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Hungary and the Transfrontier Communities¹

If we accept that the success/failure criteria of the Hungarian state's strategy are to help secure the cultural reproduction of these trans-frontier communities, then we are forced to conclude that success has eluded its formulators.

In sum, the transfrontier communities are shrinking in size, whether through outmigration or assimilation. More seriously, they appear to have lost any strong sense of a lasting future (cf. Prague Germans after 1918, Serbs of Kosovo, Gaeltacht in Scotland). In part, this is explained by a palpable level of insecurity in these communities, to which can be added fear in some cases. Note too that the Hungarian citizenship law has not succeeded in turning this around.

Internationally, it has to be said, there has been nothing, as if no one cared. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention is unenforceable, the EU is not interested (regards these issues as member state competence); and the Ljubljana recommendations of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) are an assimilationist's charter. The fate of the Minority Safepack is instructive here. It was launched under the European Citizens' Initiative instrument, the collection of one million signatures from nine member states, but was deemed not receivable by the Commission (as being a "member state competence"). It's worth adding that when it comes to ethnolinguistic minorities, the EU's much vaunted skills as a conflict resolution mechanism do not operate.

It should be noted that Hungary has sought also to rely on the institution of the "kin state", but there are doubts whether this institution is actually accepted by any of the states where the trans-frontier communities are located. The institution has been formally recognised between Austria and Italy (under the 1946 de Gasperi-Gruber agreement) and de facto exists as between the Irish Republic and the Northern Ireland, but Hungary has seemingly been denied this position, despite the bilateral agreements that have been signed with all the country's neighbours. The way in which the EU and European opinion simply accepted the reaffirmation of the Beneš decrees by Slovakia – these decrees began from the principle of the collective guilt of the Hungarian minority during the Second World

¹ Paper presented at the workshop organized by the Tom Lantos Institute (Workshop on Hungarian Minorities in an International Perspective), 19 July 2015, Budapest

War – demonstrates the absence of international concern, despite the complete rejection of collective guilt in other cases.

If we examine the citizenship concept of Hungary's successor states, it is clear enough that there has been no change in terms of integrating the aspirations of the Hungarian communities. Indeed, if anything one can see a steady pressure seeking to corral the Hungarian language into the private sphere; Serbia may be the least coercive, but is rather less than perfect.

Crucially, the majority defines what is “ethnic”, even while the minority is excluded from this process. This means that the majority has monopoly competence over citizenship and the parameters of what is part of the “civic” sphere. The contest over bilingual signs, for example, is a clear and widespread instance of this. In many ways, what emerges from this practice is a sliding scale that moves from petty oppression to a kind cultural paternalism that treats the minority culture as inferior. And it should be clear that currently in Europe nothing is more toxic than “ethnic” in the context of political legitimacy. This is not unique to Hungarians, cf. Turks in Bulgaria, Poles in Lithuania etc.

Note here that inherently the majority does not have ethnicity and, indeed, the presence of the minority is troubling precisely because it demonstrates the opposite, that majority identities are constructed along ethnic lines, by reference to symbols, narratives, culture and history, in exactly the same manner as those of the minority. The situation is exacerbated by the minority's adding its own narratives of its treatment by the majority (usually negative) as a feature of its identity construction. The outcome is a self-reinforcing positive-negative polarity which it is difficult to contain when the depolarising mechanisms and the will to use them are absent.

At the same time, the existence of the transfrontier Hungarians is, equally, a wider source of trouble for Hungary, in that it has the same function as it does towards the successor state majorities – it makes visible the inevitable ethnic quality of the Hungarian identity of the Hungarian state, which cannot, therefore, be veiled. Predictably this has created the space for attacks on the Hungarian state as an “ethnic” entity that pursues unacceptable policies.

The successor states likewise rely on this argument towards Hungary, while denying their own ethnic narratives. Leftwing Hungarian governments simply ignored the issue, indeed in the 2004 referendum the left stood out against any close relationship with the transfrontier communities, with the result that these have largely transferred their loyalties to Fidesz. Internationally, the visibility of this “ethnicity” has led many to label Hungary a trouble-maker, not

least because the same proposition applies by analogy throughout Europe, thus Hungary's concern for the transfrontier communities shows up the ethnic quality of every European state and undermines the purported purity of their citizenship concepts.

In sociological reality, all cultural collectivities have constructed a set of discourses that are ethnically coloured, hence civic norms are more particularistic than conventional assumptions allow. In the universalistic mindset there is a tacit assumption that ethnicity somehow violates human rights, which are central to the normativity of universalism. This is one of the more intriguing self-justifying narratives of the day, but it is no more than that.

In effect, we are looking at a powerful imperative that has the aim of veiling the ethnic quality of citizenship. This has its roots in post-1945 Europe, which has come to regard ethnicity as the sole or primary origin of Nazism. The wars of Yugoslav succession reinforced this. Pressure from the US has added to this. The implicit argument is that civic identities can be transcended in the march towards a single humanity, whereas ethnic identities are far more of an obstacle. Note that the current revolts by the far-right and the far-left are indicators of the resistance to this liberal universalism.

In the Hungarian case, there has been a complete rejection of regional autonomy as a possible solution, it is dismissed as "divisive" and reference to Western models cuts no ice. This is interesting in its own right, because in general Western models are regarded as superior to what Central Europeans practice, but territorial autonomy is seen as a dangerous, and in all likelihood, as an obstacle to universalism, in as much as the combination of territory and minority power is alleged to be a significant source of danger to the integrity of the state. The fact that West European experience points in both directions – Scotland, Catalonia towards secession, South Tyrol, Åland Islands towards integration – adds to the complexity.

