




2009

# Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania: International Relations Examined Through Minority Language Education

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## Recommended Citation

Stockton, Julianna Connelly, "Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania: International Relations Examined Through Minority Language Education" (2009). *Mathematics Faculty Publications*. 7.  
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HUNGARY, SLOVAKIA, AND ROMANIA:  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS EXAMINED THROUGH MINORITY  
LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Ethnic Hungarians make up the single largest minority group in both Slovakia and Romania. There are active Hungarian political parties in both countries, holding several seats in parliament. The treatment of these minority groups by the rest of the population as well as official legislation regarding minority rights have been sources of contention between political leaders in all three countries for decades. As these tensions continue to occasionally flare up in the form of violent crimes or public protests, it is important to attempt to understand the historical reasons for the tension. One way to examine the relations between Hungary and two of its neighbors, Slovakia and Romania, is through these countries' policies on minority language education. This is often one of the most highly contentious issues between majority group members and national minorities. It is also an area which has been addressed specifically by the European Council in their Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and so became important to Central and Eastern European countries not just in terms of their relationships to each other but also in terms of their accession into the European Union. This paper will briefly describe the historical relationships between Hungary and its two neighbors, and then discuss each country's policies and approaches toward the education of minority language groups and how these policies both impact and reflect the nature of the relationships between the Hungary and its neighbors.

For almost 1000 years, Hungarians politically dominated much of East and Central Europe. From the Kingdom of Hungary through the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungarians occupied a region significantly larger than present-day Hungary. With the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, following Hungary's defeat in World War I, Hungary's borders were redrawn and portions of its territory granted to neighboring states. This restructuring left millions of ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary. Some emigrated or were forced to relocate into the now-smaller Hungary, but many remained in what was their ancestral home and became citizens of their new *host* State instead. Figure 1 shows the regions outside Hungary in which ethnic Hungarians make up more than 12% of the region's population (as of 2001).



Figure 1: Regions with significant Hungarian population<sup>1</sup>

According to census data, there are approximately 1.4 million ethnic Hungarians living in Romania and 520,000 in Slovakia, with smaller groups in Ukraine, Serbia, Croatia, Austria, and Slovenia. In Slovakia and Romania, Hungarians make up the single largest ethnic minority group in each country, representing ~10% of the total population in Slovakia and 6.6% of the population of Romania<sup>2</sup>. As can be seen in Figure 1, these ethnic Hungarians live primarily in regions along the Hungarian border, although in Romania there are regions with significant Hungarian presence well into the center of the country, such as Transylvania. The heavy concentration of ethnic Hungarians in these regions means that there are some towns and governmental districts in which this ethnic minority actually becomes the local majority, with ethnic Hungarian populations higher than 50%. The existence of ethnic Hungarians as both a substantive percentage of their neighboring countries' populations and the existence of regions in which ethnic Hungarians represent a higher than average (or even majority) percentage of the local population combine to make the ethnic Hungarian minorities one of the most vocal and politically active minority groups within Slovakia and Romania.

In comparison, the largest ethnic minority group within Hungary is the Roma, comprising 2% of the total population, followed by the Germans with

<sup>1</sup> Z. Csergo & J. M. Goldgeier, *Virtual Nationalism in: Foreign Policy* 125, 2001, p.77.

<sup>2</sup> CIA World Factbook, Romania, retrieved Febr. 27, 2009 from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ro.html>, CIA World Factbook, Slovakia, retrieved Febr. 27, 2009 from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lo.html>.

1.2%. All other ethnic groups combined including Slovakian, Romanian, Croatian, Serbian, Slovenian, and Ukrainian totaled only about 1% of Hungary's population in 2001<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, while Slovakia and Romania have large populations of ethnic Hungarian citizens and ethnic Hungarian political parties in their parliaments, Hungary does not have a correspondingly active minority group from those countries.

The Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia are not just ethnic minorities but also linguistic minorities whose language has almost no linguistic similarity to their host nations' language. One aspect of life in which linguistic minority issues arise most frequently is that of education. Should minority linguistic groups be forced to learn the national language in order to attend school or participate in official functions or should the government provide or allow for education in their native language? Different countries around the world have approached this dilemma differently. In the United States, for example, despite vast quantities of non-English speaking citizens, English is the only official language and is the predominant language of instruction at all levels of schooling<sup>2</sup>.

And herein may lie the difference. The ethnic Hungarian minorities did not, for the most part, emigrate from Hungary to these other countries by choice the way most immigrants come to the U.S. Rather, the borders of Hungary were altered after World War I and World War II, leaving previously Hungarian citizens now living in other neighboring countries essentially overnight<sup>3</sup>. Since the formerly Hungarian citizens did not change nationality by choice, the Slovak, Romanian, and other governments may have felt a greater sense of obligation to provide educational services for these citizens in their native language<sup>4</sup>. Certainly ethnic Hungarian political parties in each country have lobbied for this responsibility of the host nation and the varying responses by Slovak and Romanian ruling coalitions serve as a means of examining Hungary's relationship with these two countries.

The education of minority language groups is one of the most common minority issues that states deal with. From the point of view of the minorities, *the right of minority groups to conduct classes in schools in their own language – is seen as the central means to restore and perpetuate a minority group's cultural identity*<sup>5</sup>. When this right appears to be threatened by the majority, resentment and tension may rise and eventually culminate in violence. Education rights can be a particular source of tension because of their

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<sup>1</sup> CIA World Factbook, Hungary, retrieved Febr. 27, 2009 from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/hu.html>.

<sup>2</sup> T. H. Eriksen, *Linguistic Hegemony and Minority Resistance* in: *Journal of Peace Research* 29, 3/1992, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> N. Grant, *Some Problems of Identity and Education: A Comparative Examination of Multicultural Education* in: *Comparative Education* 33, 1/1997, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> S. Deets, *Reconsidering East European Minority Policy: Liberal Theory and European Norms* in: *East European Politics & Societies* 16, 2002, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> M. E. McIntosh, M. A. M. Iver, D. G. Abele & D. B. Nolle, *Minority Rights and Majority Rule: Ethnic Tolerance in Romania and Bulgaria* in: *Social Forces* 73, 3/1995, p. 943.

collectivist nature rather than just applying to distinct individuals<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the right to *schooling in own language* was the minority right least supported by majority group members in Romania and Bulgaria. This is perhaps because guaranteeing state-funded schooling in a minority language can be seen as taking funds and resources away from the majority of the population<sup>2</sup>.

Education policies involve not just the language rights of ethnic minorities and the structure of schools for these students but frequently cover curricular content as well. Often, changes in governmental regime lead to calls for changes in curriculum in an attempt to *rectify old wrongs*. This can take many forms: rewriting history textbooks to cast former rulers as war criminals or mandating which language's version of place names or historic events is used<sup>3</sup>. Especially in Eastern Europe, educational reform is linked to the transition to democracy with a *return of pluralism and freedom from oppression*<sup>4</sup>.

In Slovakia, the ethnic Hungarians have been viewed not just as an ethnic minority but as the *dispossessed former masters*<sup>5</sup> who controlled Slovakia for centuries. There was an especially strong surge of Slovak nationalism linked to the establishment of an independent Slovakia in 1993. It is common for nation-building efforts to involve extensive attempts at linguistic homogenization<sup>6</sup>. In 1993, numerous acts of legislation were passed to promote the official use of Slovak language in all aspects of public life and the Slovakization of people and place names. These laws cut down on the number of Hungarian schools as well as requiring that all teachers of Slovak be ethnic Slovaks. While Slovakia has signed and ratified European Frameworks and Charters regarding minority rights and education, the official government policy outlined in the Education Act of the Slovak Republic states: *Education is conducted in the state language. Citizens of the Czech, Hungarian, German, Polish and Ukrainian (Ruthenian) nationality have the right of education in their own language in the extent measured to the interest of their national development.*<sup>7</sup> Currently, for ethnic Hungarians this takes the form of schools with instruction primarily in Hungarian with Slovak taught as a subject and a few other practical subjects with specific terminology taught in Slovak. There are additional schools with more of a bilingual approach and some in which Hungarian is only offered as a subject. The number of schools offering instruction in Hungarian is largest at the kindergarten/nursery school

<sup>1</sup> S. Deets, *Reconsidering East European Minority Policy ...*, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> M. E. McIntosh, M. A. M. Iver, D. G. Abele & D. B. Nolle, *Minority Rights and Majority Rule ...*, p. 944.

