

## **Enhanced representation of minority interests in the EP: the significance of transborder Hungarian mandates**

From a Hungarian perspective<sup>1</sup> an important issue of the 2014 EP elections was the number of Hungarian and transborder Hungarian representatives in the EP elected for the next five years. Five representatives of the governing conservative party alliance FIDESZ-KDNP (Hungary), two representatives of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR; Romania), and the MEPs of the Party of the Hungarian Community (PHC; Slovakia) and Most-Híd (Hungarian-Slovak interethnic party; Slovakia) will focus on representing and promoting the rights of national minorities in the European Parliament in the upcoming parliamentary term of 2014-2019. The MEPs of the ethnic parties (DAHR and HCP) and the interethnic party (Most-Híd) will represent minority rights in a classic way, while the work of the deputies of the FIDESZ-KDNP may be interpreted as an aspect of Hungary's kin-state policy.

Ten years have passed since the Central European countries joined the European Union. The European Union and the European Parliament are considered by the Hungarian state and the Hungarian minority communities living in neighboring states as an outstanding arena for the representation of minority interests, since political participation and the representation of minority interests at local, national, and European level is one of the tools for representing minority claims and extending minority rights. Even if the 1999 Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities does not explicitly refer to minorities' right to effective participation in *supranational* decision-making bodies such as the European Parliament, the importance of this approach can be deduced from the wording of paragraph 7 of the Recommendations as follows: "Experience in Europe and elsewhere demonstrates the importance of the electoral process for facilitating the participation of minorities in the political arena."

During the past ten years the Hungarian representatives from the Carpathian Basin kept minority issues and the most important problems of national minorities abroad alive on the agenda of the EP and its special committees. Beside plenary speeches, one of the excellent possibilities to represent minority claims has been the work of the Minority Intergroup (i.e.: Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages). The work of the Intergroup resulted in a good cooperation with other minority representatives of the EP as well as with MEPs interested in minority issues, which is essential for a stronger voice and wider representation of the concerned issues – even if the Intergroup itself is not a parliamentary body, only an informal forum. Other important developments in the field of minority protection within the EU have been the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and granting it the same legal status as the Treaties themselves, as well as the setting up of the Fundamental Rights Agency. However, participation and representation do not

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<sup>1</sup> On the issue of national minorities see our former analysis: There is nothing new under the sun: minority rights, dual citizenship, and autonomy. [http://bgazrt.hu/files/NPKI/Autonomy\\_Subc.pdf](http://bgazrt.hu/files/NPKI/Autonomy_Subc.pdf)

guarantee the protection of minority rights within the institution, although the publicity of the EP has provided more visibility and more effective representation of their interests and concerns.

In 2004 only the Hungarians of Slovakia were able to send representatives to the Parliamentary body of the European Union. In 2007 the Romanian accession to the EU opened the way for Hungarians in Romania to delegate representatives as well. The 2009-2014 parliamentary term, which is just coming to an end, also provided five transborder Hungarian representatives for the EP. Regarding Slovakia, in 2009 the HCP repeated its 2004 performance and sent two representatives to the EP again. In Romania the cooperation between DAHR and the Transylvanian Hungarian National Council resulted in sending three Hungarian representatives to the EP. From Hungary Kinga Gál, György Schöpflin (both are members of the FIDESZ-KDNP), and Csaba Tabajdi (Hungarian Socialist Party) were the most active in raising issues concerning national minorities, obviously concentrating especially on the Hungarian minorities in neighboring states.

**Hungary.** It was also a peculiarity of the elections that the Hungarian governing party (FIDESZ-KDNP) put on their list Hungarian candidates living in neighboring states who should represent both the interests of the FIDESZ-KDNP as well as those of the Hungarian communities abroad.

Fidesz-KDNP obtained more than half of the seats in the EP at the elections. The ruling party acquired 51.49% of the votes which means that FIDESZ-KDNP will send 12 candidates (out of 21, the total number of candidates Hungary can send) to the EP. Five out of the twelve deputies of the FIDESZ-KDNP are concerned with minority issues. György (George) Schöpflin, former professor at the London School of Economics, is a well-known scholar on minority issues. He will be in charge of the Hungarian diaspora living outside the Carpathian Basin. Kinga Gál is a recognized specialist on minority rights (author of several articles and books), and the former president of the Intergroup. Andrea Bocskor is representing the Hungarian community of Transcarpathia (Ukraine), Andor Deli is representing the Hungarian community of Vojvodina (Serbia), while László Tökés (former MEP entering the European Parliament on the list of the DAHR was the candidate of the Transylvanian Hungarian National Council; the two Hungarian political organizations agreed to participate in the EP elections on a common list in 2009) is representing the Hungarian community of Transylvania (Romania). Andrea Bocskor and Andor Deli – both from countries that are not EU-members – are dual citizens (Ukrainian-Hungarian, and Serbian-Hungarian, respectively).

