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Another tension in Romanian-Hungarian relations

At the end of April 2020, the Romanian Parliament dealt with a bill aimed at establishing an autonomous region covering areas inhabited by the Hungarian-speaking ethnic group Székelys. The bill was rejected by the senate, however, the initiative caused a number of controversies on the political scene in Romania, including, above all, the statement of President Klaus Iohannis. The President's statement was criticized by the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Romanian National Council for Combating Discrimination. The whole matter is more contentious because of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Trianon Treaty, which was celebrated this year. June 4th, 1920, was marked differently in the history of these two countries: as the emergence of Greater Romania and as the end of Greater Hungary.

In the region of Central Europe, history plays a special role, which was clearly demonstrated by the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon. This uneasiness can be observed in the area of bilateral relations and it is particularly clear in the case of Hungary and Romania. (The anxieties in the region can be observed in the context of bilateral relations and they are particularly clear in the case of Hungary and Romania).

The source of tension in the Hungarian-Romanian relations lies in Transylvania (Rumanian *Transilvania* or *Ardeal*, Hungarian *Erdély*). The past of this historical land is extremely complex – over the centuries it was under Hungarian, Saxon, Turkish and Habsburg rule. After the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867, Transylvania became part of the Holy Crown of St. Stefan and, therefore, belonged to the Hungarian part of the dualistic monarchy. After the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, following its defeat in the First World War and under international regulations on June 4th, 1920 in the Grand Trianon Palace in Versailles, Transylvania, and parts of Krishana, Maramures and Banat were granted to Romania. The revision of the Trianon Treaty was the main goal of Hungary's foreign policy in the interwar period and was instrumental in bringing this country closer to the Third Reich. As a result of the second Viennese arbitration on August 30th, 1940, Hungary received land that had been lost to Romania after the World War I. However, following the World War II and as a result of the provisions of the Paris Peace Treaties, this area was returned to Romania. Currently, the majority of Transylvania's population is Romanian, but it is also inhabited by numerous ethnic and national groups, including Saxon (German), Roma, Hungarian and Slavic. It is because of the Székely Land (Romanian *Ținutul Secuiesc*, Hungarian *Székelyföld*) which is inhabited by a Hungarian-speaking ethnic group, traditionally called Székelys, that we now observe a cooling in Romanian-Hungarian relations.

Székelys or the Hungarian minority? According to the 2011 census, in Rumania live 1,227,673 people declared themselves as Hungarians, mainly in Transylvania (i.e. about 6.5% of the population of the whole country). This number is steadily decreasing. Detailed research shows that 49.41% of the population with the same identity in Romania live in Székely Land¹. In turn, according to data from 2002, only 532 people from the 650,000 of the population of this area defined themselves as Székelys, with a choice of identification as Hungarians. In comparison, in the 1990s it was about 1000 people² who identified as Székelys. The area of Székely Land is of

¹ *Rezultate definitive ale Recensământului Populației și al Locuințelor*, 2011, http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/REZULTATE-DEFINITIVE-RPL_2011.pdf [21.05.2020].

² *Notă metodologică. Recensământul Populației și al Locuințelor s-a efectuat în perioada 18-27 martie 2002 pe baza Hotărârii Guvernului României nr. 680/2001 și a Hotărârii Guvernului României nr. 504/2001, potrivit principiului liberei declarații a persoanelor*, 2002, <https://insse.ro/cms/files/RPL2002INS/vol4/notavol4.pdf> [21.05.2020].

particular interest to Hungary; for example, this is demonstrated by the fact that Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, during the summer regularly resides in the spa town of Băile Tuşnad (Hungarian *Tusnádfürdő*). In his speeches and informal talks, Viktor Orbán often raises controversial issues that underpin his political program. The reasons for this may derive not only from caring for the good of the Hungarian minority outside of Hungary, but also from the fact that since 2011 the Hungarian diaspora has acquired electoral rights. The large Hungarian minority in Romania may, therefore, have an impact on the outcome of the Hungarian elections.

Székely Land autonomy project. The territories inhabited by Székelys after World War II in 1952-1968 constituted the Hungarian Autonomous District (Romanian *Regiunea Autonomă Maghiară*, Hungarian *Magyar Autonóm Tartomány*). The unit was established under the Constitution of the Romanian People's Republic of 1952. In practice, it did not have any special rights; however, the idea of re-establishing the autonomous region, systematically returned to the public debate in Romania and Hungary (e.g. in 2003, 2015, 2018). The last time was in 2019, that resulted in a bill which, during the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, became the subject of heated debate.

