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MINORITY POLITICAL AGENCY IN POLITICAL REGIMES OF UNEQUAL ACCOMMODATION

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NÁNDOR BÁRDI, ISTVÁN HORVÁTH (EDS.),
*UNEQUAL ACCOMMODATION OF MINORITY RIGHTS.
HUNGARIANS IN TRANSYLVANIA.*
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This volume builds on a number of contributions by Western scholars, including Brubaker et al.,¹ Csergő,² Waterbury,³ and Stroschein,⁴ who framed theoretically and investigated empirically majority and minority nationalism in Transylvania and Romania, Hungarian ethnic mobilisation along linguistic and cultural lines, and transnational constellations involving kin-states, home-states, ethnic nations, and ethnic minorities.

More importantly, the book rests on a wealth of excellent work done by scholars in Romania and their collaborators in Hungary, comprising a significant number of comparative surveys conducted in the Carpathian Basin, national opinion polls including representative subsamples of the Hungarian minority population in Romania, mining of available census public use microdata sets, and ethnographic research based on interviews, observation, document analysis, and focus groups. This extensive and thorough material, published mostly in Hungarian, has not generally had the chance to reach extensive audiences, beyond a certain specialised field of scholarship. The authors of this volume now bring the material to the greater public through an English collection of detailed expositions and sophisticated analyses, set in solid theoretical and comparative frameworks.

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- 1 Brubaker, Rogers, M. Feischmidt, J. Fox and L. Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).
 - 2 Csergő, Zsuzsa, *Talk of the Nation: Language and Conflict in Romania and Slovakia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007).
 - 3 Waterbury, Myra, *Between State and Nation: Diaspora Politics and Kin-State Nationalism in Hungary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
 - 4 Stroschein, Sherrill, *Ethnic Struggle, Coexistence, and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The book opens with an introduction that clarifies the conceptual parameters of the volume, its analytical architecture, and the structure of the contents. It is organised into three main parts. The first part discusses minority politics in Romania historically through the lens of the transformation of the minority rights regime. It consists of a chapter by Nándor Bárdi and Tamás Kiss that presents minority political agency in historical perspective; a chapter by Tamás Kiss, Tibor Toró, and István Gergő Székely that details the process of unequal accommodation of Hungarian minority in Romania; and a chapter by István Horváth and Tibor Toró on minority language politics in Romania. The second part of the book is dedicated to the granulated investigation of Hungarian ethnic parallelism as political program and social reality, and includes chapters on Hungarian language education (by Attila Z. Papp, János Márton, and István Gergő Székely), churches and religious life (by Dénes Kiss), Hungarian media in Transylvania and media use by Hungarians (by Tamás Kiss), and on the relationship between economy and ethnicity in Transylvania (by Zsombor Csata). The third part is devoted to societal and demographic macro-processes and contains three outstanding chapters by Tamás Kiss on demographic dynamics; the changing system of ethnic stratification; and the context, practice, meanings, and political consequences of mixed families.

The volume is introduced modestly as a case study on which a number of concepts from sociology and political science in particular, and a number of theoretical statements, are proposed and tested, opening the ground for more nuanced analyses and comparative studies on certain blind spots in the study of political processes within multi-ethnic polities. These pivot around what the authors conceptualise as *unequal accommodation*, the dominant social form that the model of inter-ethnic relations took in post-communist Romania. By unequal accommodation the authors understand an arrangement whereby minority organisations are recognised as the legitimate representatives of the concerned groups and minority elites are co-opted into executive power structures, without the full constitutional recognition of ethnocultural diversity and without institutional guarantees of power-sharing among ethnic groups (Tamás Kiss et al. p. 14.).

Within such an institutional arrangement, predicated on several structural asymmetries, including demographic and linguistic asymmetries, the reaction of the Hungarian representatives, as main holders and performers of *minority political agency* (concept developed from Csergő and Regelmann⁵), took highly informal ways of claim-making and bargaining—through political patronage, clientelism, pork-barrel politics, and community organizing

5 Csergő, Zsuzsa, and A.-C. Regelmann, “Europeanization and collective rationality in minority voting”. *Problems of Post-Communism* 64(5), (2017) 291–310.

through ethnic parallelism. The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania's (DAHR) participation in government is understood as *control through co-optation* and results in the toning down of the radicalism of the initial claims for the central programmatic goal of post-Communist elites—namely the political integration of the Hungarian community through the form of segmental autonomy and power-sharing. *Control through co-optation* also indicates the central importance of the co-optation of the Hungarian elites into executive power in Romanian politics.

