

National minority issues and Hungary – a source of tension

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National minority issues and Hungary – an ongoing source of political tension

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National minority issues in Central and Eastern Europe are a delicate topic. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Balkan region, the situation of national minorities has never been adequately settled. In Central Europe, ethnicity and state rarely coincide. Minorities live outside their nation-states due to war twentieth-century history and redrawing borders. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the new democratic states of the CEE revived the minority issue after remaining dormant during the Communist era. In the Hungarian case, the legacy of the Treaty of Trianon (1920) led to a new awareness of Hungarian minorities who found themselves outside the state borders. This report provides a short historical overview of the national minority issues in CE, the state and nation-building efforts of countries in the region since the 1990s, as well as the Hungarian approach to ethnic Hungarian minorities residing in neighbouring states and why is it – between Hungary and its particular neighbours – still a source of political tension and hindrance of friendly relations and cooperation. The study introduces national minority issues in Central Europe and the present situation of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring states.

Keywords: national minority, Central Europe, Trianon, Hungary, kin-states, tensions, nationalism

Introduction

States and nations rarely coincide, and across Europe, the question of minorities within a democratic nation-state appears to be an enduring political problem. In this context, the Central European (CE) region presents particular difficulties for minorities outside their nation-state container.

Henry Brubaker maintained that the relationship between national minorities, nationalizing states, and external national homelands may be observed and analyzed across CE. As a result, three species of nationalism are pursued, although they interact with each other.¹ This triadic nexus linking national minorities, the nationalizing states in which minorities reside, and their external national "homelands" to which they belong by ethnocultural affinity can overdetermine relations between CE states formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In CE countries, there are two ways of dealing with the idea of the nation. In political terms, shortly after the breakdown of the Soviet bloc, newly liberated states viewed state-building as nation-building. In other words, this new consciousness viewed the state and nation broadly coinciding, and states shaped their policies based on nationalist tendencies. For instance, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s in Ukraine, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, strong nation-building efforts were made to put aside national minority issues and the aims of these groups residing in the newly established countries. This resulted in more minor or significant problems and animosities between the majority and minority societies, which can be observed to differing degrees, depending on the state.

The alternative view, characteristic of more consolidated democracies, was that states should refine their national politics and follow an ethnocultural conception of the nation, meaning that nation-states recognized that they were multinational, multicultural or multiethnic states in which, besides the majority society, minority groups resided. This view "legalizes" a link between the pluralist, multicultural state and their nationals living abroad. This latter approach does not follow the political conception of an ethno-national state. Most CE states extend their borders in specific ways supporting the ethnocultural concept of nation.² For instance, this is the case regarding Hungary; since the 1990s, the country has provided for its nationals living in neighbouring countries and in the diaspora. Among CE states, Slovenia and, to a

certain extent, Romania and Slovakia also support nationals outside their borders. However, it does not reach the level of financial, political, and other support provided by Hungary. The following analysis focuses on the historical and political importance of national minority issues in CE, in Hungary and neighbouring states. Furthermore, it asks the question why Hungary needs to provide for its nationals outside its border and the reasons that the presence of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries and the provision for them by Hungary - in certain instances undermines cooperation, investment and trade.

The national minority issues in CE

In the CE region, national minority issues were accentuated in the 19th century. The Austrian Empire granted the Kingdom of Hungary, which had been part of the Habsburg-controlled Empire since 1526, internal political and administrative independence due to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. Thus, the Dual Monarchy or Austria-Hungary was established, which was ruled by the Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, Franz Joseph I. This union lasted until the declaration of the Hungarian People's Republic after the end of the First World War on November 16, 1918. It must be noted that Austria-Hungary was the second-largest country in Europe geographically and one of the continent's great military and economic powers. Regarding the nationalities of the Monarchy, *Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Serbo-Croatians, Polish, Ruthenians, Romanians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Italians and other nationalities* lived together (see Map I). In the Kingdom of Hungary, the Nationalities Law of 1868 granted national minorities broad linguistic and cultural autonomy in districts where minorities set up over 20 per cent of the population. However, Hungarian political and administrative authorities often curtailed or neglected to enforce the rights guaranteed in the law, and minorities faced both natural and coordinated assimilatory pressure known as Magyarization that raised the proportion of native Hungarian speakers in the country from 46 per cent of the population in 1880 to nearly 55 per cent of the population in 1910. By the end of the First World War, a significant number of non-Hungarian nationalities in the Kingdom of Hungary favoured secession to newly founded or expanded Romanian and Slavic nation-states to be composed partially of the kingdom's territory.³