It follows, that the minority has for all practical purposes no guaranteed access to the majority dominated public sphere, other than at the local level. There may be political appointments, but this depends on the contingent participation by a minority party in a coalition, as a junior partner. When the minority party leaves, then the appointment is usually terminated.

The core of the problem is that the phenomenon that we are looking at is that of non-consensual citizenship on the part of the Hungarians in the successor states. In sum, when the new boundaries of Hungary were drawn by the Treaty of Trianon (1920), some three-and-a-half million Hungarians found themselves attached to another country, against their will. The non-consensual quality of the

Hungarian presence in the successor states has not been transcended for the best part of a century and, it is clear enough, the majority state has made precious little effort in this direction. The fact that some three-quarters of a million applications for Hungarian citizenship have been made under the new citizenship law indicates that the non-consensual quality of the 1920 transfer of these populations remains in being. The transfrontier Hungarians continue to have a Hungarian identity that is connected symbolically and in other ways to the Hungarian state.

The outcome is that these minorities are weak in terms of agency, certainly significantly more so than the majorities. In a non-democratic system, as under communism, this was not particularly important, but once these successor states reconstituted themselves as democracies, the issue emerged as a serious defect, one that the majorities have refused to recognise, not least because, in real terms, European opinion adopts the same position. Thus what we are looking at is an issue of power. The majorities can and do exercise state power to secure their own reproduction without constraints where the minority is concerned. They are not accountable for this power or barely. Note too that the administration of the law may look neutral, but may well be weighted against the minority in practice.

It might be thought that the majority interest would dictate a policy towards the minority that promoted its consensual integration, by offering it an adequate share of the real and symbolic goods of the state. A satisfied minority would certainly serve political peace, rather than conflict or the threat of it. The fact that this has not happened suggests that the rationality of eliminating political conflict has been overridden by another, stronger logic, in this instance that of identity and the securing of political advantage by denying the minority its place in the polity. This state of affairs is far from unique to the transfrontier Hungarians and their majorities – it is found near universally in inter-ethnic relations where the majority has refused to offer the minority the necessary space and conditions. It should be evident that the rationality of identity – cultural reproduction – cannot be underrated in the analysis of politics.

The Hungarian state has been unable to do much about this, if anything its actions tend to be counterproductive, in as much as they are seen as potentially or inherently irredentist – no evidence needed for this proposition. Disclaimers are ignored.

Against this background, it is clear enough that the strategies of the Hungarian state have failed to achieve much success, so it is important to ask where they went wrong. Thus working through the ethnic minority parties, has not brought success, partly because the

leaderships of these parties are under constant pressure to demonstrate its loyalty to the majority, to show its independence vis-à-vis Budapest and from its own voter base. These can be very difficult to balance. Then there is also enormous pressure to break the unity of these parties, both from the majority, from the internal cleavages within the Hungarian community and from abroad – thus a US-based body, played an active role in splitting the unity of the Hungarian party in Slovakia and encouraging the emergence of Most/Híd as a mixed party.

What then should be the alternative strategy for Budapest? It should function as an enabler, work towards the reempowerment of these transfrontier communities, help towards the construction of stronger sense of the collective self, and endow it with agency and self-confidence.

A key step in this direction is to avoid the “double minority” trap, that the minority feels that it is in a minority, hence subaltern, relationship both with Budapest and the local majority. The established patterns are hard to break, in this context.

On the other hand, the majority system is neither totalitarian nor authoritarian, hence there are considerable gaps in the system, and these can be exploited, by an active concept of being Hungarian. To achieve this, it would be highly effective to work not only through the political parties, but vitally through civil society. A language and culture-based civil society can be legitimated by reference to diversity and pluralism, in that it would be inclusive of all who wished to participate on the basis of the Hungarian language. This can be called “Hungarophony”. This means active support for legal, economic, cultural, social and academic activity on the part of the minority, and a broad support for local level institutions run by civil society. As against this, one should note that majorities are inherently intolerant towards a competing high culture in the same state, on the state territory (cf. the Finns party’s attitude towards the Swedish speakers).

Centrally, the strategy must look to establishing urban models of Hungarian life in the successor states, in competition with that of the majority. This has to be a multifaceted model that can offer worthwhile alternatives to that of the majority. Notably, there must be new narratives of Hungarian identity, which compete with the prestige of the majority culture (note that Budapest is very vibrant currently). Basically, what this new narrative should aim at is to make it attractive to be Hungarian in a lifeworld of modernity.

However, to attain this requires major changes in Hungary itself. These include something like a truce in the cold civil war between right and left at any rate on this issue (this is hard to imagine at

this time); an acceptance by all of an overarching Hungarian nationhood concept; an end to party competition among the transfrontier Hungarians, difficult because the Hungarian citizens in the transfrontier communities have the right to vote in Hungarian parliamentary elections; and confront Jobbik (a Hungarian right-radical party) on this.

Finally, there must be an effort to dilute the exclusiveness of Hungarians in Hungary, who have a decidedly narrow understanding of Hungarian diversity, tacitly insist on a monopoly of Hungarian identity, placing the transfrontier Hungarians in a lower position on the scale of values so constructed (note that this also affects the Hungarians who live in the West and return home).