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Cooperation despite mistrust
The shadow of Trianon in Romanian-Hungarian relations

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On 3 November, the Romanian parliament declared that 4 June would be a new public holiday commemorating the signing of the Treaty of Trianon on that day in 1920. This document formalised the transfer of large territories then belonging to the Hungarian part of Austria-Hungary to the neighbouring countries, including Romania. These lands today constitute over 40% of Romania's land area. Over the past two years, preparations for the 100th anniversary of the treaty's adoption have exacerbated the relationship between Romania and Hungary, which perceives this event as a national tragedy. The two states' widely divergent perceptions of the treaty, and the presence in Romania of a large and politically active Hungarian minority as its result, are a constant source of tensions between the two countries. The Hungarian problem, symbolised by the aforementioned document, resonates throughout society, and has traditionally been exploited as an instrument of political struggle by representatives of the main Romanian political groups. Budapest has also been willing to exploit the 'Trianon complex' in the Hungarian mentality for its domestic political aims. However, Hungarian politics does not constitute a real threat to the stability of Romania in the current international environment. The geographic location of both countries obliges them to cooperate, especially in the fields of economy and energy, which mitigates their historical and symbolic disputes.

Trianon: a blessing for some, a curse for others

The most important historical conflict in the relationship between Romania and Hungary focuses on issues related to Transylvania (Romanian *Ardeal* or *Transilvania*, Hungarian *Erdély*). This region, which has traditionally been inhabited by both Hungarians and Romanians, is of great importance for the culture and identity of both nations. For the vast majority of the last millennium, these areas belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary, but in the nineteenth century it was there, under conditions of increasing Magyarisation, where the grassroots Romanian national movement developed rapidly. Its activists demanded political and linguistic rights for the fast-expanding Romanian population. After the defeat of the Central Powers in World War I and the collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918, Romania incorporated Transylvania, which then was already inhabited by a mostly Romanian population.[1]

[1] According to the last available census conducted before the annexation of Transylvania to Romania (dating from 1910), this region was inhabited by 54% Romanians and 31.6% Hungarians.

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This fact was confirmed in the Treaty of Versailles, and the final form of the new borders was recognised internationally at the Palace of Trianon near Paris on 4 June 1920. Under that treaty, Hungary lost more than two-thirds of its territory, including Transylvania, which is still seen today as an unfair partition of the state. This narrative has been promoted by Fidesz and the government of Viktor Orbán in particular; after coming to power in 2010 – by striving for support from the right-wing electorate, among other things – he increased the emphasis on cultivating the memory of Trianon and the idea of the unity of the nation beyond the borders of the state.[2] As early as the first sitting of the government in 2010, 4 June was established as National Unity Day (Hungarian *Nemzeti összetartozás napja*) to commemorate the signing of the treaty.

During Fidesz's time in office, Budapest has stepped up its support for the diaspora, perceiving this as the state meeting its moral obligation.

Meanwhile, for the Romanian people, the annexation of Transylvania is the most significant event in the country's modern history, and symbolically completed the process that had been ongoing since the 19th century of consolidating the territories inhabited by the Romanian population. However, Great Union Day (Romanian *Ziua Marii Uniri*) has traditionally been celebrated on 1 December because it was on that day in 1918 that the National Assembly of Romanians in Transylvania and Hungary passed a resolution in the city of Alba Iulia to annex the region. This date marks the beginning of a kind of Romanian 'golden age' (1918–1940) and the birth of 'Greater Romania'.[3] The Trianon agreement, although clearly viewed positively, is less important from the Romanian perspective than the Alba Iulia resolution, which legitimises their claims to Transylvania. Nevertheless, Bucharest is very sensitive about any manifestations of Hungarian resentment towards Transylvania or any attempts to undermine Trianon, and considers them to be symptoms of revisionism. When in 2019 the Hungarian parliament announced that the next year would be the 'year of national cohesion', in connection with the hundredth anniversary of the signing of the 'peace dictate', Romania's foreign ministry said that any attempts to rewrite history were unacceptable and that "the Treaty of Trianon, which establishes... the border between Romania and Hungary, is not a problem which needs to be resolved". Almost two-thirds of Romanians also believe that Budapest would like to regain control of Transylvania 'one way or another'.[4]

