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# Analysing Political Exchanges between Minority and Majority Leaders in Romania

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## *Introduction*

The issue of minority rights in Eastern Europe can be approached from a multitude of perspectives. This article employs a political view not concerned with the cultural aspect of ethnicity which is emphasised by multiculturalist studies. My focus is on the changes that democratisation has brought about to the relationship between central and local actors, between the political elites representing ethno-territorial interests and the leaders of other political parties. The first part of the article is an attempt to conceptualise these ongoing negotiations, which seem to constitute a trend in several Eastern European countries. Several scholars have proposed Lijphart's concept of 'consociational democracy' to describe the dynamics of ethnic politics in the region. After discussing the applicability of this term to the Romanian case I turn to the concept of political exchange. I believe that analysing political exchanges between political leaders captures a better picture of the direction in which ethnic politics is heading across the region.

The second part of the article moves away from the discussion of political exchanges at the centre, shifting the attention to the mechanisms of influence and control between local and central leaders. Claims for autonomy put forward by the representatives of the ethnic parties are faced with the legacy of a highly centralised political system in which the political centre dominates the local authorities. Therefore, I discuss the implications the centralisation of political power has on the exercise of self-government rights in localities inhabited by national minorities using data from interviews conducted in Hungarian with Hungarian local council officials in December 2000 in Gheorgheni, Harghita county, a town where 88% of the population is Hungarian. Finally, I turn to the strategies developed by local elites in the relation with central authorities.

## *Towards a Consociational Arrangement?*

In Romania, the Hungarian minority numbers approximately 1,600,000 people (7% of the total population) who are geographically concentrated in the area bordered by the Carpathian mountains. Only 28% of Transylvania's Hungarians live along the long Romanian-Hungarian border, while 35% of them are concentrated in Szekler's region. The Hungarians became a minority in 1918, when the union between Transylvania and Romania was made possible by the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although Romanians were in the majority in Transylvania, Hungarians enjoyed a higher economic and social status forming the majority of urban and educated dwellers. During the interwar period, the newly formed Romanian state actively promoted the interests of the ethnic Romanians and strove to reduce the economic differentiation between Hungarians and Romanians living in Transylvania (Livezeanu 1995). These endeavours were accomplished by the socialist regime which gradually abolished the political representation of national minorities and favoured a policy of internal migration which changed the ethnic composition of the Transylvanian cities.

The collapse of socialism has brought about a change to the political relations between Romanians and Hungarians. The political representation of minorities was re-established and minority claims were put forward using democratic channels despite the violent but

singular outburst of street fights between Hungarians and Romanians which took place in 1990 in Târgu Mureº. A turning point in the history of the relationship between the Romanian government and the Hungarian political leaders were the 1996 elections when the Hungarian party joined the ruling coalition and appointed two ministers in the government. This indicated a shift from the policy of control and domination towards one based on political exchanges between political elites.[1]

The co-optation of ethnic political parties in the process of decision making took place in several countries in the region where ethnic parties have joined the ruling coalition. By ethnic party, I understand a political party which openly support the interests of an ethnic group and has an electorate which belongs predominantly to this ethnic group. Ethnic parties started to play an increasingly important political role after the collapse of socialism. The Hungarian party (coalition) has joined the ruling coalition in both Romania (1996) and Slovakia (1998). Similarly, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), representing the interests of Turkish minority plays today a balancing role between the two opposed poles of the Bulgarian political stage although it was seen with reluctance at the beginning. In this context, positions of ministers and the protection of minority rights are exchanged for domestic and international political support.

In order to explore the type of institutional arrangements which is taking shape, one needs new adequate conceptual tools. The question of how to describe these new trends of minority/majority inter-ethnic relations has become a priority for the political analysts. Can we speak about a so called 'Romanian model'? Do we witness an irreversible trend towards minority participation in the government and if yes what are its implications? These questions are recurrent in the debates of the Romanian scholars. Recently, Gusztav Molnar published several articles in *Provincia,*[2] which triggered off a lively discussion about the applicability of the term consociational democracy for the case of Transylvania and Voivodina. Molnar argues for the prospects of implementing a consociational system in Transylvania, where the population is divided along ethnic lines.

