

Circumventing the State: Securing Cultural and Educational Rights for Hungarian Minorities

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The Hungarian minorities in Romania and Slovakia are embroiled in a struggle over cultural and educational rights, pitting them against the central governments in Bucharest and Bratislava. Both sides clash in an intellectual space devoid of creative thinking; the space is occupied by a premise that the government must define and finance education and cultural institutions. This paper addresses this presumption by exploring the theoretical justifications for removing the state from the process of establishing such institutions for ethnic minorities. The Hungarian case study demonstrates how the character of the state can determine the role, or viability, of alternative social structures. The study concludes that these non-governmental institutions effectively and essentially counterbalance state power, and therefore must be fostered within the confines of the current nominal democracies in Slovakia and Romania.

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Introduction

The nation-state is an entity under constant challenge from the various nations that either have no state of their own or are forced to live separated from the state of their ethnic kin as minorities.¹ This situation has become exacerbated since the end of the Cold War, since grievances can now be aired safely. Groups are asserting their “collective rights” to “autonomy” or “self-determination,” or merely attempting to reserve independence in certain regulatory domains. But what should the state forfeit? How far do rights of ethnic groups extend? What operational necessities or practicalities follow from this?

The problem of accommodating ethnic minorities can be elucidated via an examination of the Hungarian minority situation in Central and Eastern Europe. This case involves demands for certain language rights and cultural freedom, at a minimum, accompanied by additional claims for educational rights, administrative powers and even certain types of autonomy that fall short of secession.² The minorities and their allies are engaged in creating legal and political safeguards that will delineate areas of independent activity. Individuals have been working on the international, regional and national levels to forge constitutions and secondary law that would grant minorities certain rights pertaining to culture, education, and language—most of these pertain, directly or indirectly to the use of the Hungarian language.³ Yet in the area of Europe, once commonly referred to as the “East Bloc,” the process of obtaining guarantees for minority rights and for their exercise has been contentious. New “democratic” governments have been unwilling to acquiesce to any proposals leading to decentralization, and in some cases, simply the notion that minorities may remain unassimilated by the majority language and culture.

According to most proposals or paradigms for addressing minority rights, the state—the central government and its administrative apparatus in the first instance, and beyond that, local government—must be persuaded to take some positive action to grant positive rights. Positive action implies that the state must do something and the right which is granted is the right to commit a particular act. Herein lies the problem: the nature of power and bureaucracy and the unique history and culture that has shaped political attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe have combined to produce a formidable obstacle to liberalization.⁴ The majority governments are not interested in relinquishing power. International

pressure has been most effective at forcing change, but even this has been minimal, and sometimes only cosmetic.

Moreover, even the minorities assume that it is government that must grant them the rights and privileges they seek; only government can take action to meet their needs. The operative assumption on all sides is that the government will define the scope of its power and that of the minorities. The Hungarian minorities in Romania and Slovakia are currently embroiled in a struggle over cultural and educational rights, pitting them against the central governments in Bucharest and Bratislava. Both sides clash in an intellectual space devoid of creative thinking; the space itself is defined by certain premises that regrettably remain unquestioned. The first of these premises is that the government must regulate and delineate the role, function, scope, and substance of educational and cultural institutions, and second, that these must be state-financed. Such premises predate current governments, and even the recent communist regimes—which were most blatant in their intrusion, especially in terms of content—finding their roots in the administrative organs of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Both assumptions, however, must be challenged if the Hungarian minorities are to obtain greater autonomy and control over the education of their members and the dissemination of their culture. As long as Hungarian minorities remain dependent on state sanction and government coffers, the fate of their education and culture will remain subject to capricious government policies and vulnerable to centralizing tendencies, to policies of assimilation and possibly even eradication.

This paper addresses this presumption by exploring the notion of negative state action and the theoretical justifications for removing the state from the process of establishing viable educational and cultural institutions for ethnic minorities. The first section summarizes attempts to secure minority rights within the state-centric international context. This is followed by an exploration of the concepts of liberty and the state, culminating in a description of the liberal democratic state. Education and culture are addressed within this context, in the fourth section, with particular emphasis on the way in which any monopoly, especially a state, can infringe upon liberty and thus, true liberal democracy.

In the fifth section, the practical likelihood of creating and maintaining educational and cultural systems particularly in non-liberal state settings is assessed with reference to the Hungarian minorities in East Central Europe, particularly those in Slovakia and Romania.⁵ The case study demonstrates how the character of the state can determine the role or even

the viability of alternative social structures, especially when it precludes the enforcement of existing international and even national legislation intended to protect individuals and groups living as permanent ethnic minorities. The final point expresses the conviction that these nongovernmental institutions counterbalance state power, and therefore must be fostered within the confines of the current nominal democracies in Slovakia and Romania.

The Struggle for Minority Rights in the Nation-State System

The rise of the nation-state and nationalism created the minority status. Under multiethnic monarchies or theocracies ethnicity was constrained by stronger political forces. It was only when territory was consolidated into new states based on cultural and linguistic affinity that this changed. The charge of nationalism, to make ethnic and territorial boundaries coincide, threatened many nations with extinction or assimilation.⁶ States obtained “sovereignty” that was to protect them from domination or interference by outside powers; within its boundaries state government was the sole enforcer of law and order. Later, as notions of self-government and democracy evolved, individual rights began to encompass rights to observe different religions, and cultural traditions and to employ different languages.⁷ In some cases, this was reflected in a “bill of rights.” Such individual rights were extended to collectivities or ethnic groups to some extent with the introduction of the term “self-determination,” and through Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Though self-determination was based on individual rights, in practice it was granted to geographically-concentrated groups, not scattered members of a diaspora. Ethnic communities now appeared to have the option to secede from states to create their own polities.

