The debate over Hungarian national unity from Trianon to the "Status Law" (1920-2001)

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Some time ago an article dealing with the implementation of the so-called „Status Law” caught my attention. The author complained that an application form for a Hungarian card sent by a number of elderly women living in the Hungarian village of Sic/Szèk, Cluj county, Romania to the Home Office in Budapest had been rejected for security reasons: in the enclosed photograph the women were wearing shawls. In their view, the traditional shawl was either part of their everyday dress or of Hungarian popular culture. It seems that there is a lack of cultural harmony between the approach of the modern Hungarian bureaucracy defining itself as European and these women living only a few hundred miles from Budapest.

The belief that Hungarians belong to a unitary Hungarian nation is still widespread among people living in Hungary as well as across the border. But the historical legacy of the peace treaty of Trianon signed in 1920 lies in a fragmentation and not simply in a division of different Hungarian identities. Hungarian minorities have been culturally and socially developing apart from Hungary. For the Hungarian public opinion, a negative long-term consequence of Trianon was, as a pathological reaction to the trauma, a progressive loss of contact with the real needs of Hungarians then living under Romanian or Czechoslovakian rule. My paper seeks to analyse how deeply the false belief that Hungarian values and loyalties are unchangeable affected the relationship between Hungarian minorities and Hungary after 1918. I will further show that this fiction influenced the conception of the „Law on Hungarians living in neighbouring countries”.

2 Application forms are collected by local commissions appointed in every neighbouring country (except for Austria) by Hungarian ethnic parties, cultural associations and Churches. The dossiers are then sent to the Home Office in Budapest, which alone may take decisions on personal eligibility for the Hungarian card.
Unfinished nation-building and its consequences on the new minorities

Before proceeding, it will be necessary to place this debate in historical context. According to standard accounts, the peace treaty of Trianon led to the forced division of the Hungarian nation. However, it seems to me that the question is more complex than this.

In the 50 years following the 1867 Compromise with the Habsburg Empire, Hungary did not become a modern nation-state nor a modern society, despite some attempts at centralizing power structures. The ruling liberal-conservative élite tried to forge a standard Hungarian identity expressed by the fiction of „the indivisible political nation“. They called for other nationalities joining a sort of supernational, but Hungarian-minded élite. A consequence which later proved to be disastrous was the marginalization of traditionally existing local Hungarian identities and the abolition of centuries-old autonomous regions, such as Transylvania.

Paradoxically, this combination of imperial, premodern nationalism and of centralization harmed those Hungarian communities which were expected to profit by it. The often biased nationalizing policies carried out in the territories Hungary lost after the First World War did not lead to the assimilation of non-Hungarians, with the exception of some Jewish and German groups living in urban areas. Another often forgotten fact is that the social system at the local or county level was based more on an intricate network of privileges than on national cleavages. Most of those living in Transylvania or present-day Slovakia and Serbia were peasants working under Hungarian land-holders and could not play any role in the nation-building process. It was unlikely that a well-off craftsman living in Cluj or Oradea have had anything in common with a Szekler peasant speaking Hungarian, yet barely aware of his own nationality.

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6 Ignác Romsics, *Nation and state in modern Hungarian history*, «The Hungarian Quarterly», 2001 Winter, p. 46. The concept of „political nation“ was a modern version of the old *natio hungarica*.


9 Id., pp. 28-29. László points out that the spread of modern nationalism during the XIX-th century and the political changes related to it undermined the diversity which had for centuries characterized these local societies.
certainly may have not felt part of the same Gemeinschaft before 1918. Sociologists call the Hungarian populations living within another state „forced communities”, and suggest that poorly integrated local communities had to undertake a „nationalizing” process competing with the majority’s.\(^\text{10}\)

In this respect one must underline the role of the peasantry. Between the two wars and even after 1945, the bulk of the Hungarian population across the border was employed in agriculture and lived in the countryside. When radical land reforms were carried out in Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia shortly after the change of boundaries, many landowners left the the territories lost by Hungary, joined by former state officials. Yet the Hungarian ethnic political parties established in the lost regions in the first half the the 1920s were led by members of the old èlite. These conservative parties politically and even financially relied on the support of the government in Budapest. Not surprisingly, they took a defensive stance, elaborating a system of self-defending values, while expecting territorial revisions to be made in their favour.\(^\text{11}\)

„Imperial thinking” and minority-life realities : 1918-1945

The debate over the future of the nation after Trianon was started by the historian Gyula Szekfu in a pamphlet written in 1920\(^\text{12}\), and was to dominate Hungarian thinking until the communist seizure of power in 1948.\(^\text{13}\)

Despite the declared task of critically evaluating the nation’s recent history, the analyses produced under the shock of Trianon, when not merely being a search for scapegoats (the unloyal nationalities, the revolutionary governments of 1918-1919, the Jews as a destructive element), tended to follow the pattern of what has been recently defined by the historian Romsics as „imperial thinking” \(^\text{14}\). According to this view, Hungary had to take back every territory it had lost in

\(^{10}\) Zoltàn Kàntor, Kisebbségi nemzetépítès: a romàniai magyarsàg mint nemzetépito kisebbség, «Regio», 2000/3.

