

Acceptance or Lack of Tolerance towards Minorities in Romanian Public Administration

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Hungarians represent the largest ethnic minority in Romania: 1,431,807 Hungarians were registered at the 2002 census, meaning 6.60% of the country population. The largest community lives in Transylvania, especially in Harghita (84.61%), Covasna (73.81%) and Mures (39.26%) counties, formerly known as the Szekler Land. Due to Transylvania's complicated history, Romanians and Hungarians exchanged in time the role of majority and of minority within the region; as a consequence both communities have developed competitive identities.

The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR), the main representative of the Hungarian minority, was established in December 1989 for the purpose of "defending and representing the Hungarian community's interests". It initiated and contributed to the law-making process, improving the status of Hungarians and of other minorities. Thus, today Romania has a strong legislative and institutional framework against discrimination. Nonetheless, the two groups have developed antagonistic versions of history; amplified by the political entrepreneurs, they lead to an environment of intolerance and distrust manifested on every occasion. Romania's EU integration, supported by neighbouring Hungary, was the most important common goal for both the Romanians and Transylvanian Hungarians after Ceausescu's fall, and sidelined for a short period of time the historical rivalries. But once the common goal was achieved, the old adversity reappeared.

Today, the specific (i.e. electoral and populist) interests of both Romanian and Hungarian political representatives have manipulated and distorted the ethnic dispute. This situation is well revealed by the following case study, a case study that deals with the symbolic execution of a Romanian mythological hero by a young ethnic Hungarian and tax service employee from Szekler Land, in a mock trial during the Hungarian Revolution Day commemoration on March 15th, 2010. He showcased the trial and sentenced to death the Romanian revolutionary for his crimes against the Hungarians during the 1848 Revolution. This isolated event gained epic proportions in the public sphere, involved all media channels, politicians, public institutions and even led to some small-scale street protests.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

Media coverage, the political discourse and procedural fairness.

The video with the mock trial became the main news of the national press in Romania within just a few hours. Bucharest's main press paid a lot of attention to the event, making it "hot" news for three months. The Romanian politicians were in the position to choose how to approach it: either as an isolated example that needed to be dealt with by the relevant criminal institutions, or as a dramatic event, as it happened. Both party members of the ruling coalition in the Romanian Parliament, as well as those in the opposition parties, denounced the gesture in nationalistic terms, and 200 people gathered at the Romanian hero's grave as a sign of protest.

The criminal and administrative institutions have acted in this case with an unusual promptness and turned it into a state issue. The case was transferred in only few days from the local prosecutors to the Romanian General Prosecutor's Office and the number of charges was growing: instigation to discrimination, crime of indecent exposure and of disturbing public order and peace. But in an almost similar situation, when a group of young Romanians have desecrated a statue of a Hungarian hero, the penal institutions have decided to do nothing.

Also the Tax Authority, the public institution where "the executioner" was employed, transferred him two times on disciplinary grounds (first time right in the city where the Romanian hero symbolically hanged lived in his childhood) and eventually fired him because he did not presented himself at the workplace, although the institution regulation says the transfer is made only with the consent of the transferee. The head of Tax Authority, a controversial politician of the main governing party, has made of this case a personal cause in hopes he will get more public sympathy if he will act firmly even with violation of the institutional procedures, but the National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) decided that his measures were not represented a discrimination. A separate opinion was filed to the NCCD decision where the authors considered that the first transfer represented a discrimination based on opinion, instead of ethnicity.

The media and the politicians overreacted, deliberately reviving for audience and popularity the transgenerational fear of losing Transylvania. This event was linked in the public discourse with the dual citizenship accorded by the Hungarian state to the Hungarians from Romania and also with the DAHR claims for the autonomy of

"The press exaggerated this singular event (because there was only one participant, not a crowd) amplifying the phenomenon with its mirrors"

Vlad Mixich, journalist

"The national press paid too much attention to this event, trying to create an artificial conflict between the Hungarian and the Romanian community in Transylvania and trying to generalize this isolated event to create the impression that all Hungarians act like this"

Antal Arpad, Mayor of Sfantu Gheorghe

"If Hungarians are victims and Romanians aggressors, the public authorities minimize the cases"

Csaba Asztalos, National Council for Combating Discrimination

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Szekler Land. All Hungarians were accused of disloyalty to the Romanian state, through generalization. The public actors - Romanian media and political elite, institutions - have reiterated by their actions the complex of the young state (modern Romanian state was founded in 1918) that is afraid of dismemberment, the complex described by the Hungarian historian Istvan Bibo as the major challenge for the Romanian state.