Ultimately, however, self-determination as it was exercised through secession, or irredentism was doomed. First, it was difficult to gauge the will of groups in a democratic manner, because in order to determine what was a majority vote, some arbitrary, or at least subjective, district lines had to be drawn. “The absolute right of self-determination as expressed in referenda is sociologically irrelevant if it does not contain general criteria concerning electoral boundaries” (Ankerl 1994, 9). Second, the concept came into direct conflict with balance of power politics. Fear of a multitude of unstable small states and, closer to home, of a diminution of influence, led the large powers to resist any attempt to shift boundaries.

Finally, the Third Reich, where Hitler used the pretense of protecting ethnic Germans to invade neighboring sovereign states, led most decision makers to view collective rights in a critical light. The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration made no reference to the rights of groups. In the 1960s, however, experts began to express dissatisfaction with the UN Charter and other existing human rights documents for their failure to separate minority rights from human rights, thereby leaving them unattended. The drafters of the 1966 UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) included Article 27, which stated: "in those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language" (Benoît-Rohmer and Hardeman 1994, 10). Here it was acknowledged that minorities had cultural, religious and linguistic rights "in community" with one another. It was a step away from the strict argument that minority rights are only a subset of human rights.

In the final analysis, power politics won out in Europe with the 1975 Helsinki Accords, in which all parties, from the Soviet Union and its satellites to the Western Europeans, agreed to respect post-World War II borders. Borders were never to be altered again, and in exchange, minorities would ostensibly be able to exercise their rights. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries committed themselves to a document that included a "Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations Between Participating States." Principle VII, paragraph 4 declared:

participating States on whose territory national minorities exist will respect the right of persons belonging to such minorities to equality before the law, will afford them the full opportunity for the actual enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms and will, in this manner, protect their legitimate interests in this sphere (Benoît-Rohmer and Hardeman 1994, 10).

Whether they were willing to take their obligations seriously or not, the communist countries were now accountable for meeting certain standards. Measurement of these standards, which referred only to individuals, continued to be troublesome, but the Helsinki Accords provided human rights groups and sympathetic governments with something to point to as the basis for their arguments on behalf of discriminated persons.

In the post-Cold War period much of the debate among minority group advocates, international lawyers and bureaucrats has focused on bringing collective rights onto the agenda of the organizations charged with addressing human rights and stability in Europe. Proponents of extending collective rights to minorities to supplement their individual rights argue that this be done based on rights that accrue to individual members of an ethnic group when they come together or act as a group. Accordingly, minorities require additional protection because "some rights find their locus in the community rather than the individuals who comprise the community" (Geroe and Gump 1995, 675). Beyond this, advocates of collective rights are divided between those who maintain that national legislation and international agreements should secure the rights of minority ethnic groups without granting rights that the majority does not share, and those espousing a more "aggressive" approach whereby, "minority group members must be given extra rights, rights that extend beyond those extended to the majority" (Geroe and Gump 1995, 675). The latter approach is based on reasoning similar to that of the U.S. Supreme Court *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978) majority opinion that under conditions of disproportionate discrimination formal inequality may be necessary to remedy the resulting situation. "The fact that facially neutral statutes can impact more adversely on minority groups than upon the majority suggests that collective guarantees of rights for ethnic minorities that exist beyond those afforded to members of the majority are both necessary and justified" (Geroe and Gump 1995, 684).

The debate about collective rights continues to be waged in international fora, as well as within the context of national legislative proposals. In 1990, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), Copenhagen Conference on the Human Dimension placed the minority issue on the agenda. The Copenhagen Document that resulted from the conference contains a list of rights, "the broadest inventory of minority rights to have been adopted by an international body to date" (Benôit-Rohmer and Hardeman 1994, 10). The document defends the rights of "persons belonging to national minorities to exercise fully and effectively their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law" and obliges states to "adopt, where necessary, special measures" to insure full equality (*Human Rights Law Journal* 1990, 233). Specific rights that can be exercised individually or in community include: utilizing the mother tongue in private and public, professing and practicing religion, establishing and maintaining cross-border contacts, establishing organizations and associations and partici-

pating in non-governmental organizations. States are required to create conditions that protect and promote the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities of national minorities. This can be accomplished by forming "appropriate local or autonomous administrations corresponding to the specific historical and territorial circumstances of such minorities and in accordance with the policies of the State concerned" (*Human Rights Law Journal* 1990, 233). Finally, the CSCE states recognized the right of individuals to seek remedy in the event that their rights are harmed.

The 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities Article 4.3 maintains that states should create opportunities to learn or be instructed in a minority mother tongue. Yet this, like the CSCE/OSCE⁸ documents, is conditioned by the words "wherever possible." Likewise, the 1995 Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, though it produced an extensive list of rights accruing to ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious minorities, continued to firmly uphold the central role of the state. The parties to this agreement, like the OSCE and UN documents, were the states. Moreover, almost an entire section (section III, articles 20–22) was devoted to reaffirming state sovereignty. "Nothing in the present framework Convention shall be interpreted as implying any right to engage in any activity or perform any act contrary to the fundamental principles of international law and in particular of sovereign equality, territorial integrity and political independence of States" (Council of Europe 1995, section III, article 21). In all of these instances, the debate regarding collective rights remains unresolved. The terms identity, minority status, sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence are not clarified and none of these documents are legally binding. Regardless, when one speaks of collective rights or individual rights, they both depend on the state for enforcement.