\(^{11}\) Bárdi, Cleavages,cit. p. 20.


1920 because of its millenary “historical right” of ruling over the whole Carpathian Basin.\textsuperscript{15}

The approach of the Hungarian governments under Horthy towards the minority question was dominated by the diplomatic struggle for revision. What is even more important in our analysis, however, are political leaders like Bethlen, Gömbös and Teleki, who all tried to establish a vertical relation between the centre of the unitary nation (Budapest) and its various peripheries (Cluj, Bratislava, Novi Sad). The Hungarian authorities regarded with suspicion any regionally-minded movement calling for inter-ethnic cooperation, like Transylvanism in Romania.\textsuperscript{16} The insensitivity shown toward social issues had to be the reason for deep conflicts among Hungarians after the border revisions obtained with German aid between 1938 and 1941. After the southern part of Slovakia had been returned to Hungary authorities seemed unwilling to admit that Hungarians in Czechoslovakia had been living for 20 years in a much more democratic and socially-minded context, and that the minority condition had forced them to reframe their national belonging, transforming unintegrated social classes into democratic, self-conscious regional communities.

Mòricz Zsigmond once said: „They grew up in alien schools and had to develop a different Hungarianness. A more social and civilized one. A more European one”\textsuperscript{17}. Another writer, the populist Laszlò Nèmeth, tried to overcome the Hungarian nationalist discourse by rejecting the program of territorial revision and calling for cooperation between the Central European countries. After visiting Romania, in 1935, he reached the conclusion that what the


\textsuperscript{16} Recent studies tend to regard early Transylvanism as an attempt at breaking the nation-state logic by emphasising the common roots of the three Transylvanian „nations”. See Piroska Balogh, „Transzilvanizmus: reviziò vagy regionalizmus?” in Trianon, cit., pp. 156-174. According to a different account, Transylvanism helped Hungarian intelligentsia to „define a life-strategy for the members of the community”. Sata Kinga-Koretta, „The idea of the Nation in Transylvanism” in B.Trencsényi et al. (ed.), Nation-building and contested identities. Romanian and Hungarian case studies, Budapest-Iasi: REGIO&Editura Polirom, 2001, p 42.

\textsuperscript{17} The statement made in 1931 was quoted by the left-wing, later communist politician and writer Balogh Edgàr in his introduction to the volume Ez volt a Sarlò.Tanulmànyok, emèkezések, dokumentumok, Budapest-Bratislava, 1978, p. 10. On Sarlò movement’s history see Deborah B. Cornelius, In search of the Nation: the new generation of Hungarian youth in Czechoslovakia, 1925-1934, Boulder (CO): East European monographs, 1998.
Hungarians across the border needed was a moral renewal.\textsuperscript{18} His non-conformist views got very little support in Hungary, where the public sphere was dominated by the the nationalist discourse which focused on territorial revision.\textsuperscript{19}

The populist approach proved to be more successful among Hungarian minorities. Starting from the end of the 1920s, several young intellectuals took a left-wing orientation, as the communist approach to the nationality question seemed to be more sympathetic to central European minorities than that of the ruling parties.\textsuperscript{20} A conceptual conflict emerged between the older élite who had grown up before 1918 and the new one which had socialized in the new conditions.\textsuperscript{21} Despite not questioning the Hungarian revisionist policy, party-leaders like János Esterházy in Slovakia gave up the formerly dominant self-pitying stance and undertook a kind of minority nation-building\textsuperscript{22} through the construction of a parallel society on ethnic grounds within the state. Political parties, Hungarian churches and civil associations then joined in to run schools, museums, printing houses, and theatres.

