



2.9 • Nacionalismos e separatismos

The historical roots of the Transylvanian question

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THE HABSBURG EMPIRE fell on October 31, 1918 and the Hungarians decided to follow the other national councils that were formed in every corner of what remained of the ancient Holy Roman Empire and to build up their own national state.

The union of Transylvania with Romania

The crowd showing an aster seized public buildings and supported the formation of a new government headed by Mihály Károlyi and the birth of a republic. The minister for the nationalities, Oszkár Jászi, adopted a liberal approach and promised national rights and good levels of autonomy to the non-Magyar communities living in Slovakia, Vojvodina, Ruthenia and Transylvania: the latter, anyway, were no more disposed to accept such guarantees. The Romanians, for example, summoned a national assembly (*Adunarea Națională*) at Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár) and on December 1 proclaimed their union with Romania. Naturally, this act accelerated the clash between Romanians and Magyars and meant the birth of an international dispute.

With the support of France and the more or less tacit acquiescence of the Allies, Yugoslav, Czecho-Slovak and Romanian armies advanced and occupied the territories that the respective governments wished to include within their new frontiers, expelling the Magyar functionaries and preparing the ground for the future annexation. On the 19th of March 1919, the conference ratified this new temporary borderline, asking Budapest to withdraw its troops from regions and cities which were considered an integral part of the country. The French Colonel Fernand Vyx communicated this decision to the Hungarian government, which resigned, released the communist leader Béla Kun out of prison and gave him the chance to establish a soviet republic. In fact, the communists were the only ones who were ready to deal with the new tragic situation, as the other political forces did not want to assume such a difficult and unpopular task.

Between Spring and Summer the communist regime tried to negotiate with the Allies and, at the same time, to defend the frontiers against Czech, Serbian and Romanian troops, reorganizing the army and succeeding even in creating a Slovak soviet republic, expecting help from Russian Red Army that was fighting in Galicia. But at the beginning of August the situation was critical, the Romanian army entered Budapest and the country was occupied by foreign armies. At the end of the year, the Kingdom of Hungary was restored, and a new government was formed under the leadership of Admiral Miklos Horthy, who held the regency of a country that was still a monarchy and lost the access to the sea.

The territories that soon were to be ceded to the neighbouring states had an outstanding importance in Hungarian history: Transylvania, in particular, was considered as the cradle of Magyar culture, the only place where it could survive and develop freely during the times of Habsburg and Ottoman occupation (1541-1699).

A collective shock

Hungarian public opinion could not believe that these regions were to be ceded to other states which were considered backward and reacted to the imminent “catastrophe” with the key-words “*Nem, nem, soha*” (No! No! Never!) or “*Extra Hungariam non est vita, si est vita, non est ita*” (Outside of Hungary there is no life, and if there is, it is not the same). As a British diplomatic agent underlined, the outlook of the entire Magyar people was distorted, since the Hungarians “from time immemorial have been accustomed to regard themselves as a ruling race, called upon by Providence to administer law and justice to the Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Transylvanian Romanians...” (G. Motta, 2013).