The Theoretical Basis for State Non-Intervention

The arguments for limiting state intervention are the product of classic liberal, "libertarian," or like-minded thinking.⁹ This "libertarianism" refers to a system of politics that implies free-market capitalism, political and civil liberties, and room for ample pluralism in cultural, artistic, educational, and religious approaches to human life" (Machan 1989, xv). It proceeds from an exploration of the concepts of freedom and rights, natural and individual, and of the distinction between liberalism and democracy. The main contention, according to proponents of the "mini-

mal state," is that the individual and his or her rights are the foundation of society and that there is no collective, no state, with special rights beyond that of individuals.¹⁰ While majority-rule is necessary for the operation of a democratic system of governance, it must be carefully limited to certain domains, so as not to infringe upon, or violate, individual rights.

Liberty, Hayek writes, "is that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society" (1960, 11). Liberty precedes all social organization. It exists as part of the Lockean state of nature. As such, it rests on the notion of negative rights, rights that protect against infringement by any other person or entity, including a state, however voluntary the basis of its existence, or its laws. For Hayek, the virtue of liberty, freedom of thought and action, is the fact that it alone makes progress possible. "The case for individual freedom rests chiefly on the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of all of us concerning a great many of the factors on which the achievement of our ends and welfare depends" (Hayek 1960, 29). The values that humans hold and the ability to meet material and other needs determine success and survival. However, the fact that there is no universally accepted way of meeting human needs points clearly to the necessity for competition. The state, created and maintained upon the voluntary consent of the individual members, must refrain from monopolizing power or action. A state monopoly would hypothetically never remain permanent.

Nonetheless, states have historically demonstrated a propensity to increase their power over individuals via centralization and bureaucratization. Surprisingly, this trend is accelerating instead of reversing in some of the newly democratizing countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The old ideology is being substituted by nationalism and enforced by a more thorough centralization in many more cases than existed during the communist era (King, 1996). The politicians, already accustomed to emphasizing the needs and virtues of the collective, the state or "the people," and to dismissing the role of the individual, now define the people in ethnic terms, according to the dominant nation. It is this political process that places the liberty of minorities in jeopardy.

According to one prominent Slovak ethnologist, in the territory of contemporary Slovakia ethnic conflict has historically manifested itself as the struggle of a particular ethnic group against the state. The succession of conflict since the interwar years (1914–18) has pitted Jews against a Hungarian state, Germans against a Czechoslovak state and now, Hungar-

ians against a Slovak state. "All conflicts that took place did [so] as a conflict of one part of an ethnic community on the one hand and state power on the other hand" (Kalavský 1995).

The Character of the State: Democracy and Liberalism

The character of a state determines the extent to which individual rights, or liberty, will be protected. No modern state is a minimal one, but within the range of existing redistributive regimes there are various mechanisms of governance and philosophical justifications for state intrusion, or regulation. Democracy is one method of governing, where majority rule determines what policies will prevail. Since Schumpeter redefined the classic theory of development, the consensus holds that "democratic method...is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote (1947, 269). This system affords peaceful change, safeguards liberty and offers a means to educate the citizenry of a state. But it knows only one limit to government—prevailing majority opinion. For this reason, democratic states, especially those saddled with the totalitarian legacy of communism, must be moderated by liberalism.

Democracy can decide what must be done, but not whether it is fitting to act at all.

Clearly it is necessary for people to come to their own agreement as to how necessary tasks are to be performed, and it is reasonable that this should be decided by the majority; but it is not obvious that this same majority must also be entitled to determine what it is competent to do. . . . If we recognize the rights of minorities, this implies that the power of the majority ultimately derives from, and is limited by, the principles which the minorities also accept (Hayek 1960, 107).

The community of individuals under a regime must have a common body of principles capable of limiting, or alternatively challenging, short-term preferences of a temporary majority.

Liberalism, with its insistence on preserving areas of action beyond the realm of the state or at a minimum providing competing alternatives is then, the greatest proponent of a civil society—the plurality of institutions opposing and balancing the state and controlled and protected by the state," according to Gellner (1994, 1). Liberalism creates the possibility that

a dynamic pluralistic society can exist. Democracy is the framework, but perhaps Gellner omits the intervening variable, liberalism, which enables civil society to develop. Though the state maintains its monopoly on enforcement, the civil society can ensure that state regulation takes on a negative nature, as opposed to a positivist one that results in overwhelming government regulation. The pluralistic society can temper the state's ability or desire to exercise its power; this is most crucial in the sensitive areas of education and culture.

Education and Culture

“Politics—indeed educational policies—can be used to further, transform, or destroy a social, cultural or national identity and does affect groups or individuals in different levels of scale of change” (Brock and Tulasiewicz 1985, 1). That liberty is the protector of diversity becomes infinitely clearer when one considers the situation of ethnic minorities, those who espouse alternative perspectives and cultures and who advocate alternative systems to foster their needs and goals. If democracy is coupled with liberty the path will be clear for ethnic minorities to organize, establish, and fill in the political framework with their unique contributions to society. If ethnic minorities in the new Central and Eastern European democracies seize the opportunity, they will find that they have created something that is protected, but not directed, by the state.

