

Where Compassion is Intrusion

Strange Reactions to Hungary's Efforts to Help Kinsmen Beyond its Borders

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The past century dealt harshly with numerous communities. While the horrid attempt to exterminate the Jews is well-known, Stalin's deportation of several nations living in his empire has not received the attention it deserves. A book published a few weeks ago¹ shows that the recent horrors of the Balkans had far too many earlier parallels. Few people are aware, however, that the Hungarians, an eleven-century-old nation in Central Europe, received a devastating and unjustified blow in the aftermath of the First World War. Ignoring President Wilson's principle of self-determination, the victors partitioned the historic kingdom of Hungary, by arbitrarily assigning 3.5 million Hungarians, a third of the nation, and two-thirds of its territory, to the newly-created or enlarged states of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania.²

Despite or because of decades of mistreatment these Hungarians and their descendents have never ceased to regard themselves as part of the Hungarian nation. The imposition of Communism following the Second World War worsened their lot considerably. Close to half a million were expelled from Czechoslovakia and Romania to the rump state of Hungary. Those who were allowed to remain in the land of their ancestors faced the expropriation of their properties and the banning of their schools and associations. They suffered under double oppression: while everyone suffered from the iron hand of

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¹ *Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (eds. Steven Béla Várdy and T. Hunt Tooley, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003)

² In addition to the many books on the subject, for a short assessment see Balint Vazsonyi, "Bad treaty that won't go away," *The Washington Times*, June 4, 2000.

dictatorship, anti-minority policies and practices affected only the Hungarians, who could not even protest as all political expression was stifled. Improvements have been painfully slow even after the fall of the communist regimes. For example, only a fraction of the Hungarian communal or private assets has been restored to the previous owners since 1989.

The Hungarians living in the seven neighbors of Hungary feel that their very existence is in jeopardy. The policy of uprooting, expelling, discriminating and sometimes outright killing, combined with “socialist industrialization” and deliberate colonization (transferring a large number of non-Hungarians to territories traditionally inhabited mainly by Hungarians and thus changing the ethnic composition of the area), has considerably reduced the number and, to a larger extent, the proportion of the Hungarian minorities in the states neighboring Hungary. Since 1910 the number of Hungarians living in the areas detached from Hungary has declined from 3,3 million to 2,6 million. Their proportion has drastically fallen from 30 to 11 percent of the population in Slovakia; from 32 to 20 percent in Romanian Transylvania; from 28 to 16 percent in the Vojvodina (Serbia); and from 31 to 12 percent in Subcarpathia (Ukraine). The ethnic composition of the cities has changed even more dramatically, as graphically demonstrated by the case of the capital of Transylvania, Kolozsvár. In 1910, 82 percent of the city’s population was Hungarian and 14 percent Romanian. Today it is called Cluj-Napoca, where - due to the methods of deposed dictator Ceausescu and the notorious present-day mayor Funar - Hungarians comprise only 18 percent of the population.

These figures reveal a sophisticated form of ethnic cleansing. The dream of the nationalists, the elimination of the “undesirable” Hungarian minorities, has come closer to realization. While its fulfillment would still require considerable time, the aim, policies and tendencies of intolerant majoritarian elites inevitably generate constant tension and conflict. The international community should recognize that the source of ethnic tensions is not the demands of minorities but the unwillingness of many governments to satisfy their democratically expressed aspirations to preserve their identity.

It is against this background that on June 19, 2001, a 93 percent majority of the Hungarian Parliament, including the Socialists who then sat in opposition but now govern Hungary, passed a “Law on Hungarians Living in the Neighboring Countries,” known as the „Benefits Law”. The fundamental aim of the Law was to mitigate the consequences of decades of both overt and subtle forms of discrimination by providing mainly cultural benefits to citizens of Hungary’s neighboring states whose identity is Hungarian, to help them preserve their linguistic and cultural identity and heritage, and to curtail the recent trend of migration to Hungary. (Both the disparity of living standards and second class citizenship induces many to emigrate.) Thus, this legislation aimed at promoting economic, political and social stability. The benefits were to be available to anyone bearing identification issued by authorities in Hungary. Throughout the year and a-half of the legislative process, Hungary maintained contact with and informed both its neighbors and the European Union about the aim and content of the law. The law is far from being unique in Europe, many countries (including Germany, Greece, Spain, Portugal, and, ironically Romania and Slovakia) have similar measures, providing benefits to their co-nationals living beyond their borders.

As unbelievable as it appears, the two countries where the largest number of Hungarian national minorities live, i.e., Romania (1.5 million) and Slovakia (0.6 million), protested against Hungary’s Benefits Law. They submitted the matter to the European Union and the Council of Europe, complaining that Hungary’s alleged “extraterritorial” jurisdiction interfered with their internal affairs. The only possible explanation for this conduct is that Romania’s and Slovakia’s aim of gradually reducing the number of their Hungarian population and thereby providing a belated justification for the borders unfairly drawn in 1919 has remained intact.

