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## Hungary's 'Near Abroad'

Minorities Policy and Bilateral Treaties

by Hans Binnendijk and Jeffrey Simon

### Conclusions

NATO (and EU) enlargement has been successful in establishing incentives for aspiring members to resolve border and ethnic minority issues.

Hungarian bilateral treaties have stabilized the situation more in Romania than Slovakia because, unrelated to its treaty, Slovakia has been moving in autocratic directions.

Both treaties have marginalized nationalist extremists and helped transform Hungarian minorities from being a potential "bloc" to becoming a "bridge" for Euro-Atlantic integration.

If Hungary enters NATO with no clear prospect for Romania, it could undermine recent positive developments in Bucharest.

### Historical Legacy

Hungarian minorities are the legacy of the defeat and collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I. The Treaty of Trianon (1920) reduced Hungary's size by roughly two-thirds; the Romanian crown occupied Transylvania, the Serbs southern Hungary, and the new Czechoslovakia northern Hungary. Hence, the Versailles Peace settlement divided the states of Central Europe into winners and losers.

During the 1920s Hungary's appeals to the League of Nations on behalf of minority rights were undermined by its irredentist aspirations and by France who allied itself with the Little Entente of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia to protect the status quo. Hitler's rise to power gave momentum for revision; the September 1938 Munich agreement accepted dismemberment of Czechoslovakia as the British and French policy shifted to appeasement.

Hungary's revisionism occurred in stages. (1) In November 1938 an Italo-German "Vienna Award" returned to Hungary 4,600 square miles from Slovakia with predominantly Hungarian populations; and in early 1939 gave Hungary another Hungarian minority fragment-Ruthenia-from Slovakia. (2) In August 1940, the Second Vienna Award gave Hungary northern Transylvania, which left large numbers of Romanians and Hungarians on the wrong side of the border. (3) In April 1941 when Germany invaded

Yugoslavia, Hungary followed suit and re-annexed the ethnically-mixed Vojvodina and formally allied itself with the Axis powers.

At the end of World War II, neither Britain nor the USSR supported any change in Hungary's pre-1938 borders, and the 1946 Paris Peace Conference restored the partitions of the Trianon Treaty. While Slovaks, Romanians, and Serbs retained grievances against Hungary for its role in the pre-Trianon era and during World War II, Hungarians remained bitter about their treatment as minorities in the inter-war period and after 1945.

During the Communist era, Marxist-Leninist ideology and Stalin's theory on nationalities considered nationalism to be a malady of Abourgeois capitalism." In Hungary, the minorities question disappeared from the political agenda. Communist hegemony guaranteed a facade of inter-ethnic peace while failing to secure a lasting accommodation of minority interests in unitary states.

The fall of Communism aroused the expectations of Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries and left Hungary unprepared to deal with the issue. Hungarian politicians campaigned to formalize the rights of Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries, thus causing anxiety in the region. They secured agreements on the necessity for guaranteeing collective rights and formed new Hungarian minority organizations to promote cultural rights and political participation. In Romania, Slovakia, and Serbian Yugoslavia, former Communists secured popular legitimacy by accommodating nationalist tendencies that were hostile to minority rights.

### **Contemporary Situation**

Some 3 million Hungarians live in neighboring countries; 2 million in Transylvania, 600,000 in Slovakia, 350-400,000 in Vojvodina, Serbia, and 160-200,000 in Ukraine (see Map). Extremes in the treatment of Hungarian ethnic minorities are evident in Ukraine, where no major issues prevail, and Vojvodina, where the situation of those who live in the north and south-central regions has deteriorated since Serbian President Milosevic stripped the province of autonomous status in 1989. In addition, Vojvodina has had to absorb more than 100,000 Serbian refugees from Croatia (Krajina) further upsetting the ethnic balance.

This paper focuses on neighboring Hungarian communities and rising ethnic tensions in Transylvania and Slovakia after the recent basic treaties, and with the Hungarian Government's attitude of closely monitoring the rights of Hungarians in neighboring states.

### **Hungarians in Slovakia**

During the First Republic of the interwar period, Czechoslovakia's major concern was to establish a democratic state and permeate it with Czech ideas. The existence of a Hungarian minority coupled with Hungary's revisionist policies provided the context for denying the Slovaks the federation that they had been promised. Hence, Slovaks saw Hungarians as rivals; and Slovak mythology about the period of forced assimilation after the 1867 Ausgleich was pushed back historically for 1,000 years. The First Vienna Arbitration in 1938 merely confirmed the Slovaks' perceptions of Hungarians as enemies.