The troubling scenario occurs when liberal democracy appears to be far out of reach, when only institutional or nominal democracy exists and ethnic minorities are permitted a voice to express concern, but not to affect legislative change. The simple Lockean notion of democracy is insufficient because it assumes all majorities are temporary; it fails to account for permanent ethnic minorities (Freeman 1995, 11). At the core of the current dispute between ethnic Slovak or Romanian majorities and Hungarian minorities is the fact that the division between them is permanent. It is not linked to shifting political debates, but rather to the question of identity, which at this point does not co-exist with a strong sense of civic, as opposed to national, participation, or belonging. Under these circumstances, what hope is there for alternative education or culture? This scenario, where majoritarian democracy exists without meaningful compensation for minorities, is the one addressed in the Hungarian case study.

Government support of agendas that neglect minorities or damage their status often become issues of survival not only because of the money governments refuse to grant minorities, but also because of the funding

they provide to their pet projects. In Slovakia, minorities charge that some of these new initiatives are directed against them (*Government Defends Ethnic Policy* 1995). If minorities perceive that government support will determine their chances of economic, political or cultural survival, the first arena to be affected by such a struggle will be the educational one; its impact can be felt for generations. "In multinational states the problem of who is to control the school system tends to become the chief source of friction between nationalities. . . . To one who has seen this happen in countries like the old Austria-Hungary, there is much force in the argument that it may be better even that some children should go without formal education than that they should be killed in fighting over who is to control that education" (Hayek 1960, 379).

Yet if the goal is to remove government from the equation, as liberal thinkers urge, the task in Slovakia and Romania is formidable. It is particularly difficult to imagine the possibility of nonintervention given the historical legacy from the period of Hapsburg rule up to and including the Cold War era. Even after the Hapsburg empire had been destroyed, old political patterns were evident, leading to observations that "our nominally republican system is actually built on an imperial model, with our professional politicians standing in the place of the praetorian guards" (Nock 1946, 19). Likewise, in this time of transition from communist rule, it is unrealistic to expect central governments to revoke recently enacted detailed legislation in areas affecting minorities, such as language and education, and moreover to abstain from any regulation at all. However, this does not mean that efforts should not be made to undercut the role of the government, to erode and counterbalance state activity. In fact, the most important charge to the people of Slovakia and Romania of any ethnicity is to create alternatives to the government monopoly. In short, a civil society must be established because this is the only way that under the current regimes minorities will obtain greater autonomy in the educational and cultural spheres. If minority groups can forge their own structures and financial foundations, they will cease to depend on the central government for their cultural sustenance.

The Hungarian Minority Case

In the aftermath of World War I and with the conclusion of the treaties of Trianon and St. Germain, the borders of Austria, Hungary and Romania were redrawn and the two "successor states" of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia came into existence. The new borders left members of all of

the nations, or ethnic groups, outside of the state. Each nation-state contained citizens of a different ethnic group and many states suddenly found themselves with a substantial diaspora community in the region. This was most dramatic in the case of Hungary, which lost two-thirds of its territory and one-third of its population. Roughly three million Hungarians suddenly became foreign citizens. Today, close to two million ethnic Hungarians live in Romania; 600,000 in Slovakia; 400,000 in Serbia (or somewhat less since the recent Balkan war); 200,000 in Ukraine;¹¹ and approximately 200,000 combined in Austria, Croatia and Slovenia (Schöpflin 1993, 2). One out of three Hungarians lives in one of the countries bordering Hungary (Sunley 1993, 28).

The Hungarians in Romania and Czechoslovakia suffered under communism from various forms of discrimination; they were targeted by Ceausescu, Husak, and their deputies for assimilation and treated as second class, potentially traitorous, citizens. As the proclaimed transition toward democracy occurred, new constitutions were drafted and political structures and secondary laws were formulated to implement them. The Hungarian minorities, comprising nearly 8.9 percent and 10.7 percent of the Romanian and Slovak populations respectively, were not included in the drafting process.¹² Their contributions came in the form of proposals for broader educational, cultural and political rights for minorities and in their negative response to government proposals that ranged from the reactionary and discriminatory to the conservative, laden with weak language and inadequate instruments to ensure legal and political implementation and enforcement.

All of the constitutions fell short of minority expectations. In Romania, while Article 6 of the constitution granted the right of ethnic identity, Article 1 proclaimed the "unitary and national state" of Romania and Romanian as its only official language. A Romanian foreign ministry official explained, "the formal approach is that unitary is an antonym to federalist state. The word national should be read according to paragraph 4 [of the Romanian constitution]: 'Romania is a common land of all its citizens'" (Farcas 1994). Yet if this were the case, why not employ "democratic" instead of "national" or "republic" instead of "national state?" The September 1992 Slovak constitution, likewise speaks of "the Slovak nation" and designates Slovak as the sole official language.

Ethnic groups in Romania and Slovakia are entitled to form parties and minority members have the right to obtain interpretation for documents and in court. In Romania, according to Decree-Law Number 8 on registering and establishing political parties (enacted 31 December 1989)

251 members are required to register a party. Decree-Law Number 92, adopted 18 March 1990, guarantees that, "organizations representing the national minorities registered at the date of adoption of this decree-law which fail to gather the necessary number of votes in order to get a mandate to the Assembly of Deputies are entitled to one deputy mandate. . . . Organizations of national minorities will be considered similar to political groups, if they propose lists of candidates on behalf of respective minorities" (*White Paper* 1991, 7). Beyond this, "the Romanian Government sets out from the principle according to which democracy is one and indivisible: there cannot exist one democracy for persons of Romanian ethnic [sic.] descent and a different democracy for the persons of other ethnic descent living in Romania" (*White Paper* 1991, 1-2).