<sup>3</sup> S. P. Heyneman, *From the Party/State to Multiethnic Democracy: Education and Social Cohesion in Europe and Central Asia* in: *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 22, 2/2000, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Epstein, E. S. Swing & F. Orivel, *Education in a New Europe* in: *Comparative Education Review* 36, 1/1992, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Hungarians in the Slovak Republic*, 2007, retrieved February 18, 2009 from <http://www.slovakia.org/society-hungary2.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> T. H. Eriksen, *Linguistic Hegemony and Minority Resistance*, p. 315.

<sup>7</sup> Mercator, *Minority Language Education in Slovakia* in: *European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning* 2005, retrieved Febr. 27, 2009 from <http://www.mercator-education.org/minority-languages/Language-Factsheets/minority-language-education-in-slovakia>, p. 1. emphasis added.

level and decreases as the level of education increases – there are fewer state-funded Hungarian secondary schools, and the issue of Hungarian tertiary education is an ongoing debate<sup>1</sup>.

One of the main concerns with minority language education is the potential for separatist sentiments among the minority population. Many members of the majority population worry that the establishment of separate Hungarian schools (or even bilingual schools) just promotes continued isolation instead of assimilation into the mainstream culture<sup>2</sup>. In Slovakia, this concern took the form of legislation in the early 1990s to ensure a minimum level of Slovak language competency for all students. The legislation was met with resistance from the Hungarian community and was seen as an implementation of Slovak nationalism and ethnic prejudice<sup>3</sup>.

This nationalist sentiment has flared up against individuals in a few incidents over the years. For example, in 1990 a school principal ordered the playing of the Hungarian national anthem in addition to the Czech and Slovak ones and was then immediately suspended from his position<sup>4</sup>. The most recent educational debate arose in December, 2008 when the president of Slovakia vetoed a bill that would have allowed the use of Hungarian place names in textbooks. Currently, only Slovak place names may be used, even in textbooks designed for Hungarian minority students and written in Hungarian. Parliament can and may very well override the president's veto but nonetheless his actions and the urging of some members of the Slovak parliament, including SNS leader Jan Slota, have fanned the flames once again<sup>5</sup>. The statements of politicians such as Jan Slota's can indeed be inflammatory, although it happens on both sides. For example, the Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall in 1990 declared himself prime minister *in spirit* of 15 million Hungarians, when in fact only 10 million Hungarians lived inside Hungary at the time<sup>6</sup>. In general, it seems that relations between individual citizens remain relatively cordial and recent reports suggest that what tensions exist are mainly carried out on the political level<sup>7</sup>.

In Romania, the ethnic Hungarians represent yet another case where the formerly dominant group has now become the ethnic minority. As a minority

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<sup>1</sup> Mercator, *Minority Language Education in Slovakia*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> M. E. McIntosh, M. A. M. Iver, D. G. Abele & D. B. Nolle, *Minority Rights and Majority Rule ...*, p. 944.

<sup>3</sup> B. von Kopp, *The Eastern European Revolution and Education in Czechoslovakia* in: *Comparative Education Review* 36, 1/1992, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> B. von Kopp, *The Eastern European Revolution and Education in Czechoslovakia*, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> *Slovak president vetoes law on Hungarian place names* in: *Trend News Agency* (Azerbaijan) Dec. 19, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> S. Stroschein, *Contention over Minority Self-Government: The Case of Hungarians Abroad*, 2003. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia Marriott Hotel, Philadelphia, PA Online [pdf], retrieved March 1, 2009 from [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p64157\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p64157_index.html), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Hungarian-Slovak problems appear mainly in politics, says OSCE* in: *Budapest Times*, Febr. 12, 2009, retrieved Febr. 18, 2009 from <http://www.budapesttimes.hu/content/view/10922/159/>.