The “mythological blockage”. The case of the tax service employee’s exposes the conflict between historical narratives of Romanians and Hungarians. Over the last 20 years, Romania was the scene of many scandals which had to do with statues as national symbols of an exclusionary nature, which raise specific challenges to both Romanians and Hungarians, challenges defined by historian Lucian Boia as a “mythological blockage”. The presence in opposing camps of Romanians and Hungarians in the 1848 revolution is still resented today, and widespread social representations exist of each group as the victim of the other.

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The Hungarian political elite, supported by Budapest, makes use of this “mythological blockage” and keeps alive the traumatic memory of historical defeats alongside with the myth of the Golden Age of Greater Hungary and the fear of assimilation by the Romanian majority. This prophecy of losing Transylvania is present in the Romanian political discourse since the early 1990s. The issue was introduced immediately after the revolution of December 1989 by the first postcommunist president of Romania, Ion Iliescu, who in a televised speech spoke publicly about certain separatist tendencies in Transylvania, just one month after the Ceausescu's fall. Iliescu was a trend setter in the post-communist politics by invoking the separatist threat. In time, the separatist threat lost its privileged place in the Romanian political discourse, but it is revived whenever politicians believe that by nationalism can win votes, as it happened in the analyzed case.

Competing identities and loyalty issue The polls conducted after 1990 in connection with the way in which both groups define their identities shows that the Hungarians identify themselves according to the ethno-territorial criteria, the most ethnocentric being those who are living in Szekler Land. The Hungarians’ failure to assume civic is due to the Hungarian elite that keep the community captive in the “mythological blockage”. The rhetoric exercises of certain Hungarian politicians, from within and outside Romania, multiplied by the Hungarian

media, contribute to the consolidation of ethnic identity, as means of protection against a potentially aggressor state, to the detriment of the civic identity. It is also related to the way that the state and the Romanian majority formulate the civic identity. Constitutionally, Romania is a nation-state and its major national symbols (the National Anthem, the National Day) refer to the historical struggles between the two communities.

After the Second World War, the ethnic Hungarians in Romania made several attempts to obtain the individual and collective rights, including autonomy, they were promised on the occasion of the 1918 Union, when Transylvania became an integral part of Romania. Providing more substantive rights to the Hungarian minority as a condition for loyalty toward the Romanian state was made known by many Hungarian intellectuals after the 1918 Union. But for the majority of ethnic Romanians, the limit of tolerance is much lower, being intolerant even with the public presence of ethnic diversity such as the use of mother tongue in public. Most often the majority expects more from the minority than from itself, in terms of loyalty. Through the Romanian media, political representatives and state institutions, the majority asks the minority to display a civic loyalty beyond the legal obligations, and expresses its intolerance towards what it considers to be the Hungarians lack of loyalty toward the Romanian state, through its national symbols.

From regional autonomy to the prospect of a national-security threat

Although the Hungarian from Szekler Land face the same problems as most Romanians, i.e., of economic nature, the autonomy is promoted by politicians and by the Hungarian media as a magical solution. The autonomist idea seems to be the only one with a potential of ethnic mobilization of the Szeklers, used by politicians in the electoral interests. But the Hungarians' claims for autonomy for Szekler Land based on the historical right revive the bad memories of the majority and their fears of losing Transylvania, as it was cultivated by the Romanian political elite. The fear of secession is also enhanced by the Kosovo precedent and by the official stand adopted by Hungarian prime-minister, a nationalist populist politician beloved among the Transylvanian Hungarians, who change the Hungarian Constitution, whose preamble now refers to the "Hungarian nation". Central Romanian authorities did not even accept the official use of the name "Szekler Land", although many official government documents refer to other geographical regions as "country": Barga Country, Hateg Country, Almaj Country. The Romanian politicians try to avoid at all costs discussing the autonomy of the Szekler Land, rejecting the possibility from the start.

"My loyalty towards the Romanian state was often questioned, I was the witness of certain declarations according to which "a Hungarian can never be the president of a public institution such as the National Council for Combating Discrimination. (...)

Tests of patriotisms are very common, from linguistic skills related to the State's official language to the positions that I adopt when I settle claims or I officially represent the Romanian institution.