On the local or national level, Hungarian minority groups have peacefully¹³ articulated their demands—special rights to self-government on the cultural and administrative levels, which they call "autonomy." The ethnic patchwork that is East Central Europe must be accepted and managed, they argue. In the Hungarian case, this may mean "guaranteeing genuine rather than merely formal equality of rights of the national and ethnic minorities, creating various forms of autonomy" (Tabajdi 1994, 17). Minorities that are territorially scattered, the Hungarians assert, ought to have cultural autonomy, while those in compact areas could compound their cultural rights with territorial autonomy and regions of contiguous minority communities might receive regional autonomy. A solution could involve a combination of some or all of these rights to local self-government.

Liberty

The current "democratic" governments of Vladimir Meciar and Ion Iliescu in the Slovak Republic and Romania respectively, are not liberal. While democratic constitutions and institutions exist, the political cultures are far from liberal in the classic sense. Slovak and Romanian citizens may suffer infringements of their individual rights, but the ethnic minorities in these two states are more routinely stigmatized and disadvantaged, politically and economically.¹⁴ In both countries the governing coalitions have introduced secondary legislation regarding education and language rights that directly conflicts with the national constitutions and threatens to strip minorities of even those rights that were preserved under communism. This situation of nominal-institutional democracy has led one Hungarian politician in Slovakia to conclude, "Ethnic conflict came about because the

[1989 Velvet] Revolution was based on democratic, not liberal concepts" (Petöcz 1995).

"Things have been made worse by an extreme centralization, which is, in part, inspired by a striving not to allow any decisions to be made at a level where the ethnic and socio-cultural mix might be different than that at the level of the [nation]-state" (Várady 1994, 2). The centralized political structures and processes serve majority interest at a cost to minorities. In Slovakia, for example, the Meciar government has continually advocated redistricting southern Slovakia, the region where Hungarians are most heavily concentrated, so that the Hungarians would be divided among five larger districts running wider from north to south, clearly diluting the ethnic minority vote. Under Iliescu, the system of government-appointed prefects has worked to undermine the power of local authorities by placing a check on their activities. When local authorities in several counties permitted the posting of bilingual or trilingual (Romanian-Hungarian or Romanian-Hungarian-German) signs, the prefects filed lawsuits against the localities and in Mures County, where Hungarians constitute 40 percent of the population, the prefect had the signs dismantled in 17 villages without waiting for a court decision (*Rumanian Government Prefects* 1994, 2). In 13 out of 16 cases argued from 1993 to July 1994, the courts ruled in favor of the government-appointed prefects and against the democratically-elected local councils, despite the fact that the prefects acted in violation of Article 7(4) of the Council of Europe's Recommendation 1201 (Protocol on the Rights of National Minorities to the European Convention on Human Rights) and Article 6 of the Romanian constitution, which protects minorities' right to "preserve, develop and express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity."¹⁵

The ethnic Hungarian political parties have responded to the challenge of centralization and the perceived opportunities inherent in the transition to democracy with their proposals for local, ethnic self-government. Without exception, the main organizations representing the Hungarians living in the Central and Eastern European diaspora advocate a concept they call "autonomy" as the solution to their troubles and the method of resolving the conflicts that have evolved between them and their ethnic majority governments. "Autonomy" as it is used in the literature and statements of the Hungarian minorities refers to self-government in cultural, educational, and administrative domains. The minority leaderships elaborate by dividing this autonomy concept into three components: personal autonomy, local autonomy and territorial autonomy.

The types of autonomy were designed to correspond to the different minority situations within which the Hungarians find themselves. Minorities that are territorially scattered obtain cultural autonomy, while those in compact areas—where they are concentrated and make up over 50 percent of the population (in Romania this applies to Harghita and Maros counties where 75 to 80 percent of Hungarians are concentrated)—compound their cultural rights with local autonomy, and contiguous minority communities may also receive regional autonomy. Local autonomy augments personal autonomy by providing the minorities with additional language rights in local administrative procedures. Regional or territorial autonomy is only possible if the members of the minority are physically concentrated. If not, personal autonomy is necessary to protect minority rights to education (separate schooling) and preservation of cultural traditions, not to mention language (Markó 1994).

Education and Culture

Romania

The Helsinki Watch noted three years after the Romanian revolution of 1989 that Hungarian minorities lack equal access to education in their mother tongue (*Struggling for Ethnic Identity* 1993, 123). There are insufficient Hungarian teachers and classes given the level of demand, and local school inspectors and government officials harass those Hungarian schools that are operating. Of the total teaching units (preschool, primary, secondary and vocational) 8.4 percent are Hungarian. At the preschool to university levels 235,912 students (4.9 percent of the Romanian student population) were learning Hungarian. About 7,000 students of the almost two million-strong Hungarian minority in Romania are receiving a higher education. Ethnic Hungarian teachers comprise more than five percent of the country's teaching staff. At Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca some subjects are taught in Hungarian. In response to student requests, new groups have been organized for studying mathematics, physics, chemistry and history in Hungarian. Some 1,350 Hungarians attend Babes-Bolyai and 597 attend courses in their mother tongue. The Medicine and Pharmacy Institute and Theatrical Institute, both in Turgu Mures, have Hungarian language programs. At the former, 97 percent of the student body studies in Hungarian; at the latter, all students study in their mother tongue. Unsatisfied with this limited menu, Hungarians have been campaigning for the reestablishment of the Hungarian- language János Bolyai

University, which existed in various forms for 400 years until 1959 when it was merged with Babes University to form Babes-Bolyai University (*White Paper* 1991, 20).

