



COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

**PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE**

Council of Europe / Conseil de l' Europe
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex
Tel : +33 (0)3 88 41 20 00
Fax : +33 (0)3 88 41 27 76
E-mail : pace@coe.int
<http://stars.coe.fr>

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The Csángó Minority Culture in Moldavia

Preliminary draft report

Committee on Culture, Science and Education

Rapporteur: Mrs Tytti Isohookana-Asunmaa, Finland

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The term “Csángó” (Ceangai in Romanian) is used to identify a non-homogeneous group of Roman Catholic people of Hungarian origin living in Moldavia. This ethnic group is a relic from the Middle Ages that has survived in the melting pot of Moldavia, in the eastern part of Romania. The Csángó is archaic Hungarian, in some respects centuries behind our times, with a distinct ethnicity, linguistic peculiarities, ancient traditions, and a great diversity of folk art and culture.

2. In our rapidly changing world the Csángós are helplessly exposed to the very strong influences of their environment and in particular the village priest and the Romanian local authorities. By now they have reached a late stage of assimilation. What can be done to save this unique Central European heritage, to strengthen this ethnic group and its individuals in their identity?

II. WHO ARE THE CSÁNGÓS

3. The Csángós are one of the most enigmatic minorities in Europe. There is no consensus on who were their ancestors, where they came from, when they settled in Moldavia or how many they are today. Even the origin of the word “csángó” is controversial. The only undisputed feature about the Csángós is their strong Roman Catholic faith. They live in western Moldavia, near the eastern slopes of the Carpathians, in villages around the cities of Bacau (southern group) and Roman (northern group), along the rivers Siret, Bistrita, Trotus and Tuzlau, where they preserve traditional European methods of agriculture, body of beliefs, and mythology, as well as the most archaic dialect of the Hungarian language.

4. Their number ranges, depending on the definition, from as many as 260 000 (which corresponds roughly to the Catholic population in the area), even if more than two thirds of them cannot speak the language, to as few as a couple of tens of thousands (based on the fact that in the last official census only less than 3000 persons declared themselves as Csángós).

5. The Csángós are one of the best examples of the beneficial effects of European cultural diversity. The group has for centuries been living more or less isolated from other areas where Hungarian is spoken, in an area with a Romanian majority. This resulted in the development of a pocket with an individual, most specific culture, interacting with elements of Romanian culture. This is perhaps best illustrated by the folk songs and ballads, which are living and developing even today. They show Hungarian as well as Romanian elements. It is well known that many of the European ballads cross the political and ethnic frontiers. One of the last fortresses of this common European ballad-culture is that of the Csángós the study, fostering and conservation of which is therefore a very important task both for Hungary and Romania, as well as for Europe.

6. The lifestyle of this ethnic group still shows in many respects the marks of the Middle Ages. Its folklore and ornamental art flourish even today, achieving new products. The same is true for the folk-tradition, the body of beliefs and mythology.

7. This culture is today on the verge of extinction. Out of the maximum figure of 260 000 Csángós only 60 000 – 70 000 speak the Csángó dialect. Assistance on the European level is needed to save their culture.

8. For centuries, the self-identity of the Csángós was based on the Roman Catholic religion and the Hungarian language spoken in the family. This, as well as their archaic life-style and world-view, may explain their very strong ties to the Catholic religion. It is not unusual that the Csángó, to the question “What nationality are you?” would answer: “I am a Catholic”. In spite of this, there appear to be influences from the surrounding Romanians even in the practice of religion. Thus, for example, the Catholics of Moldavia follow their dead in an open coffin to the grave – an Orthodox tradition.

9. Their religious life has preserved many elements of the Middle Ages. Even elements of pagan rites may be discerned, such as traces of the sun-cult. Their body of beliefs and superstitions is extremely rich, with many archaic features.

