Hungarian Minorities in Europe: A Case Study

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Any state with sizeable numbers of co-ethnics living just across its border as citizens of another state will be sensitive to the problems and aspirations of these co-ethnics. And the state in which they live will likewise be concerned about the loyalties of these ethnic minorities.

To look in this connection at the broad canvas of post-communist international affairs is to be struck by the contrast between the calm in Hungary and the turmoil of the former Yugoslavia. There is of course regular speculation about the situation of the Hungarian minorities in Serbia, Slovakia and Romania and whether their relationship to Budapest is a source of instability. But while there has certainly been friction between Hungary and its neighbours, the overall situation has remained relatively calm; and Hungary's behaviour towards its co-ethnics has been in complete contrast to that of Serbia, Slovakia and Romania.

To some extent, the relative calm in Hungary may be seen as a consequence of the upheavals in the former Yugoslavia. Hungary and its neighbours seem ready to go some distance to avoid bloodshed and to seek a political solution to what will always be a complex relationship.

The Hungarian situation

After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918, the old kingdom of Hungary lost large chunks of its territory to the successor states — Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia — and smaller areas to Austria and Poland. Part of this lost territory was inhabited by non-Hungarians, but what distressed many Hungarians was that around 3.5 million ethnic Hungarians now found themselves living in the successor states, often in the immediate vicinity of Hungary. Suddenly every third Hungarian was living outside Hungary. This loss of empire led Hungary, along with Slovakia and Romania, to side with the Axis powers during the second world war. Between 1938 and 1941 Hungary did regain sizeable parts of the lost areas, only to lose them once more in the post-1945 territorial dispensation.

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Under communism, the ethnic Hungarians became a taboo subject. Hungarian society grew used to having lost the territories, though it retained an active interest in the fate of its co-ethnics: 600,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia, between 1.7 and 2.0 million in Romania and approximately 350,000 in Serbia. There are smaller and politically less important minorities in Ukraine, Slovenia, Croatia and Austria.

With the collapse of communism, the new government that took power in 1990 under the prime ministership of József Antall pursued a policy that was virtually the polar opposite of that of the communists. The Antall government put the fate of the ethnic Hungarians first in its foreign policy aims, causing some degree of alarm in the host-states.

Following May 1994 elections, a government was formed by a coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Alliance of Free Democrats, under the prime ministership of Gyula Horn, with a strong base from which to launch a more conciliatory foreign policy.

As for the ethnic Hungarian minorities themselves, it would be wholly misleading to assume that their interests are identifiable with those of the Hungarian state. Far from it. The Hungarians of Romania, Slovakia and Serbia have a strong and clear-cut identity of their own, and their priority is demanding the equal rights denied them. It is fair to say that all the minorities have sought to use Budapest for their own purposes, but those interests have not automatically coincided with the interests of the Hungarian state.

Despite repeated polemics between Hungary and its neighbours, the relationship between Budapest and the other three capitals has never deteriorated to a crisis. Friction there has been aplenty, but all sides seemed ready to recognize that there was more to lose than to gain by letting matters escalate. The very complexity of the Hungarian ethnic situation makes all the participants move with caution, seeing that outcomes are very uncertain.

Furthermore, the presence of the West, to which both Hungary and the host-states look as a source of both political and economic support, acts as another inhibitor. Integration into the West is conditional on the reduction of tension, and various Western organizations, not least the High Commissioner on National Minorities, have played an active role in minimizing it.

At the same time, it should be noted that most if not all of the political actors in the Danube region have only limited experience of the politics of compromise and acquiring this will take time. The communist system, with its clear-cut, black-and-white attitudes, was hardly the best school for the new breed of post-communist politicians, who have had a completely different set of tasks to tackle. Post-communist politicians have had to learn on the job, and there is little doubt that they have made many mistakes.

Their task is made more difficult by the readiness of a minority of politicians to listen to the siren call of the easy way of mobilizing political support by appealing to extreme nationalist sentiment. In every post-communist state there is a well-defined constituency of members of the ethnic majority that will listen to nationalist demagogues — as a rule, those who have the most to lose by the transformation into a democratic market system.

The argument that will be developed in this paper is that nationhood became an inescapable fact of political life in Europe in the 19th century and that, far from
disappearing or even weakening, it has retained its key function in the 20th century. Considering the Hungarian case, I shall focus first on the Austro-Hungarian empire, where national and ethnic tension emerged in its modern form, up to 1918, when the empire ceased to exist.