The right to education in the mother tongue, granted by Article Art 32 (3) of the Romanian constitution, was qualified by the clause: "The ways in which these rights are exercised shall be established by law" (*The Legislative and Institutional Framework* 1993, 18). On 28 June 1995 parliament passed and on 24 July Iliescu signed an education law which provides only for education in the mother tongue at the primary and secondary levels. Tuition in minority languages is restricted at the tertiary level. The study of and proficiency in the Romanian language is compulsory for every Romanian citizen regardless of nationality, a provision which provides a potential justification for denying ethnic minorities translators for official (judicial, etc.) proceedings. The elderly, who were full-grown adults before they involuntarily became Romanian citizens, are particularly vulnerable. "Proficiency" is also an imprecise term, open to interpretation. Another article grants "officially recognized churches" the right to organize educational systems to train their personnel, a provision that is far too narrow in its exclusion of non-recognized churches, the congregation, or members of the community at large.

More disturbing, a provision dealing with educational content holds that,

[t]he history of Rumanians and the geography of Rumania are to be taught in the Rumanian language at the secondary level and according to the same curriculum and textbooks used by Romanian [sic.] classes. In primary education these subjects are taught in the mother-tongue (*Rumanian Chamber of Deputies* 1994, 3).

Romanian history and geography cannot be taught at the secondary level in minority languages and all children will be taught the history of the Romanians, not the history of the nation-state. Already, ". . . the Chairman of the German Democratic Forum, representing some 100,000 Saxons and Swabians in Romania, has complained about the fact that the Romanian history books do not mention the existence of ethnic minorities in the country" (*Minority Affairs* 1995).

The education law also bans minority-language vocational training in legal, technical, agricultural and commercial subject areas and provides exclusively for university education in pedagogy and the arts, "if re-

quested and provided for by law." On the vocational level, according to ethnic Hungarians, the education bill eliminates training in subject areas that was permitted even by Ceausescu (though he successfully forced a decline in the number of institutions teaching in minority languages). This would be tantamount to a restriction of access to jobs and professions to minorities in their native language, a violation of ILO Convention No. 111 and its 1991 Recommendation to the Romanian government. In a memorandum to the Council of Europe, the Romanian government asserted,

[m]edical and vocational training, as well as the teaching of history and geography, have always been held in Romanian, the national language of the country. Therefore, it is not a matter of imposing restrictions on the education for the minorities (*Further Details* 1994).

Finally, the education law maintains that all educational facilities will remain in the hands of the state. The Hungarians, who have yet to obtain compensation for or regain properties expropriated under communism, are permanently denied redress. In fact, the Honorary President of the Hungarian Democratic Union in Romania (HDUR) claims, "[t]he education law renationalizes the church education, limiting secondary and post-secondary education to the Romanian language" (Tökes, 1995). Responding to the Council of Europe queries regarding the issue of restitution of ecclesiastical property, the Romanian government remarked, "the scarcity of financial means with which the confessional education is confronted does not spare the educational system in general during this difficult period of transition and economic restructuring" (*Further Details* 1994).

The law flies in the face of the spirit and principles enunciated in the Copenhagen CSCE/OSCE concluding document, the Romanian constitution and Council of Europe recommendations (particularly Recommendation 1201, 1993).¹⁶ U.S. officials stated that, "it does not appear at this point that the law itself as written violates international standards. However, if as implemented it becomes a repressive issue we [the Clinton Administration] would have a big problem" (*Holbrooke* 1995). One observer notes, "all ethnic problems have become politicized . . . Hungarians are interpreting the education law in the worst light partly because it serves their purposes" (Burke 1995, 1). The responsibility for the ethnicization of politics lies, nonetheless, with both Romanian and Hungarian leaders.

On 18 July 1995 the HDUR executive body issued a twelve-point plan

to protest against implementation of the education law. The strategy included lobbying international organizations, utilizing the Hungarian diaspora to inform the international public opinion, and staging several rallies. The twelfth and final point instructed the HDUR "Crisis Commission" to draft "proposals on further ways to protest, including possible forms of civil disobedience" (*Ethnic Hungarians* 1995). Most encouragingly, however, in a separate statement the executive chairman of HDUR stated that the party will take steps to organize an alternative Hungarian education system in Transylvania (*EIU Country Report* 1995, 10).

Slovakia

Education levels in all of the Hungarian minority communities decreased since the 1950s relative to the national majority populations. In Slovakia, an average of 16 Hungarians out of 1000 citizens graduate from college or university, while for Slovaks the comparable figure is 37 out of 1000. The percentage of ethnic Hungarians within the pool of those who obtain a university education has moved from 5.2 percent in 1959–60 to 4.9 percent in 1990–91 (*Memorandum* 1992, 4). There is no Hungarian university and the number of elementary and grammar high schools with Hungarian language instruction has decreased.¹⁷ In 1955, 565 elementary schools were attended by 61,325 students. By 1970, 490 schools educated 68,902—on average each remaining school had to assume responsibility for 32 additional pupils. By 1990, 257 elementary schools served 48,405 students (*Memorandum* 1992, 3). The trend was different for grammar schools, for which the number of Hungarian schools went from nine in 1955 to thirteen by 1968 and the number of Slovak schools with Hungarian language classes rose from two to nine. In 1990 ten Hungarian schools were operating and eight Slovak schools had Hungarian classes. These increases, however, reflected changes in the grammar school student population, which rose from 1,980 in 1955 to 4,045 in 1968 but fell to 3,782 in 1990 (*Memorandum* 1992, 3).

