
***NATIONAL MINORITIES AND REGIONALIZATION. A COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVE ON ROMANIA AND SLOVAKIA***

**Andra Karla Sienerth, PhD Student, University of Bucharest, Project: "Rute de
excelenta in cercetarea doctorala si post-doctorala - READ", Contract nr.
POSDRU/159/1.5/S/137926 (proiect cofinantat din Fondul Social European prin
Programul Operational Sectorial Dezvoltarea Resurselor Umane 2007-2013, Romanian
Academy**

Abstract: What regionalization determines is the emergence of a multilevel governance in which, by applying the principle of subsidiarity, the decisions are taken at the nearest level of their direct beneficiaries. The debate on this policy of regionalization brings forward a series of political, economic, ethnic and cultural criteria that have been weighted and integrated differently by various Central and Eastern European countries in their regionalization projects.

The research aims at comparatively analyzing the manner in which ethnicity was managed in the context of regionalization in Romania and Slovakia, two countries which comprise a similar percentage of Hungarian minority. While in Romania regionalization is still at the stage of public and political debate – just the regional development policy being implemented, in Slovakia it has already been enacted. Thus we find it interesting to see which the reasons are for these divergent developments.

The research seeks to answer to the question whether the ethnicity criterion is a decisive factor in the articulation of regionalization projects and the subsequent political decision to implement the project. In order to analyze that, we will assess the influence exerted by the largest national minority (Hungarian) of the two countries in this matter.

Thus, we analyze the mechanisms used by the Slovak political elite to manage the ethnic criterion in implementing regionalization, as well as the debates that arose in this context. Regarding the Romanian case, given the previously exposed status quo, we will study the debates around the regionalization projects since 1989, focusing on the considerations linked to the Hungarian minority.

Keywords: regionalization, ethnicity, national minorities, Romania, Slovakia

Introduction

The fall of communism opened up significant challenges and opportunities for countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Structural reforms in economy required the adjustment of the administrative system, in conjunction with the process of democratic consolidation and European integration.

Yet, in spite of a similar type of centralist administrative system inherited from communism, the transition towards a decentralized state witnessed differentiated paths and paces in the countries in this region, due to several political, social, economic and cultural factors. Among these, a rather contentious topic considered throughout the regionalization process was the status and role of the dominant national minorities, a particularly sensitive issue in a region that was throughout history demographically and culturally heterogeneous.

Therefore, our comparative study focuses on the influence and weight of the ethnic dimension in the process of regionalization in Romania and Slovakia, two countries that have a similar proportion of the same dominant national minority, namely the Hungarian one. Our aim is to assess whether ethnicity was a decisive factor in the design and implementation of regionalization policies in the two countries, by taking into account the minority's claims on the one hand, and the response from the political elites on the other hand.

We find this research particularly interesting, because in spite of sharing similar features with regards to the Hungarian minority, the achievements in the design and implementation of regionalization vary greatly between the two countries.

I. The Hungarian Minority in Romania and Slovakia

1. Territorial and Administrative Developments in Romania and Slovakia (1918-1989)

Both the Romanian and the Slovak people have long lived in traditionally ethnically and culturally heterogeneous regions, for centuries in a row being under political and cultural dominance of other nations. This state of affairs sparked nationalism, which constituted the underlying base for subsequent nation- and state-building processes in the late 19th – early 20th centuries.

These processes were catalyzed by the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, which allowed the creation of Czechoslovakia and Greater Romania, while depriving Hungary – which had been a dominant regional power – of a large portion of its territory.

In what concerns the Slovak nation- and state-building process, it must be noted that its territory had been integrated and developed its own identity as part of larger multinational states, first as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and afterwards as part of Czechoslovakia. It has been argued that the century-long subordination to the Hungarian sphere of influence has undermined the consolidation of the Slovak national identity, while giving birth to stronger regional and local identities. These territorial identities were further supported by the administrative divisions inherited from the Austro-Hungarian Empire (“*zupas*”), which were largely confined to the natural territorial borders¹.

In the case of Romania, the Old Kingdom (1859-1918) – composed of former principalities under Ottoman suzerainty Moldavia and Wallachia – served as a cradle of Romanian nationalism and a strong reference point for the Romanian elite in Transylvania, back then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Therefore, after the integration of the former Austro-Hungarian provinces of Transylvania and Bukovina and the former Russian province Bessarabia in the aftermath of World War 1, the Romanian Kingdom inherited not only a large percentage of ethnic minorities, but also different types of territorial units and administrative systems². Hence, one of the first priorities in the following years was the

¹ Jennifer A., YODER, *Crafting Democracy: Regional Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013, p. 112

² The Old Kingdom was functioning according to the administrative system introduced by the legislation from 1864 and 1866; Transylvania featured a more decentralized system; Bukovina had a rather archaic system; Bessarabia exhibited only an apparent local autonomy, being in fact subdued to the tsarist absolutism.

adoption of legislative and administrative measures aimed at consolidating the Romanian unitary state.