Consociational democracies are characteristic for plural societies, i.e., societies divided along cleavage lines, which can be of religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial or ethnic nature (Lijphart 1977: 4). The cleavage lines divide the society in social groups, which have their own distinct subculture and political institutions. They form the so-called 'pillars' or 'segments' of the plural society. In consociational democracies, political elites representing the 'pillars' or 'segments' of the society are engaged in negotiations at the top level. The three main features of the consociational model are (1) the elites representing the segments of the society have mutual veto regarding political decisions (2) these segments are represented proportionally in political institutions, civil service appointments and allocation of public funds (3) the system allows for a high degree of segmental autonomy (Lijphart 1977: 25).

[1] I refer here to ethnic political parties from various countries in the region: Romania (The Democratic Alliance of the Hungarians in Romania DAHR); Slovakia (Coexistence, Hungarian Democratic Party HCDM, the Hungarian Civic Party HCP), in Bulgaria (Movement for Rights and Freedoms MRF) and in Macedonia (Party for Democratic Prosperity PDP).

[2] *Provincia* is a Transylvanian periodical published in both Hungarian and Romanian which promotes the idea of a Transylvanian regional identity and culture regardless which could bridge the social and political cleavage existing between Romanians and Hungarians.

Is such an arrangement a realistic option for Eastern European democracies? As regards the Transylvanian case, several objections have been raised against this idea. Andreescu (2000) pointed out that in Romania the 'substance' of the consociational arrangement i.e., the participation of the minority leaders in the government, has not yet been accepted, but it is disputed and negotiated by political leaders. In addition, the consociational arrangement involves negotiations among leaders representing segments of the society. The Democratic Alliance of the Hungarians in Romania (DAHR) can be viewed in this sense as a legitimate representative of the ethnically defined Hungarian community.[3] DAHR politicians negotiate however with the ruling parties and it is unclear whom these parties represent. Kantor (2001) for instance points out that the majority of Romanians do not support the claims put forward by the Hungarian political elite. Therefore the Romanian political elite does not represent the voice of its electorate while engaged in negotiations with the Hungarian counterpart and this renders the compromise heavily depending on political circumstances. At the same time, Romanian politicians do not necessarily see themselves as leaders of the Romanian population defined in ethnic terms. Those who tend to do that (i.e, leaders of nationalist parties) reject any kind of dialogue with the Hungarian political elite. The fact that Romanian political leaders who define their electorate in terms of non-ethnic citizenry claim leadership for all citizens when in government represents therefore an additional difference from the consociational model.

Another sensitive aspect is the balance of power between minority and majority, which endangers the stability of a consociational arrangement. Lijphart warns us that in plural societies 'if one segment has a clear majority its leaders may attempt to dominate rather than cooperate with the rival minority' (Lijphart 1977: 55). Consequently, he recommends the presence of at least three different segments among which there is an equilibrium of power. On the contrary, the cleavage line in Eastern European countries divides the overwhelming majority – not necessarily defined in ethnic terms and organized on ethnic basis – from one main national minority (representing at maximum 10% of the population) bordered by an external homeland.

In Romania, the majority is not willing to accept a high degree of segmental autonomy and power is not equally distributed among ethnic groups and central state leaders. Minority leaders have the veto right in the sense that they can withdraw from the government (or threaten to do that as in the case of the Hungarian state University)[4] but their room of manoeuvre is severely constricted by the long-term social consequences of such a move. The November 2000 elections marked the rapid rise of extreme nationalism, limiting the bargaining options of the minority leaders. Basically, withdrawing the support for the government meant to give way to nationalist leaders, which could endanger the democratic gains of the post-socialist period.

### *A Model of Political Exchange*

Taking these objections into account, I would like to draw attention to another concept which helps us better understand the trend of ethnic politics. Rothschild in his study on

[3] DAHR reported a number of 500,000 members out of the estimated 1,500,000 total Hungarian population.

[4] In 1998 DAHR claimed the right to establish a state university with teaching in Hungarian language, and when the partners from the ruling coalition did not agree on this subject, threatened that it would withdraw from the coalition. Finally, the parties from the coalition came up with a last minute proposal about a multicultural university with teaching in both Hungarian and German which did not meet the expectations of the Hungarian community. The issue of the Hungarian state university is still not solved, in the meanwhile a private university with teaching in Hungarian language (Sapentia) being developed.

political ethnicity in middle Africa put forward the concept of hegemonic exchange (1986: 73). This arrangement takes place within less developed democracies (where free elections are not necessary accompanied by other democratic procedures such as pluripartidism, accountability, etc). The substance of the arrangement is that 'central state leaders quite typically give some measures of status, autonomy, power, representation or economic resources in exchange for the regional unit's support of and compliance with the state's regulation' (Rothchild 1986: 70). At the center, informal negotiations bring together political elites for which 'the conflict of interest is implicit' (Cyert and March in Rothchild 1986: 72). On the one hand, the government needs the political support of the ethnic groups but they are not willing to give away power. On the other hand, ethnic leaders seek autonomy and recognition and they see political support to the government as a compromise. Thus the two parties involved in negotiations have diverging interests. The relation is conceived as a zero-sum distribution of resources, i.e., what is gained by one party is lost by the other.

