

## Is there a "Hungarian issue" in Romania?

At a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel held on 26 February 2015, President of Romania Klaus Iohannis – who has been in office since December 2014<sup>1</sup> – made a remark which drew great attention among Hungarians: he said that “There is no Hungarian issue in Romania.” Below we try to give a context to the president’s announcement which might serve its better understanding and examine if there is a “Hungarian issue” in Romania from the perspective outside the Carpathian Basin, that is from a non-Hungarian point of view.

Klaus Werner Iohannis<sup>2</sup>, who was the longest-serving former president of the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (FDGR), won the mayor’s election in Sibiu/Nagyszeben in 2000, causing great surprise. Mr. Iohannis repeated this victory three more times, receiving the vote of confidence in a town where the rate of Saxon minority constitutes only two percent of the population. It must be noted, however, that Mr. Iohannis ran for every election as candidate of the FDGR, it was only on 20 February 2013 when he entered the National Liberal Party (PNL), and was elected the PNL’s president only after unsuccessful European Parliament elections, in June 2014.

As a matter of course, it emerged during the Romanian presidential election campaign that Klaus Iohannis, the leader of the German minority in Romania is actually not of Romanian nationality, but Mr. Iohannis had evidently been prepared for this “accusation”. When he was still a presidential candidate, he declared that he considers himself “German by birth but Romanian by identity”. After he was elected president, Mr. Iohannis continued to abstain from taking a stand on minority issues, although it was just some weeks ago when he said in an interview in connection with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the FDGR that “the positive discrimination of minorities

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<sup>1</sup> A study on the Romanian presidential election written by the research associate of the Research Institute for Hungarian Communities Abroad Gerely Illyés is available in the volume *Kissebségkutatás*, issue 2015/1 (the volume is currently under publication)

<sup>2</sup> In official documents, the Romanian President’s name is written as Iohannis, this form can be explained by the birth registration practice of communist Romania. In spite of this fact, the president said in an interview that he uses his name as Johannis, following his family traditions and the rules of German spelling. Since the presidential election campaign, however, he has left this practice and the President’s Office has started to issue official statements under the name Iohannis. Despite this latest practice, we use the traditional form, following the form the president has most frequently used during his political career.

– that is, ensuring parliamentary representation for minorities and an opportunity to take part in municipal elections – is not typical in every European country.”

Knowing the above presented facts, it is natural that the announcement President Klaus Johannis made in Berlin, stating that “there is no Hungarian issue in Romania”, was received with great interest. It is important to note that the president responded to a journalist’s question when he made this remark, who asked “whether the president is not afraid of conflicts regarding the Hungarian community in Romania, taking into account Hungary’s endeavors to protect Hungarian communities abroad and represent their interests.” Although it was not explicitly said, the context of the question referred to the current tense situation in Ukraine, and Russia’s “protection” concerning the Russian minority in Ukraine. The Romanian president’s answer to this question was that “Hungary shows an extremely high level of interest in the Hungarian communities living beyond its borders”, adding that “We do not feel threatened by this attitude in Romania, at the same time, it is natural that we are very attentive when a neighboring country shows such strong interest in a certain minority.” The president added: “The Hungarian community has political representation in Romania. They are our partners. I meet these politicians very often, we discuss the current problems and, I assure you, there is no Hungarian issue in Romania.”

We consider that – regarding the above presented context – Klaus Johannis actually avoided the possibility of drawing any parallel between the relations of Hungary with the Hungarian minority in Romania and that of Russia with the Russian minority in Ukraine, and regarding the current geopolitical situation, this response is welcome. Since the situation of minorities in Romania was not among the topics of the press conference, the president only gave a brief response to the question, therefore, we do not evaluate his announcement as an irreversible and clear presidential standpoint on the situation of Hungarians living in Romania.

Nevertheless, it might be important to examine whether there is a “Hungarian issue” in Romania. The examination of this question is also important because Romanian politicians continuously stress that the minority policy of Romania is exemplary in Europe, and the problems of Hungarians living there are solved.

We consider that the most relevant standpoint from this point of view should be formulated by the members and political advocacy organizations of the concerned community, since – beyond the existing laws and the events reported by the international press – they are the ones who feel

and know whether they experience any forms of discrimination in their everyday life, whether they enjoy their full rights as the citizens of Romania and Europe, whether or not the experience of their cultural and national identity and its passing on to future generations, the long-term preservation and prosperity of their community is guaranteed.

Although the international press rarely pays attention to these issues, and journalists tend to be superficial and get information from one side only, by examining the reports of the Hungarian press in Romania we see that cases of discrimination and cases connected with the enforcement of the rule of law, the selective application of the laws in force and the questioning of the existence of minority identity occur on a weekly level in the daily life of the Hungarian community. Examples include cases when the application of language rights enshrined in the laws is made impossible in practice, when the regulation of the Act on Education stating that Hungarian-language education should be realized in independent departments at multicultural universities (like the *University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureş/Marosvásárhely*) is ignored, when the use of community symbols – flags and national anthems – is fined or the restitution of properties confiscated by the communist regime is continuously postponed or abstracted.

Political and social organizations representing the interests of the Hungarian community in Transylvania and the churches connected with minority identity often draw the attention to cases of discrimination and the violation of rights, although it is clear that there are no Hungarian organizations in Romania which would question the possibility of settling these problems in a peaceful and democratic manner, therefore, no acts of violence have taken place since the events of March 1990. Unfortunately, examples of these cases can be found in many other countries of the region.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Hungarian community of Romania is facing several unsolved problems, and the state's answers to these problems – if there are any answers at all – are often not sufficient. The organizations representing the Hungarian community continuously draw attention to these issues, what is more, they also suggest solutions to them. These solutions supported by every Hungarian advocacy organization in Romania include – but are not limited to – territorial and cultural autonomy, multicultural higher education operating in accordance with the laws in force, state support ensured for Hungarian-language higher educational institutions, the enforcement of language rights in all aspects of life, the free use of community symbols, the

complete restitution of properties confiscated during the era of communism, and the preservation of ethnic proportions during the redrawing of territorial administrative units. In every case the existence of the “Hungarian issue” depends on how this issue is evaluated by the community and its elected leaders.