

Moving Politics Beyond the State: The Hungarian Minority in Slovakia¹

ERIKA HARRIS

Abstract: Whilst elaborating identity politics in the new European space, theoretically, the empirical focus of this article is on the changing relations between majorities and minorities in Central Europe, generally, and in Slovakia, specifically. The underlying premise is that European integration alters the meaning of “the nation”, the state and territory, and that there is a discernible shift from politics at the state level to a regional one, and with that a change in identity politics vis-à-vis new institutions and geographies. The question is whether this shift is accompanied by the re-emergence of ethno-regions, i.e. political/geographic entities beyond and “across” state level. Democracy and identity within the state form a contradictory relationship, whereby democracy suffers from the monopolisation of political and cultural activity by the dominant group. The Slovak-Hungarian relationship is a prime example of this dynamic. Thus, this article proposes the following points: a) that democracy may need “rescuing” from the confines of the nation-state and hence, b) a number of hypotheses about politics beyond the state. These hypotheses are then tested against a small survey conducted among the Hungarian minority in the Slovak-Hungarian border regions. The evidence provided here suggests that the EU opens new possibilities to move politics beyond the state, and in the process it removes some identity-related challenges to democracy within the state.

Key words: post-Communism; nation-state; Europeanisation; minorities and transnationalism

ETHNO-POLITICAL RELATIONS IN POST-COMMUNISM: THREE STAGES

The historical achievement of nationalism is the nation-state, which binds “the nation”, the territory and the state into what must be considered the most successful form of political community in the modern world. The core group of this community and the subject of nationalism’s political and cultural aspirations – the nation – can best be viewed as a “large social group integrated by a combination of objective relationships, such as territory, economy, politics, history and culture, and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness” (Hroch, 1993). It is not a revelation that the controversy of nationalism lies in the fact that the nation-state is hardly ever a single nation state. Most states comprised of more than one national group are actually non-nation-states (Migdal, 2004), but in nearly all cases one national group assumes the dominant position in the distribution of cultural values, thus forming a majority, which determines the official culture of the state. Non-conformity or self-definition as a separate cultural entity from the official culture of the state constitutes a national minority, often referred to as an ethnic group.

The modern state has rested for a long time on social and cultural homogeneity, hence the perception that unity means homogeneity. In multinational states (where the population consists of two or more culturally distinct national groups)², the process of homogenisation can be conflicting. This is mostly due to the assumptions of dominant nations and their nation-building elites that the state is their own nation-state, which implies the exclusion of other cultures from ownership of the state (Brubaker, 1996: 103). Too much emphasis on construed national identity tends to inhibit the internal integration of national groups within the state and aggravate the relationship between the majority and minorities. By the same token, taken into the larger context of the EU, we can argue that too great an insistence on national identity inhibits political integration of the new European polity.

Both the nation and the ethnic group are communities characterised by a sense of belonging and loyalty to a group of a perceived “sameness”. Thus, a group’s identity³ is usually based on common ancestry and/or a shared historical past. The distinction between the nation and an ethnic group lies in the fact that ethnicity is a cultural trait in which the people are bound primarily by a common ancestry (language, territory, religion) and does not necessarily entail loyalty to the legal structure of one’s citizenship (Harris, 2002: 3). In the present context, it needs to be stressed that state borders do not define ethnicity; they transcend them. This explains the strength of ethnic affiliation in migrant communities and among ethnic groups across borders and continents (Harris, 2002: 52). The rather subjective character of ethnicity, however, does not make it apolitical. The ethnic principle is at the heart of the national self-determination doctrine, which holds that any self-differentiating people have the right to self-government. In Eastern and Central Europe, where the ethnic principle served as the founding principle for states carved out of the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, ethnicity is still considered the most legitimate foundation for political claims – whether by dominant or minority national groups. The political and cultural claims of national groups, vis-à-vis the state and vis-à-vis each other, are understood here as “ethnic politics”⁴. This article seeks to illustrate that the power and political relevance of ethnic identity, over and beyond the cultural realm, has not diminished anywhere in the world and especially not within the European Union with its emphasis on democracy, minority rights and regional decentralisation (Keating, 2004: 373).

The ethno-political relations within the state reflect the fundamental challenge of democracy. The notions of popular sovereignty and participation from below, rights, expectations and the protection of interests are not only democratic principles only; they are also principles of nationalism, which are rooted in the idea that all political authority stems from “the people”. Post-Communist transitions to democracy brought this interplay of democracy and nationalism into sharp focus theoretically and politically. However, transitions by their very nature are dynamic processes, and they move through a number of subtle transformations.

This article is divided into three parts. The remaining sections of this first theoretical part identify three intricately differentiated stages of post-Communist identity politics, whereby the third, transnational stage is

hypothesising future developments. Before these hypotheses are put to the test and analysed in the third part, the politics of the Slovak-Hungarian relationship are reviewed in the second part. The conclusion argues that the traditional nation-state must be challenged for its repeated failure to produce a lasting reconciliation between ethnic groups and that “Europeanisation” may be a way to move forward.

First stage: Post-Communist nationalism

Enough has been said and written about the salience of nationalism in transition from communism to democracy:

- a) The mobilisation of the ethno-territorial character as an integral part of democratisation has dominated the transition to such an extent that some states, i.e. Czechoslovakia (as well as Yugoslavia, and of course, the Soviet Union) could not withstand its force and disintegrated.⁵
- b) The states that had a tradition of independent statehood to fall back on, i.e. Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, managed (for reasons too complex to discuss here) to sustain the democratisation process without being “derailed” into post-Communist nationalism, as was the case with Slovakia.
- c) In all cases, however, we observed state nationalism from the dominant national groups and a threat to minorities, in some cases a subjugation of minorities (i.e. Slovakia, Latvia, and Estonia).