Hegemonic exchange is a particular type of political exchange, which occurs in less developed democracies. In the Romanian case discussed below, political exchange should not be seen as a stable characteristic of the political system, being heavily dependent on political circumstances and actors. I consider the Romanian example of political exchange to be illustrative for the societies in which the state is dominated by one ethnic group and national identity was built around the principle of ethnic homogeneity. Consequently, this type of political exchange can develop in democratic societies which show less toleration to ethnic diversity. In these cases, political exchange leads to a policy of 'control through co-optation' rather than to a consociational model based on segmental autonomy. In other words, political exchange allows for the accommodation of minority claims (which are conflicting with the national ideology of the majority) in a way which avoids a radical redefinition of the nation-state.

It can be however hypothesised that the institutionalisation of democratic principles will bring about an increase in tolerance towards ethnic diversity, the decline of majority rule, and the weakening of the centralised state, all being preconditions for the development of a consociational model.

In what follows I argue that the concept of political exchange enables us to analyse the dynamics of ethno-politics in Romania. I employ here the definition given by Parri (1990: 217) to describe the relationship between central government and sub-national actors:

> the territorial political exchange between two public actors occurs when one of the two public actors, normally at the higher level, allows the other to influence the content of the public decisional […] and implementation processes [...] so that it can profit from part of the public policy outputs and outcomes, and when, in exchange for this, the latter gives its consensus to the former, i.e., it puts at the other's disposal its power resources in order to guarantee the efficacy and the effectiveness of the public policy question.

## *Political Exchanges between Minority and Majority Leaders in Romania*

General Considerations

In Eastern Europe political exchange involves the co-optation of minority leaders into the government. In the Romanian case, certain group-differentiated rights[5] are exchanged for political support, whether in domestic or international politics, given the absence of territorial claims. This type of exchange was initiated in 1996 when DAHR (The Democratic Alliance of the Hungarians in Romania) joined the ruling coalition formed at that time by the Romanian Democrat Convention (RDC) and the Democrat Party (DP) (see Table 1 for the distribution of votes in elections). The main opposition party was the left-wing Social Democrat Party (SDP), led by Ion Iliescu. Iliescu, who lost the 1996 elections, had at that time a visibly nationalistic electoral discourse, picturing the imminent danger of federalisation in case that the other main candidate, Constantinescu, would win the elections. Against this backdrop, the political alliance between DAHR and the other two parties (RDC and DP) seemed to be facilitated by a common ideological ground, that is an anticommunist, pro-minority rights, pro-market economy orientation. During the four year term the protocol signed between the parties was endangered by numerous conflicts and broken promises. Nevertheless, DAHR achieved certain legislative changes of the education and self-government laws. Other legislative initiatives such as the use of the minorities language in local administration and the restitution of the real estate confiscated by the socialist state were debated without being passed by the Parliament.

Table 1: Results of National Elections, 1989-2000

| Party | 1990 | | 1992 | | 1996 | | 2000 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Deputy Chamber* | *Senate* | *Deputy Chamber* | *Senate* | *Deputy Chamber* | *Senate* | *Deputy Chamber* | *Senate* |
| DAHR | 7.23% | 7.20% | 7.46% | 7.59% | 6.64% | 6.82% | 6.79% | 6.89% |
| PRNU[a] | 2.12% | 2.15% | 7.72% | 8.12% | 4.36% | 4.22% | 1.39% | 1.42% |
| GRP[b] | - | - | 3,90% | 3.85% | 4.46% | 4.54% | 19.48% | 21.01% |
| NSF | 66.31% | 67.02% | - | - | - | - | 36.61% | 37.09% |
| RSDP (NDSF) | - | - | 27.72% | 28.29% | 21.52% | 23.08% | 7.03% | 7.57% |
| DP[c] (NSF) | - | - | 10.19% | 10.39% | 12.93% | 13.16% | 6,89% | 7.47% |
| RDC | - | - | 20.01% | 20.16% | 30.17% | 30.70% | 5.03% | 5.28 |

[a] Party of Romanian National Unity. During 1990 elections, PRNU formed a coalition with the Republican Party. In 2000, PRNU formed the coalition Party of National Alliance, but did not pass the electoral threshold.
[b] Greater Romania Party.
[c] Social Democratic Party. This party ran in 1992 elections as NSF (National Salvation Front), then split from DP and was named for a while NDSF (National Democratic Salvation Front). In 1996 elections it ran as RSDP (Romania Social Democrat Party).
[d] The Democratic Party split from the NSF and ran under this name in 1992.
[e] The NPL (National Liberal Party) withdrew from the CDR and ran independently in the 2000 elections.
[f] The RDC in 2000 did not pass the electoral threshold which was 10% for coalitions of parties.