Fighting for the favour of the Hungarian minority

One consequence of the post-World War I border changes is the presence in modern Romania of a significant Hungarian minority, numbering about 1.2 million people according to the 2011 census (i.e. 6–7% of the Romanian population, and about 18% of Transylvania's population), who mainly live in the so-called Szeklerland (also Székely Land; Hungarian *Székelyföld*, Romanian *Ținutul Secuiesc* or *Secuimea*), that is, south-eastern Transylvania (the Harghita, Covasna, and Mureș counties). Romania's Hungarians are well organised and are represented in three political groups, of which the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) plays a key role. This party was founded in 1989, and has been present in the Romanian parliament since the very beginning. Traditionally this party has been supported by almost the entire Hungarian minority, and at present has around 20 to 30 deputies (out of the c. 314–345 seats in the Chamber of Deputies) and around 10 senators (out of 136–140 seats in the Senate).[5]

[2] A. Sadecki, *The long shadow of Trianon*, OSW, Warsaw 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

[3] The term 'Greater Romania' refers both to the Romanian state within its boundaries of the interwar period and the political idea that the Romanian state should include all territories inhabited by Romanians, that is – apart from the lands currently belonging to this country – *inter alia* Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina.

[4] V. Lupu, 'INSCOP Survey: Most Romanians Say Corruption, Russia Are Main Threats', Romania Journal, 20 May 2019, www.romaniajournal.ro.

[5] The number of deputies sitting in the Chamber of Deputies and senators in the Senate is inconsistent due to the specificity of the electoral law.

Current legislation in Romania gives the minorities a wide range of rights, which the UDMR takes great care to exploit as it tries to wield the greatest possible influence on Bucharest's policies. Formally a centre-right group, since 1996 it has often participated in the country's ruling coalitions (regardless of their ideological affiliation), or has offered *ad hoc* support for successive governments in exchange for having its demands met. The UDMR was a formal coalition partner for 13–14 years, and for the next 7–8 years it cooperated with or supported the governments (including minority administrations). In 2018 alone, the group received a state subsidy of around €5.5 million. The Hungarian minority has extensive support for its culture and language at all levels of education (in minority schools all subjects, except grammar and Romanian literature, can be taught in their own language). In villages inhabited by at least 20% minority representatives, the government is obliged to offer them access to administrative services in their language. Bilingual signs and noticeboards are also erected in these areas.

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Despite what is formally favourable legislation for the minorities, representatives of the Hungarian population regularly complain that their rights are not always fully respected. Since Fidesz came to power, Budapest has paid particular attention to these voices, and casts itself in the role of the defender of Romanian Hungarians' interests, which has contributed to this group's growing assertiveness towards Bucharest. During Fidesz's time in office, Budapest has stepped up its support for the diaspora, perceiving this as the state meeting its moral obligation towards those Hungarians who found themselves living abroad as a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon. In May 2010, the Orbán government decided to grant ethnic Hungarians living abroad the right to dual citizenship (and therefore also to participate in elections in Hungary); at least half the Hungarians living in Romania have taken up this option. Fidesz politicians seek to mobilise the Hungarian minority in Romania during election campaigns to the Hungarian parliament (often in cooperation with the UDMR), and they regularly visit Romanian Hungarians; this includes participation in the annual Bálványos Free Summer University organised in Băile Tușnad (Hungarian *Tusnádfürdő*). One vivid example of this mobilisation was Prime Minister Orbán's call in 2018 to Hungarians living outside their homeland to support his party in the upcoming vote.

