional politics. The law on elections to local and regional bodies in the Slovak Republic is based on the proportional principle and due to coherent and disciplined electorate of the Hungarian minority, ethnic Hungarians have their representatives even in the communities where they are in minority. Local/regional actors do not see majority – minority (Slovak- ethnic Hungarian) relations as problematic; rather, they point out at the relations between Roma and others (non Roma) as a source of potential (societal) conflict,

However, relations between Slovak and ethnic Hungarians are not without problems. Following the collapse of the communist regime, the main source of ethnic tension was grounded at the national level, in the requests of Hungarian minority representatives for territorial and cultural autonomy. Nevertheless, the conflict was present largely in the politics at the national level and it had limited impact on the ordinary life of people at mixed areas. The calming of the situation came after 1998, when SMK, the Hungarian minority’s political party, became a part of the governmental coalition. With SMK’s 8-year participation in government during 1998-2006, the autonomy request vanished from the Hungarian minority’s political agenda, and it has not been reintroduced since. The SMK participation in power at the national level was partially caused due to indirect influence of the EU on Slovak party strategies. The perspective of the EU membership has reverted reservations of the (part) Slovak political elite that previously hesitated to cooperate with the Hungarian minority parties/party. Thus, the perceptions of majority – minority relations in Slovakia and the Košice region portray a rather mixed picture. On the one hand, the most serious tensions at the national level have been improved due to the EU conditionality. On the other hand, although there are no serious conflicts at the local and regional level, there is little cooperation between the two groups. The European Union is therefore seen as the facilitator of the ethnic Hungarian – Slovak relationship at the national level.

Influence of the EU

The EU changed the opportunity structures for the Hungarian minority at the national and regional levels. In Slovakia, the EU conditionality empowered the national ethnic Hungarian political elite. It promoted the *power-sharing arrangement*² at the national level

¹ Pillarization of society – division of society in several smaller segments or "pillars" according to different ethnic origin, which operate separately from each other in a non-racial form of apartheid.

² *Power sharing arrangement* we refers to the participation of both ethnic communities in governance that is understanding based on Brunsis (2003) definition. For more details see Brunsis, M. (2003): The European Union

during 1998-2006 (at the time a largely conflicting arena) and it strengthened the negotiating position of the minority representatives in the promotion of minority interests. Since the liberalization of the political regime in 1989, the division of the party system along ethnic lines had frozen in Slovakia. An ethnically segmented society was mirrored in parallel systems of Slovak liberal, socialist and nationalist parties, and ethnic Hungarian liberal and nationalist parties. A major part of Slovak political parties was not willing to openly cooperate with the Hungarian minority representation. Due to the EU's increasing concerns about minority rights expressed during Slovakia's accession to the EU, the opposition parties started to cooperate with the SMK and subsequently build a governmental coalition that included Hungarian minority representation upon their advent to power in 1998.

At the national level, the EU (indirectly) influenced the position of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia through the mechanism of conditionality. Using Vachudova³ terminology, the European conditionality as a dynamic mechanism has worked through the *active* and *passive* influence of the Union. The representatives of the Hungarian minority used the reference to the necessity of Slovakia's compliance with the EU political conditionality as a tool to reach their minority-oriented political goals (*active* influence). After entering the governmental coalition, many important requirements of the SMK (including the establishment of state-funded Hungarian university) were fulfilled. On the other hand, the attractiveness of the EU membership (*passive* influence) influenced the Slovak political elite to be more open towards the minority requirements.

At the regional level, the perspective of the EU membership paved the way to the regionalization of Slovakia and self-governance was established. The regionalization brought devolution of power and opportunities for local/regional politicians to govern the territory. The disciplined electorate of the Hungarian minority political representation has been very successful in the regional elections, and therefore the establishment of self-governing regions creates new opportunities for the Hungarian minority to influence day-to-day affairs.

The exact effects of the EU, the OSCE and the Council of Europe are complex and difficult to measure. As a result, it is difficult to pin-point the relationship between EU conditionality and domestic political incentives in the area of minority protection.

There is also an unclear picture concerning the influence of the EU funds on the ethnically mixed areas. The pre-accession funds have not had a significant impact on the economic development of the Slovak regions. The pre-accession funds served only as a 'demo' for state administration to prepare itself for structural funds (which have not yet had a positive effect on the socioeconomic situation in a given region). The disillusionment which stems from the adaptation to the EU cohesion policy is present in Košice not only because of the insufficient amount of financial resources but also because of the shortcomings of the 2004-2006 programming period, such as the bureaucratic regime, centralized allocation of money, delayed evaluation procedures, and problems with co-financing.

Thus far, the EU cohesion policy implementation has brought two unanticipated outcomes. First, it increased intra-community solidarity along centre-periphery lines.

and Interethnic Power-sharing Arrangements in Accession Countries. *Journal of Ethnic and Minority Issues in Europe* (1) 2003:1-20.

