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# Ethnic Minorities in Post-Communist Romania: From Rhetoric to Integration

Tiberiu Dianu

*American University Washington College of Law*

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## FIELD REPORT

## Ethnic Minorities in Post-Communist Romania: From Rhetoric to Integration

by Tiberiu Dianu

Nationalist issues have traditionally been an important part of Romanian politics. Pre-Communist Romania was a parliamentary democracy, but ethnic minorities were a weak area in its social policy. After the fall of communism, newly-found freedoms of speech and expression facilitated the emergence of radical nationalism, which had formerly been suppressed by authorities for more than four decades.

Between 1989 and 1996, the reform Communists in power used lack of "national unity" as a justification for their inability to promote real reforms in the economy. With the November 1996 defeat of the Communist Party by a pro-West coalition of parties, however, the long road from passive rhetoric to true integration may be coming to an end. The new administration is attempting to effect serious change in traditional policies regarding minorities in order to bring Romania into alignment with Western standards of protection. This article will examine the efforts of the Romanian government since 1989 to improve its minorities policy and consider why minority rights in Romania remain an issue.

### Historical Background

Minorities constitute 11% of Romania's 23-million people, including 1.6 million ethnic Hungarians, 400,000 Gypsies (Roma), 200,000 Germans and 30,000 Jews. Ethnic Hungarians form one-third of the population in Transylvania, a former province of Austria-Hungary that reverted to Romania after World War I, and have traditionally been seen by Romanians as a particularly troublesome minority. The Gypsies were released from servitude in the 1850s, but continue to be considered second-class citizens by many. Anti-Semitism, which emerged during the same period,

was initially equated with religious intolerance, but later became fueled by economic and political factors, and continues to be a problem today. The various minority groups historically have faced ethnic and religious intolerance, and since the mid-nineteenth century, constantly have voiced their dissatisfaction with the nationalist policies traditionally practiced by local authorities.

When the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was overthrown and executed on December 25, 1989, Romania's record on human and minority rights was far from satisfactory. For example, Ceausescu's so-called 'Romanianization policy' attempted to assimilate minorities by merging schools belonging to minorities with Romanian ones, and by forcibly relocating

rights in early 1989, and later that year placed the national representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights, Dumitru Mazilu, under house arrest because he had released a devastating report on abuses in Romania.

### Nationalism and Rhetoric

The revolution in December 1989 that led to the fall of Ceausescu began in the city of Timisoara as a spontaneous local revolt in reaction to government abuses against the Hungarian pastor Laszlo Tokes. The manner in which citizens of all ethnicities cooperated in ousting Ceausescu raised hopes about the future of inter-ethnic relations, but initial efforts to improve these relations floundered.

Ion Iliescu, a reform communist, was elected in 1990 on a platform that included promises to improve Romania's minorities policy, but his efforts to do so in some cases increased ethnic tensions. For example, Iliescu attempted to reintroduce the Hungarian language into schools in the areas populated with Hungarians such as Transylvania, but this was done in a way that antagonized ethnic Romanians in the region. In Cluj and Mures counties, Romanian pupils were barred without notice from certain schools in the middle of the academic year. Eventually, complaints from the Romanian community

led the government to back away from some of its more ambitious promises. The delay irritated the Hungarian community, who began holding demonstrations calling for the separation of schools.

Ethnic tensions were exacerbated in March 1990, when several thousand Hungarians in the city of Targu Mures celebrated Hungary's national holiday by draping Hungarian flags on city



minorities through job layoffs and reassignments to predominantly Romanian areas. Romanians, meanwhile, were relocated to areas that were once dominated by minorities. In 1988, in order to avoid a full-scale investigation of his regime by the U.S. Congress, Ceausescu unilaterally renounced Most Favored Nation (MFN) status. He also refused to sign a Council for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE) agreement on human

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buildings. This was construed by many Romanians as a deliberate provocation, and violent clashes broke out in the city and the neighboring areas, resulting in deaths and injuries on both sides.

In the city of Cluj-Napoca, the local council members, many of them from the ultra-nationalist Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR), took a series of aggressive actions against the Hungar-

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ian community, evicting some ethnic organizations and publications from their premises, and banning the use of bilingual signs. In addition, the new constitution was adopted in 1991, which states that Romania is a "unitary" state, and many Hungarians thought this implied intolerance.

In February 1993, Romania became an associate member of the European Community. In order to implement the European Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the government created the Council for National Minorities to investigate complaints and stimulate cooperation among different governmental departments dealing with minorities issues.

The Council initiated several projects to improve the situation of Gypsies (Rroma), including job training programs and experimental classes in the Rromani language. Much work remains to be done for this community, however, where nomadism and crime rates are high. Since December 1989, over 30 incidents have been reported in which ethnic Romanians and Hungarians have retaliated against the Gypsies for alleged offenses that had gone unpunished by local authorities. This retaliation has taken the form of arson, demolishing of homes, lynching and expulsion.

The Council also approved decisions on such contentious issues as bilingual signs, and use of minority languages

for Romanian history and geography, but the government failed to implement them due to pressure from nationalist groups. As a result, the representatives of the Hungarian Democratic Federation of Romania (UDMR, the party of ethnic Hungarians), claiming lack of substantive progress, withdrew from the Council.