group under Ceausescu's regime, the ethnic Hungarians were strongly oppressed and played a large role in the revolution against his government in 1989. As a result of the Hungarians' support, the Romanian governments of the 1990s were quick to guarantee numerous rights for minorities in their new constitution. One of the main targets of Ceausescu's *national unity* campaign was minority education and previous Hungarian schools were shifted over into the control of ethnic Romanians. While there remains a great deal of prejudice and bad feelings between ethnic Romanians and Hungarians, as a whole the Romanian population is more supportive of minority rights than the majority groups in many other countries of the region<sup>1</sup>.

The current minority education policies in Romania are much like those in Slovakia, providing for schools with instruction primarily in Hungarian, bilingual schools and schools in which Hungarian is offered as a foreign language option. During the early 1990s there was a backlash of Romanian nationalist sentiment and some Hungarian schools that had remained open even under Ceausescu's reign were closed. Since then, however, the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UMDR)'s involvement as a member of the ruling government coalition from 1996 to 2008 has helped bring about more accommodating education legislation for the ethnic Hungarian minority. The current approach to minority education, along with Romania's inclusion of ethnic minorities in parliament, has received a great deal of support and accolades from the international community. When U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Bucharest in 1997 he applauded the Romanians:

*You have turned old quarrels into new friendships, within and outside the country's frontiers. You have signed treaties with Hungary and Ukraine. For the first time, you have shared a democratic government with the Hungarian ethnics. You let minorities play a larger role in creating your future. Together with them, you represent the new Romania.*<sup>2</sup>

European policies on minority groups and education include the 1992 & 2001 European Charters on Regional and Minority Languages, the 1995 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the 1997 Hague Recommendations. In general these European standards all call for states to provide access to education of the minority language but do not necessarily require that they provide instruction in the minority language. For example, Article 13 of the Framework Convention allows ethnic minorities to establish private educational institutions but does not necessarily require the state to fund them. The language of Article 14 is intentionally vague, again only mandating that individuals from a linguistic minority have a right to learn their minority language<sup>3</sup>. The European norms are also careful to emphasize

<sup>1</sup> M. E. McIntosh, M. A. M. Iver, D. G. Abele & D. B. Nolle, *Minority Rights and Majority Rule ...*, p. 945.

<sup>2</sup> W. Clinton, *Remarks to the citizens of Bucharest, Romania: July 11, 1997*, retrieved March 1, 2009 from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2889/is\\_n29\\_v33/ai\\_20032986](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2889/is_n29_v33/ai_20032986).

<sup>3</sup> G. Gilbert, *The Council of Europe and Minority Rights in: Human Rights Quarterly* 18, 1/1996, pp. 184–185.

the responsibility of all citizens to learn the official language of the state in order to limit the possibly separatist implications of exclusive minority education<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the European standards could be met just by offering Hungarian as a foreign language with all other classes taught in Slovakian or Romanian. However, the Eastern European standard seems to require even more from the state and the norm in this region seems to be at least bilingual instruction and quite a few schools with entirely Hungarian instruction.

While the EU may not require that Hungarians be permitted Hungarian-language schools, it does require that Slovakian and Romanian governments be responsive to Hungarian minority requests, especially when those requests grow into protests. Such was the case with the debate over establishing a separate Hungarian university in Cluj (Kolosvár), Transylvania. The Hungarian and Romanian universities in the city had been merged in 1959 and their separation was one of the first requests of the UDMR in 1989. There has not been enough popular or political support among the rest of Romanians for a separate Hungarian university and instead the existing Babes-Bolyai University has been expanded to include tracks in Romanian, Hungarian, and German – a result that has received the praise of European officials and is pointed to as an example of good inclusion of ethnic minorities. Another case was the 1994 Slovakian *alternative education* policy designed to improve Slovak language skills among the ethnic Hungarians. In both instances, Romania and Slovakia were found to be in accord with – and occasionally even more generous than – European norms, but due to the outcry within the Hungarian community the governments were urged by international bodies such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities to find another approach that would be more acceptable to both sides<sup>2</sup>. As the Hague Recommendations outline, minority language education involves political considerations as well as human rights ones and therefore European countries are urged to make their decisions about educational policies *open and inclusive so that [they] may respect everyone's rights and also be seen to be fair*<sup>3</sup>.