In the interwar period, two major tendencies can be traced in the political discourse on the territorial and administrative organization of the Romanian state: a centralist model, promoted by the liberals, and the regionalist model, promoted by the National Peasants' Party. In spite of their apparent antagonism, both models adhered to the primary objective of political and national consensus: the statehood consolidation. In fact, while there has been an oscillation between these models, fears of affecting the territorial integrity of the young state determined a very restricted application of decentralization principles, regional authorities being granted certain administrative powers, but not legislative ones.

The establishment of the communist regimes in Romania and Slovakia brought about the creation of a highly centralized state administration of Soviet inspiration. State-building policies in Czechoslovakia had been rather aggressive, especially after the brief period of Slovak statehood in the period of the World War 2, the communists de facto subordinating the Slovak institutions and political activity to the authorities in Prague. Attempts to grant Slovaks a diluted type of self-administration in the aftermath of 1968 revolution failed, and the feeling of alienation deepened among the Slovaks, which eventually led to the peaceful dissolution of the federation in 1992³.

In Romania, two stages can be noticed. The Stalinization period under Dej (1948-1965) witnessed the implemented a new form of territorial and administrative organization in accordance with Soviet directions (“*regiuni*” and “*raioane*”), including the proclamation of the Hungarian Autonomous Region in the areas inhabited mainly by Hungarian ethnics, in an attempt to resolve the issue of the national minorities and in line with the Soviet deceptive ideology of “freedom of the peoples”. Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1989) reversed this policy under the banner of nationalist communism, being in favor of a unitary state, heavily centralized politically and administratively. The result was the replacement of the Soviet-type territorial units (“*regiuni*” and “*raioane*”), including the Hungarian Autonomous Region, with not-so-new organizational units called “*județe*”. Arguments supporting this decision were: creating a direct link between the central and local levels, avoidance of powers overlaps, streamlining communication and coordination between administrative centers (horizontally and vertically)⁴. This latter form of territorial organization suffered only minor changes in 1981, being in place even nowadays.

2. *The Hungarian Minority*

As already mentioned, Hungarians have exerted a significant influence on the territories of nowadays Romania (especially Transylvania) and Slovakia, being for centuries endowed with more political and cultural rights than other populations from the Hungarian and then Austro-Hungarian multinational states. This privileged status meant eased access to the social, economic, cultural and political life in society, all of which were lost along with the dissolution of the Empire and subsequent rise in the majority groups' nationalism.

³ John, COAKLEY, *The Territorial Management of Ethnic Conflict*, Routledge, 2004

⁴ “Principiile de bază adoptate de plenara C.C. al P.C.R. cu privire la îmbunătățirea organizării administrativ-teritoriale a României și sistematizarea localităților rurale – 5-6 octombrie 1967”, *Politica*, Bucharest, 1967, pp. 9-10

This change of status from a dominant ethnic group to a minority group over such a short period of time must have had a significant impact on the collective consciousness of the Hungarian ethnics in these countries, one of the outcomes being the consolidation of their national identity giving birth to claims for autonomy, be it cultural or territorial. This process was facilitated by the fact that the Hungarian minorities remained concentrated in specific areas defined by the landscape: mountainous regions in central Romania and the south-western lowlands in Slovakia.

In fact, the demographic composition in the two countries changed substantially after the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy in 1918. Present-day Slovakia witnessed a dramatic decrease in the Hungarian population both in absolute and relative numbers, namely from 884,309 (30.29%) in 1910 to 458,384 (8.48%) in 2011, mainly due to the intergovernmental agreements on the exchange of populations after World War 2, but also due to assimilation policies⁵. Romania⁶ witnessed only a slight decrease of Hungarian population, from 1,425,507 (7.9%) in 1930 to 1,227,600 (6.5%) in 2011⁷. In Transylvania alone, while part of the Dual Monarchy, there were 1,662,180 Hungarian ethnics in 1910⁸.