Anti-Semitism had been largely absent in Romania during the Communist era because of a massive emigration of approximately 400,000 Romanian Jews after World War II, which left a much smaller Jewish population that today numbers only 30,000. This sentiment was resurrected after 1989 by nationalist-Communist tabloids like "*Europa*" and "*Politica*." Attempts were made recently to rehabilitate Marshall Ion Antonescu, glorified in Romania as an anti-Soviet hero, but responsible for deporting tens of thousands of Gypsies and Jews to concentration camps.

Although Iliescu has made formal statements against anti-Semitic press and actions, this was apparently pure rhetoric, since he has not backed his statements up with real progress. In September 1995, for example, the parliament initiated a draft law on the restitution of property confiscated from Jews by the communist regime, but eventually the draft law was abandoned. More-

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over, before the November 1996 elections, President Iliescu and his Social Democracy Party of Romania (PDSR) allied itself with the left-nationalists and campaigned for the votes of ethnic Romanians by using racist slogans about the "Hungarian menace" and criticizing the Jewish descent of some of their political opponents.

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1996. Despite vociferous opposition from nationalist circles in both countries, the treaty was deemed a necessary and acceptable step for joining NATO and EU. Under the treaty, Hungary agreed to abandon territorial claims in Romania, and Romania agreed to promote local and cultural autonomy for its ethnic Hungarians, in accordance with European standards.

Despite some efforts to improve the status of minorities in Romania, the Iliescu administration still was unable to promote national unity. Indeed, more often than not, these efforts were mere rhetoric that was quickly abandoned.

#### Developing Ethnic Integration

In the November 1996 elections, the reform communists headed by Iliescu & the PDSR lost power in favor of a pro-West coalition of parties, including the Christian Democrats (CDR), Social Democrats (USD), and for the first time, the ethnic Hungarian party (UDMR). The new President, Professor Emil Constantinescu, of CDR, has promised that he will be "a president for all Romanians."

The new administration includes representation of all three parties in the parliament and ministries, with UDMR controlling both the Tourism Ministry and the Ministry on National Minorities. The new parliament began a process of promoting minority languages in education, and extending local autonomy in areas with a high percentage of ethnic minorities. The current agenda also includes initial discussions on property restitution or compensation to Hungarian churches in Romania and the Jewish community. The administration has also initiated exploratory discussions with Romanian-Jewish leaders from Israel to promote legislation restoring their former assets and real estate confiscated during Communism.

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Premier Victor Ciorbea (CDR) and the ministers of foreign affairs and national defense (both of USD) each paid visits to Budapest, in order to improve bilateral relations and foster support for Romania joining NATO and EU. Also, as a sign of ethnic reconciliation, President Constantinescu pardoned an ethnic Hungarian who had been sentenced in March 1990 to a 10-year imprisonment, and in March 1997, Premier Ciorbea sent a message of unity to the participants on the Hungarian national holiday. Despite criticism by the nationalist-Communists, who predicted the "imminent disintegration of the country," the governments' actions gained popular support.

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signs in villages where Gypsies live. The Gypsies, however, are not well organized politically, and in fact, many Roma declare themselves as Romanians, in order to avoid the "pariah" label. Thus, the Gypsies are divided even among themselves in how to fight for minority rights.

Romania is trying to offer more effective protection to minorities by cooperating with and requesting assistance from Western monitoring bodies.

Ethnic détente after the November 1996 elections impacted considerably upon the ideology of some fervent nationalist parties, such as PUNR, which has experienced a visible decline in popularity and is now trying to redefining its image.

Practicing an open-door policy toward minorities, the Constantinescu administration addressed a call to German emigres to come back and invest in Romania, in exchange for returning their former assets and properties in Transylvania. Romania is also trying to offer more effective protection to minorities by cooperating with and

requesting assistance from Western monitoring bodies, such as the OSCE. For example, in April 1997 talks were held between Romania's Foreign Minister Adrian Severin and the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, Max van der Stoep.

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mitment to defending human and minority rights will be necessary to continue on this path. The current administration's dedication to this reform thus far has already helped Romania gain more credibility in the West and has increased its chances of being adopted into the large family of democratic nations. ☉

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use of the methods have prevented ninety large-scale terrorist attacks in the last two years, including helping the GSS find and defuse unexploded bombs.

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Israel faces serious threats to its national security, and undoubtedly suffers at the hands of violent terrorist groups that advance their political agenda by engaging in indiscriminate killing of the civilian population. The argument that some force should be allowed against one person to prevent the potential murder of hundreds is persuasive. There is a significant risk, however, that allowing force to be used to obtain information, even in the most extreme cases, could lead to the erosion of human rights standards. Israel and the international community therefore must find a way to address the growing problem of terrorism in an effective manner without violating the human rights of those accused or suspected of such crimes. ☉

This article does not address the case of *Association of Civil Rights in Israel v. The Prime Minister, et al.* (HCJ 4045/95) because a decision has not yet been issued by the HCJ. In that case, the detainee 'Abd Al-Samad Harizat died as a result of violent shaking during the interrogation process. The decision has been pending for more than a year, and in the meantime, the Court has refused to issue interim injunctions prohibiting the use of this method. For a detailed discussion of this ongoing case, see Amnesty International's October 1995 report "Death By Shaking: The Case of 'Abd Al-Samad Harizat."