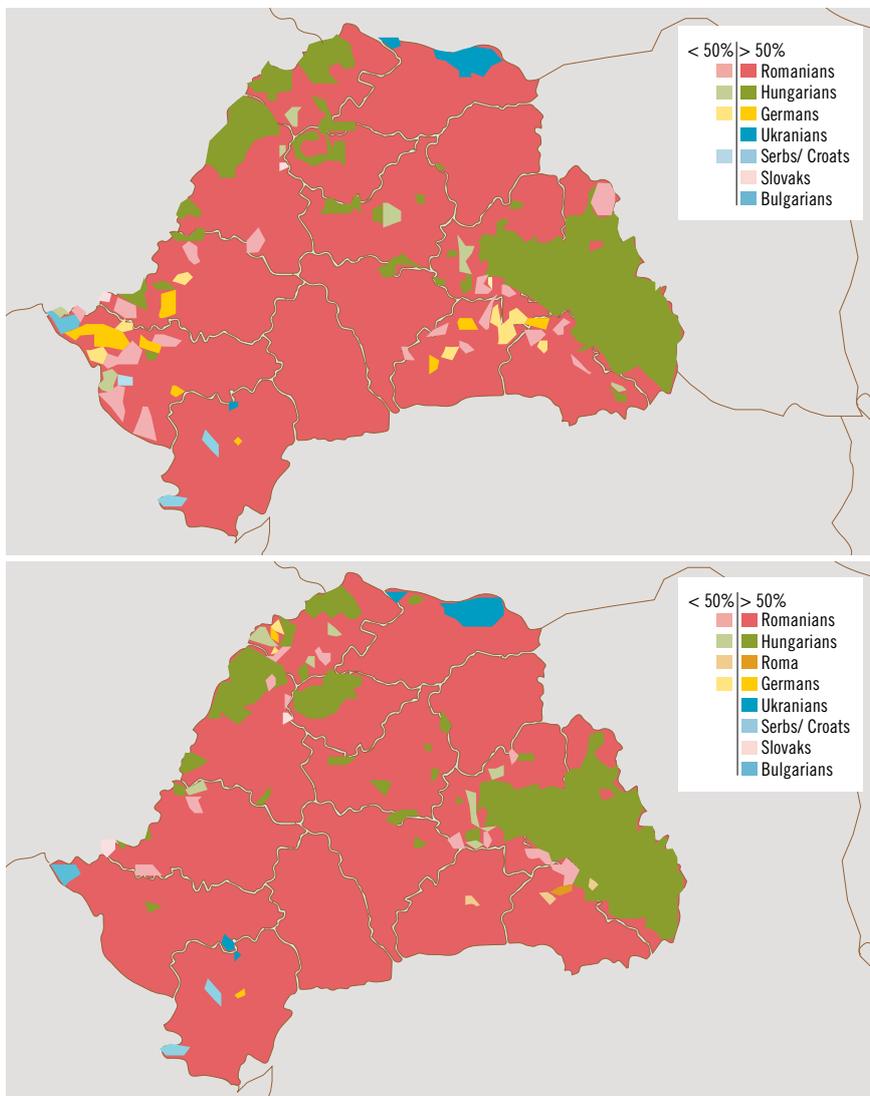
Hungary naturally tried to avoid this cession also with diplomatic tools, but the problem was aggravated by the continuous flow of Hungarians who were coming back to Hungary and sometimes were obliged to live in improvised dwellings such as train wagons. Between the Fall of 1918 and the Summer of 1924, 197,035 Hungarians, especially public servants, military personnel and landowners fled Romania to the new state territory of Hungary, while the approximate total number of emigrants from Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia was 426,000. As a matter of fact, the Magyar minorities who remained in Transylvania were experiencing a rapid change of their status: while in 1910 they held 75% of the work in public administration, after 1918 the new states tried to invert this situation and carried out a massive dismissal of public functionaries and continued with radical agrarian reforms affecting the dominant position of the Magyars, who were unanimously regarded by Romanians, Slovaks and Serbs as “Magnates” possessing a real economic and political monopoly (C. McCartney, 1962).

Hungary as a kin state

The signature of the Treaty of Trianon, in June 1920, opened a new phase in Hungarian history who became the kin state of the different Magyar minorities living beyond the frontiers and covered the final aim of its foreign policy – the revision of the treaties – under the international protection of minorities that was granted by the League of Nations. Magyar minorities, as a consequence, represented the “fifth column” of Magyar revisionism and the Trojan Horse thanks to which

Budapest animated the international system of Eastern Europe during the interwar period. In a first time, the government even proposed to create a parliament of Magyars outside Hungary or to reserve for them some seats in the assembly. The minority question became an important issue in international relations and in the internal political agenda of the different governments. The Hungarian-Romanian dispute regarded different issues but the main part of the different petitions was focused on the effects of Romanian agrarian reform and on the regulations of churches and schools (including the historical university of Cluj, whose professors fled Romania and were engaged in the near university of Szeged). The international dispute concerning the agrarian reform animated the relationships between the two countries for many years and was often discussed in the meetings of the Council of the League of Nations. Also after the signature of a special convention, in April 1930, at Paris – settling the obligations resulting from the Treaty of Trianon, and the questions relating to the agrarian reforms in the successor states – the Transylvanian question remained an important piece of the diplomatic puzzle that was leading Europe towards the revision of the frontiers in Central-Eastern Europe. In this context, the 1938 conference in Munich anticipated the Vienna awards regarding the cession of a part of Southern Slovakia (1938) and Northern Transylvania to Hungary (1940). This second arbitral decision under the auspices of Germany and Italy meant a division of Transylvania between Hungary and Romania that had no historical precedent while the fact that Bucharest and Budapest sided with the Axis did not spare the region from experiencing tragic clashes, reciprocal violence, drastic and discriminatory measures against the respective minorities.