Early Hungarian policies toward education of minority groups were largely crafted in response to repressive practices employed against ethnic Hungarians abroad<sup>4</sup>. These of course created a series of cyclical reactions on behalf of other nations, increasing the tension between Hungary and its neighbors. At present, however, Hungary's minority policies require schools to provide programs for minorities whenever the parents of eight or more students from a national minority request it. Because of the low percentage of minority groups within Hungary and the fact that the legislation doesn't specify what type of programming must be provided, these laws end up costing the Hungarian government very little in terms of resources or political

<sup>1</sup> S. Deets, *Reconsidering East European Minority Policy ...*, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> S. Deets, *Reconsidering East European Minority Policy ...*, pp. 41–43.

<sup>3</sup> G. Siemienski & J. Packer, *Integration through Education: The Origin and Development of The Hague Recommendations* in: *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 4, 1997, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> G. C. Paikert, *Hungary's National Minority Policies, 1920–1945* in: *American Slavic and East European Review* 12, 2/1953, p. 201.



capital. However, their presence alone allows the Hungarian government to pressure neighboring countries into providing comparable rights for ethnic Hungarian minorities within their borders<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the Hungarian government has allocated funds for the assistance of the ethnic Hungarians living in other countries – an action that was criticized by those other governments as interfering and again raised concerns of irredentism<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to offering direct aid to ethnic Hungarians, the Hungarian government also sought to assist them more generally by lobbying for further European integration for Slovakia and Romania. Protection of minority rights is one of the conditions considered for EU accession and so Hungary may have hoped that encouraging Slovakia and Romania's acceptance into the EU would force the countries to revise some of their minority education policies to be more favorable for ethnic Hungarians. As Csergo and Goldgeier suggested in 2001, *European integration may be the best way for ethnic groups to pursue their national ambitions*<sup>3</sup>. Although Slovakia joined the EU with Hungary in 2004, and Romania followed in 2007, the tensions among minority language groups still remain, so it may be that European integration was not as influential as the Hungarian government had hoped.

The fact that there are more widespread European norms for the education of ethnic minorities than there are for issues such as political representation also means that examining a country's policies on education makes it easier to compare that country to others in the region, since each can be compared back to the same international standard. Overall, the difference in the nature of the relationships between Hungary and Slovakia and Hungary and Romania is apparent in the legislation and offerings for the education of ethnic Hungarian minorities in each country. Relations with Slovakia remain tense, as seen in the recent outbreak of police violence in Dunajska Streda<sup>4</sup> and the President's veto of the law to allow Hungarian place names in textbooks. In what is perhaps an attempt to make up for the extraordinarily oppressive nature of Ceasescu's regime, on the other hand, the Romanian approach to minority rights is one of the most liberal in all of Europe. Hungary continues to work on behalf of the ethnic Hungarians residing in other countries, both through political activity and financial support within the countries and through the establishment of minorities policies within Hungary that are designed to serve as an example for those countries governing large ethnic Hungarian minority populations. Perhaps, with most countries in the region now members of the European Union, there will be more pressure from the rest of Europe to resolve minority language education issues and thereby decrease some of the remaining tensions between Hungary and its neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Deets, *Reconsidering East European Minority Policy ...*, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> S. Stroschein, *Contention over Minority Self-Government: The Case of Hungarians Abroad*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Csergo & J. M. Goldgeier, *Virtual Nationalism*, p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> *Bitter blood boils between neighbors* in: *Budapest Times*, Nov. 17, 2008, retrieved February 18, 2009 from <http://www.budapesttimes.hu/content/view/9981/87/>.