The national mobilisation of one group leads to the politicisation of another group’s identity and to the overall increase of populist discourse⁶ among all national groups that brings the emphases on belonging to a particular culture into the centre of the political arena. The dominant group may appear increasingly more threatening, and that may lead to the involvement of an ethnic kin state across the borders. Depending on historical experience, this dynamic sends a ripple of fear back and forth, whilst gathering momentum radicalises politics to a dangerous and at times explosive extent. Elites, for all their exploitation of the group’s identity, in terms of political capital, are not wholly responsible for this dynamic – they could not succeed without building on the foundations of historical memory, which is easily invoked when pointing to new insecurities. Regions of historical and ethnic complexity (mutually dependent factors) are particularly prone to this dynamic, which has been well formalised by Rogers Brubaker’s theory of the “triadic nexus” (Brubaker, 1996).

In his attempt to explain the rise of “new nationalism” in post-Communist Europe, he identifies an interlocking dynamic between “nationalising” the nationalism of newly independent states, the autonomist nationalism of national minorities and the trans-border nationalism of the “external homelands”, to which they belong by shared ethnicity but not by citizenship. The role of the “external homeland” in any analysis of majority-minority relationship in Central Europe is crucial. Slovakia and Hungary have been prime examples of this dynamic. Each government and opposition, at various times in their political fortunes and misfortunes, relied on historical events to mobilise their respective groups.

The “triadic” paradigm was particularly relevant to the early stages of post-Communist transitions to democracy, but its critical capacity to characterise inter-ethnic relations in the latter stages of post-Communism may have diminished. Ethnic groups are relatively stable categories, but their identities and interests respond to the opportunities and constraints of institutional processes within the state. This, in turn, responds to the changes in domestic and international developments. The majority-minority relationship, as the most symbolic inter-ethnic relationship, depends on many variables: the policies of the residence state, the political, historical and socio-economic position of the minority, the political environment in the “external” homeland and the international position of both. Claims that minorities make in relation to their residence and ethnic kin states usually vary according to historical legacy and future calculations. The latter is possibly weightier than the former. Since the establishment of democracy, the main objective of the Central European states has been European integration, and hence, a fourth actor – the EU – has entered the majority-minority-homeland equation.

The second stage: “Europeanisation” and the deepening of democracy

The early years of post-Communism could be characterised by the simultaneity of identity-related politics accompanying democratisation at best or the subordination of the democratisation process to “national” issues at worst (as exemplified by Slovakia and, more dramatically, by the ex-Yugoslav republics). The second stage of post-Communism became characterised by the intensification of democratisation from beyond the state through the process of Europeanisation. This is where we are at present. The current Europeanisation stage signifies a considerable improvement in inter-ethnic relations within and between states in the Central European region. It also signifies something of a democratic consolidation and a commitment to democracy, practiced and exercised at various levels – national, sub-national and beyond the state at the EU level. As with all transitions, this stage is also prone to different levels of success, stagnation or even regression.

Europeanisation is taken to mean a process of transformation of the domestic structures of a state by European frameworks, norms and rules. This process necessitates a series of adaptations by national and sub-national actors to economic, social and political changes originating at the European level. Some have managed to mediate through institutions of the European Union, by way of implementing EU rules and policies, in – and this must be stressed – an otherwise almost unchanged domestic arena, but others have not. Domestic structures entail the formal institutions of the state and its national legal system and administration but also the perception and public discourse about national and ethnic identity and the meaning of citizenship and the role of the state and political traditions. The latter is the focus of this paper.

Evidence shows that in states with a significant ethnic division and the presence of ethnic parties, e.g. Slovakia, Europeanisation affected the structure of political competition in a way that bears directly on the relationship between national groups within the state and less directly on perceptions about national identity and its changing function within the new

European framework (Harris, 2004). Europeanisation does not just add another dimension to the discussion about the politics of the state; it changes the debate about the available solutions to political problems.

Europeanisation is a very broad and overused concept (Harris, 2004; Börzel, 2003; Olsen, 2002; Radaelli, 2000). Here, its relevance is limited to its significance for the majority-minority relationship in newly integrated states and confined to the highlighting of a number of points:

- a) Democratisation and Europeanisation are overlapping processes; in fact, in the latter years of accession negotiations, they have become mutually dependent.
- b) Laffan (2001) argues that the EU is a social construct that is being grafted onto the nation-state. The significance of this can hardly be overestimated in cases where Europeanisation follows soon after the relatively recent establishment of independent statehood and where there are still many unresolved issues concerning nationhood and minorities⁷, as I argue below. Laffan further identifies three pillars of the EU as an institutional field: regulative, normative and cognitive. The latter, a product of social subjectivity encompasses meanings, perceptions and symbols through which identity and social reality are constructed. This is the focus of the article.
- c) Europeanisation raises new questions about the purpose and meaning of national identity in the context of European integration. These questions concern the exclusivity of national identity that reinforced the project of the nation-state and the capacity of national identity to offer a contribution towards the reinforcement of the European political project in the area of identity, which it so obviously lacks.

The evolution of identity politics in Central Europe is marked by a degree of ambivalence toward the EU, typically during the Europeanisation stage. This is understandable given the speed and a certain inevitability of the accession. Depending on one's point of view, it is also somewhat risky for further developments within the EU. The third stage – “transnational identity” – that is expected to follow will depend on the progress of the EU over the next few years.

