

Ethnic Policies and Romanian Political Parties

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Political parties play an important role in exacerbating ethnic tensions and propelling societies toward violence, and politicians often play with ethnicity to build constituencies for the attainment or maintenance of political power. This is especially the case when nationalism is on the rise. As Stephen M Saideman said, political entrepreneurs - individuals who may not share the beliefs of extremists but who seek political office and power - may reflect the polarisation of societies and, through their actions, worsen this process.¹ When faced with the threat of such challenges, even centrist politicians can be driven to embrace a more ethnic position, and defend communal interests more vigorously, a phenomenon often referred to as ethnic outbidding.² This is partly because parties look beyond the present political scene to alternative futures when calculating their political strategies. Non-rational factors such as emotions, historical memory and myths can feed into the electoral programme.

Ethnic tension in Romania

Inter-ethnic relations influence national security. A superficial approach to or neglect of these issues has, at times, led to violent conflicts. Like Serbia's Vojvodina and sections of Slovakia and the Ukraine, Transylvania is home to a large ethnic Hungarian minority, and has been experiencing increased ethnic tensions. This tension flared up, for example, in the spring of 1990 in Targu Mures. Unidentified groups were able to capitalise on the town's almost equal percentage of Romanians and Hungarians, and this generated the first inter-ethnic conflict after the fall of communism. After the bloody conflict in Targu Mures (4 dead and 300 injured)³, Romanian society experienced a period when nationalist rhetoric played an important role, including in electoral campaigns.

During a visit to Mures in the Transylvania region on 5 June 1999, the Romanian President Emil Constantinescu responded to a document reportedly circulating among intellectuals in Transylvania which promoted a federal structure for Romania. The document reportedly asserts that, since Transylvania is more advanced economically than the rest of Romania, it could be integrated more rapidly into the European Union. The document argued for the devolution of Transylvania and the Banat region, with the establishment of a regional government and parliament. According to the proposal, Bucharest would then only deal with foreign policy and defence issues related to the Transylvania and Banat regions. In his reaction to the document, Constantinescu said he would never accept 'ideas leading to the loss of sovereignty, unity, or the indivisibility of Romanian territory.' He stressed that his administration could not accept 'any form of federal governing system or regional-type legislative administration, and we would not accept separatist ideas running counter to the interests of the Romanian nation.' He added that 'intellectual adventures of this kind will cost the people of this country dear.' Constantinescu was echoed three days later by the main party of the governing coalition, the Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party. The party's spokesman said on 7 June that the President and the whole country had to 'watch so that constitutional provisions regarding the national, sovereign, independent,

unitary, and indivisible state' were not attacked either from inside or outside the state.

Anti-Hungarian demonstrations erupted in the same year in the Transylvanian city of Cluj. The mayor of Cluj, who was also the head of the nationalist Party of Alliance for Romanian Unity, reportedly rallied the crowds with extremist anti-Hungarian comments, sparking a demonstration of several thousand people in front of the Hungarian Consulate in Cluj. The demonstrators shouted slogans such as 'we will defend Transylvania' and 'expel Hungarians'.⁴

Positive signs: the model of historic reconciliation between Romania and Hungary

The efforts to establish good relations with neighbouring countries and to resolve interethnic tensions within the country form the basis of Romania's national and international policy. All treaties concluded by Romania with her neighbours reflect the principles and values of the UN Charter, the Washington Treaty and OSCE. The historic reconciliation with Hungary is a model for all countries in the region.⁵ Romania has developed a positive human rights and minority rights 'record'. Bucharest has made significant strides in promoting interethnic cooperation and marginalising nationalist extremism.⁶ It is a widely shared view in Romania that respect for the highest European standards of human rights applies to individuals from a variety of nationalities, including representation in the country's parliament. Governments after the 1996 elections were the first in the Romanian post-communist era to include minority participation in the decision-making process.

The view that European standards on human rights should apply to all national minorities has been formalised in governmental policy on education. The native language of all minorities, irrespective of their proportion of the general population, is promoted, as is multiculturalism. Thus, the Romanian-Hungarian Treaty of understanding, co-operation and good-neighbourliness, signed on 16 September 1996, stipulates the commitment of the parties to refrain from the threat or use of force, be it directed against the territorial integrity or political independence of the other party, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the UN and with the principles of the Helsinki Final Act (article 3, paragraph 1). Additionally, 'any disputes that could occur among the Contracting Parties will be solved exclusively by peaceful means' (article 3, paragraph 2). Article 14 of the same treaty consecrates the commitment of the parties to encourage a climate of tolerance and understanding among their citizens of different ethnic origins, religions, cultures or languages. The parties condemn any manifestations of xenophobia, hatred, discrimination, as well as racial, ethnic or religious prejudices and they will provide efficient measures in order to prevent any tendencies of this kind.