Growing tensions around the demand for autonomy

The vast majority of Romanians regard the Hungarian support for its diaspora with great distrust, considering it as open interference in their internal affairs and an instrument of political corruption. They find most offensive the financial support which Budapest offers to companies, media and organisations of the Hungarian minority in Romania. In 2017–18 approximately €300 million from the Hungarian state budget went into Transylvania in this way.[6] This money mainly goes to Hungarian media and foundations, and is also used to build and renovate sports facilities, schools, kindergartens and churches. Additional resources go to areas inhabited by the Hungarian minority in Romania as part of cultural programmes (mainly the renovation of buildings and monuments which are important for Hungarian culture). According to the findings of Romanian investigative journalists, in recent years Budapest – with the aid of state finances and the Fidesz-supported Association for Media Space in Transylvania (Hungarian *Erdélyi Médiatér Egyesület*) – has *de facto* subordinated or taken over the region's key Hungarian-language media (including press, radio and TV stations and websites, with the popular *Székelyhon* service at the head).[7] The Hungarian government's actions are all the more visible and effective as the counties that make up the Szeklerland region (mainly Harghita and Covasna)

[6] A. Keller-Alant, 'Living like in Hungary: Orban bankrolling romania 'ethnic parallelism'', Balkan Insight, 30 January 2020, www.balkaninsight.com.

[7] B. Felseghi, 'Presa în limba maghiară din Transilvania este preluată de FIDESZ', Press One, 8 July 2019, www.pressone.ro.

are among the poorest in the country. In 2017, GDP per capita in these two regions amounted to c. €19,500, which is 70% of the national average and just 44% of the EU average.

"The government in Bucharest has met the demands to create a Hungarian autonomous region on Romanian territory with a particularly negative reaction.

Romania fears that Budapest's activity towards the Hungarian minority is undermining this population's loyalty and negatively affecting its integration with its country of residence. This anxiety redoubled after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014. The picture is made even more complex by the different approaches of the Romanians and Hungarians towards Russia: Romania views Orbán's rapprochement with Moscow with great distrust and sees Russia as a key threat to its security and its main rival in the Republic of Moldova, which is a priority of Romanian foreign policy.[8]

Although most of Budapest's activities for the Hungarian minority in Romania have been tolerated, there are exceptions to this rule; one example was the idea revealed in 2018 for Hungary to make c. €77 million available for development projects in the Szeklerland. Even though formally this programme was not addressed to Romanian Hungarians alone, the grant applications had to be made in the Hungarian language, which met with indignation from Bucharest. A year after the initiative was announced, Romania made an official protest at Hungary's actions, pointing out that they were being carried out without its consent. Fears of a rise in Hungarian influence in the region mean that Bucharest is clearly reluctant to implement any investments connected with improving the communication routes between Transylvania and Hungary (such as the *Via Carpatia*). Considering the unsatisfactory quality of the road infrastructure linking the region with Bucharest, and that Budapest has been strengthening its influence in the areas dominated by the Hungarian minority, Romania is above all trying to integrate this area with the rest of the country in terms of communication; only then will it attempt to implement ideas for modernising the routes running towards Hungary.

The government in Bucharest has met the demands to create a Hungarian autonomous region on Romanian territory with a particularly negative reaction. This demand has been consistently made by the UDMR in particular, with the support of the Orbán government.[9] The slogan of autonomy is raised at the numerous demonstrations and marches held every year on 10 March, the so-called Szekler Freedom Day, and these events often involve a significant number of the minority (for example, several tens of thousands of people participated in the Great Szekler March for Autonomy in 2013: according to the organisers, perhaps over 100,000 people). On 8 January 2018, the UDMR and the other diaspora parties signed a joint declaration calling on Bucharest to establish a Hungarian autonomous region in the Szekler region, which the Romanian government strongly criticised. The then Prime Minister Mihai Tudose stated at the time that whoever hung the Szekler flag on a public building (in a minority-inhabited territory), "will also wave next to the flag".[10]

Romania consistently takes the position that, despite lacking formal autonomy, Hungarians have dominated the governments of the communes and localities in the areas they inhabit since 1990. At the same time, they emphasise that the possibility of creating an independent Hungarian region is blocked by Romania's Basic Law. In 2017, the Legislative Council (the parliament's advisory body), referring to the demand for the establishment of a Szekler Autonomy, explicitly stated that the constitution defines Romania as a "national,

[8] K. Całus, *In the shadow of history. Romanian-Moldovan relations*, OSW, Warsaw 2015, www.osw.waw.pl.

[9] Such an autonomous region would have legal personality, legislative and executive bodies (including a president), and Hungarian would have the status of official language within its territory.

[10] It is worth noting that in 2014, the Szekler flag replaced the European Union flag which had previously hung on the Hungarian Parliament building in Budapest.

sovereign, independent, unitary and indivisible state"; creating a separate unit in parallel to the existing unified administrative structures is therefore impossible.

The Hungarian bogeyman

The idea of establishing a public holiday commemorating the signing of the Treaty of Trianon is part of the Romanian elite's frequent habit of using socially resonant topics concerning Hungary to distract the electorate from current problems. For example, in June 2019 the ruling Social Democrats (PSD), who were then facing a political crisis after their president had been sentenced to imprisonment for corruption, decided to use the Trianon issue to present itself as a party that cares about the national interest and opposes any attempts to 'rewrite history'.[11] When riots broke out between Hungarians and Romanians in the military cemetery in the village of Valea Uzului (Hungarian *Úzvölgye*), where soldiers of both nationalities who had fought in World War I are buried, the PSD immediately submitted a bill establishing the anniversary of Trianon as a national holiday.

> **Hungarian-Romanian ties are set to expand further in the near future. The prospects for developing energy infrastructure look particularly favourable.**

Another example of this instrumental exploitation of historical issues was the situation which began in April 2020. The UDMR submitted a bill to create a Szekler Autonomy in December 2019; as usual, it was delayed by four months. But then, through an oversight, it was referred for further work in the Senate, as a result of the tacit consent of the Chamber of Deputies. Marcel Ciolac, the head of the chamber and a leader of the PSD, failed to include it on the agenda for a further 45 days after the bill was submitted. This time, President Klaus Iohannis decided to take advantage of Ciolac's error to present his party before the upcoming elections as endangering Romania's vital interests, and he publicly accused the PSD of trying to give Transylvania to Hungary. The president's statement sparked a harsh reaction from Budapest; Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó called Iohannis' words "uncivilised" and "an incitement to hatred".

It's not just Trianon that matters

In the current international conditions, Hungary's policy – both towards minorities and its historical-symbolic policy – does not, as mentioned above, pose any real threat to the stability of Romania. Despite the tensions that have arisen over the approaching 100th anniversary of Trianon (especially over the last two years), neither country is interested in escalating its historical and identity disputes to other areas. This is evidenced by the attempts Bucharest and Budapest have made to diffuse the strong emotions related to this event. For example, on 26 May this year, just ten days before the anniversary, both countries' foreign ministers organised a meeting during which they adopted a conciliatory tone in reference to their nations' different attitudes towards Trianon, and agreed to start a dialogue on a development programme for Transylvania, which had hitherto been criticised by Romania.

Bucharest and Budapest are important economic partners for each other. In 2019, Hungary was the fourth largest recipient (after Germany, Italy and France) of Romanian goods and services (4.8% of the total) and the third biggest exporter onto the Romanian market (7% of the total).[12] In 2018, over 5% of total Hungarian exports went to Romania, which put this country in fourth place after Germany, Slovakia and Italy. The value of Hungarian investments in Romania exceeded €1.2 billion (14th place) in 2018. Tourism is also growing: Hungarians are currently the sixth largest group of tourists visiting Romania.

[11] K. Całus, 'Rumunia: lider obozu rządzącego w więzieniu' [Romania: the governing camp's leader in prison], OSW, 29 May 2019, www.osw.waw.pl