\textbf{1938-1948: the painful road to reality}

After Hungary obtained substantial territorial revisions with Nazi help (1938-1941), all the ambiguities concerning „the debate over the national unity” tragically exploded. The Horthy-led mainstream right was neither able to measure the consequences of the alliance with Nazism, nor to realize that the development of \textit{modern} nationalisms in Central Europe had made necessary a new approach to the national question. Even if a unitary Hungarian nation had existed before 1918, it certainly did not in the inter-war period. Of course all of them still spoke the same language, but they had shared neither a recent history nor similar experiences of socialization. Despite being difficult to accept, the development of more Hungarian identities had become possible and even legitimate after Trianon. The misperception of the reality led to painful misunderstandings between the centre and the peripheries. To start with, the


\textsuperscript{19} On the construction of the cult of Trianon among Hungarian public opinion see Miklós Zeidler, \textit{A revíziós gondolat}, Budapest: Osiris, 2001, pp. 159-190.

\textsuperscript{20} This approach to the minority question in Lajos Jócsik’s essay «A Sarlò kapcsolata magyarországi és erdélyi haladó mozgalmakkal», in \textit{Ez volt a Sarlò}, cit., pp. 159-183.

\textsuperscript{21} See on this Nándor Bárdi, \textit{Az kisebbségi értelemiség önképe a második világháború elott}, «Magyar Kisebbség», 1998/3.

\textsuperscript{22} I take Zoltán Kántor’s definition of the Hungarians in Transylvania as a „nationalizing minority” (see footnote 10).
administration in the new provinces was full of officials “coming down” from Budapest who were unaware of the living-conditions of local populations. They soon acquired the nickname „parachutists” for crashing without any humility into deep-rooted communities. The mass atrocities and the repressions carried out by Hungarian officials, like in Novi Sad in 1942\textsuperscript{23}, are the best example of this intolerant behaviour.

Nevertheless, the main point remains the manner in which the Holocaust was carried out in Hungary between April and July 1944. Its victims were largely Hungarian-speaking Jews living in the recently reconquered regions. The Hungarian government had made clear with the third Anti-Jewish Law passed in 1941 that even Jews declaring themselves as Hungarians - like the Transylvanian ones in the 1941 census - no longer remained part of the ethically defined nation. That meant not only breaking with the old assimilationist canon („good Jews may become Hungarians”), but also forcefully separating them from the local Hungarian communities, where anti-semitism was much less widespread than in Budapest. István Bibó wrote in a perceptive essay that the behaviour towards Jews in World War II had represented a dramatic exam, which Hungary and the Hungarian people failed to pass\textsuperscript{24}. Hungarian Jews almost disappeared from the regions Hungary had lost in 1920. To sum up, the very concept of „one people, one nation” had proved to be false and deceptive, leading the country into the terrible blind-alley of 1944-45.

After the tremendous upset caused by the German and then the Soviet occupation, every previously undiscussed value was to be put under revision. The peace treaty with Hungary signed in Paris on 10 February 1947 restored the 1920 borders. According to Ignác Romsics:

„The ongoing transformation of the Hungarian concept of nation and state in 1946-47 involved first and foremost abandoning all revisionist demands, and coming to terms with having become a small and divided nation.”\textsuperscript{25}

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\textsuperscript{23} In the reappraisal called „Ujvidék hideg napok” (21-23 January 1942) Hungarian regular troops killed more than 3500 persons, most of them Serbs or Jews. More details on the policies in the reconquered territories of Northern Serbia (Délvidék) in E. A. Sajti, Délvidék: 1941-1944, Budapest: Kossuth, 1987.
\textsuperscript{24} István Bibó, Zsidókér dés magyarországon 1944 után (1948). This important essay has remained unpublished until 1986. I.Bibó, Válogatott tanulmányok, 4 vols, vol. II., Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1986.
\textsuperscript{25} I. Romsics, Nation and state, cit., p. 53.
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Underground attention to the minority issue, 1948-1988

The position of the Hungarian communists on the national question was pointed out by the party-ideologue József Rèvai already in 1945. „S.Stephen’s Hungary” and the whole imperial thought were over for good, and the boundaries could not have been modified any more.26 After the communist seizure of power, the minority question disappeared from the Hungarian public sphere and from the party’s resolutions; the regime seemed to accept the issue of Hungarians across the border being an internal affair of the neighboring countries. The nation-minded approach was replaced by a state-minded one, according to which the borders of the state and of the nation overlap. Yet the debate over the minority question continued underground inside the Hungarian Communist Party and within the communist theoretical framework. The most discussed questions was not surprisingly the Transylvanian one.