The 2000 elections changed radically the Romanian political scene, bringing to power the former opposition party (SDP) and its leader Ion Iliescu. The agreement between SDP and DAHR seemed improbable and against nature given the SDP's previous appeals to nationalism and its leftist political orientation. However, the two parties signed an

[5] According to Kymlicka, differentiated rights cover 'territorial autonomy, veto powers, guaranteed representation in central institutions, land claims and language rights' (1995: 109).

agreement which proved to be more efficient than the previous one. According to this agreement, DAHR engaged to support the legislative projects put forward by SDP in the Parliament in exchange for political positions and measures of recognition and power.

During 1996-2000 DAHR was proportionally represented in the government, having the right to appoint two ministers and several positions at the county level (two prefects and eight sub-prefects).[6] As opposed to that, the post-2000 agreement did not involve the representation of DAHR in the government. Rather the accent was put on legislative changes and the implementation of these changes at the local level. The new agreement signed on 29 January 2002 stipulates also a series of local agreements between local DAHR and SDP leaders aimed at solving in a top-down manner concrete problems about the situation of certain schools or historical monuments belonging to the Hungarian minority, where the consent of the local government was needed.

After 2000, DAHR achieved several priorities which the previous coalition was unwilling and unable to pass (such as the use of minority language in local administration, restitution of real estate confiscated by the socialist state, etc.). This came at certain expense for DAHR who voted laws which were strongly contested by the opposition and considered undemocratic (such as the law for classified information).

The course of events that followed the 2000 elections renders the concept of political exchange more fruitful for understanding. Political exchange is a very pragmatic institution. It follows the rules of an economic exchange in which the political colour of the partners is irrelevant. Political exchange thus does not necessarily involve a consensus or pact among elites nor the convergence of long term political projects. It is rather based on negotiations of concrete, short term objectives, on mutually imposed conditions, which can be easily broken by the partners trying to modify the agreement in their interest. After all, the parties have diverging interests and there is no genuine consensus to be achieved given the antagonistic national ideologies at stake.

The key issue over which no real consensus can be achieved is territorial autonomy. One could argue however that political crises were avoided due to the series of political exchanges and agreements between politicians.

Negotiating Autonomy

Autonomy plays a key role in the negotiation processes. According to DAHR's Programme territorial autonomy is defined as a reunion of local self-governments with a special status, conception which is in conflict with the Romanian Constitution. Support for the idea of a 'parallel' autonomous society distinguishes the loyal supporters of the Hungarian cause from those who seem to endanger the community by favoring flexible, permeable boundaries between minority and majority. In this context, the way autonomy is envisioned is a potentially divisive topic within the Hungarian political community. The consensus is forged (and imposed) within the party in order to strengthen the bargaining power in the negotiations at the center. In the name of unity, divergent voices are thus often marginalised (see also Magyari-Vincze 1997: 207).

6 Local state administration is headed by the county prefect who is appointed by the central government. The role of the prefect is to observe that things stay within the law. Formally, the relationship between the prefect and the county council chairman is not a hierarchical one, however in practice this depends on the informal networks of power relationships each of them has.

Territorial autonomy is also a controversial aspect of the relation between minority and majority. It cuts across the ideal endeared by the majority of an ethnically homogeneous and unitary nation-state. Minority claims for a separate, autonomous national existence thus collide with the centralized nation-state dominated by the ethnic group which forms the majority. In Eastern European countries nation-states were never a neutral arena of group interest conflict. Historically, the 'core nation' has been considered to legitimately own the polity (Brubaker 1996). The state, in this ethnicised version, has *the obligation* to promote the language, economic welfare and political hegemony of the core nation as a remedial for previous discrimination.