(Map I: Map of the ethnic demography and urban population of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, 1910, designed by the Research Institute of Ethnic and National Minorities, 2020. Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-ethnic-demography-and-urban-population-of-the-Austro-Hungarian-Monarchy-1910_fig1_356481678)

The First World War ended in 1918. The Treaty of Versailles meant "peace" for some states and a "diktat" for others. According to the treaty drafted during the peace conference held in Paris by the Allies, Germany accepted responsibility for the war and lost 68,000 km² of its territory.⁴

From the Hungarian point of view the **Treaty of Trianon (1920)** determined Hungary's subsequent history. The Treaty was concluded between Hungary and the Allied and Associated Powers on 4 June 1920. The agreement – called by Hungarians a "tragedy" – cemented the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hungary lost 70 per cent of its territory and one-third or three million of its ethnic-Hungarian population. Besides, the country lost all its seaports and 90 per cent of its vast

natural resources, industry, railways, and other infrastructure. Therefore, for millions of Hungarians, the borders of their homeland had been arbitrarily redrawn, and these Hungarian nationals found themselves living in now foreign countries. Swathes of Hungarian territory went to Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia, and Romania (which received all of Transylvania). The treaty also reduced the size of Hungary's armed forces to just 35,000 troops. The treaty created new states and produced not only Hungarian minorities residing in neighbouring countries but also new minorities who today struggle to sustain their ethnic identity.



(Map II: The Dismemberment of Hungary by the Treaty of Trianon, 4 June 1920. Source: https://www.americanhungarianfederation.org/news_trianon.htm)

After the First World War, Central and South-Eastern European states acted as if they were responsible for protecting minorities under the *League of Nations treaty system*, although their aims were selective and did not prevent nationalist policies and territorial revisionism.⁵ The Wilsonian ideal after the First World War did not solve the issue of national minorities, and the border changes deepened ethnic tensions. In the interwar period, minorities were considered responsible for social

fragmentation or as security threats. Scholars highlight security as a motivation for drafting legal instruments and creating transnational organizations focused on minority issues, particularly the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe High Commissioner on National Minorities.⁶ Others emphasize perceived security threats as drivers of policy.⁷

In the inter-war period, resentment at the treaty saw Hungary enter World War II on the side of Nazi Germany. Defeat in war brought the loss of regained territory and the reinstatement of Trianon boundaries. Hungary was subsequently absorbed into the Soviet empire for over 40 years, which brought a trauma of a different kind.

Political changes after 1989 in CEE can be considered the next phase in taking responsibility for kin minorities and protecting their rights. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, nations and national emotions that had been suppressed were rekindled. Long-held animosities within and between neighbouring states framed by the historical shifting of borders and populations, emerged. Thus, the treatment of national minorities (those with strong ties to a neighbouring state) became a crucial issue in many post-communist states' foreign and domestic policy.⁸ The collapse of the Soviet Union initiated a process of state-building in Central and Eastern Europe. States defined themselves as non-communist and democratic but also as nation-states with national values.⁹ New political elites divorced themselves from the former communist leadership, ideology, and political structures while preserving and emphasizing those elements of national history that supported an independent and democratic existence.¹⁰ State and nation-building in CE, mainly in Ukraine and Slovakia, resulted in growing disagreement between the newly independent nation state and the minorities residing there, leading to hostility and insecurity.

The significant problems this created led to the establishment of a multilevel system under the aegis of European organizations.¹¹ The role of kin-states was explained in several international documents, mostly non-binding.¹² Most Central European and European constitutions also incorporated provisions related to protecting European minorities outside national borders. For instance, Article D of the Fundamental Law of Hungary of 2011 declares that Hungary *“shall bear responsibility for the fate of Hungarians living beyond its borders, shall facilitate the survival and development of their communities, shall support their efforts to preserve their Hungarian identity,*

the effective use of their individual and collective rights, the establishment of their community self-governments, and their prosperity in their native lands, and shall promote their cooperation with each other and with Hungary”. The constitutions of other CE states follows this wording and establishes a duty for the state to take care of communities residing abroad who share the same national identity.