Third stage: “Transnationalism” and the changing context of identity politics

EU Membership does not yet define personal identities; however, it increasingly defines state identity. It has become a constitutive feature of statehood (Herrmann, Risse, Brewer, 2004: 263) and defines the social and institutional space within which states act. This is where we left the second Europeanisation stage of identity politics – the internal integration of national groups within the state (thus, the intensification of liberal, democratic and civic values from within (and partially from beyond) the state). At this stage, it is not clear how this affects the personal identity of the European citizen and how strongly this bonds people to the EU and its institutions – possibly more than the strictly intergovernmental approach to the EU suggests and less than pro-integration elites would like to claim.

Hence, it is nevertheless clear that the EU must be considered an integral part of domestic politics in its member states, no matter how small the impact of the EU on identity construction is. This is even more so with new member states, where the evolution of new party politics has been tightly connected to European integration.

European integration has disturbed the traditional relationships between the state, the nation, sovereignty and democracy: it is creating a multifaceted political entity with a diffused sovereignty. It has split state competencies into various levels of governance, and it even seeks to exercise an influence over democratic processes from beyond the state boundaries⁸. The operative prefix here is multifaceted. The assumptions are that identities and interests of national groups will also adjust and, where appropriate, assume multiple affiliations between the place of residence and kin territory, and that this will (and in some cases, it already does) involve institutional arrangements and policies that cross state boundaries. These “transnational territories will emerge as a significant framework for economic, social and political change”⁹. This would lead to the politics of transnationalism – that is, a form of affiliation that is less defined by the relationship of the individual to state citizenship and more by solidarity based on other factors, i.e. region, or ethnic kin. The empirical evidence in this article seems to confirm the strength of this form of solidarity among the Hungarian minority in the Slovak-Hungarian border region. However, at this early stage of European integration, it is less persuasive when it comes to economic, social and political changes. Transnationalism defies the conventional meaning of the state and does not fit easily into the existing state dependent theories of integration, nationalism or democratisation. It is often referred to as “new regionalism”, that is, “self-rule based on territory, but without exclusive territorial control over territory, as implied by the classical nationalist doctrine” (Keating, 2004 and 1998).

One ought to be aware of the subtle difference between sub-state regionalism, i.e. Scotland or Wales, and regionalism in Central Europe, which usually denotes an ethno-region¹⁰. This is the reason why the term transnationalism appears to be more suitable for this article. With some reservations, we could be looking at a border region (a trans-state or trans-border identity) which ignores the overwhelming ethnic content of affiliation. Ethno-regionalism comes nearer to the mark but gives a false impression of ethnic homogeneity in these territories, which is not always the case¹¹.

The impact of transnational integration can, at this stage, provide only some tentative suggestions. I shall continue with a series of interrelated hypotheses, which are likely to characterise the third, transnational stage of identity politics in Central Europe. I will then turn to the Slovak case.

1) *The main challenge of the accession is reformulating the meaning of the nation, the state and the territory both perceptually and in reality.* The state’s sharing of competencies with Brussels diminishes the role of the nation as the dominant owner of the state with intended consequences for minorities, whose position should become less threatened and more secure in political and practical terms.

- 2) *European integration, if it is to continue on its intended path of civilising and democratising the European continent, changes the traditional meaning of borders.* Borders, far from the assumed clarity of purpose to delimit one society from the other, signify something of a paradox. In terms of identity, they are deemed to offer inclusion and cohesion; politically, they are a physical expression of sovereignty and they symbolise a completion of the project of the nation-state, as well as delimiting the state's territorial and institutional reach. Historically, borders (particularly in Central Europe) have been subject to a constant renegotiation, always producing overlapping and contradictory ethnic zones (Balibar, 2004), which have led, more often than not, to increased insecurity, ethnic and social divisions, exclusion and political conflict. Within the EU, borders take on a new significance¹². Again, rather paradoxically, the significance is actually in their absence. The new lack of borders, particularly in the region where borders were associated with historical animosity and/or communist army check points, constitutes one of the most profound changes in the history of the Central European region with tremendous consequences for majority-minority relationships, interstate relations and identity formation as we understand them in a more traditional nation-state-dependent context. This is probably best expressed in the words of the Slovak MEP (SMK) Edit Bauer: "No borders as such! It is an historic moment of unforeseen circumstances."
- 3) *New arrangements increase trans-border cooperation, which reinvigorates the kinship identity and produces the rise of ethno-regions.* Here the story becomes rather complex and adds to the surplus of speculations in the absence of sufficient empirical evidence. One story is becoming clear: the blurring of boundaries between national, international and regional. There is a fluidity of spaces within which politics are conducted, and that logically leads to a fluidity of affiliations and varied consequences.

THE SLOVAK-HUNGARIAN RELATIONSHIP

The relatively high level of ethnic heterogeneity makes the position of minorities one of the most important socio-political issues in Slovakia¹³. It must be stressed immediately that it is also the only Central European state where an ethnic party, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (henceforth, the SMK or the Hungarian Coalition), has been one of the most stable and dominant political parties in the government (1998–2006), even if currently in opposition. Due to the combination of the historical significance of Hungary and the political weight of the Hungarian minority at the centre of Slovak politics, the national question in Slovakia is largely exemplified by this inter-ethnic relationship above any other.