The archives of Budapest and Bucharest are now showing full evidence that the Hungarian party was well aware of the policies Gheorghiu-Dej and after him Ceausescu were carrying on in Transylvania27. During a secret top-level bilateral meeting held in the summer of 1959 the Hungarian leadership openly expressed its concern about the negative changes that occurred after the 1956 revolution. But Ceausescu, as he did many times up till 1989, played the role of the orthodox communist by reminding Hungarian comrades that, according to the doctrine of non-interference, Transylvania was not the Hungarian party’s business.28 The non-interference policy was only officially given up in the 1980s. However, starting in the late 1960s, the Kàdàr-regime came up with a new theory relating to the debate over the national unity, after some populist intellectuals had called for the party to pay more attention to Hungarians across the border.

Hungarian minorites were to be cultural „bridges” between Hungary and its neighbours, while being loyal citizens the country there were living in. Particularly popular in Yugoslavia, this doctrine upgraded the role of all Magyar minority élites, which in the 60’s and in the 70’s were quite well integrated into the party and state-structures.29 Intellectuals kept stressing their double loyalty,

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27 I recently examined in Budapest (Magyar Országos Levéltár: KÜM, Romàn TÜK - 1945-64 ; XIX-J-1-j) confidential and top-secret reports sent to the Politburo by the Hungarian diplomats working in Bucharest.
28 A. Varga-G. Vincze, Kàllai Gyula nemhivatalos látogatása Bukarestben 1959 nyaràn, «Magyar Kisebbsèg», 1999/1. Strangely enough, no copy of this archival file conserved in the Romanian National Archives had been found in the Hungarian ones.
29 Bárdi, Cleavages, cit., p. 20. „By the late 1960s the institution-building efforts of Magyar minorities were infused by activists who used socialist phraseology and stressed leftish traditions”.
but instead of stressing their belonging to the whole Hungarianness they were encouraged to create the myth of the multi-ethnic local patriotism, for instance in Voivodina. Here and in Transylvania the local élites, by talking in the 70’s of the birth of regional Magyar literatures, broke up the taboo that had existed since Trianon: they denied the role of Budapest as the only possible centre of the Hungarian cultural nation.

But this policy of accepting the reality of national fragmentation only worked until the Communist party in neighbouring countries allowed Magyars to find a new identity. By the mid-80’s, the tensions caused by the speeding up of ethnic homogeneization of late-comer national states like Romania, Slovakia and Serbia reached a critical point. When even the ultra-loyal minority élites were marginalized and the whole Hungarian population discriminated, the Hungarian communist leadership developed a more confrontational approach on the national issue. In 1988 the party admitted feeling responsible for the fate of Hungarians living across the border. Nevertheless, the 1990 statement made by Antall in which he stated that he felt „in spirit” the prime minister of 15 millions Hungarians” did not imply any wish for setting back „S.Stephen’s empire”. It rather marked the political interiorization of the „unitarist”, nation-minded approach to recent Hungarian history. After 1989, one has to accept that long-term historical processes like economic globalization and the expansion of the EU to Eastern Europe are breaking down the territorialist paradigm (i.e. full sovereignty of states considered as territorial entities) which had dominated Europe since the Peace of Versalia in 1648.

The „Status Law”: putting together the fragments?

Since 1990, the multilateral support to minorities has been part of the programme of every Hungarian government. The Hungarian élite and the whole

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30 I here refer to the statement made by MátéSzuros (the leader of the „national wing” within the Hungarian communist party) in which he expressed Hungary’s concern about the human rights violations committed on peoples belonging to Magyar communities.

31 This process started well before 1989. See the article on St. Stephen, see as the Hungarian „state-establisher”, appeared on 20 August 1982 in «Magyar Nemzet». On the ideological orientation of the Hungarian intelligentsia in the late 1980s see András Kőrösenyi in A. Bozóki (ed.), Intellectuals and politics in Central Europe, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999.

32 There are five agreed priorities: 1) changing the substance of the borders, not their place, 2) assuring the right of minorities to self-identity by financing their independent institutions, 3) treating the political representatives of Magyar communities as equal partners, 4) supporting Magyar minorites in international forums, 5) setting the financial
society recognizes the legitimacy of the Trianon borders: the national issue no more has territorial features. Yet the debate I tried to outline has not lost its significance. The social, economic and cultural developing-apart of the Magyar communities increased under Communism; reintegrating these broken-off societies in the whole nation then became the main challenge for the Kin-state. The theoretical background of the so-called „Status Law” (more precisely the „Law on Hungarians living in neighbouring countries”) approved by the Hungarian parliament in June 2001 is that across the border Hungarians belong to the „unitary Hungarian nation” (egység es magyar nemzet). This law contains both practical and highly symbolic features. From the one side, it seeks to slow down the massive emigration of Magyar minorities to Hungary by placing their financial support into a comprehensive framework. Hungarians across the border can apply for benefits in fields like culture, education, public transport and temporary work in Hungary by getting a Hungarian card. In this way, a relationship is established between these individuals and the Hungarian state. To avoid any misunderstanding, one still has to stress: 1) the „card” does not imply any kind of double or external citizenship; 2) personal eligibility is based on criteria like linguistic skills and membership of Hungarian parties, churches or cultural networks, but not on ethnicity.