10. The ethnic conscience of the Csángós is much weaker than that of other Hungarian-speaking ethnic groups. This may have several causes. It may reflect the weakly developed concept of nation among the settlers of the Middle Ages or the fact that their settlements are geographically dispersed, but an important factor has been the self-conscious, policy of assimilation practised over the centuries by the surrounding society and in particular the Catholic Church.

11. To my knowledge the Csángós or their associations do not express any claim for political autonomy or for the status of an ethnic minority. On the contrary they consider themselves Romanian citizens and are loyal to their country. The fact that many speak a Hungarian dialect does not mean that they feel to be “Hungarians”. Those who leave Moldavia and settle on the other side of the Carpathians or in Hungary do so more for economic than for nationalistic reasons.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

12. Historical, linguistic, as well as ethnographical research and the study of place names have resulted in different interpretations as to the origin of the Csángós. Some researchers believe that they descend from a group of Hungarians who split from the main group before it arrived in Hungary and others suggest that they descend from the Cumans, the Pechenegs or other tribes. Some Romanian authors even claim that the Csángós are in fact “magyarised” (or “szeklerised”) Romanians from Transylvania. It is however generally accepted by serious scholars that they have a Hungarian origin and that they arrived in Moldavia from the west. The first groups may have settled there as early as the 13th century, when the Hungarian king, Béla IV, christianised the people of Cumania, or as late as the 15th century during the reigns of Stephen the Great or Sigismund. It is also accepted that the first waves of the Csángós were settled east of the Carpathian Mountains, along the strategically important mountain passes, in order to control and defend Hungary from eastern intruders. They were later joined by other groups of Hungarians from the other side of the Carpathians, the Szeklers, who either mixed with them or settled in different villages.

13. The Csángós held bishoprics and many of them held important posts in the state apparatus of the Moldavian voivodship. After the Hungarian defeat in Mohacs in 1526, the situation started to change, the Hungarian court was too far away and the Csángós were left alone. Their intelligentsia died out and their status as privileged free peasants was abolished. After the Hungarian Franciscan Order ceased being active all institutionalised forms of Hungarian culture came to an end in Moldavia. Contacts with the Szeklers in Transylvania continued, however sporadic, and some families continued to cross the Carpathian Mountains to settle in Moldavia until the 19th century.

IV. THE LANGUAGE OF THE CSÁNGÓS

14. Whatever can be argued about the language of the Csángós there is no doubt that this is a form of Hungarian. This ethnic group has been isolated from the Hungarian cultural development. The Hungarian language went through a renewal in the 18th-19th centuries, but this did not affect the language of the Csángós. Their oldest sub-dialect, northern Csángó, preserves numerous elements of the Hungarian language of the late middle Ages. It also contains new elements, specific to this language area. The geographical dispersion of the Csángó settlements and their relative isolation contributed for a non-homogeneous language although experience shows that the different dialects are mutually intelligible and that those Csángós that still speak their language understand modern Hungarian. The wide proliferation of television aerials for TV Duna, a Hungarian language channel, in Csángó villages is an indication that they understand Hungarian.

15. The Csángó dialects offer unusual possibilities for linguistic research regarding the conserving effects of isolation and at the same time, the development of innovations under such circumstances. They also provide a series of informative examples of mutual influence between two languages, belonging to entirely different language families. The Moldavian dialect of the Finno-Ugrian language was enriched by numerous lexical elements of the Indo-European Romanian language. Similarly, there are many Hungarian loanwords in the Romanian dialect of Moldavia, often pertaining to agriculture, handicraft and state administration.

16. Today in Moldavia, the language of the school and the Church is exclusively Romanian. Correspondingly, almost all Csángós are illiterate as regards the writing of their mother tongue. The Hungarian language survived for centuries as the language of the family and the village community. The epic culture – of tales and legends – still rich among the aged people and spread by oral tradition, contributed significantly to the preservation of the language.