The Hungarian approach to national minority issues

The Hungarian government generally accepted as a basic principle that Hungarians living in neighbouring countries belong to the Hungarian nation. Therefore, the reasons for Hungary's provision for Hungarians living in neighbouring states are self-explanatory: the principle of historical responsibility as a result of defeat in two World Wars. Therefore, it should also support and preserve their cultural identity. According to the Hungarian view, to stabilize the CE region, Hungarian communities must be supported since ethnic conflicts and migration would endanger peaceful relations and regional political stability.¹³

The first democratically elected *Prime Minister of Hungary, József Antall*, in May 1990, set the three main directions of Hungarian foreign policy, which became Euro-Atlantic cooperation and integration into European processes, new foundations of regional and neighbourly relations, and the establishment of new national policy goals towards Hungarians living in other, mainly neighbouring countries.¹⁴

However, Trianon and the Hungarian approach towards Hungarian ethnic minorities residing in neighbouring countries remains a source of political tension, often hindering cooperation and development. It has to be emphasized, though, that crucial differences can be observed regarding the approach of neighbouring states towards Hungary and Hungarian national minorities living on their territory. Based on the last census in neighbouring states, **456,000 Hungarians live in Slovakia, 150,000 in Ukraine, 1.1 million in Romania, and 185,000 in Serbia, approx. 6200 in Slovenia, and 10,000 in Croatia**. The number of Hungarians is quickly and dramatically declining in all neighbouring states, having two main reasons: migration and assimilation into the majority society.



(Map III: Areas with ethnic Hungarian majorities in the neighbouring countries of Hungary, 2009. Source: <https://sebok1.adatbank.ro/legbelso.php?nev=KozEu>)

Differences may be observed regarding the rights of Hungarian national minorities in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. Here minority rights are respected, and cooperation with Hungary can be characterized as more or less free of significant conflict. In **Slovenia**, special rights were secured for the Hungarian community that were unknown in other Central European countries.¹⁵ After Slovenia became independent in 1991 the Constitution, adopted on 23 December 1991, protected and guaranteed the rights of the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities, and recognized the collective rights of national minorities. After Yugoslavia disintegrated in the course of the 1990s, the Constitution of independent Republic of Croatia recognized several national minorities including Hungarians. The issue of ethnic Hungarians does not have a security aspect in Croatia. Meanwhile in **Serbia**, the Constitution of Yugoslavia (1974) already secured extensive rights of self-rule for the province of Vojvodina, where different ethnic minorities reside, including the majority of Serbian Hungarians (250,000 Hungarians in 2011). According to the Statute of Vojvodina 2009, the Hungarian national minority, among other minorities,

enjoys cultural autonomy and is represented in the Assembly of Vojvodina. The province of Vojvodina is allowed to adopt laws, use symbols, or conclude international agreements.

These three countries thus recognize the rights of the Hungarian national minority. By contrast, **Ukraine, Romania and Slovakia**, do not. In these states, the rights of the Hungarian minority, are not only neglected, but dismissed. These states fear that the significant Hungarian minority population will secede. Therefore, the minority issue in these states is still highly securitized, and their nation-building objectives demand the assimilation of national minorities into the majority society. The fear that Hungarian minorities will secede or ally with Hungary to reinstate Hungary's pre-Trianon borders is historically entrenched in these societies. For these reasons the Hungarian national minority issue adversely affects relations between Hungary Ukraine, Romania, and Slovakia. These countries treat with suspicion financial and other support that Hungary offers the Hungarian diaspora communities.

In **Romania**, even during the communist era, the idea of a homogenous Romanian society led to a process of minority assimilation. After 1990, due to the impact of European institutions and international expectations, interethnic relations improved.¹⁶ Nevertheless the rights of the Hungarian national minority have been seriously neglected, which negatively influences relations between the two states. In this context, the failure to restitute Hungarian property nationalized during the communist era affecting Hungarian churches like the Roman Catholic Church – Batthyáneum; Reformed Church and the Székely Mikó High School; Marianum building in Cluj-Napoca; together with the neglect of education in Hungarian exacerbates tension. Furthermore, Romanian textbooks designate Hungary as an oppressive power thus encouraging anti-Hungarian sentiment. The Romanian government also undermines institutions necessary for sustaining a Hungarian identity (for instance merging the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureş with the state-led Petru Maior University and teaching only in Romanian); and the administrative obstruction of the functioning of the Roman Catholic II Rákóczi Ferenc Lyceum in Târgu Mureş. Restrictions also occur in connection with the use of the Hungarian mother tongue in judicial practice, and access to judicial

proceedings. Romanian discrimination extends to popular protests like setting fire to the Hungarian flag in the Black Eagle Palace in Oradea; deeming that Székely flags could not remain on flagpoles in front of the Town Hall of Băile Tuşnad; and fines regularly imposed on the mayors of the larger municipalities of Seklerland for displaying Hungarian national symbols on the national holiday of 15th March.