The major importance of the Slovak – Hungarian relationship (for both sides, incidentally) reflects a number of historical facts and their mutually incompatible interpretations as well as some very contemporary problems. Two of the most significant historical markers, around which Slovak national identity has been historically constructed, are the Hungarian and Czech

nations. Since Slovakia's independence (1993), the perceptions of the relationship between the nation, the state and democracy are all focused on the Hungarian minority, which represents Hungary in the Slovak national consciousness. When it comes to the Hungarian state, their ethnic kin seem to take on a similar role – an extension of the Hungarian state – and thus, become a subject of the Hungarian national consciousness, particularly its pre-occupation with post-World War I arrangements by which these minorities were “lost” to Hungary. Moreover, the incorporation of Hungarian minority representatives in Slovakia's power structure symbolises, simultaneously, maturing or regressing democracy and an important criterion by which Slovakia's admission into the EU was assessed.

The nationalistic slant of the Mečiar administration was one of the reasons for the initial rejection of Slovakia from the first wave of entrants into the EU. This was the period of the implementation of a discriminatory State Language Law (1995), the negative reforms in the provision of cultural subsidies and unsuccessful efforts to enforce Slovak education into Hungarian schools. The post-1998 administrations succeeded in creating a better framework for the resolution of minority issues despite many political crises, permanent frictions and mutual misgivings about broken promises – from all sides, including the Hungarian Coalition (Harris, 2004). In the 2002 and 2006 electoral periods, the position of the SMK in the government was very strong, with 20 seats in the Parliament and three ministries (agriculture, environment and development) as well as the Deputy Prime-Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and European Integration and the First Deputy Speaker of the Parliament.

The latest general elections, in June 2006, similar to the 2002 elections, were also accompanied by a degree of nationalist rhetoric and the usual inter-party haggling¹⁴, which, despite the presence of the strongly nationalist SNS, resulted in the formation of the leftist-nationalist coalition SMER-SNS-HZDS and cannot be blamed on ethnic tensions. The inclusion of the SNS appears to be questioned by both minorities and ordinary citizens. This less than desirable result is the consequence of a number of factors that are a testament to the immaturity of Slovakia's political system and false perceptions about democratic negotiations and compromise rather than to identity-related issues: a) very low turnout (54%, 71% in 2002); b) the post-accession release of the EU's political conditionality which kept certain political parties out of the government in return for membership. This reward-based strategy by the EU to stabilise political changes and promote liberal-democratic norms has initially, in the pre-accession period, been very effective in Slovakia¹⁵, particularly in minority issues; c) overall dissatisfaction with elites accused of arrogance, a lack of transparency and the abuse of economic power. The combination of those factors brought victory to the nationally orientated SMER party which then proceeded to form a government of least resistance¹⁶ including Mečiar's HZDS. On the other hand, the readiness with which ethnicity re-emerges as a political tool every time political elites vie for voters' attention should tell us something about the entrenchment of ethnic division in political practice.

The positive shifts in minority policies notwithstanding, politically, the Slovak-Hungarian relationship remains tense. The absence of constitutional changes, which would guarantee the continuation of these shifts, questions Slovakia's ability to deal with minority issues to the satisfaction of the Hungarian minority. No actual laws to address outstanding problems have been passed in the Parliament, with the exception of the Minority Language Law (1999), which brought changes to the previous, much-criticised Language Law of 1995 (Harris, 2002 and 2004) and enabled the ratification of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*¹⁷. The Hungarian SMK rejected the new parliamentary law because of the inadequate usage of minority languages, whilst the opposition abstained from voting for the opposite reason, but the law was passed anyway.

Many other issues remain open, i.e. the change to the preamble of the Constitution (1992), which refers to "the Slovak nation", thus implicitly excluding minorities from ownership of the state (Harris, 2002: 115–119), as well as other demands concerning the constitutional guarantees, the boundaries of administrative districts and the legally and emotionally complex issue of the revocation of the *Beneš Decrees*¹⁸. All in all, the Hungarian representatives, during nearly nine years in the forefront of Slovak politics, achieved a number of minor compromises on some issues but no significant victories. Paradoxically, despite regular disagreements, the assessment of the SMK's influence on the democratic process is overall very positive, particularly the assessment by the Slovak political parties (Harris, 2004; Krause, 2003).

Interestingly, there is an observable and rising dissatisfaction with the political representation of the Hungarian minority by the minority itself. The reasons are many. The following sections are informed by interviews (see below)¹⁹. First there, is the lack of choice whereby one party now represents the minority, which in actuality is an amalgam of 5 different political parties who have all abandoned their individual aims in favour of all-Hungarian representation. Whilst this may have served the electoral purposes of the 1998 elections, when Mečiar's government increased the electoral threshold in an attempt to minimize the opposition, the SMK is now often accused by more liberal and left orientated wings of the minority of short-sighted policies and the maintenance of ethnic tension rather than any resolution of economic problems.

The unemployment rate (13 to 20%) in the Southern, overwhelmingly Hungarian, region has been mentioned by all interviewed. It has been blamed largely on communist neglect and Mečiar's nationalising policies but also on the inability of the SMK to attract more investments. Thus, "the Hungarian Coalition is a conservative party and that is not what this region needs – identity rhetoric is a replacement of the real issue" (Oravec, the Mayor of Štúrovo). On the other hand, "there is no alternative to the SMK in the current climate" (Tóth, The Director of the Forum Minority Research Institute, Šamorín). It should be noted that "the increased concern for socio-economic issues rather than ethnic ones, particularly by the minority elites is a positive development towards de-ethnicisation of Slovak-Hungarian

relations” (Pál Csáky, the former Deputy Prime Minister [1998–2006] and the new leader of the SMK).