The current Meciar government has adopted a new education program, which entails the gradual establishment of an "alternative" or bilingual education system. Officials explain,

[a]t these schools students would study part of their curriculum in their mother tongue and part of it in the Slovak language. The current schools for ethnic groups with the entire curriculum taught in their native

tongue would remain in place. Hungarian parents would be able to opt for either having their offspring's entire education in their mother tongue or for alternative education (*Newspaper Comments* 1995).

Parents are now able to choose Slovak instruction for their children in currently Hungarian-language schools. The dismissal of several non-sympathizing principals of Hungarian language secondary schools indicates the Slovak government's intent to bring all schools under closer government control, probably at the expense, literally and administratively, of the Hungarian schools. Slovak officials have asserted that where there is even one ethnic Slovak in a Hungarian majority village, a Slovak-language school must be established. The proposal has raised the ire of Hungarian political leaders and sparked student demonstrations and declarations advocating civil disobedience.

Furthermore, the government eliminated the 80 million korunas that had been allocated to the Hungarian minority from the 130 to 140 koruna total allotted to all Slovak minorities for the maintenance of their cultural and educational infrastructure (*Position of the General Educational Meeting* 1995). Compounding this, a new language law was passed by the Slovak parliament on 15 November 1995. The law restricts the official use of non-Slovak languages to marriage ceremonies. It could also effectively lead to the abolition of all non-Slovak press.¹⁸ This measure exploits the fact that the Basic Treaty Slovakia signed with Hungary to guarantee territorial borders and minority rights defers at various points to national legislation. The treaty has been accepted, and even praised, by ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia, but restrictive national laws—violating the principles, letter and spirit of the treaty—would place this important prerequisite to normalization of Hungarian-Slovak relations into jeopardy. Ethnic Hungarians protest:

Justification for teaching in our native language is solely determined by the state, not by citizens or demand. Education is still the main area in which state totalitarianism can be followed, even though Slovakia's political system has formally become pluralistic. The only reason why education in Slovakia has not been delegated to local governments is not to allow elected Hungarians to have a voice in matters of education (*Position of the General Educational Meeting* 1995).

Conclusions: Alternatives to State-Centric Solutions

The theoretical argument for removing the state from the educational and cultural spheres has considerable merit particularly in light of accepted notions of individual rights, and given assumptions about progress and creativity which are shared by classical liberals, and many Western citizens today, except those of the most Hobbesian sort. It is however, impractical to consider the wholesale reversal of history and legislation to bring about the virtual absence of government intervention in these areas. This is particularly true in Slovakia and Romania, and for this reason any implementation or application of the *laissez faire* argument is confined by the reality on the ground. Government will not be removed, but it can be circumvented and ultimately balanced by the civil society.

Just as “theorists of democracy who operate in the abstract, without reference to concrete social conditions, end up with a vindication of democracy as a general ideal, but are obliged to concede that in many societies the ideal is not realizable,” so must advocates of classic liberalism accept the constraints the particular culture and history of Central and Eastern Europe place upon the realization of their theory (Gellner 1994, 188). The traditional model of democracy assumes one type of individual, informed and principled, participating in a secular, individualist state. Yet many countries are attempting to adopt the democratic paradigm, despite the fact that some of these prerequisites do not exist.¹⁹ Indeed, existing culture must often be reconciled with democratic structures. The irony of democracy is that while “the underlying model is that of a society which is the fruit of the will of its participants or members,” people live in a culture they do not chose (Gellner 1994, 184). “A culture is a system of prejudgement” (Gellner 1994, 185). It precedes democratic decision making and cannot be selected by democratic means.

This is not to say that socio-political presumptions cannot be altered and should not be challenged. Indeed, the civil society as a whole, or at a minimum its constituent elements, will offer alternative mentalities and methodologies. Hopefully, the stubborn notion that the minorities must rely on the state for the perpetuation of their unique language, culture and education will be replaced by independent activity within the scope of local activity. If the state will not protect different ethnic groups, as it does in Switzerland, South Tyrol and Belgium, then it must be counterbalanced. For it is most certainly a futile exercise to attempt to convince politicians such as Vladimir Meciar of the necessity for liberal national legislation.

Under the current regimes in Romania and Slovakia, as the case study above demonstrates, no meaningful change can be realized in the legal status of ethnic minorities. This is not to say that the minorities should not argue their case before parliament or continue to negotiate with their Romanian and Slovak counterparts, but the most fruitful results can be achieved by circumventing the current leadership. Local initiatives and independent activity ought to be harnessed to erode and ultimately diffuse the power of the central government and to nurture the roots of a potential groundswell of support for individuals and political groups with a more liberal approach. It is instructive to note how vehemently Meciar rails against nongovernmental initiatives, especially those supported by the Hungarian-American financier, George Soros. That Soros has been declared *persona non grata* by the Slovak government is not simply a result of some anti-Western, anti-Hungarian or anti-Semitic vendetta, although these emotions certainly color Meciar's rhetoric. An astute politician, Meciar can clearly comprehend a threat to his power. Likewise, the political and (if Meciar has his way) constitutional struggle between the premier and Michal Kovac, the President of the Slovak Republic, also reflects not only Meciar's desire to further consolidate power within his office, but also opposition to a President who advocates dialogue and a more conciliatory approach to the Hungarian situation. Significantly, Kovac's chief foreign affairs advisor is a strong supporter of nongovernmental organizations. "NGOs," he asserts, "have a role in establishing relations between citizens and the government" (Demes 1995).