This occurred even though the two countries aimed to cooperate. Ironically the main example of this cooperation was the *Free University and Student Camp in Bálványos, or Tusványos/Baile (Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem és Diáktábor)* that first was organized in 1990 to promote Hungarian-Romanian dialogue, Hungarian-Hungarian political exchanges, and to operate as an intellectual event and workshop in the Carpathian basin. Since then, the camp has been organized every year in July in Romania, where, besides political workshops, different cultural events take place. The event's origin was to promote friendly relations between Hungary and Romania. During the initial years, Hungarian, Romanian, and other experts explored different topics regarding literature, history, sociology, economics, law, and politics.

However, over time, the camp has become a site where primarily FIDESZ politicians participate and share their views regarding political and national issues, as well as minority topics, including the situation of Hungarians in Romania. It has become a tradition that the event closes with a speech from the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán. Therefore, the Camp rather than facilitating cooperation has in fact become a platform for Hungarian-Romanian cultural difference.

Somewhat differently **Slovakia** and Hungary, experienced different phases of cooperation and conflict from the 1990s. However, the Hungarian national minority, similar to Romania, is not adequately respected, being a source of tension between the two states. Although cooperation between Hungary and Slovakia accelerated in the middle of the 1990s, in part because of the objective of both countries to become members of the European integration process. The promotion of Hungarian national minority rights residing in Slovakia has not been achieved in practice. Besides linguistic and educational problems concerning the Hungarian minority, the different interpretations of recent history leads to conflict in terms of Slovak education, with history textbooks presenting negative stereotypes of Hungary and Hungarians as well as exaggerating the origins and historic roots of Slovaks. This official

presentation of Hungary as past oppressors of Slovaks with separatist claims towards Slovakia deepens inter-state disagreement and divisions between the majority and Hungarian minority in Slovakia. A more controversial issue was the Slovak citizenship law of 2011, which prohibited dual citizenship. Therefore, persons acquiring citizenship in another state lost their Slovak citizenship. However, this law was repealed in 2022.

Furthermore, a significant disagreement between the two states is the issue of the Beneš Decrees, according to which the Slovak state confiscated hundreds of hectares of land from ethnic Hungarians, without restitution. The Decrees claimed the collective responsibility of Germans and Hungarians after World War II, depriving them of their citizenship, fundamental rights, and property. It cannot be predicted how these issues will be resolved which negatively affects cooperation and friendly relations.

In **Ukraine**, before 2022 the rights of the Hungarian national minority were also not respected or protected. A significant problem that could be observed from the 1990s was that the Ukrainian leadership and anti-Hungarian forces often triggered public disapproval of the Hungarian minority, which was, in many cases, reinforced by the Ukrainian press. Therefore, the Hungarian minority is viewed as irredentist and secessionist and does not respect Ukraine's statehood, territory and language. These stereotypes are deeply rooted in Ukrainian society. The linguistic rights of the Hungarian community have been restricted. In January 2020, a new education law stated that Hungarian pupils can be taught in Hungarian only at kindergarten and until the fourth grade of primary education. Additionally, the Ukrainian language law, accepted in April 2019, defined significant restrictions concerning minority rights.

Regarding Hungarian education in Ukraine, significant problems have occurred in terms of hindering the publishing of minority language textbooks, as well as impeding those schools that teach in minority languages from acquiring textbooks, as well as the abolition of state support for Hungarian ecclesiastical schools. Other anti-Hungarian acts have also occurred, for instance in 2017 Ukrainian nationalists held an anti-Hungarian procession in Beregszász/Berehove, while in 2018, the building of the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Romania in Ungvár/Uzhorod was set on fire.¹⁷

Considering the above, the Hungarian government aims to provide Hungarians in neighbouring countries and seeks the protection of their rights. In this context in November 2011, the Hungarian national policy towards Hungarian national minorities living abroad was renewed, focusing on their well-being and prosperity. The government adopted a *Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad – The Strategic Framework for Hungarian Communities Abroad*, setting the objectives of the active policy-making of Hungary for Hungarian communities abroad and serving as a comprehensive basis for guiding the future of those communities.¹⁸ The objectives of the Strategic Framework asserted that Hungarian communities abroad are valuable for Hungary. Therefore, Hungary aims to help them prosper in their homelands. The overall goals of the policy was maintaining the population of Hungarians, decreasing the tendency for assimilation, higher quality of life, intellectual and economic development, and enjoyment of cultural rights. Legal protection has also become an essential aspect of Hungarian communities. However, that has to be provided by the neighbouring countries; the Hungarian government's objective was to protect Hungarian individuals from ethnically-motivated assault.