For the Romanian nationalists, the theme of autonomy is haunted by the spectre of federalisation and dismemberment of the state. This fear is tamed through the institution of political exchange. The very absence of the claim for territorial autonomy is negotiated and rewarded in the process of political exchange between elites. The imposed rule of the game during DAHR's participation in the government (1996-2000) was not to formulate any claim for territorial autonomy while in the government.

Deviations from this rule endanger the democratic representation of the minorities, as it happened in 1995. At that time, the self-government initiative of the Hungarian politicians triggered off a violent reaction on behalf of the Romanian nationalist parties, which asked for outlawing DAHR. The issue at stake then was the fact that DAHR established the Council of Hungarian mayors and local councillors, seen by the Romanian politicians and mass media as an initiative to establish ethno-territorial autonomy. The conflict reached its peak at the beginning of 1995 when the government (the ruling left-wing party was in coalition with nationalist parties at that time) gave an ultimatum to DAHR and asked it to abolish these 'antidemocratic and discriminatory practices'. Such political crises in the relation between DAHR and other parties were avoided after 1996. The claim for territorial autonomy was pursued by Hungarian elite only in an attempt to boost its potential for negotiations. By this I refer to the cases when radical leaders of DAHR would publicly claim the commitment to territorial autonomy and afterwards the party would officially deny these declarations as not representative for DAHR politics.

Types of Interactions

Having a closer look at the negotiations which are taking place between minority and majority leaders one could distinguish three types of interaction involving the political actors.

*Hungarian local/centre elites*

The political exchanges at the center are made possible through the co-operation between local and central leaders of the ethnic minorities. Interests are firstly negotiated at the local level, where ethnic political elites accommodate the diverging claims of the local factions. It is only in the second phase that ethno-regional elites are involved in political exchanges with the central government. In addition, local Hungarian elites also develop their own strategies in relation to the central authorities in order to increase their financial and decisional autonomy.

*Romanian local/centre elites*
The conflict over symbolic issues is often amplified by Romanian local authorities, which oppose the implementation of laws, being unwilling or unable to enforce them.[7] In several cities, where the display of ethnic symbols is acutely disputed, the Romanian local elites resisted the implementation of the provisions protecting the minority rights. An attempt to deal with these situations was the series of local agreements between DAHR and SDP leaders regarding the restoration of historical monuments. However while these agreements are enforceable in counties where SDP has won local elections, the situation remains unsolved in cities (such as Cluj, Koloszvar in Hungarian), where the mayor or the majority of local councillors are from nationalist parties.

*Hungarian-Romanian local negotiations* are not very influential because of the difficulties to short-circuit the intervention of the centre. Nevertheless, along with the devolution processes which weaken the intervention of the centre, the trend is towards the decentralisation of ethnic conflicts and the accommodation of ethnic tensions at the local level.

Few words could be said about the civic initiative to reinforce an overarching regional identity which lack the political and economic support. I have mentioned in this respect the periodical *Provincia*, which gives voice to intellectuals in favour of decentralisation and regionalisation. A Transylvanian regional structure would allow for the mediation between ethnic leaders to take place also at the regional level. However, this idea is very much disproved by Romanian politicians who strongly reacted against the Memorandum of *Provincia*. Therefore, given the absence of regional autonomy, consultation and mediations are possible only at the county level within the elected Local Council. In these cases, the balance of power between Hungarian versus Romanian politicians can be affected by agreements sign at the centre such as the DAHR-SDP protocol signed in Jan. 2002.

The negotiations between Romanians and Hungarians politicians are also influenced by external actors. The bordering homeland of the national minority feels responsible for the situation of the co-ethnics living in the neighbouring country. It strengthens the bargaining power of the minority leaders by mobilising international support and putting pressure on authorities to implement minority rights measures. Minimally, the role of the external homeland is to make sure that democratic procedures and rules are observed and minority rights protected. Sometimes, the homeland is tempted to actively intervene in the nationalising project of the minority. It may attempt to define and control the criteria for belonging to the nation and to establish a legal relation with its co-ethnics (as in the case of the Law on the Hungarian living in neighbouring countries, the so called Status Law).

[7] Such an example is the issue of the bilingual signs for the locality names. In July 1997, the Government issued a decree (no. 22/97) stating that in localities where a minority ethnic group represents more than 20%, street signs should be bilingual. On 18th of July, in Tirgu Mures (Marasvasarhely in Hungarian), supporters of extreme nationalist organisation (Vatra Mare) gathered and painted the bilingual signs in the colours of the Romanian flag. At the same time, while local authorities were trying to implement this measure, the District Roads Office (subordinated to the Ministry of Transport) removed the indicators because of a misunderstanding (Kovacs, 1999: 203). Another example is the agreement between the Hungarian and Romanian prime ministers to inaugurate a park of 'Reconciliation Park' in Arad and to commemorate the statue of the 13 Hungarian generals who were executed in 1849. This attempt of reconciliation was unsuccessful, and again, local authorities, namely the Local Council, intervened by voting out the decision to give out the land for the construction of the park.