Ethnographic studies have analyzed the interactions between the majoritarian groups and minority ethnic groups, highlighting diverse perceptions, attitudes and behaviors towards each other, as well as numerous clichés, myths and stereotypes that still fuel interethnic tensions and distrust. In both countries analyzed, the national consciousness of the Romanians and Slovaks was sparked by the feelings of oppression caused by the former privileged status of the Hungarians under the monarchy and later during the Vienna Arbitration. “Forced Magyarization” in the past caused fears of instances of “forced Slovakiazation/Romanianization” in the unitary national states. In fact, studies⁹ have revealed that traditionally heterogeneous communities tend to be more tolerant than ethnically homogeneous communities (be it minority or majoritarian), and that in general people tend to separate their interethnic relations from the politicization of ethnicity that fuels nationalistic policies.

3. Political Representation of the Hungarian Minority

After the fall of communism several political parties representing the Hungarian minority emerged within both Romanian and Slovak political arenas and a review of these structures is necessary in order to better understand the configuration of the political life in the two cases.

⁵ Yuko, KAMBARA, “Slovak Perspectives on the Hungarian Minority: The Possibility of an Ethnographic Approach to Nationalism and Multi-ethnic Experiences”, in Osamu, IEDA (ed.), *Transboundary Symbiosis over the Danube: EU integration between Slovakia and Hungary from a local border perspective*, Slavic Eurasian Studies No.27, Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2004, p. 27

⁶ The census data from 1930, refer to the first census conducted in Greater Romania was conducted, whereas the 2011 data refer to the census conducted in present-day Romania (excluding northern Bukovina, Bessarabia and Cadrilater region lost by Romania after World War 2).

⁷ Institutul National de Statistica al Romaniei, *Rezultate definitive ale Recensamantului Populatiei si al Locuintelor – 2011 (Caracteristici demografice ale populatiei)*, p. 5, available at www.recensamantromania.ro, last accessed on 05/10/2015

⁸ Ioan, BOLOVAN, *Istoria României. Transilvania*, Vol. II, George Barițiu, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, pp. 1-174

⁹ Yuko, KAMBARA, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30

In Slovakia¹⁰, in the early 1990s three this kind of political parties had been established and they formed in 1998 a single party, due to the new electoral law (1998) which increased the threshold – the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK-MKP). The above mentioned party was included in the coalition governments in 1998-2002 and in 2002-2006 and entered into opposition from 2006. Due to some internal tensions that appeared after the loss of the representation within the governing coalition, some members of the SMK-MKP left the party and established a new political party, Most-Hid (2009). This new party entered the Parliament and also the governmental coalitions in 2010 and 2012.

The Hungarian minority in Romania¹¹ was first represented by the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romanian (UDMR), which became the main actor representing the Hungarian minority within the Romanian political scene, even without a legal registration as political party. Part of the political opposition until 1996, UDMR became since then part of governmental coalitions. A similar phenomenon with the case of the Slovak SMK-MKP in 2006, namely several internal tensions, determined the emergence, at the beginning of 2000, of other political organizations and parties linked to the representation of the Hungarian minority: the Hungarian National Council of Transylvania (which became a political party in 2011 under the name of the Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania), the Szekler National Council (2003-2004) and the Hungarian Civic Party (2011). A unification of all these parties and organizations in a single structure was envisaged by some political leaders, as it is the case of the European Parliament deputy László Tőkés, who considers this step as a major one in achieving the main behests of the Hungarian minority in Romania¹².

II. Regionalization policies after 1989

1. Slovakia

In Slovakia, the process of regionalization begun when Vladimir Mečiar and his political party Movement for a Democratic Slovakia lost power. This was due to Mečiar's policies to hinder the Hungarian minority's claims for autonomy. More precisely, his government's reforms¹³ from 1996 divided the territory in eight regions along the north-south axis and 79 districts, in such a way as to avoid the preponderance of Hungarian ethnics in any region or district. His policy was backed by Slovaks' fears concerning a potential massive political mobilization of the Hungarian minority, but also had perverted effects, as it sparked opposition to his centralized model of the state¹⁴.

A genuine process of regionalization started in late 1998, under the new government headed by Mikuláš Dzurinda. The agenda for modernizing the state following the guideline principles of regionalization was summed up in the programmatic document entitled "Strategy

¹⁰ Daniel, BOCHSLER, Edina, SZÖCSIK, "The Forbidden Fruit of Federalism: Evidence from Romania and Slovakia", *West European Politics*, volume 36, issue 2, 2013, pp. 426-446

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Adrian, EPURE, "Tőkés visează să unească partidele maghiare: "Putem obține autonomia", *paginaeuropeană.ro*, 01/12/2015, last accessed on 05/10/2015

¹³ Daniel, BOCHSLER, Edina, SZÖCSIK, *Art. Cit.*, p. 17

¹⁴ Jennifer A., YODER, *Op. cit.*

of Public Administration Reform in the Slovak Republic”¹⁵. The document compared a “separated model” of state organization, characterized by an effective devolution of powers from central government to regional authorities, on the one hand, and an “integrated model”, characterized by a limited transfer of power. Furthermore, Viktor Niznansky became the Government Commissioner for Public Administration Reform.