17. At present, however, the Csángó dialects face extinction and may be wiped out within one or two generations. The disruption of the village community, which in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe occurred in the 19th century and at the turn of the century, is now taking place in the villages of the Csángós. The authority of the Romanian language, learned in school, is much higher among young people than that of the impoverished Hungarian, used in the family. Romanian is in a monopoly situation ensured by the official culture and mass media so that young people no longer use the family language in communicating with each other.

18. Without powerful, official support for the Csángó mother tongue, a European legacy is in risk of disappearing, a legacy, which has preserved the cultural development, the elements of the reciprocal influence and of the ethnic symbiosis between Hungarians and Romanians.

V. FOLKLORE AND POPULAR ORNAMENTAL ART

19. The majority of Csángós are peasants. This fact, along with the strong persistence in the tradition of isolated cultures explains the highly traditional forms of their national costume (embroidery and weaving) and of their ceramics. In recent years, however, the replacement of traditional costumes by factory products is proceeding on a large scale.

20. The folk songs and ballads of the Csángós comprise a rich source of the most archaic strata of Hungarian folk music. Their instrumental music as well as their rich system of dance show many elements shared with those of the neighbouring Romanian villages. The couple's dance and the individual male dance that spread during the Renaissance from Western Europe towards the East did not cross the East Carpathian Mountains. At the same time as the most developed and sophisticated forms of folk dance were created in the Romanian and Hungarian villages of Transylvania east and south of the Carpathians the medieval ring dance and circle dance reached perfection. The Csángós preserve the special varieties of the folk dance of the neighbouring Romanians. There are villages in which one may find more than thirty different folk dances.

21. Among their musical instruments there are such ancient pieces as the bagpipe, lute, trump and the peasant flute with six holes, but they also use the violin, piano accordion and drum. In some villages Balkan-type bagpipes are used, in other villages an ancient type of Hungarian bagpipes to be found only in Moldavia.

22. The use of Hungarian vocal folk music, as the tradition of the folk costumes, is associated with poverty. Until recent times, folk songs and ballads of the Moldavian Csángós was the most living dialect of Hungarian folk music. It also preserved some archaic elements of the Romanian folk songs and ballads. The folklore was alive and flourishing, it was developing. There existed a specific repertoire of folk songs for weddings and other significant events, which were not performed on other occasions. New ballads were created to commemorate great events. At present, however, folklore is also on the decline.

VI. THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT

23. The strong Roman Catholic faith of the Csángós has already been mentioned. It is not by chance that the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bucharest, the Inspector for religious education and representative of the Bishop of Iasi (the capital of Moldavia) and the great majority of the catholic priests in Moldavia are all of Csángó origin.

24. Until the end of the 16th century there were two Hungarian episcopates in Moldavia. Their function was gradually taken over by a new episcopate in Bacau, while a Franciscan monastery was founded there as an affiliate of the Franciscan province of Transylvania. Due to wars and poverty in the 16th and 17th centuries many Catholic communities in Moldavia lost their priests, some of who were later replaced by Italian monks. In 1884 the episcopate of Bacau was dissolved and an archbishopric was created in Bucharest and a bishopric in Iasi. In 1895 a law prohibited the use of bilingual catechism.

25. Today the Csángós seek the possibility to sing their ancient religious hymns (in their Hungarian dialect) in the church, as they used to until the 1950s, as well as for mass in Hungarian, which they have never enjoyed. The representatives of the Catholic Church, both in Iasi and in Bucharest, while agreeing on the need to preserve the “Csángó language”, dismiss these requests as having been “invented” by “non religious people” under the influence of Hungarian nationalistic propaganda. The main argument for the use of Romanian in church services is the fact that all the 260 000 Catholics of Moldavia understand it and not all understand the Csángó dialect or Hungarian. On the other hand the bishopric of Iasi set up a committee, chaired by Professor Despinescu, to study the possibility of making the Csángó dialect into a written language and to organise a referendum among the catholic population to find out where there is a demand for religious services in Csángó.