I can state that the minority developed in time a protection system towards these expectations, with respect to such stereotypes,(...) generally Hungarian, is suspect of treason"

Csaba Asztalos , National Council for Combating Discrimination

The autonomy issue can be construed as a "societal security dilemma" as Paul Roe described (see ACCEPT PLURALISM report). Autonomy viewed by the Hungarian elite as an instrument meant to preserve the community's identity and security, or, in its rhetorical use, a piece of discourse meant to mobilize the ethnical electorate, is perceived by the majority as a threat to national identity, to the state's sovereignty and unity. In its defence, the majority can resort to counter-measures. Hungarian political elite saw in the administrative territorial reform proposal that was made by Romanian President such a counter-measure to a series of chained events, which dominated the public debate in the spring of 2011. The symbolic hanging of the Romanian hero, the oath to obtain Hungarian citizenship took by the local authorities from Szekler counties, the opening of a Szekler Land regional office in Brussels, all these events were presented by the political elite and the Romanian media as threats to national identity, to the state's unity and security. Without support from any technical or impact analysis, the public discussions around the administrative territorial reform proposal were carried out around the status of the three Szekler counties, Harghita, Covasna and Mures, that the ruling party wanted to integrate them in two regions with a Romanian majority, whereas DHAR wanted to reunite them in one single region.

The "mythological blockage" alongside with the competition of identities between Romanians and Hungarians that were maintained and exacerbated by the public entrepreneurs, delayed and will continues to impede the Romania's territorial administrative reform according to the European models.

Key Messages for National Policy Makers

- **Common projects** Important joint projects should be implemented in order to mobilize both communities and reduce both mutual distrust and intolerance. The promotion of such common projects, at micro and macro-level, could have the effect of destigmatization of the minority claims and strengthening civic identity of Hungarians.

- **Proportional representation** Although DHAR is a ruling party or is collaborating with the government since 1996, the hope espoused by many scholars on the gradual development of a model based on mutual agreement and power sharing is still very far. The proportional representation of minorities in the public administration from the government level to the sub-state institutions is a solution recommended to the fear of assimilation by the majority and also to strengthen the civic identity of minority members.

- **a new National Day** A small but meaningful gesture meant to help the two communities to overcome, in time, historical trauma and mythological blockage, could be the change of the National Day of Romania. In the recent year, there has been a debate around this proposal, because the nowadays date for celebration has an exclusionary nature, and it was criticized by scholars from both communities. The suggestion would be the celebration of the National Day around a historical event that would reflect the interests of the two groups, Romanian and Hungarians. Two alternative options were put forward: the celebration of the anti-totalitarian revolution in 1989, date when Romania became a member of the European Union.

Methodology

The analysis based on the case of Csibi Barna draws on interviews with relevant individuals from Bucharest and Covasna County, discourse analysis (media and public declaration made by public officials) and archival research. The authors conducted seven interviews, with the following people: Csibi Barna, high ranking officials from local and national Romanian administrative institutions, a historian, a sociologist and a journalist who covers issues regarding interethnic relations. Discussions with representatives of Covasna County Administration managed to obtain information regarding the share of jobs held by the Hungarian minority in the local and county State institutions, the stories behind their experience as ethnic Hungarians holding high public positions, and a thick description of the case and the general theme if interest.

The media coverage analysis focused on the narrative of Csibi Barna's case; news articles from all print and online newspapers with high circulation, and recordings of TV shows were considered. The politicians' response to Mr. Barna's case, both Romanians and Hungarians was studied on the basis of official transcripts of the dedicated parliamentary hearing of March 16, 2011, newspapers articles, agencies news and recordings of TV shows. The official response was traced through the decisions that were taken and analyzed in terms of their consistency with the legislation, and in combination with the public justification provided by the relevant actors.

Further Readings

- ACCEPT PLURALISM National Case Studies of Challenges to Tolerance in Political Life – LUPEA, Ioana; MUNGIU-PIPPIDI, Alina; IORDACHE, Narcis “*Acceptance or Lack of Tolerance towards Minorities in Romanian Public Administration*” available at <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/22314>
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- Gallagher, Tom, 1999. *Democratie si Nationalism in Romania 1989-1998 (Democracy and nationalism in Romania 1989-1998)*. Bucharest: All
- Mungiu Pippidi, Alina, 1999. *Transilvania subiectiva (Subjective Transylvania)*. Bucharest: Editura Humanitas
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Project Identity

- Acronym:** | ACCEPT PLURALISM
- Title:** | Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the
| Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
- Short Description:** | ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be
| accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe.
| The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are
| central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and
| immigrant minority groups.
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| Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project
| studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought
| but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which
| should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration
| and achieve respect and recognition.
|
| In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not
| tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is
| happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put
| forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority
| groups/individuals and specific practices.
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| The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and
| produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making
| European societies more respectful towards diversity.
- Website:** | www.accept-pluralism.eu
- Duration:** | March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
- Funding Scheme:** | Small and medium-scale collaborative project
- EU contribution:** | 2,600,230 Euro, Grant agreement no. 243837
- Consortium:** | 19 partners (15 countries)
- Coordinator:** | European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced
| Studies)
- Person Responsible:** | Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
- EC officer:** | Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer