

# Language Rights, Citizenship and the Sense of National Unity in Romania

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**Abstract:** *Although ethnic relations between Romanians and Hungarians have been improved during the last two decades, they are still marked by recurrent crises, some of them triggered by language issues. The use of minority language is even more problematic when language proves to be an essential requirement for citizenship in Romania. The structure of the requirements for citizenship in a Romanian city differs by and large from the structure of the same requirements in other European cities. The peculiarity lies in the lack of distinctiveness between the origin, the ethnic aspect and the civic aspect of citizenship and, as we unravel, in the emphasis on the language requirements for citizenship. In fact, this requirement seems to be in conflict with the use of minority rights. For the Hungarian minority, giving up to their language is perceived as a threat to its own survival in Transylvania, so ethnic Hungarians go on with the use of their language. This persistence is seen by ethnic Romanians as defiance against Romanian majority, as willingness to challenge the Romanian dominance. Despite ethnic tensions, progress has been made. Education in native tongue, names of localities, denominations of public authorities, and road inscriptions point all together to the new status of minority rights, which, even limited, is now official. The full implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages could finally be the answer to such ethnic tensions in Central and Eastern Europe.*

## **Introduction**

Language is an essential part of nation's definition. Moreover, the issue of language is a key issue of a special kind of nationalism that is linguistic nationalism. This doctrine that originates in the late eighteenth century, states that the promotion, development, enrichment and standardization of national language is an essential political concern (Patten 2004). As national identity is an imagination of belonging to a larger community, as emphasized by Anderson (1983), the formation of language identity largely helps to strengthen the sense of national identity in many parts of the world. In the same time, citizenship is more or less a definition of belonging to a peculiar political space. Whereas citizenship relates to a neutral, political community, language relates to an ethnically defined community, to a nation. The conflict between citizenship and language questions the use of minority languages, especially in ethnically heterogeneous regions, like Central and Eastern Europe. Yet partially solving this contradiction could help redefine national unity and cooperation between various ethnic groups in a region dominated by states that, following the 1989 revolutions, inherited national minorities, secessionist threats, the need to define the basis for national integration, obtain legal recognition of inherited borders and establish a constitutional framework within a short period of time (Kuzio 2001, 170).

In this respect, Romania is a good example of enduring conflict between citizenship requirements and the use of minority languages that largely affects the sense of national unity, since one of its regions, namely Transylvania, is inhabited by a large ethnic Hungarian community. Although it is a Romanian province today, Transylvania broke up from the Hapsburg Empire in 1918. Even when it was a former Hapsburg province, Transylvania was numerically dominated by ethnic Romanians, their ethnic group representing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century more than half of the province's population. At the age of the European nationalism, Romanian elites formed a strong political movement claiming cultural and political rights for the Romanian community (Hitchins 1969; Hitchins 1999). The one hundred years struggle ended in Transylvania's secession in 1918 and the subsequent union with the Romanian national state. The integration of Transylvania into the Romanian national state would reveal very difficult, because it brought in large ethnic and religious minorities, with their own active and well-

organized elites (Livezeanu 1995). Since the Hungarians living in Transylvania were part of the Hungarian nation and Hungary was a neighboring state, Romanian elites always suspected them for keeping strong ties with their nation and former country. At the same time, Hungarian elites hardly accepted the new minority conditions in the Romanian state and feared slow and painful assimilation. The Hungarian population in Transylvania started indeed to decline and the process continued during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century (Illyés 1982). The Romanian-Hungarian ethnic relations were therefore tensional during communism and well after the fall of communism in the two countries.

Despite the internationalist features of early Romanian communism, Ceaușescu's era represents the climax of the nationalist ideology. The communist propaganda at the time exacerbated the nationalistic feelings by outrageous nationalist discourses, in order to ideologically control Romanian citizens (Verdery 1995). Contrary to common expectations, post-communism was not a turning point in the use of nationalist ideology and ethnic distrust. Ceaușescu's strategy of nationalist mobilization was continued by his successors when they needed to consolidate on power (Gallagher 2001). And the central topic of the nationalist propaganda was, once again, Hungarian minority. In the aftermath of the revolution in December 1989, Hungarian community was largely suspected of disloyalty and even of plotting Transylvania's secession. The suspicion easily turned into vivid hostility in March 1990, when the city of Târgu-Mureș in Transylvania faced the first ethnic clashes. Romania was at the brink of ethnic disaster. The behavior of the majority of ethnic elites and the international pressures finally calmed down the exacerbated tension.

Ethnic relations between Romanians and Hungarians improved after Romania and Hungary finally signed the basic treaty in 1996 and the political party representing Hungarian minority in Romania was included in the governing coalition the same year. Yet the use of minority language, as shown below, still defines the conflict between the requirements for citizenship, which is the way Romania's citizens conceive their relationship with the political community, and the civic definition of nation in Romania.

## **Citizenship and its requirements**

In order to find how people across Europe view citizenship, Daniel Fuss (2003) and his colleagues conducted surveys in ten cities from six European countries, that is Austria, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. By using an instrument with ten items, they asked about the requirements to obtain the respective country's nationality, including the full entitlement to citizenship rights and benefits provided by the state. The items used by the authors are listed in the table below. Their main finding is a structure of separate requirements containing only three underlying basic dimensions. The first aspect is the origin or the ethnic aspect, reflected by the requirements regarding place of birth and descent. The second aspect is the so called civic aspect, summarized by the requirements concerning the active integration, such as language, work and law. Finally, the third aspect is the obligatory aspect of nationality, stated by Fuss as a conscious declaration of one's belief in belonging to the country in terms of knowledge, emotions, and loyalty. The repetition of the factor analysis for each particular city sample results in unexpected similarities. Across all samples used by these researchers, the vast majority of items are analogous assigned to the factors.

Following the design used by Fuss and his colleagues, I test the structure of similar requirements for citizenship in Sibiu, Romania.<sup>1</sup> I expect the structure of these requirements to be similar of those formulated by citizens from Eastern Europe included in their sample by Fuss and his colleagues, i.e. citizens from Chemnitz, in former German Democratic Republic, Prague and Bratislava in former Czechoslovakia.<sup>2</sup> My finding is a different structure of requirements for citizenship, with four underlying dimensions instead of three. The factors are displayed below.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the data of a survey conducted in 2006 by the Department of Political Science, 'Lucian Blaga' University of Sibiu.

<sup>2</sup> The cities included in that research are Chemnitz, Bielefeld, Vienna, Bregenz, Manchester, Edinburgh, Madrid, Bilbao, Prague and Bratislava.

Table 1

The structure of requirements for citizenship in Sibiu

	1	2	3	4
Having at least one parent from country	.619	---	---	-.271
Being born in country	.791	---	---	---
Having national ancestors	.607	---	---	.304
Working in country	.802	---	---	-.339
Having lived in country for at least 5 years	.459	---	.305	-.181
Speaking the national language	---	.928	.319	---
Agreeing to abide by the country's laws and institutions	---	-.263	.582	.150
Passing a test about the country	---	-.236	.683	.118
Taking an oath of allegiance to the country	.166	---	---	.717
Feeling that one belongs to the country	.372	---	-.168	.727

Factor analysis (Principal Components Analysis). Varimax rotation. N = 955. KMO = .554. Sig. = .000

The loads on factors indicate a less clear-cut structure of requirements for citizenship in the Romanian city. Whereas the requirements for citizenship in European cities are grouped in three dimensions that express the origin or ethnic aspect, the civic aspect and the obligatory aspect, the same requirements are differently grouped in Sibiu. The structure unraveled in the

Romanian city is built on four dimensions instead of three. In the table above the items composing these factors are grouped in squares in boldface. Whereas the first dimension in the European surveys, namely the origin, contains the items regarding the national ancestors, the place of birth and the parents belonging to the country, the first factor in Sibiu also includes the requirements to work and to have lived in the country, apart from having one parent from the country, being born in the country and having national ancestors. This fact obviously shows confusion between the ethnic and the civic aspects of citizenship. At the same time, the requirement to speak the country's language forms a clear distinct factor. The second factor identified by Fuss – the civic aspect – includes in addition in Sibiu the demand to pass a test about the country. The last factor – the obligatory aspect of citizenship – therefore contains only the requirements regarding the oath of allegiance and the feeling that one belongs to the country. The loadings on factors indicate that there is not a clear distinction between the identified dimensions, as it is in the comparative European cases. At the same time, the percentages of explained total variance are quite alike in Sibiu (58.5 %) and, for example, Chemnitz (61 %).

### **Citizenship and language**

Why the requirement for speaking the national language represents another dimension? The answer may be found in the uncertain relationship between the civic nation and the ethnic nation in Romania and the uncertain status of minority languages, especially of the Hungarian language. The use of native language in public space relates to public and road inscriptions, to teaching, as well as to the language to use when dealing to local administration. The use of native language is part of minorities' cultural rights, yet the implementation of these rights unravels subsequent ethnic tensions. Kettley (2003) underlines the varying relationship between Hungarian community and the Romanian state regarding the issue of language. The new Romanian constitution from 1991 and the first laws regarding public administration and education express the willingness of the majority group to impose its dominant position. Romanian language is the official language of local and county council and the facilities for minorities' languages are difficult to use. For example, according to the Local Administration Act from 1991, citizens speaking other native languages than Romanian could use their language in communicating with local authorities but they had to accompany any written request by a

Romanian official translation. Local authorities' decision could be published in other language than the official Romanian only in localities where the concerned ethnic minority was of significant numerical importance. The same kinds of restrictions were imposed by the 1995 Act of Education. Regardless of ethnicity, all pupils had to learn disciplines such as history and geography only in Romanian, though the use of native tongue was formally accepted at the primary and secondary levels. The issue is very sensitive in Transylvania, where Hungarians do have their own geographical denominations. Moreover, their traditional history is often the opposite of the Romanian official one that has to be thought in schools.

Despite high ethnic tensions, concessions have been made. The linguistic policies shifted from linguistic hegemony to an accommodation model, allowing the expansion of minorities' language use, but keeping intact the primacy of the official language and stating the use of minorities' languages as acceptable exceptions (Horváth 2008). Both concerned acts were amended after 1996 in order to expand linguistic rights. They now allow full education in minority languages, but also provides a minimum education in Romanian. The use of minority languages was limited to the local public institutions where the concerned linguistic minorities surpass a 20 % threshold. Minority citizens can now communicate with officials in their own language, elected officials can themselves use the minority language during meetings and local institutions can use those languages in order to inform citizens. Although official acts of local authorities continue to be issued in Romanian, they can also use minority languages to inform about the content of those acts or to deliver other important public information (Horváth 2008, 207). Education in native tongue, names of localities, denominations of public authorities, and road inscriptions point all together to the new status of minority rights, which, even limited, is now official.

## **Conclusion**

Because issues of language cannot be easily accommodated within the standard framework adopted by western liberals in dealing with diversity, there is not a proven solution for the question of language, emphasize Kymlicka and Grin (2003). Whether western liberals

solved the religious conflict by separating state and church and by “privatizing” religion, they have hoped to apply the same model to other areas of diversity, in particular to ethno-cultural diversity. There should be no official or established culture, no public support for the culture, practices or identity of any particular group; this is the liberal project of coping with ethno-cultural diversity. While this is an attractive model in theory, it cannot work in practice. There is no possibility of “privatizing” language issues. Therefore the state will always decide which will be the official language, which language will get the primacy and which one will be relegated to private life, and this fact is obviously in conflict with the liberal conception of freedom and equality (Kymlicka and Grin 2003, 9).

The Romanian case, along other cases in the region, sheds light on the inherent tension between the primacy of a national language, which is a key component of a nation, and the use of minority languages. Yet this is more problematic when language proves to be an essential requirement for citizenship. The use of minority language is then perceived by the majority like a threat to the national unity. Since Hungarians living in Transylvania are part of the Hungarian nation and Hungary is a neighboring state, ethnic Romanians suspect them for keeping strong ties with their nation. At the same time, ethnic Hungarians look for better minority conditions in the Romanian state and fear slow and painful assimilation. Since the denial of minority rights could largely contribute to separatism, a solution could be delivered by the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

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