EUROPEANISATION AND MINORITIES

The national question claimed a prominent position in the political life of all post-Communist states due to either historical or recent developments. Europeanisation also meant the adoption of *minority legislation* in line with *European norms* (Tesser, 2003), and, on the whole, national elites adopted them as a part of the EU’s political conditionality attached to their accession. It would be naïve, however, to assume that the formal adoption and implementation of minority legislation would guarantee an instant change in majority-minority relationships. Not only are these relationships a result of long-standing historical processes, but the internationalisation of the minority issues left the national elite with little choice but to proceed with rigorous minority policies, often ahead of domestic developments.

A degree of political cynicism associated with minority rights must not be underestimated. Whilst Slovakia would probably have been less inclined to adopt the *European Charter on Minority Languages*, Hungary, with a significant number of kin abroad, supported extensive minority protection. Simultaneously, though, whilst both Slovakia and Hungary were in the process of accession negotiations with the EU, Hungary also adopted controversial legislation on the *Legal status of Hungarians living in neighbouring countries* (*Krajanský Zákon, Status law*, 2001) extending “partial” citizenship rights to their minorities, with the exception of Austria (Stewart, 2002). This legislation, after cautious criticism by the EU (*Venice Commission*, 2002), was eventually changed within the limits of international law and within what was considered a good neighbourly relationship between Slovakia and Hungary.

Whilst the majority of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia admit to some symbolic value of the *Status Law* (concessions for cultural and educational venues in Hungary for students and pensioners), the truth is that membership in the EU makes the law and its benefits, particularly in the area of employment, *de facto* redundant. Nevertheless, the frictions caused by this process only exacerbated a historically delicate relationship between the two nations and emphasised the durability of ethnicity as an electoral tool.

Most representatives of the Hungarian minority interviewed for this article considered the *Status Law* political manipulation orchestrated by the Hungarian Right for the purpose of its waning pre-election campaign and aided by the most nationalistic wing of the Hungarian Coalition. They regretted that the Coalition let itself be drawn into it. On both sides, nationalist elites appear resistant to the fact that the Hungarian minority is precisely that – a minority in a neighbouring state. While at times the excessive concern for ethnic kin by the Hungarian nationalist elites seemed exaggerated, the Slovak depiction of the *Status law* as another attempt to reassert the greater Hungary was even worse.

It is worth considering whether a politically integrated Europe is not, unwittingly, reinvigorating ethnicity through the back door. The erosion of the nation-state’s ability to endorse civic affiliations, particularly in the

newly independent states where the post-Communist nationalist mobilisation has not yet subsided, could lead to the strengthening of ethnic ties rather than establishing a larger political community. The architect of the *Status Law* and the ex-Prime Minister of Hungary, Victor Orbán, endorsed this sentiment when he claimed that “from the Hungarian point of view, the EU is a possibility to unify the Hungarian nation without the modification of borders” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 17. 10. 2003).

It is obvious that in the Central European context nationalism remains an active yet latent force that can be easily mobilised at national levels and that shifting the focus from the national to the European level may give these historically inspired group identities less opportunity to dominate the political process. According to some representatives of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, since the accession, “the minority feels a greater sense of trust, and interethnic relations are improving as they have been for the last seven years because the EU offers a degree of stability” (Fridrich Nagy, Deputy Mayor and the Member of the Regional Parliament, Dunajská Streda).

When it comes to the construction of identities, economic issues should not be underestimated for identities are “formed and reformed in everyday life” (Fridrich Nagy). Where employment opportunities have increased, and where there are more Slovaks moving into Hungarian areas (e.g. near the capital Bratislava due to rising property prices in the capital), communities are becoming less ethnically divided (Fridrich Nagy). By the same token, European integration promises the possibilities of the exchange of labour resources between Hungary and Slovakia; the relative lack of labour force on the Hungarian side of the border may be set off by the high unemployment on the Slovak side (Edit Bauer, MEP). In this case, “the Hungarian communities will become less dependent on the Slovak state and add to the overall aim of the regional regeneration by the EU to equalise economic life throughout the whole region” (László Nagy, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, National minorities and Position of Women).

AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION²⁰

As has been suggested, the Slovak-Hungarian relationship embodies a number of factors that are of supreme importance in the investigation of changing relations between national groups: the strong cultural, historical and political ties between the Hungarian minority and Hungary and their strong political position in the newly integrated Slovakia. For this reason, the border regions of Southern and Eastern Slovakia offer a suitable opportunity to investigate the propositions above, which form the organising framework of the following survey.

This ethnographic survey tried to capture perceptions about politics and a sense of belonging among the members of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia a year after the EU accession. The micro-sample of 110 people is of course too small to represent the more than 500,000 members of the Hungarian minority. The most obvious criterion for this minority is persons whose primary language is Hungarian. Obviously, there are many people in

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Slovakia who self-identify as Hungarian but do not use Hungarian as their primary language, just as there are many who speak Hungarian in private but do not consider themselves Hungarian²¹. Thus, respondents were chosen from schools where Hungarian is the language of instruction, from people who work in Hungarian cultural organisations (and are by their own admission committed to the preservation of their minority) and from politicians who represent the Hungarian Coalition in the national Parliament or local level. 47 of the respondents were lower six-form students (17 years of age) of two Gymnasia with Hungarian as the language of instruction from the capital, Bratislava, and Štúrovo, the predominantly Hungarian border city in the South. The other 63 respondents consisted of the following: teachers at those Gymnasia, council workers in Štúrovo, employees and librarians working at the Forum Institute (Institute for minorities) in Šamorín, which is a mixed town near Bratislava, a number of MP's from the Hungarian Coalition and a few representatives of the Hungarian minority in the city of Košice in the eastern part of the country (also attached to the Forum Institute).