The collapse of Horthy’s system during World War II destroyed the stratum that had kept alive the ideology of the historical Hungarian integrity and thereafter the concept of the Crownlands disappeared from Hungarian political thought. The integral revisionism was discredited, but the concept of a single cultural community of Hungarians remained alive and was central in the relationships between the People’s democracies of Hungary and Romania. Under this perspective, Bucharest and Budapest gave birth to a sort of second level Cold War (A. Biagini, 1995), which was partially resolved with the creation of a special autonomous region, in 1952, and with concession of some linguistic and cultural guarantees. However, after the Hungarian revolution in 1956, and particularly after Soviet troops withdrew from Romania, the treatment of nationalities became



Major ethnicities in the Communes of Transylvanian counties of Romania (according to the census, above 1956, below 1992).

Source: <http://timbes5.livejournal.com/117827.html>.

less liberal. Nicolae Ceaușescu soon proved to be as nationalistic as his “capitalist” forerunners and the Magyars represented the natural scapegoat to invoke for all the problems of the country, especially after the economic and financial crisis in 1980-81, when the minority problem was brought back onto the central government agenda.

But after the Helsinki Conference in 1975, the attention on the minority question in Romania was once again “internationalized”. The different review conferences concerning the application of human rights were the perfect occasion to draw the attention to the tragic conditions of Transylvanian Magyars. Bucharest, on the contrary, reacted punishing the signatories of the different memorandums that were sent to these international meetings (Karoly Kiraly, Attila Ara-Kovacs, Karoly Toth, among others.)

Also the intervention of the Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev, and the menaces of the American Congress to revoke Romania’s Most Favourite Nation status, did not have concrete consequences. The Romanian government, on the contrary, kept on developing anti-Hungarian measures, such as the plan regarding the “renewal” of thousands of villages in order to establish new agro-industrial centres absorbing the various national groups into

the majority of Romanian population. It was not the case that provoked the end of Ceaușescu’s regime in December 1989: it started up in the town of Timișoara where the people protested against the removal of the Hungarian Reformed Church pastor László Tökés, who had dared to criticize the Romanian regime in an interview to the Magyar television.

During the last official meeting before 1989 December revolution, Ceaușescu kept on insisting that the troubles originated in Timișoara were the product of foreign intrusions and Hungarian intrigues. But despite the intervention of the notorious secret police (*Securitate*), the rebellion extended to all the country and brought to the summary trial of the “royal couple” (Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Helena) and their hurried death by shooting.

The transition after 1989

The great change of 1989 reopened the Pandora’s box of history and re-proposed the Transylvanian question to the attention of the Romanian government. In this new context, the Hungarian minority pooled around the Democratic Union of the Romanian Magyars, a strong ethnic party whose program included the demand for autonomy and special cultural concessions for the Hungarians.

	1900	1930	1992
Romanians	2,673,300 (55,2%)	3,208,000 (58,5%)	5,684,100 (73,6%)
Hungarians	1,324,200 (26,7%)	1,354,000 (24,7%)	1,603,900 (20,8%)
Germans	518,900 (10,5%)	543,000 (9,9%)	202,700 (2,6%)

Changes throughout the twentieth century.

Source: P. Heberhardt, *Ethnic Groups and Population Changes in Twentieth-Century Central-Eastern Europe*, M. E. Sharpe, Armonk-London, 2003, pp. 280 ff.

These demands were immediately interpreted by Romanian public opinion as an attempt to promote Hungarians’ secession from Romania, as it was proved by the Târgu Mureș accidents (Marosvásárhely) on March 19-20, 1990, when violence broke out between Hungarians and Romanians, leaving on the field six people dead and three hundred injured. This episode was viewed as a “threat” in the building of a new, stable and democratic balance in Eastern Europe, causing the concern of international observers, who were alarmed by the renewal of this historical controversy (T. Gallagher, 2005).

But the international scenario has profoundly changed: the European Communities were converting into the European Union and opened their doors to new candidates conforming to a precise strategy of enlargement. The meeting of the European Council in Copenhagen, in June 1993, laid down some membership requisites and among the political criteria, the council decided to mention democratic institutions, state of law, and the respect of human rights including the protection of minorities. As a consequence, Bucharest and Budapest started a reciprocal rapprochement and signed a basic treaty in 1995: Hungary renounced all territorial claims to Transylvania, and Romania reiterated the intention to respect the minorities’ rights. But Romanian political debates were once again destined to be monopolized by the traditional distance between the most radical factions of Hungarians looking back to the tragedy of Trianon, and the Romanians who interpreted all questions concerning autonomy or decentralization as a menace to state integrity. ■

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