**Slovakia.** In Slovakia the turnout was extremely low; altogether 13.05% of the electorate voted for representatives to the European Parliament. From a Hungarian perspective, the crucial question at this election was whether or not the Hungarians of Slovakia would be able to retain their representation in Brussels. At any rate, the HCP and the Most-Híd obtained one representative in the European Parliament each, with HCP receiving 6.53% of the vote and Most-Híd collecting 5.83% of the vote. Thus the HCP could better mobilize its voters which probably was a result of their effective campaign in November 2013 for the country's local

governmental elections, as well as their successful participation in the Spring 2014 presidential elections.

The fact that two Hungarian representatives go to Brussels in spite of the low national turnout is a result of a larger Hungarian turnout in Southern Slovakia where the Hungarians constitute the majority of the population. The representative of the Most-Híd is József Nagy, while the HCP is represented by Pál Csáky. The relationship between the two parties is anything but cordial since the 2009 party-split and at the national level the two parties do not cooperate (HCP is a Hungarian ethnic party, while the Most-Híd is a Hungarian-Slovak interethnic party). How this will affect the relation between the two representatives in the European Parliament is an open question, since both parties belong to the European People's Party (EPP) faction. Pál Csáky was for eight years the state secretary responsible for human and minority rights. József Nagy became well-known as an environmental specialist who stressed his environmentalist commitments in the EP-campaign and stated that he also wants to stand up for the rights of national minorities and his goal is to protect the rights of autochthonous and traditional minorities by contributing to the development of the EU's legal regime .

**Romania.** In Romania the electorate had 32 representative seats to fill. The voter turnout was 32.44%. Compared to the 27.21% participation in 2009 this was more than a 5% improvement. One of the reasons for the increased participation was the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for fall 2014 for which the Romanian political parties have used the EP elections as an opportunity for mobilization. For the parties on the right it has been an opportunity to clarify their relative strength in the electorate, while the coalition of left-wing parties wanted to consolidate their prospects.

The DAHR finished in fifth place obtaining 6.3% of the total votes and it guarantees two representatives in the EP for the party. In this context they will increase the Hungarian sector's share in the EPP's overall numbers. The party's current EP representatives Gyula Winkler and Csaba Sógor can continue their work in Brussels.

On the basis of these results we can see that the mobilization of the Hungarian voters did not reach the 2009 level. At the same time, their proportion was still higher than that of the majority parties' electorate. The reason for the lower turnout of the Hungarian electorate (compared to the turnout of the Hungarian electorate in 2007) is due to the general disappointment with the EU's protection of minorities, and the unfulfilled prospects and slower increase of living standards than anticipated at the time of accession to the EU. For the Romanian voters the mobilizing force was the intense competition for the Presidency. The Hungarian voters were less motivated by this, yet they still participated in larger numbers proportionately than the voters of the majority nation.

During the past ten years most of the transborder Hungarian representatives have worked in certain issues closely with the representatives of the FIDESZ-KDNP from Hungary. Together they strengthen the same political European party faction, the European People's Party in the EP. They stand for similar principles in the area of minority protection.

Due to the strong performance of the FIDESZ-KDNP in the elections of 2014, their EP list incorporating candidates from minority Hungarian communities, and the success of

transborder parties at the EP elections in their country of residence, the Hungarians of the Carpathian Basin now have a strengthened representation in the EP. The European Parliament's role is becoming more and more important in the process of decision-making, and its activity is more and more visible as well. From the perspective of resolving minority problems, the forthcoming term may be favorable since more and more documents<sup>2</sup> have been adopted by European institutions (even if they are documents of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe)<sup>3</sup>, which can provide guidance in handling minority issues. For this very reason the transborder Hungarian parliamentary representation acquires greater significance, and in Europe this might strengthen the legitimacy and the attention paid to national minority issues.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: Report on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union (2012) (2013/2078(INI)). Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. Rapporteur: Louis Michel

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Resolution 1985 (2014) "The situation and rights of national minorities in Europe" adopted by the Council of Europe (CoE) Parliamentary Assembly on 8 April. See our former analysis: Resolution of the Council of Europe on the situation and rights of national minorities: [http://bgazrt.hu/files/NPKI/ET\\_en.pdf](http://bgazrt.hu/files/NPKI/ET_en.pdf)