A second external actor which intervenes in the negotiations is the European Union. International standards for minority rights are also invoked by Hungarian parties in their negotiations. Such an example is the Hungarian-Romanian treaty, the signing of which was protracted because of the Hungarian demand that the treaty should make a reference to Recommendation 1201 (1993) of the Council of Europe. Article 11 of this Recommendation referred to the collective character of minority rights alluding to the highly sensitive issue of territorial autonomy for ethnic groups.

Mechanisms of Influence and Control between Local and Central Leaders

Political exchanges at the centre are complementary to the relation between the Hungarian local government representatives and central leaders. Given the territorial concentration of the Hungarian minority in Romania, local government structures are crucial for advancing minority claims.[8] For the last decade, the political priority on DAHR's political agenda has been the acceleration of the local government reform. Decentralisation would allow for the accommodation of ethnic tensions at the local level, without the intervention of the centre. This would improve the current situation when all minority claims have to be negotiated firstly with the central leaders. Many of the issues (concerning for instance education or symbolic aspects such as the names of the streets, monuments) would become the responsibility of local government and would not be anymore regulated from the centre. In addition, this would improve the legitimacy of certain institutions, such as the Police which is at present subordinated to the minister and it is not accountable to the elected local government.

The Hungarian local government representatives are faced with the legacy of the highly centralised political structures which survived the collapse of socialism. In the absence of a genuine local autonomy, the local government develops its own strategies to put pressure on central authorities. Local Hungarian elites are not in a position to offer direct political support to the Romanian elites at the centre, but they can put pressure using democratic means and EU policies to attain their goals. Consequently, the relation between local and central leaders can be characterised rather through strategies of influence and control than by political exchanges. Before turning to this, I will briefly refer to the socialist legacy and practices used to prevent and limit the local accumulation of power.

*Political Control of the Centre*

The attempts of central authorities to dominate the local after 1989 bear some resemblance with the practices used during the socialist regime. Daniel Nelson (1988) distinguishes several ways in which the Communist party prevented the accretion of local power. Firstly, governments initiated territorial – administrative reforms which were not rooted in a concern for administrative efficiency. On the contrary, often such reforms aimed at making administrative units less independent and more vulnerable by multiplying their number.[9] Secondly, Nelson mentions the attempts to create an image of autonomy through the propaganda of 'local initiatives', and 'community involvement'. This propaganda was only a facade, meant to disguise the intention to control the sub-

[8] In 1992, there were a total of 175 settlements in Transylvania in which the proportion of ethnic Hungarians exceeded 50%.

[9] Such territorial administrative reforms took place in Poland between 1972-1975 (the number of wojewodztwa increased from 22 to 49), in Romania between 1968-1969 (39 judete replacing 16 regions), and in Slovakia in 1948 and 1960.

national units. Even when the reforms were aimed at local autonomy, their effect was nullified by the limitations imposed on the use of financial resources. Thirdly, local administration was controlled by the central party. The prefect as a supervisor of the local government exercised governmental control over local groups. After 1975 in both Poland and Romania local party secretaries simultaneous hold the position of people's council president. Mayors were therefore appointed by party officials to represent the local interests. Finally, socialist governments relied on the rotation of the local cadres and leaders to avoid power accretion.

The legacy of a dominant centre which manipulates local leaders and leaves no room for local initiatives is still present today. Although local/centre relations have been redefined after the collapse of socialism, some of the strategies survived the change of regimes. In Slovakia, for instance, the practice of administrative reforms was used by Meèiar's regime. Starting with 1993, Hungarian parties asked for a new territorial division according to the 'natural ethnic boundaries'. Nevertheless, in 1996 the Slovak government passed the law on the new territorial division according to which Hungarians did not form a majority in any of the newly formed districts. After the 1998 elections, the issue was again on the political agenda and eventually new regional authorities were instituted, without the 'Hungarian region' demanded by the Hungarian minority.

