

ON THE DYNAMICS OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES REGARDING THE NUMBER, COMPOSITION, AND LOCALITY OF THE ROMANIANS IN HUNGARY

GHEORGHE PETRUȘAN¹

ABSTRACT. *On the dynamics of the circumstances regarding the number, composition, and locality of the Romanians in Hungary.* The following pages provide the information necessary to get acquainted with a significant Romanian community left outside the Romanian borders as established in 1918. We look at the dynamics of this population relative to the historical factors which have determined its destiny. The research is based on documents less known to the wide public. The experience of the author, strengthened by the fact that he is contemporary with the evolution of this community, his entire academic activity, is, in its turn, a bibliographical resource.

Key words: *Romanians in Hungary, majority, minority, nation, language.*

REZUMAT. *Dinamica circumstanțelor distribuției teritoriale, compoziției naționale și a numărului românilor din Ungaria.* Paginile ce urmează oferă informațiile necesare pentru cunoașterea unei importante comunități românești ce a rămas în afara granițelor României, stabilite la 1918. Privim dinamica acestei populații în funcție de factorii istorici ce i-au determinat destinul. Cercetarea are la bază documente mai puțin cunoscute publicului larg. Experiența autorului, confirmată de faptul că este contemporanul evoluției acestei comunități căreia i-a dedicat întreaga activitate academică, este la rândul său sursă bibliografică.

Cuvinte cheie: *Românii din Ungaria, majoritate, minoritate, națiune, limbă.*

¹ *The study is dedicated to the anniversary of 100 years from the Great Romanian Union of 1918.*
Gheorghe PETRUȘAN, Professor Emeritus, University of Szeged (Szegedi Tudományegyetem), Hungary. He is the author of seminal works regarding the community of the Romanians in Hungary; the most important of these works bears the symbolic title *În căutarea identității noastre* [*In Search of Our Identity*] (Gyula, 1994). Professor of Romanian history and civilisation at The University of Szeged, Hungary, he has educated most of the Romanian intellectuals who stood out from the ranks of the Romanian community. Founder and editor of *Conviețuirea* [*Living Together*], he established contacts, with the means at his disposal, between the Romanian intellectuals on the two sides of the border. A collaborator of the *Romanian weekly* from Gyula, Hungary, the author is the leader whose point of view is constantly expected by the community. E-mail : petrusangh@yahoo.com

In the introduction to the statistics of the census of 1990, one may read that "since 1880, in the programme, the Hungarian census started paying attention to the mother tongue and knowledge of language of the populations living on the Hungarian territory". Below, it is mentioned that: "But it cannot be questioned that the census questions connected to the nationality are biased due to the subjective considerations of the respondents. It is also unquestionable that the bias of the data differing from reality depends on the minority politics of the given country". Under such circumstances what is a nationality statistics worth if, after more than a century's efforts, it has not been possible to carry out even one census which would have registered the number of non-Hungarians with somewhat accuracy? This refers especially to the assessment carried out during the period following the decision of Trianon. What kind of conclusions can be drawn from the extremely rough estimate numbers? Is it possible to work out and turn to good account a realistic minority policy on the basis of the systematically objected to number ratios by those concerned, that is when a significant difference is seen between the official and the estimated data? If that be the case, the question what exactly is the aim of a census regarding minorities presents itself. Is it to enforce a more efficient policy aiming at the preservation of national identity? Is it to satisfy a scientific curiosity, to register the origin of the population, according to ethnic composition, record keeping, or possibly the enforcement of certain political points of view? The experience of several decades proves that we are still incapable of giving convincing answers to such questions. That is proven by the relativity of the statistics so far, by the disputes flaring up on the occasion of the conscription of the minority population.