After the first world war the victors were themselves well aware that the national settlement they had created in 1918-20 was, to say the least, imperfect. Besides the hopelessly mixed ethnic make-up of the region, the emerging new states were anything but ethnically homogeneous nation-states. The period after the first world war saw massive loss of faith in building on the existing European tradition, understandably so in the light of the terrible devastation that Europe had undergone. The problem of broadening popular participation remained, coupled with a weakening of the self-legitimation of the ruling elites. This inevitably produced a gap in the fabric of thought and through this gap emerged two broad radical alternatives — fascism and communism. Both of them denied development and demanded radical transformation. Fascism failed first with the defeat in 1945, for which the world paid a terrible price. It left Europe more exhausted than ever before. Having linked itself to the nationalistic currents of the right, fascism did much to discredit nationhood as well as nationalism. On the other hand, communism and nationalism are theoretically incompatible. Ethnic interests and nationalism are very much subordinated to internationalism, the linchpin of communist ideology. Existing national identities were replaced with what was termed "socialist internationalism". The legacy is still with us today, and common efforts are needed to overcome it. The combination of political, social and religious tolerance with a willingness to cooperate is essential to this process of overcoming the legacies of fascism and communism.

Finally, Hungary's official attitude towards its own ethnic minorities will be described in some detail, and I shall also evaluate the challenge to the churches, drawing on the lessons of Hungary. Although history is central here, in dealing with ethnic and national issues it may not be helpful to focus only on historical rights, since there are as many histories as there are sides to the conflict.

An historical résumé

The term "Marchland" was used by some American geographers to indicate the region in the Carpathian Basin where the Hungarian state was formed towards the end of the 9th century. The question of the origin of the Hungarians is beyond the scope of this paper. History tells us, however, that the bulk of this nation moved from the east to central Europe and established a kingdom there in A.D. 896. The new state proved its viability and soon obtained admission on equal terms into the company of Christian kingdoms by the coronation of King Stephen, later St Stephen.

Hungary was not only the eastern religious, cultural and political border of Europe; it was also its defence frontier: first against the Mongol invasion (1241), later against Islamic expansion. After 150 years of defensive battles, the Hungarian resistance against the Turks collapsed at the battle of Mohács (1526). This was the beginning of the most disastrous period of Hungarian history: almost two centuries of Turkish occupation in the centre of the country, with the German-Habsburg empire holding the western fringe under a rule almost as harsh as that of the Turks. The flickering light of Hungarian independence barely survived in semi-independent Transylvania. With the
death of King Louis II at Mohács, Hungary and Croatia came into the possession of the Habsburg dynasty.

The losses inflicted by the Turks resulted in a radical alteration of the demographic conditions of Hungary. Vast regions had been depopulated. The Habsburgs promoted their policy of Germanization by repopulating these areas with German settlers and immigrants from neighbouring countries; thus Hungary, including Transylvania, became ethnically more coloured. The 50 million population of the Habsburg empire (as it was called after 1867) was, however, ethnically and linguistically mixed and heterogeneous to an extent that had been and remains unparalleled in the history of Europe (except perhaps for the Balkans and Russia).

The main issue was finding a form of government and administrative structure for such a huge heterogeneous population that would operate smoothly but at the same time be acceptable to all ethnic and national groups. From the beginning of the 19th century until the collapse of the empire in 1918, when the ethnic and national problems emerged in a modern form, the concept of “we-ness” against “otherness” was strengthening. Many ideas came to the fore — from the centralistic model to the suggestion that the empire be developed into a federalized power. The most important of these, coming from different ethnic and national groupings, aimed not to transform but to break up the empire. The mixture of the contemplated solutions, or rather the tension between them, eventually led to the first historical watershed of the 20th century, the first world war. In 1914 all plans for the transformation of the empire were swept away by the storm of history, creating in its place a mosaic of small successor national states which, though badly shaken in the last three or four years, by and large survive to this day.

What finally was the cause of the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire into small national states? Was it failure to cope with national issues or were there power interests involved? Most likely a combination of these two factors was responsible.

On the one hand, a growing national awareness was taking place among the nations of the empire or, to put it more precisely, the nationalism of the élite was changing into mass nationalism. Two new states emerged at the same time, Serbia between 1830 and 1878, and Romania between 1867 and 1878.

On the other hand, a vacuum was created by the Turkish withdrawal from the Balkans, resulting in conflicting interests among the major European powers: Russia and Germany aspired to fill this vacuum; Britain and especially France regarded the survival of the Danubian empire as a guarantee of the balance of power in Europe. For several historical reasons, however, from the summer of 1918 onwards, the question was no longer whether Austria-Hungary would survive, but rather where the new frontiers of the states to be created in its place would be drawn.

But this new balance of power established after the first world war was to be short-lived. It soon became clear that the newly created states were unfit to halt Germany’s expansionist drive. For ironically from the mid-1930s onwards the entire region became dependent on the German economy, regardless of the political sympathies of the countries in the region.