26. There seems to be no justification however for the fact that last year the Bishopric of Iasi forbade a Hungarian-speaking priest (from Miercurea Ciuc) to hold a mass in Hungarian in the church of a Moldavian village inhabited by Csángós, at their request. The mass in question was held in a sort of pub and was followed by almost the entire population of the village.

VII. EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

27. Romanian education legislation provides that parents can choose the language of education for their children (art 180 of the 1995 Education law). There are three possibilities: education in Romanian; education in the mother tongue with history and geography in Romanian; and education in Romanian with the mother tongue as an optional subject (the latter is the one chosen by most Csángó parents). The Csángós (and their Associations) ask for their right to education in their mother tongue to be respected. It should be noted that this is much less than what other Hungarians get in Romania, be it in the departments of Harghita and Covasna, where they are the majority, or in other regions of Transylvania.

28. The local authorities in Bacau state that they are willing to observe European standards and to implement their own law. They claim however that the Csángó dialect (which does not exist in written form) is not a language. They claim also that it is not by introducing “literary Hungarian” that they will help the Csángós who, so they say, do not even understand it. They also claim that they do not have the financial means to provide Hungarian and that anyway the children whose parents had asked for Hungarian were among the lowest performers and would not be able to take up another subject.

29. Csángó being a non-written Hungarian dialect, in the same way that Alsatian or Bavarian are German dialects, it is obvious that education cannot use that dialect. The study of “literary Hungarian” will certainly not harm or replace the Csángó dialect in the same way that the study of “Hoch Deutsch” does not harm or replace the various German dialects. According to the Romanian Education Law it is for the parents to decide whether they wish their children to study Hungarian and for the school authorities to provide for it if there is sufficient demand.

30. Some Csángó parents have been asking for Hungarian classes for their children since 1977 and it is beyond any doubt that there is a demand for Hungarian as a subject in some villages inhabited by the Csángós. The fact that some families send their children to Hungarian speaking schools in Transylvania illustrates this. I visited one of such schools in the village of Guimes and observed that roughly one third of the (around 100) pupils were from Moldavia. Despite a clear provision in the Romanian law and the requests from parents in the last four or five years, there is no such subject in any of the schools concerned. Some parents who had asked for Hungarian classes for their children complained of pressure from the School Director and/or the priest.

31. It would appear that there is a lack of will (at local level) and incapacity (at central level) from the Romanian authorities to implement their own education law.

VII. PRACTICAL PROPOSALS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE CSÁNGÓ CULTURE

32. In order to encourage the Csángós to want actively to preserve those singular and, even on European terms, important cultural values, which they possess, the present situation must be changed. These values should not be associated with poverty or isolation and they should not be despised. This can only be achieved by strengthening this population culturally and economically.

- i. Parents living in Csángó settlements should be informed of the Romanian Law on Education and instructions should be issued on how to apply for its provisions concerning languages;
- ii. The possibility of education in the mother tongue should be ensured in accordance with the Romanian Constitution. In the meantime teachers working on a voluntary basis in the villages teaching the Csángó language should be paid;
- iii. There should be an option for Roman Catholic services in Csángó language in the churches in the Csángó villages;
- iv. Csángó associations should be officially recognised and included in the list of the Council for National Minorities. Particular attention should be paid to the correct registration of the Csángó minority at the next official census;

- v. Access to modern mass-media facilities should be promoted. Financial support should be given to Csángó associations to enable the issuing of a monthly publication and the functioning of a local radio station;
- vi. Scholarships should be given with the aim of developing an intelligentsia among the Csángó people and securing work opportunities in the Csángó area;
- vii. A local institute should be set up for the promotion of Csángó culture with a view to raising awareness of and respect for minorities;
- viii. An information campaign should be launched in Romania concerning the value of the Csángó culture and the advantages of peaceful co-operation between the majority and the minorities;
- ix. An international committee of experts should be established to study the Csángós;
- x. The establishment of small and medium enterprises should be encouraged in Csángó villages.

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