Anyway, it should be acknowledged that with the census methods/techniques/census questions, the uninstructed and unexperienced census commissions etc so far, *the real numbers* of several ethnic groups cannot be established. Those concerned *cannot and would not* be part of that. They cannot because many of them do not really understand the questions referring to their alterity, and would not because along history it has been proven on several occasions, that admitting their identity, they suffered, and were at a disadvantage, and in several cases they even suffer today. The combined influence of the two factors results in uncertain nationality records, so far giving grounds to many disputes and tensions often difficult to solve. The essence of the problem is contained by the already quoted sentence according to which "the bias of the data differing from reality depends on the all-time nationality policy of the given country". That is relevant and true for all southern, eastern, and central European country. If, in connection to that question, we consider only the disputes which have existed for a long time

between our country and the neighbouring ones, namely the different points of view regarding the headcount of the ethnic groups living in Hungary and the Hungarians living beyond the borders, and the tensions resulting from these, we realize what a far-reaching problem we are facing. Consequently we have to do our best in order that the affected countries, among which, ours as well, reconsider their practice so far, and, drawing the consequences corresponding to the value system of the end of the 20th century, apply democratic and humane census methods.¹ That would be important for the history of the different nations' co-existence because that would finally restaure the trust between the majority and minority and it would do away with a significant part of the previous differences in opinion. While the countries in question could lay their nationality policies on more realistic bases, in general, that would result in clearer political relations, and scores of thousands of people would not be brought in front of impossible dilemmas, forced to choose their identity / e.g. the children of mixed families. / Not to mention the fact that many multilingual countries would not have to face such conflicting situations which, in spite of the magnanimously declared and granted rights, result from the disintegration and assimilation of the ethnical groups. / It should finally be admitted that there exists natural assimilation; however its meaning and content should also be defined. /

Returning to our country's circumstances, no matter how much the simplifying verdict that "like politics, like statistics", I am convinced that – if we insist by all means – the census of the nationalities, even under the special Hungarian conditions as well, and by that we mean, first of all, beside the bitter historical experience, the dispersion – could be carried out with more humane and probably with more realistic results. That has an extremely simple solution possibility, that is asking the question referring to "*knowledge of the language*" / inherited and *learned language*! instead of a datastream referring to "nationality" and "mothertongue". Originally, the national and ethnical belonging was part of the legal category of conscience, later it acquired political importance, but that is *not important from the point of view of the practice of national policy*, as the needs of individuals belonging to a national community claimed from the state, differing from those of the majority, were always connected to the knowledge of language. Self-defining, free identity choice is everybody's natural right, but its declaring and registering cannot be imposed on anyone, nor assert claims in that direction.

It is instructive to analyse the content of the questionnaires used for the census in the past decades which contain as answer possibilities the phrases: "nationality" and "mothertongue" as well as "language(s) spoken beside the mothertongue". This stream of questions was misleading for most

of the ethnic citizens. They were confronted with a difficult decision, many of them were unsure, and that resulted in the expression of mistaken answers, quite frequently / especially in the case of the larger, older age minority groups/ leaving it to the census officer to solve their dilemma. It is of greater concern the fact that behind the method, a political intention might lurk. It could not be accidental that in essence that means was employed in Romania in 1930 and in Hungary in 1941. In both cases, the intention was the same: to influence the real national composition in favour of the majority. Both countries were after an important territorial realignment, so it was their interest to modify the proportion of the minority population living in the re/gained territories. 49.5% of the population living in the territories reunited with Hungary between 1938 and 1941 were not Hungarians. "That proportion - Juhász Gyula writes in one of his articles - is slightly corrected by the experiment of the census of 1941 trying to differentiate between the mothertongue and nationality." But to the question regarding their nationality, 520 thousand non-Hungarian mothertongue respondents declared themselves to be of Hungarian nationality. Almost half of them lived on the newly annexed territories, so the number of the non-Hungarian nationals dropped to 44.7 %. It could be established on the basis of further analysis that the greatest divide between mothertongue and nationality happened in the southern part where, especially the majority of the Croats, but also many of the Slovenians declared themselves to be of Hungarian nationality. / From more than 100 thousand speakers of mothertongue Croatian, only 10 thousand declared themselves as Croatian nationals too. / The data constitutes food for thought as such a difference was experienced neither in Northern Transylvania, nor in the Northern part [Felvidék], that is in Subcarpathia [Kárpátalja]. It is certain that the fresh experience of the changes, the unconsolidated relationships played a role in that, since declaring one's nationality was already a decision which could have been influenced by many facts: fear, intention, and happiness. So that was not simply about the fact that declaring one's nationality was the expression of a subjective feeling, of a community feeling, which may not only be different from one's mothertongue, but, in general, it is also independent from a language knowledge, as it was attempted to be explained during the war.²