"The peace of the victors"

All the peace treaties made in this century have been the peace of the victors, particularly the treaties which concluded the 1914-18 war, the Versailles peace treaty, just as the 1945
peace treaty. All the peace treaties which came from these were unjust treaties. None of them took notice of historical, geographical, intellectual or ethnic realities, and each peace treaty served to glorify the victor or to satisfy its instincts for power and its interests at that particular time. The tragedy of the next war was always written into the previous peace system.

These words of François Mitterrand, president of France, at the 1992 Paris symposium for representatives of ethnic groups in Europe, are revealing. An increasing number of politicians and political scientists realize that in Central and Eastern Europe the majority of conflicts, the slow pace of democratization, social development and the escalation of nationalism in the wake of fascism and communism are rooted in the peace settlement after the first world war. While peace treaties claimed to be based on the principle of self-determination, in practice they demonstrated an unjust application of that principle. The antagonism between a nation organized into a nation-state and the ethnic-cultural entity has led to internal conflicts within the countries concerned and to confrontations between neighbouring countries. These ethno-cultural communities, different from the majority, responded with resentment and hostility to the attempts at integration, which they perceived to be an alien policy.

The terms of integration were such that no distinction was made between loyalty to the state as citizens and loyalty to the cultural community. Ultimately this meant that members of ethnic minorities were inherently suspect and that the terms of loyalty demanded of them complete abandonment of their own moral-cultural codes, something that communities as a whole would seldom do. Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia between the wars illustrate this process well.

After the second world war the state of affairs in Central and Eastern Europe remained deeply unsatisfactory to all concerned. Intensified anxieties continued, which did little towards the integration process. The Holocaust is the most extreme example of this. After the war, ethnic German minorities were expelled from their homes. Similarly, Hungarians were repressed in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. And during the war itself, inter-ethnic conflict produced terrible bloodletting, the memory of which does not disappear easily. One could conclude that in Central and Eastern Europe the ugly face of nationalism acquired an exclusive, messianic quality.

Prospects for the future

The recognition that nationalism is an inescapable present-day reality which is playing and will continue to play an ever-increasing role in both internal and international politics — and not only in Central and Eastern Europe — compels us to concentrate on the prospects for the future and on what influence can be brought to bear on the outcome.

To begin with, we need to take into account the aspirations of ethnic minorities. In Central and Eastern Europe the primary aim of minority ethnic groupings is not the alteration of frontiers or secession but the right to retain their language and culture, to educate children in the language of their parents and ancestors, to have local officials and national representatives chosen from their own ranks. Autonomy and self-determination is for them the only way forward if they are to survive.

Indeed, autonomy is the only viable alternative to ethnic cleansing, mass migration or secession. In Europe there are well established patterns than can help to guide our
thinking in the right direction. Consider, for instance, the autonomous rights of the German communities in Central and Eastern Europe during and after the Middle Ages. They were able to preserve their language and culture for eight centuries, while making a valuable contribution to the kingdom of Hungary. But there are a few functioning present-day models too. Belgium, Switzerland and the Southern Tyrol region of Italy are all worthy of attention with a view to adapting their solutions to the Central and Eastern half of the continent.

Both Hungary and its neighbours have often expressed the desire to join the European Union. Integration with the West, however, is conditional upon the reduction of tension in this region and the adoption of a democratic system of government which takes the well-being of ethnic minorities into consideration. So far, however, there is little evidence of willingness in the post-communist governments to acknowledge the rights of ethnic minorities living within their borders, with the exception of Slovenia and Hungary.

In the light of the foregoing, what response is expected of international ecumenical organizations in general and the churches in particular? In the first place the WCC and other such bodies must maintain their global initiative on issues such as this one. We have seen the WCC at its best when coordinating worldwide action against apartheid in South Africa. The same worldwide action of churches is imperative now if we are to be instrumental in halting the dangerously escalating nationalistic trends.

The Lutheran World Federation expressed its opposition to apartheid by expelling two white South African churches from among its ranks because they did not show willingness to resist the oppressive government. The Lutheran World Federation took a status confessionis in this case.

But where does such action leave the local churches caught up in a hitherto unseen turmoil? The religious divide in Central and Eastern Europe observes the same ethnic and national frontiers as their respective governments do. These local churches have been and still are unable to cross the national and ethnic divide for fear of state arrogance and retaliation.

Therefore, while the worldwide church community needs to take a firm stand against oppression of minorities, it must at the same time give meaningful support and encouragement to local churches caught up in the conflict.