*Limits of Local Autonomy in Romania*

In Romania after 1989, a series of reforms were initiated in order to promote local government and decentralise managerial responsibility. The implementation of these reforms was, however, temporised, the post-socialist governments revealing their lack of political will to give away power. Very often the theme of local autonomy is ethnicised in order to hinder the transfer of power to sub-national units. The boundary between local autonomy as a principle of efficient administration and ethnic local autonomy as a Hungarian threat to the 'state unity' are blurred by the politicians who try to maintain the status quo.

The sluggish decentralisation processes constitute an impediment for the attempts of Hungarian politicians to increase the autonomy of the regions inhabited by their co-ethnics. Limitations are imposed on local government through legislation and lack of financial devolution. In Romania, the centre continues to maintain the financial control and exercises its influence through informal and formal political hierarchies. The interviews conducted in December 2000 with Hungarian representatives from Local Council (in Gheorgheni, Harghita county, a small town where the vast majority of inhabitants are Hungarians) show a deep dissatisfaction with the degree of financial autonomy granted to Local Councils.

> The local budget law is more than incomplete. It does not grant sufficient autonomy because even at this moment all the money goes first to Bucharest and then a certain percentage is returned. Abroad some of the local taxes stay in the locality right from the beginning. Here it happens that the money to be returned is negotiated and this I consider to be a form of political manipulation in economy.

The interviews pointed out that the redistribution of financial resources is perceived to be unjust, since it does not reflect the needs or the contribution to the total budget but the political influence of party leaders.

In this context, any increase in the responsibilities delegated to elected local representatives is perceived as a burden:

> The Local Council has more and more responsibilities (it is responsible for schools, health care, poverty, etc.) but it hasn't received a penny more from the state budget.
>
> The law stipulates that schools are to be paid from the local budget. We cannot afford to finance that from the local budget and, consequently, this responsibility is perceived as a burden, especially as long as our competence is limited to the financial aspect of school administration. The strategies for the development and functioning of the schools should also become the responsibility of the Local Council.

Thus, the delegation of responsibilities has no impact whatsoever in the absence of a long term strategy backed by the transfer of economic resources.

*Mentalities*

Besides the legislative limitations on local autonomy which allow for the interference of the central authorities in local affairs, all the respondents pointed out to the persistence of old mentalities which seem to change very slowly. As they put it, 'actually, there is no will to get things done'. Even when the legislation allows, people behave according to old mentalities, avoiding responsibility.

> A lot has to be changed in the mentality of the people to make them value the existing possibilities. I think we should ask for more, only after we use what we have.
>
> In the last years certain progress has been made, but more with respect to the form (than to the content). Mentalities remain anchored in the past.
>
> All games are played in Bucharest and this is because both the interests and the mentalities of the people favour this state of affairs. For many the already established hierarchies of power are a routine.

The processes of devolution is thus constrained and temporised not only by the unwillingness of central leaders to give away power, but also through the persistence of old mentalities attached to the paternalistic role of the state.

*Strategies of Local Elites vis-à-vis the Central Authorities*

The local is not as passive as it might appear from the picture above. Given the persistence of centralisation, one way to maximise the pressure put on central authorities is to articulate firstly the interests of local communities within the structures of the Hungarian political party and only then to negotiate at the centre with other political parties. From this perspective the ability to initiate changes and influence the policy outcomes depends on the consensus and unity of the party. Despite this internal

diversity and complex organisation structure,[10] the official discourse maintained by DAHR over the last decade conveyed an image of consensus and unity, marginalising the radical wing concerned with federalisation.[11]
In the interviews, people were also asked about their views on the concept of autonomy put forward by DAHR. The opinions varied from a genuine endorsement of how autonomy is defined within DAHR to considering the definition the result of an imposed consensus.

> To maintain that half a million of people (i.e., the number of DAHR's members) think the same is stupid. Consensus assumes a mutual accommodation of opinions, but DAHR by itself is not a democratic but an authoritarian organisation. Thus, we cannot talk about consensus. Maybe about an 'imposed consensus', about orders.
>
> As in any political party, there is a divergence of opinions also within DAHR. However, the concepts of personal, administrative and territorial autonomy were elaborated on the basis of consensus.

Secondly, local leaders can use democratic policy tools in order to generate direct pressure on central authorities. In 1995 for instance, the Hungarian community reacted promptly to the Law on Education (84/1995), which tries to restrain minority rights. DAHR territorial branches organised a series of protest manifestations including collection of signatures, meetings, seminars and so on.