In the close past and at present, Hungary could not be motivated by such political reasons on the occasion of the census in recent years, since the census method is always determined by the political philosophy of the given age. The previous regimes were interested in showing as great a capita number as possible since it propagated the fact that it carried out a model nationality policy. The present regime will most likely be interested in an as

objective recording as possible since that is dictated both by the legitimate efforts of the minority communities to strengthen their specificity and by the shaping of a set of conditions to be granted for them. But that comes in contradiction with the freedom of choosing one's identity, one of its main constituent element being the possibility of not declaring one's origin. That is also a fundamental human right. With that I would like to blow away the delusion that there is such a method with which it would be possible to establish the real number of the minority nationals in Hungary. Practice proves the opposite.

However, if the minority citizen is still confronted with the necessity of self-definition, the most secure support both for themselves and naturally for the census officer is granted by the "language-background" approach. The statistics indicate that the most objective picture with regard to the belonging or the relationship to a given nationality can be created from the answers given to the question of "language(s) spoken beside the mothertongue". Following that, the number of those who defined themselves on the basis of "mothertongue" is greater, and finally the smallest of those who were registered as "nationality". So the scientific experience is also in favour of changing the present practice. Here, I would like to return with just one idea, to the question raised in the introductory part, as to *the practical purpose of keeping the register of the population according to their nationality*. If the question is not politically motivated, then, its importance is dwarfed by its complexity and the multitude of conflicts resulting from it. The realization of specific nationality policy goals is not so important for the registration of speakers of other languages, from the point of view of a given community's satisfying its own cultural wants, as the already anachronistic thinkers who can think exclusively within the national context consider it. Especially those concepts, like "nationality", "mothertongue" lose their importance along the implementation of the national policy, since satisfying the wants that are generally of a cultural nature, differing from those of the majority, are not tightly connected to the capita numbers of the given nationality community. Not all nationality citizens take advantage of the possibility of being educated in their mothertongue; on the one hand, in some of them such a need does not even develop, on the other hand there appears an interest even from the Hungarian national citizens part towards the understanding of one or another minority language and culture. /See, for example, the participation in relatively high numbers of the Hungarian children in Romanian language education. / That is why we do not consider the registration of the ratio of the capita conclusive; there is no and it could not essentially be found any close relationship between one minority or another's capita number / constituting a

continuous subject for debate / and the practical policy to be followed. It would be possible to solve the several decades prevailing dilemma by satisfying the demands connected mostly with the cultural and religious life of the nationality minorities and the people living in mixed marriages, speaking several languages, and having several identities should not be confronted with impossible decisions. /And we have not yet spoken about the foreign policy projection of the problem! /

A specificity of Hungary has to be acknowledged: the reality that – beside the fact that the nationalities are spread and live in small groups – the number of those not speaking or slightly speaking the original language is much greater than that of those national groups living in large number blocks. From here, there also follows that the number of those who possess nationality awareness is growing relatively fast, but they no longer possess the knowledge of language. From the point of view of nationality policy, that raises such questions with which we have not dealt in earnest, so far, although the latest research categorises the people who have reached that phase of identity, into three groups: 1. obviously as a distinct nationality; 2. of mixed, but linguistically unassimilated nationality; 3. of mixed and linguistically assimilated nationality³. With regard to the citizens who have been partly or completely assimilated linguistically, the authorities have no particular obligations, since their particular wants appear at the level of classes at most.