The signing of the Romanian-Hungarian Friendship and Cooperation Treaty marked a turning point in the two countries' bilateral relations, which are now based, according to Prime Minister Gyula Horn, 'on the pillars of historical reconciliation, mutual tolerance and cooperation.'⁷ In a rally organised during a visit to Transylvania in October 1997, Horn told a crowd of ethnic Hungarians that both countries must act together against the 'evils of extreme nationalism' that marred the history of bilateral relations.⁸ The strengthening of Romanian-Hungarian relations is highlighted by the fact that the Hungarian minority in Romania (roughly 7% of the total) benefits from rights along the lines of European standards and from

governmental support of its traditions, identity and culture. The Hungarian Democratic Union in Romania is represented in Parliament and public administration, and since 1996 it has joined the government coalition. In the introductory chapter listing the fundamental principles of the Hungarian Democratic Union in Romania Program, Paragraph 3 reads as follows:

'The main interests of the Hungarian national minority, as an autonomous community are to ensure:

- the maximum ability of states to preserve their national identity, including the network of its institutions;
- the development of a democratic Romanian society; the establishment of the rule of law; the modernisation of the economy; privatisation; the establishment of a market economy; and Romanian integration into the European Community.' ⁹

New challenges: coalition problems

Romania's parliamentary and presidential elections in November 1996 seemed to usher in a peaceful phase in Romania's ethnic challenges. One key source of democratic stability came from the cooperation of the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania. The new government quickly embarked upon a policy of reconciliation with Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. The presence of a multinational government in Budapest, a coalition of socialists and liberals keen to pursue reconciliation, greatly facilitated the breakthrough in relations. The image of Romanians and Hungarians as insiders and outsiders locked in a majority-minority power relationship was abandoned. Legislation was drawn up to give minorities the right to receive education in their mother tongue at all levels, as well as the right to use their own language in courts and local administrations. All these steps produced no public outcry.¹⁰ However, fragmentation within the coalition was to bring a revival of nationalism. This revival was elite-led – there had been no popular backlash when Hungary's application to join NATO was accepted and Romania's declined.¹¹ After the important initiatives on nationalities policy during 1996-7, minority legislation was blocked by dissenters in the ruling coalition.

The major policy differences between the Hungarian Democratic Union and the main party in Power came over draft amendments to the education law. These proposed instruction in Hungarian at all levels of education. Representatives of the Hungarian minority threatened to leave the coalition if the law was not pushed through by emergency decree in time for the new academic year. Arguments flared up again at the end of September when the Hungarian Democratic Union condemned President Constantinescu's decision not to open a Hungarian university in Transylvania, but to entrust multicultural education at the Babes-Bolyai University to the university Senate, which enjoys a two-thirds Romanian majority. The excessive publicity granted to minority interests and the fear that concessions to the Hungarian minority would fuel if certain rights were granted gave further ammunition to the nationalist cause.

Arguing that the divisions among the nationalist parties were responsible for their loss of support, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, leader of the Greater Romania Party, proposed a coalition with rival nationalists. He called for a 'National Alliance for the Fatherland's Rebirth'.¹² The initiative was marked by extremes of nationalist rhetoric, including proposals to ban the ethnic Hungarian Democratic Union, to

suspend the bilateral political treaty with Hungary, to close the Hungarian consulate in Cluj, and to assist young ethnic Hungarians to study and work abroad.¹³ Since the November 1996 elections opinion polls have indicated an increase in the popularity of the nationalist parties. Indeed, by the end of 1997, Tudor had become a popular political figure and an alternative for many Romanians to the social and political status quo. Tudor blamed the coming to power of 'separatist organisations' representing ethnic Hungarians in Romania and of fermenting Hungarian plans to secede from Romania. He also accused the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania of pursuing 'ethnic cleansing' in eastern Transylvania, by its expulsion of ethnic Romanians from two counties, Harghita and Covasna, where ethnic Hungarians form a significant majority.¹⁴

According to Tudor, Romanians in these counties 'are in danger of losing their national identity' as a result of policies pursued by ethnic Hungarians, and he asked for a 'national programme' to prevent assimilation of these counties' Romanians. The Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania pledged to leave the coalition if it 'firmly rejected the increasingly alarming anti-Hungarian campaign.'¹⁵ The improvement in Romanian-Hungarian relations stalled. This is not surprising – it is well known that in times of economic hardship majorities are hard-pressed to grant concessions to minorities. In any case, rationality won and the Hungarian minority decided to remain within the coalition.