Geographically, Štúrovo is the nearest city to the Hungarian border, even sharing the Danube River with the Hungarian city of Esztergom (they were one city prior to the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 following the Trianon agreements). In recent times, a restored bridge open to crossing with a minimal border control joined the cities. Šamorín is also near the border but closer to Bratislava with a more mixed population. Both towns belong to what is called Žitný Ostrov (Wheat Island, after the predominantly agrarian nature of the Southern region, also called the Hungarian belt). Košice, in the East, has a strong Hungarian presence that goes back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and to the Hungarian annexation of Eastern Slovakia during WWII. Since 1945, the Hungarian presence in Košice has been decreasing. The capital, Bratislava, is historically a multiethnic city near the Austrian and Hungarian borders. As will become apparent, the geographical position is important for reasons associated with the economy and the influence of the “motherland” Hungary.

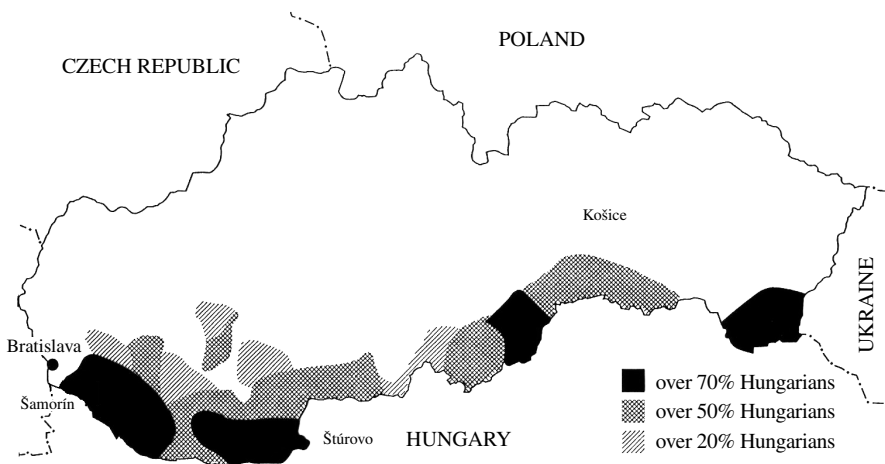


Table 1. – On a scale of 0–5, do you feel that Slovakia’s membership in the EU has altered the relationship between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority? (0 – not at all, 5 – significantly)

POLITICALLY	0–3	4–5 (significantly)	Comments
All regions and ages	100	10	the most used category: 3

ECONOMICALLY	0–3	4–5	Comments
All regions and ages	90	20	the most used category: 3

Table 2. – In terms of your identity, which of the following categories do you feel most comfortable with? In order of relevance: 1– most relevant, 2 – relevant, 3 – rather relevant, 4 – less relevant, 5 – not relevant. You can tick more than one category.

Category	0–3 (relevant)	4–5 (not relevant)	Comments
Hungarian living in Slovakia	103		Most responses: “rather relevant”
Slovak of Hungarian background	2		
Hungarian (no state affiliation)	83		This could be in response to the “no” vote to dual citizenship in Hungary
Slovak (state affiliation)	–		
European (ethnically Hungarian)	87		
European	5		
Other			

Table 3. – In terms of political activity (i.e. local politics and national politics) are you more interested in: your locality/region, the Slovak capitol Bratislava, the Hungarian capitol Budapest or Brussels? In order of importance: 1– most important, 2 – important, 3 – less important, 4 – not important

Place of interest	1–2 Important		3–4 Less important		Comment
	Residence Štúrovo	Residence Bratislava/ Šamorín Košice	Residence Štúrovo	Residence Bratislava/ Šamorín Košice	
Locality/region	45	51			
Bratislava	23	46			
Budapest	31	19		16	Further from the Hungarian border Budapest appears less important.
Brussels	21	31		9	

Table 4. – On a scale of 0–5, has EU membership affected your sense of security? (0 – not at all, 5 – significantly)

All regions and Ages	0–2 (no)	3	4–5 (yes)	Comment
Politically	66	22	22	There appears to be a small improvement in security in political and cultural terms.
Economically	83	14	13	
Culturally	70	25	15	

Table 5. – Do you think that developments in your region have a long-term influence on the relationship between Slovakia and Hungary?

	Yes/possibly	Don't know	Not really	Comment
All regions and Ages	98	12		

ANALYSIS

The above survey is not a sociological study but seeks to give an impression of issues that could be considered relevant to identity politics of a politically and geographically concentrated minority in a state where national issues remain high on the political agenda. A number of classifications are in order.

First, a minority in the Central European context usually denotes an historical minority (autochthonous) who have resided in the same territory for generations but their state affiliations have changed due to the repositioning of borders following the establishment of new states after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires or the Communist regime. This is very different from Western Europe, where the term “minority” usually refers to immigration (“new minorities”, as they are called in Slovakia). Both types of minorities face specific problems and require specific legislative arrangements for their resolution.

Second, the Hungarian minority is concentrated in certain areas of the country, which they feel should form a coherent administrative district. This is particularly the case with the Southern border region (*Žitný Ostrov*). However, this region is divided between two administrative districts (*Trnava and Nitra*) with two major consequences for political competition:

- a) The dissatisfaction of the Hungarian minority who feel that self-governing regions (VÚC, Vyššie územné celky) have been drawn according to a principle of diminishing Hungarian influence (MEP [SMK] Edith Bauer) in the areas with an overwhelmingly Hungarian population²². In this respect, they lack the ethnic and geographic coherence that ethno-regions would suggest.
- b) Political competition between parties at the state level tends to migrate into the regions. The best example was the declaration of an anti-SMK coalition between many Slovak parties for the regional elections (see note 27). There is only one Hungarian party and a number of Slovak political parties who are always willing to mobilise on the purportedly excessive Hungarian influence in the mixed regions. This is even more so now,

when the Hungarian Coalition is fighting many battles. First, it acts as an opposition party within a fractious party system (to whose fractiousness it often contributes); second, it acts as an ethnic party in the post-accession country where, as the last elections demonstrated, its presence in the government is no longer considered a foreign policy issue connected to successful European integration; and finally, it is struggling to reconcile the growing ideological and socio-economic chasms within its own electorate.