In the case of individuals belonging to a national minority, there is quite a strong relationship between the national identity and their religious belonging, to such an extent, that in the stage preceding their national awareness, which constituted the most important feature which differentiated them from the majority. Since the Romanians in Hungary constitute the most western community of the Romanians, and they have never lived within the borders of the Romanian state, a part of them have not even taken part in the process of nationality shaping / and that is why they are not really aware of their true Romanian nature, / they, first of all, have separated from the Hungarian majority, through their religion, and traditions. Their ancient rites, Orthodoxy and the cultural traditions connected to that constituted their most obvious differentiating mark from the Hungarians. A part of those Romanians possessing that weak identity awareness / in the northern territories of Nyírség and Hajdú-Bihar counties, / has been gradually converted to the Greek Catholic religion, and along with that, during the 1920s and 1930s, to the use of Hungarian. A part of the Romanians in these territories has preserved, up to the present day, several identity particularities, such as the use of their language within the family circle, but in the absence of an active national consciousness, their being taken into consideration as a minority, with the methods so far,

have been faced with great difficulties. For that group of Romanians in Hungary it becomes clear that about the concepts of “mothertongue” or that of “nationality” one cannot obtain even approximately precise data. In the category of “spoken language” there appears with relative realism, the number of local Romanians. / See the data of the census of 1980 and 1990 in the case of Bedő, Létavértes, and Pocsaj. Still here it could be employed the so-called method of “social categorisation” as well with great success.

The official data referring to the citizens of Romanian origin living in Hungary after Trianon are known. These show a decline in the population that was slower before 1970, with slight fluctuations, and faster after 1970. The difference is relatively great between the numbers registered in 1920 of 23695 inhabitants of Romanian origin and those found in 1930: 16221. It is only that of 1960 that shows an increase above one thousand as compared to the census of 1949. There were always differences between the officially registered numbers of Romanians in Hungary and the estimated ones, but a greater difference was shown after WWI and that is when it acquired a political significance both among the Hungarian and the Romanian circles due to the fact that after the decision of Trianon, the number of Romanians remaining in Hungary was estimated to be much higher than that shown by the statistics. We encounter even sharp reactions as well. For example, Ioan Georgescu, speaks about 250 thousand Romanians remaining in Hungary, in 1927, in his book entitled *Románii din Ungaria* [The Romanians in Hungary]. However he admits that a great number of them do no longer speak Romanian, but their national consciousness is very strong and it is manifest in their sticking to the Greek Catholic and Orthodox religions. He estimates the number of those preserving the language to be around 50 thousand. Vasile Stoica as well, in his article that appeared in the journal entitled *Graiul Românesc* of 1928, issue no.10, also mentions 50 thousand Romanians. That estimate is in agreement with the number of 50 thousand inhabitants mentioned by Knaller Viktor, a Hungarian social-democrat, in 1925. During the Parliament session of November 13th. In the Romanian circles, that conviction is still alive up to the present day, that the official statistics do not mirror the real data, not even by far. In spite of that, it is a fact that from among the larger nationalities, German, Slovakian, Croatian, not to mention now, naturally the Gipsies, in the case of Romanians, the existing difference between the official and the estimated data is the smallest. More impartial Romanian researchers also recognized that the real number of Romanians in Hungary in the census data achieved since 1920, is 2 – 2.5 times bigger. So, when we compare the capita

number of the Romanians living in Hungary of the latest statistics that is of 10740 to the approximately 25 thousand estimated, we are quite close to the real data which were considered probable by measurements carried out with indirect methods. / Naturally, there are many more citizens in Hungary of Romanian origin who no longer possess an active Romanian conscience. / Numerous scientific research proves that – in spite of significant loss – from the point of view of national identity, the Romanians in Hungary are in a relatively good situation. That could be explained by their geographical positioning / close to the Romanian border, closed rural communities / and by the strong conservation ability of the church. In his article entitled *A nemzeti kisebbségek nyilvános nyelvhasználata Magyarországon* [The Public Use of Minority Languages in Hungary] Radó Péter establishes correctly that Romanian preserved its positions best within the parish ceremonies. 'In more than half of the villages inhabited by Romanians / almost in every settlement inhabited by them/, as the researcher writes, beside the worship and singing, in some parts of the liturgy, or even all of it, Romanian is used constantly.'⁴