In the field of education the first step towards establishing alternatives to state the monopoly, especially under current political circumstances, should entail the reprivatization²⁰ of church properties so that the familiar and proven church schools might lead the way to independent initiatives in the realm of education and culture. Subsequent efforts would involve lobbying against detailed legislation and the proposal of broad laws which would protect all minorities, even Slovak or Romanian minorities in Hungarian majority regions or school districts, but would not delineate for local communities the structure of their educational and cultural institutions. The state of school systems in southern Slovak districts or in Transylvania must not be a national issue; debates concerning this topic should be localized. The question of Slovak and of Romanian national identity must be resolved constitutionally, at the highest level, so that a broad, flexible and multiethnic definition prevails. Beyond that, the national governments should concern themselves with economic and

foreign policy and be satisfied with merely drawing the broad outlines for educational and cultural activities, most of which are at any rate a matter of local implementation. NGOs are not banned in Slovakia or Romania and to date there is no detailed legislation regulating their activity, although such legislation has already been proposed. This lack of detailed positive legislation offers perhaps the greatest opportunity for reducing state involvement in education and culture. As NGOs and other private (possibly profit-making) organizations expand their scope of activity, they will either replace, compete with, or supplement state activities and ultimately diminish state authority in those contexts.

The ethnic Hungarian representatives have responded to the government initiatives by offering alternative legislative proposals and by internationalizing their situation, drawing support from Budapest and bringing their cases before international fora provided by the European Union, NATO, OSCE, and UN. Yet this response reveals a tendency toward the same state-centric thinking exhibited by the national governments they rail against. By fighting the battle on terms set by the state government, the minority blindly fails to exploit the opportunities inherent in decentralization.

In short, it will not be the legalization of the notion of “collective rights” or the inclusion of Hungary, Slovakia and Romania into the European Union or NATO that will offer the possibility for Hungarian minorities to protect their education and culture. Instead, their ability to do so will be inextricably intertwined with the fate of the structure and process of governing in the nation-states concerned. Only negative legislation and decentralization—removing the prime ministers and other national politicians from the process—will grant ethnic minorities, Hungarians and others, the freedom to act according to their interests.

Notes

¹Nation is defined as a group of people who share a national consciousness, which can be based on several variables in any number of combinations: history, phenotype, language, territory, etc. See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 1.

²For an elucidation of self-determination without secession, see Max M. Kampelman, “Secession and the Right of Self-Determination: An Urgent Need to Harmonize Principle with Pragmatism.” See *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 1993, 5).

³The Hungarians define themselves first according to language, but also territory—in most cases still defined by the boundaries of the former Hungarian Kingdom. See Istvan Bibs. 1991. *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination*. Highland Lakes: Atlantic Research and Publications), or for a more recent summary, George Schvpflin. 1993 *Hungary and Its Neighbors*. Paris: Institute for Security Studies, Western European Union. May.

⁴See writings of Max Weber and Cyril Northcote Parkinson.

⁵The situation in Slovakia and Romania is most politically sensitive. There are more Hungarians in either country than in Serbia, Ukraine, Croatia or Austria.

⁶The term nationalism is used here, as Gellner defines it: "...a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent." See Gellner (1983, 1).

⁷See the writings of J.S. Mill and his contemporaries.

⁸At the January 1995 CSCE summit in Budapest the organization was rechristened the Organization on Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE).

⁹The term liberal is used throughout this paper in the common 18th–19th century meaning, connoting a *laissez-faire* or hands-off approach to government.

¹⁰The term minimal state is employed by Robert Nozick, for example, to refer to a state concerned with only the minimal governance need to ensure protection and democracy.

¹¹Most of these Sub-Carpathian Hungarians (85 percent) live in a 25 kilometer zone along the Slovak, Hungarian and Romanian border that was given to Czechoslovakia after the first World War and taken by Stalin in 1945.

¹²CIA World Fact Book:

¹³This point must not go unappreciated, nor should it be taken for granted, despite the fact that the ethnic Hungarian leadership is composed of intellectuals, usually literati, who advocate rational, democratic and non-violent means toward obtaining their ends.

¹⁴This is not necessarily the case where the minority political leadership is concerned, since they can turn to the mother-country, Hungary, and to the international Hungarian diaspora for assistance.

¹⁵The protocol, ratified by Romania, holds: "In regions in which substantial numbers of a national minority are settled, the persons belonging to that minority shall have the right to display in their language local names, signs, inscriptions and other similar information visible to the public." Article 20 of the Romanian constitution gives precedence to international law over Romanian law.

¹⁶The relevant portion of Council of Europe Recommendation 1201 (1993) reads: "Every person belonging to a national minority shall have the right to learn his/her mother tongue and to receive an education in his/her mother tongue at an appropriate number of schools and of state educational and training establishments, located in accordance with the geographical distribution of the minority."

¹⁷Of course a lower birth rate would affect the statistics.

¹⁸The Slovak President, Michal Kovac, signed the bill into law upon the stipulation that the government adopt a separate minority language law, which would protect the language rights that now appear threatened. The Slovak Minister of Culture has stated that the drafting process has been initiated.

¹⁹The ideal voter, as defined by democratic theory, also does not exist in the established democracies i.e., of Western Europe, the United States and Japan.

²⁰Reprivatization, that is returning nationalized properties to their former owners, is distinct from privatization, which is selling state property to private individuals who had no prior claim on said property.

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