What do the results of the above survey tell us about the third stage of the post-Communist transition – “transnationalism”?

The identity of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia is overwhelmingly ethnic: some 84% of the respondents view themselves primarily as a “Hungarian living in Slovakia”. This is further confirmed by the 80% who identified themselves as “European but ethnically Hungarian” (Table 2). What is interesting about this is that political affiliation appears to be rather European (80%) than Slovak (the Slovak state is viewed strictly as a place of residence) (75%). However, in the responses to the question of political interest, Europe is in third place after locality (the majority of respondents) and the national level (Bratislava) (Table 3). The external homeland, that is Budapest, takes precedence over the national level only in Štúrovo, which is geographically the closest to the Hungarian border. Further away from the border, or nearer to Bratislava (where the locality is actually the capital), Budapest ceases to be important. This says probably more about media influence than about where political interest lies. The most important finding in this context is that locality/region carries the weight of political interest and engagement – politics are moving away from the centre.

In this respect, we are probably observing a slow regionalisation of the Hungarian minority within the EU context. In order to make a more meaningful statement about the relation of Europeanisation and regionalisation among other national groups, whether in Slovakia or elsewhere, one would have to conduct a similar survey among the Slovak population in mixed and mostly Slovak regions. In the absence of such a comparative survey, a degree of caution is required when claiming the emergence of an ethno-region in the Southern “Hungarian belt” between Slovakia and Hungary. On the other hand, there is no denying that the Hungarian minority’s cultural and political life takes place in their region and that European identity takes precedence over the Slovak territorial one.

This can be interpreted in a number of ways. State affiliation is marginalised in favour of ethnic affiliation, either for historical reasons or as a reflection of actual daily existence. Whilst the Slovak state is accepted, it is being supplemented by the EU, which appears to offer an acceptable political identity. This is consistent with beliefs that historical minorities in Eastern/Central Europe prefer larger, less national political units²³ and that Europeanisation opens different political spaces and opportunities within which national groups operate. Here, again, it would be beneficial to conduct a survey on the other side of the border to gain a deeper understanding of how Hungarian citizens feel about their border region and

where their affiliations lie. I contend that Europeanisation means different things to minorities than it does to the dominant national groups within their nation states, as rising euroscepticism in Central Europe demonstrates.

Just as important are the findings of the fifth question concerning the relationship between regional developments and the long-term influence on the relationship between Slovakia and Hungary, whereby 90% of the respondents believe it to be positive. If democratisation is also about peaceful coexistence among national groups, then we ought to concede that transnationalism, open borders, and politics, which are decentralised beyond the dominance of the nation-state, are a way forward.

“THE OLD REGION IN A NEW FORM?”²⁴: A CONCLUSION

The history of Central Europe has produced divergent accounts of identity politics within the post-Communist and Europeanisation stages of the democratisation processes. The Europeanisation stage has altered the political context within which the majority and minorities co-exist and how they perceive their roles within their nation-states. Interests and identities are shaped and affected by a rights-granting and economy-regulating entity – no longer the state alone but its extension and in some areas of legislation and distribution its replacement – the EU. Even though ethnic identities appear to be very durable, they are affected by policies and institutions which have been extended beyond the nation-state.

European integration affects the meanings associated with the nation, the state, the borders and citizenship while producing a plethora of contradictions, opportunities and challenges. Whilst the role of the state (and by implication, the majority) has not been shaken out of its dominance yet, transnationalism creates unprecedented prospects to move politics beyond the state and “rescue” democracy and the relationship between national groups from its confines.

Minorities are about memory, identity and solidarity; border regions in Central Europe are all of these, but they are also spaces where memories can be transcended, identities multiplied and transformed and where democracy, governance and European integration are played out. The traditional nation-state as the home of democracy ought to be challenged for its repeated failure to produce a lasting reconciliation between national groups. The intention here has been twofold. The first intention is to argue that democracy needs a novel shape and that the assertion of border regions may be the first instance where the EU project can be truly tested by shifting the political context of a majority-minority relationship beyond the boundaries of the nation-state and into a wider European space. The second intention is to highlight the potential for further research about the relationship between Europeanisation and minorities and establish in the long term whether the third stage of the post-Communist transition, European transnationalism, will indeed aid the construction of stable political communities in Central Europe.