In the 1992 Czechoslovak elections, the coalition of Coexistence led by Miklos Duray (representing Hungarian and other minority interests) and the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement gained 76 percent of the minority vote. Because the Hungarian minority had wanted to preserve the Czechoslovakian framework, Slovaks continued to view them with suspicion. After the formal division

of Czechoslovakia in January 1993, ethnic tension and nationalism heightened among the 600,000 Hungarians who comprise 11 percent of the population, live in a compact area along the Hungarian border, and make up 90 percent of the local population. After the September-October 1994 elections, the three ethnic Hungarian parties control 17 of the 150 seats in the National Council. They support a liberal economy, a Western orientation, and broad autonomy for ethnic Hungarians. The Slovaks are convinced that Budapest is behind local Hungarian activism.

Early contact with Western institutions have had an impact. The European Union (EU), in its association agreement with Slovakia, required a clause protecting the rights of minorities. In February 1993 the Council of Europe (COE) also made it clear that Slovakia's admission to the Council required a solution of the minority question; and the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) High Commissioner for National Minorities visited Bratislava and Budapest to assess the situation.

Under great pressure from the EU and NATO, Prime Ministers Vladimir Meciar and Gyula Horn signed a bilateral state treaty on Good Neighborly Relations and Friendly Cooperation in March 1995, aimed at resolving disputes concerning borders and minority rights. Its vague language, though, allows rival interpretations. One cause of conflict was the COE's Recommendation 1201 which stipulates the creation of autonomous self-government based on ethnic principles in areas where ethnic minorities represent a majority of the population.

Gyula Horn insisted that the treaty protected the Hungarian minority as a "community." Vladimir Meciar accepted the 1201 Recommendation in the treaty, but denounced the "concept of collective rights of minorities" and "political autonomy" as "unacceptable and destabilizing." Slovakia finally ratified the treaty in March 1996 after the government attached a unilateral declaration that the accord would not provide for "collective" autonomy for Hungarians. The Hungarian government refused to recognize the validity of the declaration.

The treaty's limitations remained evident after coming into force. In July 1996 tensions were renewed after Budapest signed a vague communique with ethnic leaders and minority parties living outside Hungary calling for autonomy "in accordance with European practice" for ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary. The Slovak government and opposition parties alleged the communique violated the letter and spirit of the treaty, threatens Slovakia's territorial integrity, and could cause destabilization of the area.

The deteriorating situation of Hungarians in Slovakia, though, has little to do with the treaty's imperfections. It has more to do with Prime Minister Meciar's attempts to centralize his power, intimidate his opposition, and prolong his rule by creating a semi-autocratic system in Slovakia. Meciar's efforts have resulted in open conflict with President Michal Kovac, dismantling of the Constitution, promoting draft legislation defining critics as "enemies of the state," and creating new administrative districts run solely by his supporters.

Despite the treaty's limitations, it does provide a "brake" on Slovak and Hungarian extremism. Regarding EU and NATO integration, Article 6 of the treaty "confirms their identical interests . . . and determination to assist one another in this respect." In other words, if Hungary joins NATO before Slovakia, Hungary is committed to support its neighbor's integration. In sum, this should provide a brake on Slovak nationalist extremists from blaming Hungarian ethnic minorities for Slovakia's initial exclusion, and strengthens the political role of the Hungarian minority as "bridging," rather than "blocking" integration.



### Hungarians in Romania

Before 1914 Romania was an almost ethnically pure country with citizenship based on Regatean ethnicity. In 1918, when Greater Romania emerged-after the reunification of the Romanian lands of Wallachia, Moldavia, Transylvania, and expansion into Bessarabia, and southern Bukovina-ethnic heterogeneity prevailed. Before 1918, Regateans regarded Hungarian rule over Transylvania as cruel and oppressive; after 1918 Romania celebrated Transylvania's incorporation as historical justice.

Romania justified extending its centralized system and Regatean norms to Transylvania in territorial security terms. However, because Transylvanian Hungarians had been rulers for centuries, and possessed self-confidence, higher education and economic standards, they were difficult to subordinate to Romanian norms.

The return of two-fifths of Transylvania to Hungary in the Second Vienna Arbitration of 1940 traumatized Romania; and recovery became a major war aim. In 1945 the Romanian elite accepted Communism only because the Soviet Union's offer was either Communism with Transylvania or a semi-democratic state without reintegration. Under Communism, the Hungarian minority gradually lost power and Nicolae Ceausescu promoted a deeply negative stereotype of Hungarians. After Ceausescu, hopes for improvement were dashed when Hungarians were attacked in Tirgu Mures in March 1990.

In Romania, ethnic Hungarians comprise 9 percent of the population, live far from Hungary's borders, primarily in Transylvania where they comprise more than 25 percent of the population. Two counties are

overwhelmingly Hungarian, and a few others comprise about 50 percent.