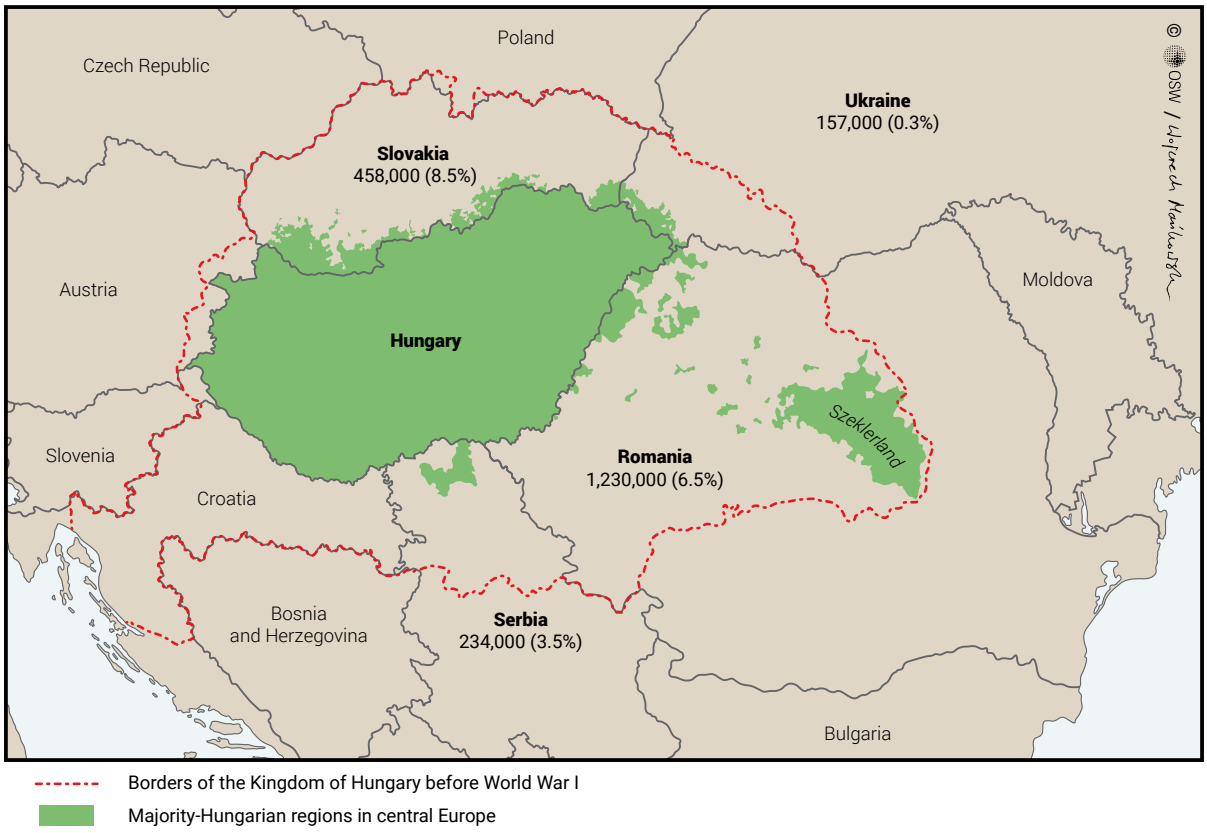
[12] 'Rezultatele Comerțului Internațional al României în perioada 01.01–31.12.2019', *Buletin informativ lunar*, No. 12/2019, March 2020, www.imm.gov.ro.

Hungarian-Romanian ties are set to expand further in the near future. The prospects for developing energy infrastructure look particularly favourable: this year, the construction of the first stage of the BRUA transit gas pipeline connecting Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria was completed;[13] this will allow gas supplies from the Caspian Sea and the Romanian Black Sea shelf.

Both countries also share common interests within the EU. Hungary supports Romania's entry into the Schengen area, and together they favour the community's rapid expansion to include the Western Balkan states. Both countries are also gradually developing regional and sectoral cooperation, including the EU's strategy for the Danube region. They are also united by their similar positions on the negotiations concerning the EU's multiannual financial framework.

[13] K. Całus, A. Łoskot-Strachota, 'BRUA i rumuńskie pomysły na środkowoeuropejski rynek gazu' [BRUA and Romanian ideas for the Central European gas market], *Komentarze OSW*, nr 365, 24 November 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

Map. The borders of the Kingdom of Hungary before World War I overlaid on a contemporary map of the region, with areas where Hungarians currently constitute the majority highlighted



Sources: B. Nagy, *Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia felosztása*, www.1914-1918.btk.mta.hu; national censuses of 2001 (Ukraine) and 2011 (Romania, Serbia, Slovakia).