However, despite the Romanian government's efforts to join NATO by maintaining internal stability and catching up with other countries of Central Europe, Romania's seven squandered years left the country unfit to join the first wave of NATO enlargement. It is important to assess the long-term implications of NATO's restrained enlargement for the possible revival of nationalist feelings in Romania and for the Transylvania region in particular.

Long term implications of NATO's restrained enlargement

In an address to the American people, President Clinton asked in the midst of the air war in Kosovo: 'Who is going to define the future of this part the world... Slobodan Milosevic, with his propaganda machine and paramilitary forces which compel people to give up their country, identity, and property, or a state like Romania which has built a democracy respecting the rights of ethnic minorities?'¹⁶ The US President was motivated by the need to secure the backing of conflict-free Balkan states like Romania for NATO's military operations against Serbia. He praised Romania in a similar fashion before and after the July 1997 NATO Summit in Madrid, where Romania failed to gain admission to the Western alliance. Romanian political parties were hardly pleased by the decision of this summit to invite only three countries to join NATO - the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. The speaker of the Senate, Petre Roman, expressed a 'sort of bitterness'; the Social Democratic Party, the main representative of the opposition, claimed an 'act of injustice' had occurred; whereas Greater Romania Party chairman Tudor went so far as claim discrimination between Catholic and Orthodox nations. However, as President Emil Constantinescu observed a day after the decision, even if the result was 'below [our] expectations', Romania's extraordinary efforts were recognised in the Madrid Declaration, which refers to the 'positive developments towards democracy and the rule of law in a number of South-Eastern European countries, especially Romania and Slovenia' in the context of 'aspiring members'.¹⁷

As expected, the Alliance decision not to endorse Romania's candidacy in the first round of NATO expansion unleashed a wave of recrimination against the West from extremist groups. The Transylvania question is but one of the ethnic minority issues that continue to harass the new NATO members and aspiring NATO members of Eastern Europe. With NATO seen as effectively sanctioning the devolution, if not independence, of an ethnically Albanian Kosovo from Serbia, keeping these other problems in check will be increasingly difficult. For their part, Hungarian nationalists are hoping to benefit from NATO's actions on behalf of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and are calling for a broad revision of borders in the region. On the 79th anniversary of the signing of the Trianon peace treaty - which redrew the map of Central Europe in such way that a large number of Hungarian nationals remained on Romanian, Slovak, and Serbian territories - supporters of the radical Hungarian National front openly called for a 'peaceful revision of the borders and a Hungarian state of the Carpathian basin.'¹⁸

Inside Romania and Slovakia, ethnic Hungarian parties have been limiting their public activities to political fights for bilingual government in areas where ethnic minorities comprise over 20 percent, but independence calls from radicals within Hungary have not gone unheard. Instead of attacking its neighbours, Hungary has aggressively sought agreements with Slovakia and Romania to guarantee the security and the rights of Hungarians in those countries.¹⁹ But this may be a pre-emptive strategy to take the irredentism issue out of the hands of potential challengers to the ruling elites.²⁰

NATO's action in Kosovo appears to have strengthened the call by radical nationalists in Eastern Europe to push their own similar agendas. As countries like Hungary attempt to settle into Western politico-military structures, and others like Romania and Slovakia seek admission into NATO and the European Union, these cross-border disputes will become ever more critical. There are a great number of maps of Europe waiting to be redrawn, and a host of groups eager to start drawing. The press and media in Romania are fanning fears that the removal of Kosovo from Yugoslav jurisdiction might set a precedent that would allow a similar NATO-sponsored action in Transylvania.²¹

Even if Romanian political stability may appear strong today, concerns that it may not remain so tomorrow may be sufficient to ignite fears of physical insecurity and a cycle of ethnic violence. Today, unsure of how to communicate effectively with the social groups that make up their electoral base, unsuccessful reformist parties are tempted to use nationalism to preserve minimal respect in the eyes of an electorate disillusioned by Romanian politics. However, in the present climate, most of the political elite reflect the view of society that Romania's only guaranteed road to recovery lies through alignment with the West. This consensus outweighs existing nationalist complexes and temptations. The Romanian approach to this objective overrides the framework of military interest, defence and security policy. It constitutes a deliberate decision to opt for the values and principles of Western democracies. Therefore, integration into the economic and security structures of the Euro-Atlantic area are a fundamental priority of Romania's policy, whether foreign or domestic: it is based on the firm support of the entire Romanian society.

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ENDNOTES

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