On April 23rd, 2020, the Romanian Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of parliament) dealt with a bill that would create an autonomous region in Romania, covering the districts of Covasna, Harghita and part of the district of Mureş. The deadline for consideration of the document by the Chamber of Deputies was March 25th, 2020. Due to procedural omissions, the project was approved by "silent approval", and thus passed without voting. According to Romanian law, the bill must also be approved by the senate. At the meeting, which took place on April 29th, 2020, following a two-hour debate, 126 out of 135 senators voted against the document.

The autonomous region proposed in the act would have its own president, whose term of office would last for four years and Hungarian would be the official language. Further, the document proposed the free use of "symbols of the Hungarian people" and an autonomous status would be granted to the region after approval in a local referendum. At the same time, the lifting of autonomy would also be adopted following a referendum.

The initiator of the document was the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (Romanian *Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*, UDMR, Hungarian *Romániai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség*, RMDSZ). The organization was established on December 25th, 1989 and since then it has been taking part in the elections in Romania at the local, national and European level. It enjoys stable support of around 6%, which corresponds to the percentage of the Hungarian minority in the Romanian population. The grouping has created several controversies since its inception; in February 1990, in Târgu Mureş (Hungarian *Marosvásárhely*), in response to the creation of UDMR, the far-right nationalist Romanian Hearth Union (Romanian *Uniunea Vatra Românească*) was established. In March the same year, riots took place in the city with the participation of Hungarians who came to celebrate the anniversary of the anti-Habsburg uprising in Transylvania in 1848. Five people were killed and about 300 were injured.

It should be emphasized that the UDMR is not currently the only representative of interests of the Hungarian minority in Romania, while this party is increasingly being criticized. There is a noticeable increase in support for the Romanian Hungarian Civic Party (Hungarian *Magyar Polgári Párt*, Romanian *Partidul Civic Maghiar*).

Reactions in Romania. Romanian President Klaus Iohannis (National Liberal Party, PNL) referred rather harshly to the bill on autonomy. He accused the opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD) of plotting with UDMR to hand over Transylvania to Hungary. The words of the President of Romania did not go unnoticed by Hungary. Péter Szijjártó, the Hungarian Foreign Minister, stated that Iohannis's statement was an incitement to hatred and asked the Romanian leader to show more respect to Hungarians living in Romania. In turn, the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, in a radio interview given a day later, refrained from further comments stating that he is waiting for the situation to clear up.

The statement by President Iohannis, which was also published on his fanpage, was criticized by the National Anti-Discrimination Council (Romanian *Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării*, CNCD) – a Romanian government's agency founded in 2001 which is politically independent and responsible for applying Romanian and EU anti-discrimination rules as well as for the management of the national anti-discrimination

plan. On May 20th, 2020, the CNCD described the statement of the President of Romania as an act of discrimination violating the right to dignity on the basis of ethnic or national origin and imposed a penalty of the amount of RON 5000 (over EUR 1000) upon Iohannis.

100th Anniversary of the Trianon Treaty in Romania. On May 13, 2020, the Romanian Chamber of Deputies passed a law that establishes June 4th, which is the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Trianon, as a national holiday for Romania. The project, for which Senator Titus Corlăţean (PSD) was one of the main initiators, provides for the possibility of organizing cultural, educational and scientific events at national and local levels to raise awareness about the Trianon Treaty and its significance. In turn, the Romanian public television could broadcast educational programs and films related to the subject of the Treaty while on that day the Romanian flag would be raised. According to Corlăţean and other parliamentarians who voted in favor of the bill, the project is not directed “against anyone”. Instead, its purpose is to commemorate the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the fact that the borders of Great Romania have been accepted internationally. Despite these assurances, Hungarian Foreign Minister and representatives of the Hungarian media and critically assessed this initiative. President Klaus Iohannis did not sign the document and asked for a constitutional check on the Trianon Day law.

Summary. The Trianon Treaty is a special splash point in the history of Romania and Hungary. June 4th, has been characterised by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, as “the darkest day of our national history”, but for Romanians, this date marks the rise of Greater Romania. For this reason, anniversary celebrations in Romania and Hungary will have a completely different character. It should be emphasized that Hungarian and Romanian decision-makers, as well as Hungarian and Romanian societies, are particularly sensitive to issues related to the Trianon Treaty.

Common history has often been a source of tension between Hungary and Romania. In such cases, there was the usual exchange of diplomatic courtesies, which, however, did not translate into cooperation, in the field of energy or the economy (Hungary is the fourth most important export destination for Romania, after Germany, Italy and France and the third import destination). Nevertheless, on May 26th, 2020, the Romanian and Hungarian foreign ministers Bogdan Aurescu and Péter Szijjártó at a joint press conference on the occasion of the Hungarian official’s visit to Romania, argued that Romanian-Hungarian relations are doing well.