After the 1992 elections, the Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR), the major ethnic party with 600,000 members, held 12 of the Senate's 143 seats and 27 of the House of Deputies' 343 seats. The UDMR supports increased ethnic autonomy and educational rights, including separate schools and the use of Magyar (the Hungarian language) in Hungarian areas.

The election also returned extreme nationalist parties with anti-Hungarian attitudes; the Greater Romania Party (PRMC3.85%) with 6 and 16 seats respectively, Gheorghe Funar's Party of Romanian National Unity (PUNRC7.7%) with 14 and 30 seats respectively, and the Socialist Labor Party (PSMC3%) with 5 and 13 seats. Ion Iliescu's Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSRC27.5%), with 49 and 117 seats, tended to rely on this bloc for support.

The Romanian Constitution is expressly unitary, draws on Jacobin tradition, and relegates Hungarians to narrowly defined minority status. The government failed to intervene when Mayor Funar banned the public display of Hungarian material in Cluj. Hungarians saw the dismissal of Hungarian prefects and their replacement by Romanians in Hungarian-populated Szeklerland in July 1992 as an assault on Hungarian rights. In February 1993 President Iliescu said that ethnic autonomy on a territorial basis is unconstitutional.

Negotiations on a bilateral treaty between Romania and Hungary had been dragging since 1991. In 1994 the new Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Horn injected a new initiative with the claim that Hungary was interested in adopting the "model of German-French reconciliation" in its relations with Romania. The new treaty would replace the 1974 treaty that had expired. By early 1995 Romania still refused to comply with Hungarian demands for collective minority rights and a measure of local Magyar autonomy.

After Hungary and Romania signed the COE's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities on 1 February 1995, tensions deepened in Romania. Ethnic Hungarians in Romania stated the Convention was a "step backwards" compared to the 1993 Recommendation No. 1201 of the COE's Parliamentary Assembly, which urged member states to grant autonomy to minorities in areas where they comprise a majority of the population. The Hungarian minority in Romania formed a local ethnic Hungarian Council to coordinate decision-making in Transylvania. Romanian parties responded by arguing the Council was an embryo of an administrative body for a future Hungarian autonomous area in Romania.

Although the EU and NATO pressured Hungary and Romania to negotiate a basic treaty before the 21 March 1995 OSCE Paris Stability Pact summit, they failed to reach a deal before the deadline. (Hungary did succeed in securing its bilateral treaty with Slovakia.) In Paris, 53 nations signed the 18-paragraph Stability Pact, including 92 "good-neighborliness and co-operation agreements and arrangements." Romania and Hungary promised only to pursue negotiations "as soon as possible." Romania's (both the government's and the opposition's) hesitancy resulted from the view that Recommendation 1201—which specifies that "autonomous" local governments are appropriate in areas where national minorities constitute a local majority—represents the wedge that threatens their territorial integrity.

Finally, on 16 September 1996, after five years of negotiations, Hungary and Romania signed a bilateral treaty, which had been stalled over the nature and extent of minority protection that Bucharest should grant to Hungarian citizens. Hungary dropped its demands for "autonomy" for ethnic minorities; in exchange, Romania accepted a reference to Recommendation 1201 in the treaty, but with a joint interpretive declaration that guarantees individual rights, but excludes collective rights and territorial

autonomy based on ethnic criteria. These concessions were made in large measure because both countries recognized the need to improve good neighborly relations as a prerequisite for NATO membership.

The Hungarian-Romanian treaty, like the Hungarian-Slovak treaty, also provides a "brake" on Romanian and Hungarian extremism. Article 7 of the treaty confirms they will "support one another in their efforts to join the EU, NATO, and the WEU." In other words, the treaty should put a brake on Romanian nationalist extremists if Hungary joins NATO before Romania, and strengthens the political "bridging" role of the Hungarian minority.

Despite the treaty, nationalist opposition remains in both countries. Sandor Lezsek, of Hungary's MDF, terms the treaty another "Trianon." Although Funar of Romania's PUNR attacked President Iliescu for supporting the treaty, claiming that ethnic Hungarians in Romania will pursue an irredentist agenda, support for PUNR in the November 1996 elections declined to 4.3 percent with 7 Senate and 18 Chamber seats. The PRM increased only slightly to 4.5 percent with 8 and 19 seats respectively. At the same time, the UDMR held steady with 11 and 25 seats respectively. Although Iliescu lost in the presidential run-off election in November 1996, nationalist opposition seems to be declining in both countries.

This paper is the result of an October trip to Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. Dr. Hans Binnendijk is the Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies. Dr. Jeffrey Simon is an INSS Senior Fellow specializing in NATO Enlargement and Central Europe. For more information contact Dr. Binnendijk at (202) 685-3838 or Dr. Simon at (202) 685-2367, by fax at (202) 685-3973, or by e-mail to [simonj@ndu.edu](mailto:simonj@ndu.edu).

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