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## The Hungarian Minority of Transylvania

A First Assessment of the Transition Period  
1990-2007



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## Introduction

This piece of work has seen the light of day for several reasons. Numerous trips to Hungary and Romania, and particularly to Transylvania, aroused my interest for both the Hungarian and Romanian language and culture, an interest still increased by the latent conflict between these two nations isolated amidst the predominantly Slavic Central and Eastern Europe. I realised that the study of Hungarian-Romanian relations, especially in the Transylvanian context, would give me an opportunity to investigate and understand the historical development of two competing varieties of nationalism and the way they manifest themselves in the present days. The necessary improvement of my knowledge in the theory of nationalism and minority rights could help me to comprehend similar issues in the future, including various problems in my own country, Belgium, where, for decades, the Flemish and French-speaking communities have found it increasingly difficult to accommodate their separate national expectations within the framework of the existing state. A further motivation was the fact that despite an abundance of literature, the subject still suffers from a lack of objective treatment. An attempt to find a balance between the positions of the two subjects of study, not only regarding the analysis of the current situation, but also from a historical perspective, would certainly be useful within the academic environment. Finally, as a doctoral candidate in territorial studies at the Charles University in Prague, I realised that although the fate of Hungarian minorities in the post-imperial successor states indeed receives due attention in the Czech academic world, most studies and articles, quite understandably, tend to focus on Slovakia. Therefore, this study is also meant to serve as a counterpoint to the existing literature in order to broaden the scope of research and shed new light on similar problems experienced by the two largest Hungarian minorities.

Due to the space limitations of this study and for the sake of efficiency, a specific territory and time scale were selected. Regarding the territory, I chose to concentrate on Transylvania since 98% of the Hungarian population in Romania lives in this region, which was formerly part of the Austrian, and later Austro-Hungarian Empire. This implies that I did not include some specific issues of the Csango minority of Moldavia<sup>1</sup> and of the internal *émigré* community living in Bucharest.<sup>2</sup> As for the time scale, my original intention to focus on the period stretching from the fall of communism to the accession to the European Union

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1 3000 to 260,000 persons depending on the definition. The only undisputed feature about the Csangos is their strong Roman Catholic faith, but their origins are unclear and only a minority of them can speak the language. [Csango minority culture in Romania (Report, Doc 9078). Council of Europe, 4 May 2001. Available on <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc01/EDOC9078.htm>.]

2 About 6,000 persons according to the 2002 census. [Romanian Statistical Yearbook, 2004, pp. 14-16, 2004. Available on <http://www.insse.ro/Anuar%202005/CAPITOLE/cap2.pdf>.]

had to be slightly reconsidered. The reason for that was the fact that some pieces of legislation deemed necessary, or highly desirable, to comply with the EU demands were enacted after 1 January 2007, or were still pending at the time of writing.<sup>3</sup> Even though the extent of my research remains quite large, two further circumscriptions of the field of study were inevitable for the sake of consistency. Indeed, religious and economic aspects of the Hungarian minority's life had to be left aside since none of these aspects is by far the only criterion for its members' national self-identification. In fact, they are by no means the decisive sources of identification, which consequently determines state policies and its conduct. As for the economy, the question of restitution, though not exclusive to the Hungarian community, is entangled in the entire process of transition from a centrally-planned to a private-owned economy, which proved particularly protracted and opaque in Romania in comparison with other countries in the region.<sup>4</sup> As regards religion, the Orthodox Church has always enjoyed strong state support in independent Romania – a position that was at times even constitutionally codified – to the detriment of the second strongest denomination, Greek Catholicism. The equation of Romanian identity with Orthodoxy often led the authorities to exert pressure on the followers of other Churches, but the national minorities were logically not the primary targets of this policy. In present times, human rights activist Gabriel Andreescu declares: "It should be noted that several cases of violation of freedom of conscience and religion have occurred in Romania but that they have not been connected with the 'national' feature of the respective persons."<sup>5</sup>

As far as the sources of the study are concerned, they can be divided into three main categories. In the historical foreword, I nearly exclusively refer to monographs on state, national, and regional history, along with shorter or more detailed studies and articles dealing with a specific period or subject. Although these would be considered as secondary literature by historians, as a non-historian writing about a contemporary issue, I used them as *de facto* primary sources. To the category of secondary literature fall reference books on the theory of nationalism in the first chapter, studies on the theory of minority rights used in the second chapter, and a number of works on international law to which I turn in the third chapter in order to support my own arguments. Among the

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3 The law ratifying the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was adopted in 2007. The law on the status of the national minorities was still being examined by the Parliament at the time of writing.

4 For more information see for instance: Lafont C., *Les processus de la privatisation en Roumanie et en Bulgarie 1989-2002* (Paris: Collection Entreprises et Management, L'Harmattan, 2004).

5 Andreescu G., *Shadow Report: October 1999* (Bucharest: Ombudspersons for National Minorities, 1999) Available on [http://www.minelres.lv/reports/romania/romania\\_NGO.htm](http://www.minelres.lv/reports/romania/romania_NGO.htm), p. 13.

primary sources in the strict sense of the term prevails some relevant Romanian legislation on minority rights provisions, followed by international legislation, on which the third chapter is grounded. The third sub-category of primary sources is used in the fourth chapter, namely accounts and reports by international human rights organisations, by Romanian NGOs and civil rights activists. The aim of this study is to give a first general assessment of the evolution of the Hungarian minority's situation during the transitional period between the end of Communism (December 1989) and Romania's accession to the European Union (January 2007). The extent of the study being rather large, it was imperative to delineate a number of guiding lines in the form of research questions. In the course of my work I decided to pay particular attention to the following points:

- Do the historical grievances of Hungarians and Romanians still have an influence on the current relations between the two communities in Romania?
- Is the current Romanian minority rights legislation in line with the Western European minority rights standards?
- What was the influence of the Euro-Atlantic integration process undertaken by Romania on the issue of minority rights and the fate of the Hungarian minority?
- Was there a clear correlation between the evolution of this minority rights legislation and the evolution of the real-life conditions of the Hungarian minority?
- Can we identify general patterns in the conduct of both parties, and if yes, what lessons can be learnt for the future from the study of the relationship between the two communities?