At the time, in the political discourse the tendency was to establish twelve regions, but the actual boundaries were subject to negotiation among the political elites. While all parties in the governmental coalition were favorable to regionalization, they had different views on its shape¹⁶: SDL (Party of the Democratic Left) and SOP (Party of Civic Understanding) opted for a centralized state, being in favor of eight regions and district offices. SDK (Slovak Democratic Coalition) favored an in-depth regionalization with twelve regions; SMK-MKP (Hungarian Coalition Party) was altogether positive about regionalization, but imposed a condition of forming a 13th region (Komárno) in the south-west region of Slovakia where most Hungarian ethnics live.

The proposal put forward by SMK-MKP was not accepted by the coalition parties and it was considered to produce tensions in a region where the ethnic configuration is extremely delicate: 52% Hungarians and 42% Slovaks¹⁷. Without the coalition support, “the SMK position shifted to a compromise in favor of a higher proportion on its population in regions and, after territorial adjustments, declared its support for twelve regions in April 2001”¹⁸. However, it was too late because the SDL and SOP had already reached an agreement on eight regions. In 2001, the reform of the Slovak administrative system produced eight self-governed regions, none of them with Hungarian majority, because the ethnic criterion was not a central one, but merely one among fourteen criteria put forward by the experts.

After 2006 when SMK was voted out from power following the parliamentary elections, dissidents from the party formed a new political platform that managed to accede to power in 2010 and 2012. This new ethnically Hungarian party does not challenge the status quo of the administrative division implemented in 2001, deciding not to pursue territorial autonomy.

2. Romania

Like in the case of Slovakia, the perspective of EU integration determined the Romanian government in 1998 to introduce eight intermediary structures called Development Regions (“Regiuni de dezvoltare”). These cannot be labeled as genuine regional levels because they lacked juridical personality, serving only for the management of European funds and statistics. It was made clear from the very beginning that there was no consensus among political elites and even society to implement a profound regionalization.

In 2009, UDMR had a legislative proposal for the Law no. 315/2004 regarding Regional Development in Romania, aimed at replacing the eight development regions with sixteen micro-regions and five macro-regions, providing as arguments the necessity to ensure

¹⁵ *pdc.ceu.hu*, last accessed on 05/10/2015

¹⁶ Jan, BUČEK, “Regionalization in the Slovak Republic”, in Gerard, MARCOU (ed.), *Regionalization for Development and Accession to the EU: A Comparative Perspective*, Open Society Institute, 2002, pp. 150-151

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ *Ibid*

a balanced development, and thus the elimination of regional disparities, in line with the European convergence policies¹⁹. It made no reference to the ethnic criterion.

However in 2011 the leader of the Democrat-Liberal Party and incumbent prime minister announced the intention of his party to launch the reform of the Romanian administrative system through regionalization. Roughly speaking, the project consisted in replacing the existing counties (“județe”) with eight mega-counties (still called “județe”). Preserving the name “județe” was an artifice to avoid reviewing the Constitution, which states that the Romanian territory is divided in counties (“județe”), towns and communes. The current powers of the County Councils and devolved institutions of the ministries were to be transferred to the local authorities, and the newly-formed County Councils were to retain attributions only in the field of regional development.

UDMR, as member of the governing coalition, objected to this proposal, claiming a separated region for the three counties currently inhabited by large Hungarian population (Harghita, Covasna and Mureș). Once again, they offered an economic justification: being tied up with other three counties (Brașov, Alba and Sibiu) that are already more developed and more prone to attract investments, the regional disparities would persist or even deepen. In addition to this, UDMR put forward the claim of a territorial autonomy regime on a region that overlapped with the Szekerland from the Middle Ages, offering the example of Northern Tirol in Italy²⁰.

In this political debate, the intervention of Romanian President Traian Băsescu bluntly rejected this administrative layout proposed by UDMR, stating that such an autonomous territorial unit was only established by Stalin. Still, he offered as an alternative to preserve the two counties with Hungarian majority as distinctive counties (Harghita and Covasna), and Mureș county to be annexed to other two neighboring counties.