Up to the 1960s and 70s, the great majority of the Romanians consisted in essence in communities of people occupied with farming, living in rural conditions. The equilibrium of the *composition of the inhabitants* was upset in 1918 to such an extent that it became almost impossible to continue the previous political, and cultural life. With the retreat of the Romanian troops, all the teachers and priests went back to Romania; only the dean from Méhkerék, Nicolae Roxin remained together with another 3 priests for the 18 emptied parishes. Even in 1928, the Orthodox Church numbered only 5 priests. The 16 Greek Catholic parishes were left with a total of 3 pastors. Thus, the Romanians were left without the intellectuals able to organize their community life. / Only after WWII there was an essential change. / Beside the peasantry there was a small layer of bourgeoisie consisting of merchants and craftsmen.

A greater *social differentiation* took place within the circles of the Romanians in Hungary, in the 1960s, when, compared to their number, remarkably many obtained secondary and tertiary certification. That greatly contributed to the integration of Romanians into Hungarian society, to the settling down in towns and localities inhabited by Hungarians, facts which strengthened the assimilation process. In essence, the same reflexes and mechanisms have set in motion as in the earlier stages of history: the acquisition of a higher social status did not always go hand in hand with the preservation of identity, while maintaining the need for education in the mother tongue, on the contrary: it strengthened the assimilation.

From the point of view of identity preservation, the *geographical positioning of the Romanians* is relatively favourable. The prevailing majority of the Romanians lives in counties neighbouring Romania and that facilitated their keeping in touch with the Romanian language and culture. / Except during the one or two decades preceeding the changes in Romania in 1989. / It is true that there is no county in the country [Hungary] without a smaller or larger Romanian population, but most of them live in the county of Békés, Budapest and its vicinity, as well as in Hajdú-Bihar county. Probably the relatively high, close to 2000 capita number registered in Budapest and its surrounding on the occasion of the 1990 census constitutes a surprise. On the one hand, that is connected to the attractiveness of the capital, on the other hand Budapest has always been an important center of the Romanian spiritual, intellectual life. The Romanians living here detached themselves from among those bigger blocks living along the borders during the 60s and 70s as a consequence of the greater social mobility that took place.

A *different orientation move* may also be experienced. A part of the Romanians from the communes in Hajdú-Bihar county have moved to Debrecen while those from the Romanian villages in Békés county, first of all from the two localities with the most numerous Romanian inhabitants, from Méhkerék and Kétegyháza, have moved to Gyula and to a lesser degree, to Békéscsaba. That is the explanation for the estimate of the Romanian inhabitants in Gyula of around 2500-3000, while in Bekescsaba it is approximated at 600. It is most likely that within the 440 capita registered in Baranya County, there is also a group of Gipsies. There is no reliable data about the number of Romanians heading westward, but settling down in Hungary.

As a conclusion we can establish that the cognition of the number of the ethnic minority populations living in our homeland, their composition, and the circumstances of their settlement, as well as the attentive observation of these constitute an important task which, above all, should be entrusted to the specialists.

The experience of the history also proves that there was not always a strict cause and effect correspondence between the quality of a given country's minority policy and the headcount of a minority community like the one desired by a democratic, minority protective policy. The consequences of that circumstance and first of all of the political misuse of the data, are that, in the 20th century, the nations have proven an ever more decided opposition against the attempts at their registration. Neither the present instability of Eastern-Central Europe, nor the nationality conflicts do favour that intention which targets a more precise establishment of the population number belonging to different national groups. Under such circumstances we have to

make peace with the thought that the individual who does not want or cannot express their belonging to a particular nationality also has the right to identity preservation, to education in their mothertongue, and participation in all levels of social labour division.

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Translated into English by Ema Ileana Adam