In order to maintain its legitimacy and effectiveness within a complex context of internal challenges within the platform, and external challenges from the tensioned kin-state policies of Hungary, the DAHR gradually operated a split between formal programmatic elements and the actual agenda of political negotiations with Romanian political partners. While autonomy was reinserted as a central element of the political program and the internal political rhetoric of the DAHR, no real strategy was associated with it concerning implementation. Formal programmatic elements came to have little relevance in shaping the political strategy of the DAHR.

The discussion concerning minority language use and the examination of the system of education in the Hungarian language are extremely useful, especially in relation to the problematisation of the existence of a parallel society (or ethnic archipelago) as a form of community organising. Romanians often find positive discrimination as unjust, especially when assessing the poor condition of Romanian schools, and express it in answers they give to survey questions that were presented in the book, where they consider that Hungarians have just enough rights or too many rights. However, what to Romanians seems to be differential treatment, to Hungarians it is a claim on the basis of their equal right to enjoy their language, community, and culture, as culture needs people to embody it, to live it, to practice it. In the book, one of the problematic aspects of Hungarian language education was the question of 'ownership' of state schools. The authors agree that '[a] proper answer to this question can only be an answer that involves deliberation at the level of the Hungarian community' (p. 289), but this thought remains enigmatic in the context of the chapter. Perhaps a bit more detail on how ownership can be assumed or declined, and on the role of Hungarian decision-makers in such an act would be welcome here.

One line of argumentation that deserves a bit more explanation is that the unfavourable attitudes of the majority population toward various minority rights represent one of the main factors that prevent a further move toward the institutionalisation of pluralistic measures. More detail on the influence-path that links the causal factor to the outcome and on the

contextualisation of the presented survey data better allows for interpreting the figures, both diachronically, in terms of opinions on the transformation of inter-ethnic relations in Romania, and in terms of what respondents believe are their most important concerns, respectively what they believe are their leaders' most important concerns at the moment of the survey, for both Romanian and Hungarian ethnics. A counterfactual to the claimed causal link is the situation of another minority category that in all surveys and practical reality receives by far the worst assessment, the greatest discrimination, and the biggest social distance—sexual minorities. The recent mobilisation in Romania to restrict symbolically if not practically their rights has failed.

A particular mention deserves the extremely interesting, paradoxical situation of the two case studies illustrating the disadvantages of unequal accommodation—the case of bilingual city signs in Cluj and the case of bilingual official signs in Târgu Mureş. The situation is paradoxical because these were instances in which the right was actually formalised; they were cases of outright refusal to apply the existing law, yet the Hungarian political representatives pondered on whether to bargain or went on bargaining anyway. They demonstrated one of the perverse consequences of becoming used to asymmetric bargaining, which is creating legal confusion and insecurity and using unsolved rights to sustain electoral mobilisation. They also raise the question of how political and civic society competitors to the DAHR are portrayed and experienced by ordinary Hungarians, and how the population relates to their leaders locally, taking into account the ontologically distinct situation of the Hungarians in the Szeklerland, in Central Transylvania and the Partium, and in the *szórvány* regions (scattered Hungarians).

The volume represents an extremely valuable resource for students, scholars, and the concerned public on the politics of interethnic relations in Romania. Not only does it bring rich, up to date empirical material, complemented by historically and regionally relevant comparative data on regimes of accommodation, minority agency, ethno-national boundary making, and the effects of ethnicity in everyday life, but it also offers multiple conceptual and theoretical tools to make sense of them. The incursions in the past are solid, concise, and illuminating. The majority of the chapters provide comprehensive and supple theorising that links micro-processes with macro-structures and social-historical dynamics through compelling explanation with the exception, perhaps, of the chapters on religious sentiment and social institutions, and on minority language media behaviour, which are mostly descriptive, but nonetheless informative. This is a welcome and generous gift offered by the authors and will stay as the most authoritative source of data and insight on the topic for a long time.