The opposition coalition Social-Liberal Union (USL) put forward their own regional layout, which preserved the existing counties (“județe”) and added an intermediary level (the regions). This form of administrative reorganization would presume a Constitutional review. In what concerns the institutional arrangements, it provided for the establishment of the Regional Courts and Regional Councils, and the transformation of the Senate in the Chamber of the Local Authorities.²¹

The feedback given by the Hungarian political elite to the USL version of regionalization ranged from criticism that it would increase the administrative bureaucracy and costs by implementing a new administrative layer, to the acceptance of the transformation of the Senate²². On the whole, UDMR rejected this form of regionalization.

Conclusions

Slovakia and Romania, like all former socialist countries, inherited a heavily centralized political and administrative system, which had to be adjusted in line with the economic and social transformations after the fall of communism. In addition to that, the issue

¹⁹ *cdep.ro*, last accessed on 02/10/2015

²⁰ Sorin, NEGOIȚĂ, “PDL anunță asumarea răspunderii pe regionalizare și capitalele regiunilor...”, 10 iunie 2011, *cursdeguvernare.ro* (last accessed on 02/10/2015)

²¹ *USL project of regional development*, p. 19

²² *Art. Cit*, *cursdeguvernare.ro*

of the dominant national minority constituted a central topic of debate, any tensions being sought to be eased democratically.

Claims for bringing closer the decision-making process to the citizens appeared as a legitimate goal, in particular in those regions where the population felt marginalized or discriminated against in the past, leaving them impoverished and backward. This was the case also of the Hungarian minorities in Romania and Slovakia, which felt that under communism much of the industrialization and infrastructure efforts were channeled in the regions inhabited preponderantly by majoritarian citizens. Furthermore, these claims for regional cultural or territorial autonomy were raised on grounds of national identity.

In both countries, the Hungarian minority was actively involved in the political bargaining on the topic of administrative and territorial reform, their representative parties being often co-opted in government. Yet, their negotiation margin was narrowed by the nationalistic fears from the majoritarian population and populist discourse.

Unlike Slovakia, which managed to implement a regionalization policy, in Romania little progress has been made in establishing a genuine intermediary administrative units, primarily due to lack of political will to provide self-government to these regions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: „*This work was financially supported through the project "Routes of academic excellence in doctoral and post-doctoral research - READ" co-financed through the European Social Fund, by Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, contract no POSDRU/159/1.5/S/137926.*”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

1. BOLOVAN, Ioan, *Istoria României. Transilvania*, Vol. II, George Barițiu, Cluj-Napoca, 1997
2. COAKLEY, John, *The Territorial Management of Ethnic Conflict*, Routledge, 2004
3. IEDA, Osamu, (ed.), *Transboundary Symbiosis over the Danube: EU integration between Slovakia and Hungary from a local border perspective*, Slavic Eurasian Studies No.27, Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2004
4. MARCOU, Gerard (ed.), *Regionalization for Development and Accession to the EU: A Comparative Perspective*, Open Society Institute, 2002
5. *Principiile de bază adoptate de plenara C.C. al P.C.R. cu privire la îmbunătățirea organizării administrativ-teritoriale a României și sistematizarea localităților rurale – 5-6 octombrie 1967*, Politica, Bucharest, 1967
6. YODER, Jennifer A., *Crafting Democracy: Regional Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013
7. Articles
8. BOCHSLER, Daniel, SZÖCSIK, Edina, “The Forbidden Fruit of Federalism: Evidence from Romania and Slovakia”, *West European Politics*, volume 36, issue 2, 2013
9. Online sources
10. EPURE, Adrian, “Tökés visează să unească partidele maghiare: “Putem obține autonomia”, *paginaeuropeană.ro*, 01/12/2015, last accessed on 05/10/2015

11. Institutul National de Statistica al Romaniei, *Rezultate definitive ale Recensamantului Populatiei si al Locuintelor – 2011 (Caracteristici demografice ale populatiei)*, p. 5, available at [www..recensamantromania.ro](http://www.recensamantromania.ro), last accessed on 05/10/2015
12. NEGOIȚĂ, Sorin, “PDL anunță asumarea răspunderii pe regionalizare și capitalele regiunilor...”, 10 iunie 2011, cursdeguvenare.ro, last accessed on 02/10/2015
13. *USL project of regional development*
14. cdep.ro, last accessed on 02/10/2015
15. pdc.ceu.hu, last accessed on 05/10/2015