Last but not least, Hungary supports the maintenance and continuous development of the Hungarian mother tongue that plays a crucial role in preserving and developing Hungarian diaspora communities' national identity. Therefore, Hungary and the Hungarian diaspora strive to achieve official regional language status for the Hungarian language.¹⁹

Besides the above, numerous reforms have been implemented in recent years to help Hungarian communities abroad. For instance, thanks to the simplified naturalization procedure, from 1 January 2011, Hungarians abroad acquired Hungarian citizenship without residence status in Hungary. Furthermore, in November 2012, the Hungarian Parliament adopted an amendment to the Act on Electoral Procedure, allowing Hungarian citizens living abroad to participate in the parliamentary elections. The Fundamental Law of Hungary, entering into force on 1 January 2012, strengthens and expands the mutual responsibility of Hungarian communities within and outside the country's borders, as well as the inseparable unity of the Hungarian nation.

Conclusion

Today, the national minority topic remains a source of regional tension. However, other problems and events occurring in CE and wider Europe often overshadow the issue. The emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century undermined the Austro-Hungarian empire. Neither the post-war Wilsonian treaties nor international or bilateral agreements could address the problem, and they continue to be a source of tension in the CE context, especially between Hungary and its neighbours. Therefore, the legacy of Trianon, the redrawing of borders, can still be considered a problem for integration and cooperation in Central Europe, mainly regarding Hungarian-Romanian, Hungarian-Ukrainian and Hungarian-Slovak relations. Following Trianon, these problems are deeply rooted in the named societies and cannot be easily resolved. Meanwhile Hungary, cannot discontinue providing for its nationals because of historical, emotional, and political reasons and when the rights of Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries are violated. Thus, when Hungary raises objections against such violations, the state where this violation happens usually interprets this as an intervention in their internal affairs, and the relations between the two countries deteriorate. The deeply-rooted fear of Hungarian irredentism in Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine still hinders friendly relations and cooperation. However, to develop good political and economic cooperation, protecting the rights of Hungarian national minorities should be prioritized, and an open and honest dialogue should be initiated, focusing on the issues and fears regarding national minorities. Besides, CE societies, in general, should desist from seeing Hungarian minorities as enemies that have to be assimilated or oppressed. Realizing that integration does not mean assimilation of minorities, but on the contrary, it should enable peaceful coexistence and development through promoting and protecting minority rights in a spirit of multiculturalism.

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Endnotes

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⁴ The Treaty of Versailles, 1919: <https://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/history/key-dates/treaty-versailles-1919>

⁵ Csergő et al., 2018.

⁶ See Kemp, 2001.

⁷ Schulze, 2017

⁸ Waterbury, 2020, p. 800.

⁹ Culic, 1989, p. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹ Thornberry, 1996, p. 257.

¹² For instance the Report on the Preferential Treatment of National Minorities by Their Kin-State adopted by the Venice Commission, 19-20 October 2001; Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1335 on preferential treatment of national minorities by the kin-state: the case of the Hungarian law of 19 June 2001 on Hungarians living in neighbouring countries ("Magyars"), 25 June 2003; The Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations adopted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe 20 June 2008.

¹³ Bárdi, 2004, p. 28.

¹⁴ Gazdag, 2014, p. 100.

¹⁵ Szilágyi, 2019, p. 114.

¹⁶ Magyarai et al, 2008, pp. 4-6.

¹⁷ See Fedinec, 2019; Venice Commission (European Commission for Democracy through Law) Opinion on the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language, 9 December 2019, Opinion No. 960 / 2019 CDL-AD(2019)032.).

¹⁸ Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad: Strategic Framework for Hungarian Communities Abroad, 2019.

¹⁹ The broad description of strategic objectives is in the document Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad: Strategic Framework for Hungarian Communities Abroad, 2019.