APPENDIX

Interviews conducted in June 2005:

Pál Csáky:	Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and European Integration (SMK), 1998–2006, recently elected the leader of the SMK.
Kornélia Csala:	The Director of “Hungarian Cultural Home”, a civil society cultural organisation in Košice.
Edit Bauer:	MEP (SMK).
Mária Kulcsár:	Head of the office of the Hungarian Information Centre, the Forum Institute, Košice.
László Nagy:	The Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, National Minorities and the Position of Women (SMK).
Fridrich Nagy:	Deputy Mayor, Dunajská Streda and Member of the regional parliament (Trnavská Župa).
László Óllős:	President of the Forum Institute, Šamorín.
Ján Oravec:	Mayor of Štúrovo.
Károly Tóth:	The Director of the Forum Minority Research Institute, Šamorín.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The article is based on a research project funded by the British Academy (SG – 37978) “The changing context of minority politics: The impact of European integration on the Hungarian minority in Slovakia”, June 2004–June 2005.
- ² National minorities, whilst not easily distinguished from ethnic groups, are nevertheless usually assumed to be indigenous, historical or territorial culturally distinct groups of a larger size. Whilst definitional distinctions between “multinational”, “multicultural” and “multiethnic” remain imprecise, in political parlance, “multinational” usually refers to a state where there is a constitutional recognition of the (co)existence of a number of national groups, i.e. what federal states such as Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia were before their disintegration. All states are at the same time increasingly more multicultural in terms of the variety of ethnic communities and protection policies they seek (including migrant communities). A multiethnic state, on the other hand, is a state where there are a number of national minorities with varying degrees of political and cultural protection by the state; Slovakia probably fits that category. See also: Kymlicka and Norman (2000) and Sasse and Thielemann (2005).
- ³ For an in-depth discussion of the concept of “identity” as used in this article, see Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 6–9).
- ⁴ For a similar definition of ethnic politics that stresses the collective actions inspired by ethnic identity, see Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 5).
- ⁵ Nationalism was obviously not the only reason for the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. However, nationalism was an integral part of post-Communist democratisation processes. See mainly Harris (2002) and furthermore: G. Nodia (1996) and Beisinger (1996). For a more historical perspective of the relationship between democracy and nationalism, see Mann in Periwal and Gellner (1995: 44–65).
- ⁶ There are many forms of populism, but usually it denotes a form of political discourse that either stresses “the belief in the value of belonging to a group or culture” (I. Berlin) or sets itself against the prevailing liberal institutions and assumptions of individuality. It is an imprecise concept because it is parasitic on other ideologies, but in nearly all cases, populism is a style of politics that tends to appeal to “people” and extols their virtues and/or suffering over “others”, thus justifying political action. See mainly: Ionescu and Gellner (eds.) (1969) and Taggart (2000).
- ⁷ For the impact of the EU’s enlargement on national policies in Central Europe, see Vermeersch (2003).
- ⁸ Lord and Harris (2006), in their defence of democracy beyond the state, argue that there is a mutual interdependence between democracy beyond the state in the new Europe and democracy within the state.
- ⁹ For the impact of European integration on national groups and regions, see mainly: Keating (2004 and 1998).
- ¹⁰ A territory on two sides of the state border that is based on ethnic kinship.

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- ¹¹ Deets and Stroschein (2005: 293) refer to “minority within minority” in their discussion about the contentiousness of territorial autonomy.
- ¹² A comprehensive overview of debates about territory and borders in Europe can be found in Rumford (eds.) (2006), Special Issue of Comparative European Politics 4: 2/3.
- ¹³ 14–18% of the population declares itself to be other than Slovak. Slovakia thus counts as one of the most ethnically heterogeneous countries in Europe. With the exception of the ex-Soviet Republics, Slovakia is in 4th place after Macedonia, Spain and Croatia (Dostál in Kollár and Mesežnikov, eds. 2000: 175–189).
- ¹⁴ The 2006 pre-election campaign which started on regional and local levels was steeped in inter-party manoeuvres to minimize the opposition. An anti-SMK coalition has been declared by some Slovak parties for the purpose of regional elections in the Nitra regional parliament where the Hungarian Coalition has the majority (SME, 11 June 2005). Similarly, the SMK is apparently exerting some pressure on their own voters to vote for their candidates in preference to Slovak candidates in local councils in mixed regions. For the role of ethnic parties, see also Chandra (2005).
- ¹⁵ For EU conditionality both as a concept and as a practice, see mainly: F. Schimmelfennig (2003 and 2007) and Lord and Harris (2006, chpt. 5).
- ¹⁶ Z. Bútorová (2006) demonstrates that the new Slovak government, particularly the SNS, does not have the support of the majority of the population.
- ¹⁷ The main post-Cold War agreements on minority rights are: the 1990 Copenhagen Documents (“the respect for and protection of minorities”) and the 1995 Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.
- ¹⁸ This refers to the post WWII decrees of the Czechoslovak President Beneš, on the basis of which the confiscation of Hungarian properties in Slovakia and the expulsions of the 3 million Sudeten Germans from the Czech lands were legally justified. The Hungarian and Sudeten German minorities were accused of being “collectively guilty” of collaboration with the enemy (Nazi Germany). None of these decrees have actually been revoked, and there are no restitutions for the confiscated Hungarian properties available under the current Slovak legislation.
- ¹⁹ Interviews conducted in June 2005: for the list of interviewees, see the Appendix above.
- ²⁰ The empirical research has been conducted in Slovakia during the year 2005. The survey took place in June 2005.
- ²¹ In certain parts of Slovakia (mainly the East and the South), Hungarian is spoken by many people who nevertheless do not consider themselves Hungarian, i.e. people who used to live in the sub-Carpathian region which was annexed to Hungary during the war; many are Romanies, people who have married into Hungarian families or people who simply live among Hungarian speaking neighbours. For a more detailed debate, see: Deets and Stroschein (2005).
- ²² The creation of at least one all-Hungarian district remains one of the unfulfilled demands of the Hungarian Coalition. See Harris (2004) and the comments of the above interviewees.
- ²³ The Hungarian minority was always opposed to Slovak independence, which was one of the reasons for ethnic tensions in post-independent Slovakia.
- ²⁴ Words borrowed from László Óllós, President of the Forum Institute in Šamorín.
- ²⁵ For the notion of democracy as if imprisoned by the overwhelmingly ethnic character of the nation state, see also Habermas (1992 and 2001).

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