In other countries from the region, referendums were also used by local actors to put pressure on the central government. In Slovakia, the referendum in Šturovo has become a symbol of resistance against central government. The local government organised a local referendum on the direct election of the president and the joining of NATO, which replaced the national referendum cancelled by Meèiar (Buèek 2001: 288). Nevertheless, when the issue at stake was secession, referendums were used and misused by political elites to legitimise their claims. This was the case in the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, where the collapse of the socialist rule was followed by the break up of the country. Referendums became a genuine 'political weapon' of minorities demanding autonomy. As Brandy and Kaplan mention, in Yugoslavia there was an 'anarchy of referendums' and 'they have often seemed more like the battle cries of highly mobilised and desperate populations than instruments of deliberative democracy' (1994: 206). Between 1990-1993, 17 referendums took place in the territory of former Yugoslavia.[12]

Thirdly, both the local and central leaders representing national minorities can use EU policies and institutions to assist their demands for autonomy. Ethnic parties tend to 'Europeanise' their goals, to integrate their claims for autonomy into the broader vision

[10] DAHR is an umbrella organisation, which co-ordinates in a loose structure the local autonomous branches, gathering together political, cultural and professional groups.
[11] A similar trend towards the unity of the ethnic political movements can be noticed in Slovakia where the different Hungarian parties have eventually formed a unique coalition. However, this evolution was largely influenced by the new electoral law which stipulated that each party entering a coalition has to pass separately the threshold needed to enter parliament.
[12] Referendums were held before the proclamation of independence in Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Yugoslavia referendums were held in Kosovo were the result was overwhelmingly in favour of independence (99%) and in Montenegro where the population voted for staying in Yugoslavia (75%). As regards minorities demanding autonomy, referendums organised by Serbs from various parts of Croatia (Krajina, Slavonia, Baranjia, Srem), and from Bosnia and Herzegovia (twice).

of euroregions. The interaction between self-government claims and the European integration process is twofold: not only that EU discourse shapes the goals of ethnic parties, but, at the same time, ethnic parties use EU policies and institutions to assist their demands for autonomy (Lynch 1996 : 10). Generally speaking, the positions of the ethnic parties vary from *negative linkage* (seeking independent statehood and full membership of EU) to a *positive linkage* (based on demands for regional autonomy and decentralisation in a Europe of regions) (Lynch 1996). In Romania, the positive linkage had an impact on the political discourse of DAHR.

The program of the political party explicitly refers to forms of autonomy which are against the Romanian Constitution and are not backed up by European Union. Nevertheless, the public discourse of DAHR has increasingly moved into the direction of regionalisation and regional development, which is part of the EU integration strategy. Regional development seems to represent the middle way between the DAHR's conception on autonomy and the central government adherence to centralisation. In 1997, the Green Card of regional development policies was adopted and that seemed to be a promising beginning. Nevertheless, the regional structures (Regional Development Councils) established after 1997 are still far away from playing an influential role in the management of local affairs. As one of the respondents put it:

> I consider the development regions as forms without content. They are established, it's clear to whom they belong, there are directors, offices, secretaries, computers, cars, but nothing is done! For every problem, when we ask their help, they answer: 'but we don't know, we have to ask the people from Bucharest'.

Although the persistence of old mentalities hinders the functioning of these new decentralised administrative structures, regionalisation has the advantage of not being that much associated in people's minds with the danger of federalisation.

***Conclusion***

Exchanges between minority and majority political leaders, the term put forward in this article, take place at two main levels. Leaders of Hungarian party negotiate with other leaders from the government and offer political support in exchange for the influence over policy outcomes. Given the ethnic geography of the Hungarian minority, local government representatives can also play a key role in advancing minority claims. However, the centre is not disposed to negotiate with local elites since they cannot offer a direct political support. Therefore, as I have argued, the relation between local and central elites is better described by mechanisms of mutual influence and control.

The thrust of the article is therefore that analysing political exchanges and strategies of influence between political leaders helps us understand the dynamics of ethnic politics in Romania. In the first part of the article I have criticised the opinion that the consociational model properly describes the current situation given the importance of ethnic ideologies, the scepticism towards segmental autonomy and the fragile balance of power between minority and majority. What is rather taking place is a political accommodation of ethnic claims through a series of political exchanges and compromises which avoid a radical redefinition of the nation-state. Indeed, the compromise was made possible by the fact that DAHR renounced the claims for territorial autonomy. However, the political support offered to the ruling parties brought undeniable gains for the

Hungarian community. In concluding, I would like to point out that political exchanges have successfully accommodated ethnic tensions and contributed to the political stability of the system and that in the long run they lead towards the devolution of economic and political power as well as the granting of minority rights.

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