Up to now about 333,000 Hungarians living in neighbouring countries applied for their card, representing 15% of all Hungarians living there. The Status Law came into force in January 2002 after 2 years of political debate within and outside the country, and is now a working mechanism. Concern expressed by some EU officials regarding the possibility of inter-ethnic tensions in mixed support of minorities on a normative base in the Hungarian budget. See Bardi, Cleavages, cit., p. 31. The governments ruling Hungary between 1990 and 2002 followed quite different policies towards across-border Hungarians. The centre-right coalitions led by Antall and then Orbán spoke in terms of political reintegration and got into conflicts with the neighbouring countries on minority issues. The Horn government submitted the particular interests of Magyar minorities both to the European integration and to less tense relations with the neighbouring countries.

33 The Hungarian and the English versions do not coincide. Egység has been translated as „as a whole”, trying to avoid the misleading term „unitary”. The bilingual text available on the site of the Hungarian Office for the Hungarians living abroad (http://www.htmh.hu/law.htm).
35 That is the case for the Slovak law on the status of co-ethnics living abroad passed in 1997, which requires a three-generation Slovak ancestry.
36 The most recent data refer to 29 April 2002. See «Szabadság», 7/5/2002; the source was the HTMH. About 170.000 applied from Transylvania and over 70.000 from Voivodina (25% of the whole Magyar population of that region).
areas caused by the „affirmative action” principle which inspires this legal framework, proved to be unfounded. From a legal point of view, the law appears to fulfill „Euro-conformity” criteria; besides, most EU countries are carrying on similar policies of „preferential treatment” for co-nationals living abroad. In conclusion, however, I would like rather discuss the conceptual background of the „Status Law”.

My first point is about the conflict between fiction and reality. The Status Law redefined of the Hungarian concept of the nation as an ethnocultural community, and placed it into the debate over national unity and developing-apart after 1918. At the same time, it is likely to perpetuate some anachronistic fictions in the Hungarian public discourse, asserting the existence of a „unitary Hungarian nation”. The every-day Magyar-Magyar relationship is marked by frequent misunderstandings, which have much to do with the weird image that the Hungarian media have built around the across-border co-nationals. The reality is that the Hungarian nation is made up by a complex network of regional communities, who themselves are increasingly fragmenting. If we say that Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia form „national minorites”, in Serbia and Ukraine one should rather talk about local societies.

My second point concerns the relationship between the centre and periphery. The Status Law seems to suggest that all problems of the cross-border Hungarian communities can be settled (only) by and from Budapest. But the Hungarian capital, even remaining the symbolic centre of the nation, should not be regarded as the only political and cultural resource. Since 1989 and especially in Romania and Slovakia, Hungarian societies have become consistent political factors. The Transylvanian president of the RMDSZ Bèla Markó is also a top-level politician in Bucharest. As the leader of a national minority, he has got a difficult task: representing either local, regional and national instances such as these in Bucharest and Budapest or in his native town, Tîrgu-Mures. In my view the „vertical” approach of the Status Law fails to recognize Hungarian minorities’ struggle for building regional societies.

Finally, it is worth placing this law in the broader context of the European post cold war politics. The traditional nation-state based on territorial sovereignty is

37 According to George Schöpflin, national policies similar to the Hungarian one are in force in 11 EU countries. Nem kifogásolhat az Unió, «Magyar Nemzet», 10/6/2001.
38 Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania.
39 According to Tamàs Bauer, A hazâtlanság tartósítása, «Nèpszabadsàg», 10/1/2001, the hidden aim of this legal framework would be to detach the Hungarians living in neighbouring countries from the political nation of which they are getting to be part. I personally do not agree with the existence of „civic” nations in East-Central-Europe.
facing an irreversible crisis, and the building of a reunified Europe also implies that we should rethinking concepts like state-legitimacy, sovereignty, national belonging.\textsuperscript{40} The Status Law, by declaring that national membership cuts across state-borders, could help all central European nations reframe their identities. But it is only possible if the Hungarian élite realizes that the task this country will get after joining the EU is no less than the \textit{social and cultural} reintegration of the minorities into the national body.

\textsuperscript{40} Miklòs Bakk, \textit{Két nemzetconcepciò euròpai verseny zajlik}, «Magyar Nemzet», 7/7/2001.