This point is well illustrated by the Hungarian-Romanian church meeting held in Novi Sad in 1990. The parties, brought together by the Conference of European Churches, firmly committed themselves to fight against national hatred, intolerance and chauvinism, and to defend together the rights of ethnic minorities. Even though this well-meaning commitment has not borne fruit, it should not be a cause of despair, but rather the opposite. Many more such events need to take place in order to demonstrate an unswerving commitment on the part of the worldwide community.

International consultations can provide a framework with well-formulated resolutions as guidelines and pointers to “where” and “how” action is to be taken. Such efforts and deliberations and their results need to trickle down through the stem to the grassroots, to the everyday men and women of the church. For only through the transformation of hearts and minds can the Holy Spirit lead and strengthen us in the struggle for justice and peace among nations and individuals.
The Hungarian government considers the protection and upholding of the rights of minorities in society to be one of the most important measures of democracy, and it is seeking, in accordance with European standards, to develop an atmosphere in society in which nobody has cause to live in fear or suffer discrimination because he or she is different.

According to the provisions of Law LXXVII of 1993, the government regards as one of the most basic human rights the right to a national, ethnic and linguistic identity, that is, the freedom to take oneself as belonging to one or other ethnic group. The survival and development of the national and ethnic minorities, the lessening of pre-existing inequalities between the majority and the minority and the alleviation of the disadvantages arising out of life as a minority require preferential treatment and special rights for communities as well as individuals.

Ethnic minorities in Hungary may claim preferential treatment as a right. Their situation must not be a function of how well the rights of Hungarians living outside of Hungary are upheld. The government rejects such an attitude of reciprocity.

The government supports the process by which minorities in Hungary are organizing themselves. In order to realize and expand the minorities’ autonomy, both culturally and in public law, the government is pushing for the formation of local and national minority councils, and wishes to support regional organizations built from these local organizations. The aim is to create an institutional form which, in harmony with the constitution, will enable the minorities’ legitimate deputies to become involved in the work of the parliament.

The right of national and ethnic minorities to maintain links freely with their parent country, the nation with whom they share a language, as well as other ethnic groups and organizations living abroad, is guaranteed by law and supported by the government. It urges minorities to participate actively in the international protection of minorities. The government considers it natural that while being Hungarian citizens, individuals who belong to the minority should also regard themselves as belonging culturally to their parent nation.

The main condition for strengthening the identity of minorities is that there should be substantial progress in the area of minority education. Respecting the minorities’ autonomy, the government guarantees them nursery education, primary and secondary education at mother-tongue schools and the conditions for higher education, as well as library and general educational provisions and the development of minority-language mass communications. It is the state’s task to train teachers and bilingual subject teachers, and to provide the textbooks and materials necessary for minority education. The central support given to these activities must, according to the principle of preferential treatment, exceed the level of similar support given to the majority.

A regional responsibility

In conclusion, while it may be extremely painful for the members of an ethnic group to be divided among two or more states, it is possible to come to terms with this and to move away, however slowly, from the traditional nationalist imperative of uniting all members of a nation into a single state. Hungarians have had since 1918 to accept the fact that membership of the cultural community (the ethnic group) need not automatically mean membership of a given political community (the state). Other
divided nations may care to take note of this, while recognizing that time is a key factor in this context.

Another lesson Budapest has gradually learned — and which neighbouring countries might also learn — is that patient negotiation can achieve more for co-ethnics than megaphone diplomacy. Clearly this is easier for Hungary, an ethnically near-homogeneous state, than for states that must construct a multi-ethnic system which will satisfy both majority and minority.

Running a multi-ethnic state will work only if citizenship is emphasized as the primary factor determining the relationship between rulers and ruled. If ethnicity is given this role, individually or collectively, the minority will inevitably see itself as disadvantaged, because it will be unable to share in the political goods of the state in the same way as the majority. In this area, the role of the kin-state is limited. There is very little that Hungary can do, for example, to promote the emergence of a civil society in other states. The most it can do is to avoid giving extremists a pretext for mobilizing along ethnic lines.

How a kin-state treats its own minorities can also affect the kin-state/host-state dynamic, particularly where (as in Hungary) the kin-state itself has become a host-state for minorities from its neighbours. Hungary has sought to establish a relatively liberal minorities regime, partly as an aspect of democratization, but partly also to serve as a moral justification for its stance towards the Hungarians in the kin-states.

The Hungarian case also illustrates another process: what are to be the principles by which the kin-state determines its policies? Here the Budapest government has several factors to balance. It must satisfy Hungarian public opinion; it must pay attention to the cultural needs of ethnic Hungarians, and with sufficient sensitivity to avoid raising the hackles of the government and ethnic majority of the neighbouring states; and, in whatever it does, it must be aware of the demands of international and regional stability, something the West is monitoring with greater awareness of the dangers of destabilization through ethnic conflict as a result of what has followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In this sense, Hungary has a responsibility in the region.