Most of Hungary’s neighbors, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Ukraine, understand and accept the aims of the “Benefits Law.” Some even welcome it as helping their own endeavors to promote the well-being of their citizens. Wilfried Martens, the President of the European People’s Party, the largest faction in the European Parliament, called the goals of the Law “legitimate and commendable.” In October 2001, the European

Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) of the Council of Europe expressed its approval of the principles of the Law, while making some proposals, so as to satisfy Romania's and Slovakia's objections. The Hungarian government expressed its willingness to modify the wording of the Law and to engage in further discussion with the governments concerned regarding the practical application of the Law. On December 22, 2001, the Prime Ministers of Romania and Hungary reached an agreement resolving all outstanding issues.

In May 2002, there was a change of government in Hungary. Sensing a "softer" Hungarian line and finding the gates to EU and NATO membership open, Slovakia became more bellicose in its opposition to the Law, while Romania reopened the matter by demanding additional changes. The new Hungarian government went out of its way to accommodate both neighbors.

Through the Commissioner for Enlargement, Mr. Verheugen, the EU jumped on board and voiced some concerns. He objected to the Law's use of the term "Hungarian nation" when referring to Hungarians living in the neighboring states. Surprisingly, Mr. Verheugen also accepted the view that the parts of the Law relating to educational support for Hungarian students in neighboring states implies an extraterritorial effect and that it is discriminatory when the benefits are available only to Hungarians and their spouses. A Dutch Socialist member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Mr. Jürgens, then introduced a resolution criticizing the Law, mainly along the lines mentioned above. On June 25, 2003, the Assembly (with only about one hundred out of more than six hundred members present) accepted the resolution. This was done despite the fact that the Hungarian Parliament had already tried to placate the Law's critics by passing a number of modifications.

Finally, in mid-July Hungarian Foreign Minister Kovács visited Bucharest and Bratislava, making further concessions and thus ending the stalemate occasioned by Romania's and Slovakia's opportunistic diplomacy to block effective assistance to their

respective Hungarian minorities. The opposition FIDESZ party's chairman of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, Zsolt Nemeth, in a statement issued on 21 July, said the government had written off ethnic Hungarians abroad and exposed them "to the aspirations of Romanian and Slovak anti-minority forces." The parties of the previous government thus voted against the modifications to the Law, saying that they would not agree to the evisceration of the measure.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and Commissioner Verheugen said that the amended version of the Hungarian Status Law was in line with EU norms and congratulated the Hungarian government. Many Hungarians, especially those in the neighboring states, were deeply disappointed not only by what they considered weakness of the new Hungarian government, but especially by the attitude shown by the European critics of the Law. The present writer has long held the view that the international community should appreciate that Hungarians living beyond the borders substantially contribute to the stability of the region and are strong adherents of the Euro-Atlantic orientation of their countries. They have never resorted to violence; they struggle for their civil rights, indeed for their survival, solely by political means. They deserve recognition and support.

Sixty-five years ago János Esterházy, then leader of the Hungarians of Slovakia (who was the only one in parliament to vote against the deportation of the Jews and later died in a Communist prison) was right in observing that, "[a] just policy toward the national minorities is a far stronger factor for security than many written pieces of law. It is stronger than any Maginot Line since nothing gives more strength to a state than when not only the citizens who belong to the majority ethnic group, but also the minorities feel at home." The guiding principle of the Hungarian Benefits Law was to help the too often mistreated Hungarian minorities feel at home and to encourage them to stay in their native land. The officials in Brussels have yet to understand this fundamental point.

The problem of national minorities is a world-wide phenomenon. Any attempt to eliminate them as a national group undermines the political stability of the state, often of a whole region. Many observers call this a form of cultural genocide. The principles, the model and the framework for solving the problem are at hand and easily accomplished with a little good will and a great deal of foresight. In the western half of Europe, decentralization, devolution, local democracy and territorial autonomy are everyday practices. A report drawn up by Swiss parliamentarian Andreas Gross and passed by the Assembly of the Council of Europe on July 24, points out that “most present-day conflicts no longer occur between states but within states... Autonomy allows a group which is a minority within a state to exercise its rights, while providing certain guarantees of the state’s unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

In the interests of stability and fairness the various European institutions should urge every state, including Hungary’s neighbors, to end all forms of discrimination against their national minorities. If that does not happen there will be endless tension between the majority nation and the national minority, and also with the kin state of the minority. It is in the interest of all the states of Europe, and it is a special responsibility of the powers that drew up the peace treaty signed in 1920 at Trianon, including the United States, to ensure that the Hungarian minorities will at last be able to breathe freely and feel they have a future in their native land, where their forebears have lived for well over a millennium.