³ Vachudova, M. (2005): *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Second, it indirectly increased the sense of ethnic identification in the case of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia...

The EU fund allocations strengthen the sense of being unfairly treated by Bratislava (capital) among the inhabitants of Košice region, regardless their ethnic background. Such perception rises from the fact that so far, western regions (regions closer to Bratislava) have made more profit from the EU funds compare to eastern regions. The respondents perceived this not as a consequence of other factors but as a goal-directed policy of the capital.

Surprisingly, access to the EU funds has also promoted cross border cooperation among ethnic Hungarians in Hungary and Slovakia, and has not yet affected the traditional patterns of cooperation and competition among ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians in Slovakia. In Košice, rather than promoting cooperation among ethnic Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians within Slovakia, European integration reinforced communication and cohabitation between ethnic Hungarians in Hungary and Slovakia given the specific structural and cultural characteristics of this region. The representatives of Hungarian minority perceived European integration as an instrument to improve their relations with the kin-state. In this light, the integration process means the abolition of national borders. The European Union is also perceived by the Hungarian minority instrumentally way as very important for promotion of ethnic identity that is based on their affiliation to Hungarian nation.

EU matters, but ...

The effectiveness of the EU's political conditionality in minority rights depends on the following: the minority's internal capacity; the organizational and political strength of the respective minority; its articulation of demands' the coordinated action of other international organizations. In the case of Slovakia, improvement of the state relations to the Hungarian and Roma minorities are considered important by monitoring documents related to the Copenhagen criteria. However, only the Hungarian minority was able to use the EU conditionality to reach the minority requirements. The decisive factor in this case was the Hungarian minority's structural profile. This is based on: relations with the kin-state; a strong identity based on a well-developed culture; a capacity for self-organization; a on strong political representation. The Roma minority which lacks these structural characteristics (comparable to Hungarian minority) was not able to use the EU to promote its interests.

Policy Recommendations

To support the power-sharing arrangements at all levels

A power sharing arrangement between both ethnic communities has long existed in Slovakia at the local and regional level in. At the national level power-sharing lasted eight years and disappeared only after the country's accession to the EU.. After sixteen years of experiences with power sharing arrangements at local level, and eight years of such experiences at the national level in Slovakia, the institutionalization of such arrangements might contribute to the consolidation of minority-majority relations in the country. Provisions based on the power sharing principle would counteract the solutions based on an ethnic autonomy principle that contribute to the tensions between Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians.

To support cooperation on cohesion projects between ethnic groups in ethnically heterogeneous regions.

Experiences from the Slovak border region of Košice highlight the paradoxical outcome of the EU cross border (INTERREG) schemes. It has supported the cooperation between two already cooperating communities (Hungarians in Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Slovakia) while it has not contributed to the cooperation between regional inhabitants of other ethnic origin. The prevailing explanations pointed to the absence of a language barrier in the case of the Hungarian minority. The cooperation among international partners who share a language is easier and less costly. In order to promote the inter-ethnic cooperation there should be a technical assistance for setting up meeting rooms with translation equipment at both sides of the border (for example as a part of cross-border regional agencies that are settled).

To strengthen the symbolic role of the periphery Schengen regions.

The Košice region is not only the border region of Slovakia, but also a border region of the European Union. As a result it faces the problem of being in the "absolute periphery." Despite the important role that Schengen border regions play in Union internal security, the proximity from the centre and prevailing silence about their role in European society might fuel the self-perceptions of disadvantaged regions. The step from the side of the European Union that would acknowledge and spread the symbolic importance of Schengen border regions would contribute to gain their support for the integration project. To strengthen structural funds orientation on marginalised Roma communities. Despite the repeated calls from the European institutions, the situation of Roma communities has not improved significantly. Taking into account the standing problems of Roma and recent population trends (the young generation is moving towards the capital after graduation), an increasing number of people in Eastern part of Slovakia are aware of the importance in increasing significance of necessity to help Roma communities to become acclimatised. The complex socioeconomic situation of the Roma communities also requires complex solutions, The EU funded projects along with nationally financed initiatives might be a good starting point for an adequate solution to this problem.

To strengthen the role of the regions in EU funds management in Slovakia.

Regional actors view the national government as a gate keeper in dealing with the EU funds. Ministries that play the role of managing bodies supervising the respective operational programs are not only too far away from the actual problems in the regions but also they lack human capital that would smooth the project cycle. Lack of people at the ministerial level resulted in the postponing of payments that had a serious negative impact on the financial situation of beneficiaries who used the private sources for co-financing of the projects. The devolution of power in the EU cohesion policy to the regional level is considered by the regional/local actors as a way to improve the effectiveness of financial sources through better targeted program documents since regional politicians have a better knowledge of the situation in the regional development.