The "Majority Question" in Interwar Romania: Making Majorities from Minorities in a Heterogeneous State

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H-Nationalism is proud to publish here the sixth post of its "Minorities in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives" series, which looks at majority-minority relations from a multi-disciplinary and diachronic angle. Today's contribution, by R. Chris Davis (Lone Star College–Kingwood), examines the efforts of Romanian nation-builders to make Romanians during the interwar period.

Heterogeneity in Interwar Romania

While the situation of ethnic minorities in Romania has been examined extensively within the scholarship on the interwar period, far too little consideration is given into the making of the Romanian ethnic majority itself. My reframing of the "minority question" into its corollary, the "majority question," in this blogpost draws on my recently published book examining the contested identity of the Moldavian Csangos, an ethnically fluid community of Romanian- and Hungarian-speaking Roman Catholics in eastern Romania.[1] While investigating this case study of a putative ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority, I was constantly reminded that not only minorities but also majorities are socially constructed, crafted from regional, religious, and linguistic bodies and identities. Transylvanians, Bessarabians, and Bănățeni (people from the Banat region) and Regațeni (inhabitants of Romania's Old Kingdom), for example, were rendered into something more broadly and collectively dubbed "Romanian." What also became clear is that definitions and dynamics of majoritarian identities could be contested as much as minority ones, especially when we consider that the very concept of minorities (and thus majorities) is the relatively recent invention of the nation state.[2]

What became the Romanian majority by the 1920s and 30s emerged not only from the inhabitants of the newly appended territories but also from a heterogeneous mix of ethnic and national communities long present in the

Romanian national space. Greater Romania during the interwar period was formed from newly unified territories that were home to large populations that were either non-Romanian-speaking or non-Romanian Orthodox or both. From these new frontiers emerged large, complex multi-ethnic border zones: in the Banat region lived Swabians, Hungarians, Serbians, Catholic Bulgarians and Krashovani, and Czechs; in Transylvania were Hungarians, Szeklers, Saxons, Swabians, Jews, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, and Armenians; in Bukovina were Poles and more Germans, Hungarians, and Ukrainians; in Moldova and Bessarabia, still more Germans, Jews, and Ukrainians, as well as Csangos and Russians; and in Dobrudja and Muntenia dwelt Greeks, Turks, Tatars, Gagauz, Aromanians, and Lipovans. Spread throughout the country was Europe's largest contingent of Roma. The capital Bucharest was also home to many of these same communities, including relatively large numbers of Albanians, Macedonians, Italians, and French. After World War I, the city became the destination for thousands of Hungarians emigrating from eastern Transylvania. Historically, many of Romania's national elites came from these groups, be they Greek Phanariots in the Old Kingdom (or Regat), Armenian and Aromanian merchants in Moldova and Transylvania, or Hungarian and German noblemen in Transylvania.

The monumental task of Romania's nation builders (i.e. its majority makers) during the interwar period was, therefore, to break down the country's regionalisms and local identities and to instill a semblance of ethno-national identity, one easily professed as well as measured, however ill-defined it might be. Eager to take stock of the new territories—and the presumptive ethnic Romanians inhabiting them—historians, ethnographers, anthropologists, sociographers, and demographers from urban centers such as Bucharest and Iași journeyed to the country's periphery, especially to Transylvania. For Romanian historians and social scientists from Transylvania, new avenues for research and publication were opened in a Greater Romanian nation eager to document the character and plight of ethnic Romanians who had long survived foreign dominion. Romania's foremost geographer Gheorghe Vâlsan called on a

new generation of professional and amateur historians, scientists, and writers to take stock of the nation:

> In every corner of the Romanian land there needs to be found a priest, a teacher, an enlightened man, to attempt to draw upon the unknown ways distinctive to the life of his region. Gradually, research on the regions will multiply and fill gaps. We are at the most significant moment of our national history, and a faithful image of the land and people of Romania in this epoch will be uniquely documented. For our efforts, future researchers will acknowledge us.[3]

A vanguard of Romanian historians and scientists, including those of the famed Gusti School of Sociology, now sought to locate, quantify, and record the varieties of Romanian-ness within the newly enlarged country. What they discovered in the Romanian countryside often shocked them.

Romanianize the Romanians

These majority makers soon realized that the Romanians were, in many areas of the country, actually a hodgepodge of languages, patois, cultures, customs, and religions, with little sense of the national identity being debated and refined in Bucharest, Iași, and Cluj. Allegiances in rural Romania were principally to family, Church, neighbor, and village, and not to some modern notion of a larger ethno-national community. In this respect, the Romanian peasantry—especially in the heterogeneous borderlands in Transylvania and Moldova—was no different than the vast majority of the rural, disparate communities that populated the rest of central and eastern Europe. As Kate Brown has discussed in her influential work on the multi-ethnic Kresy region in Ukraine—a region that could just as easily stand for Transylvania, Bukovina, or Dobrudja—the peasantries who eked out lives for themselves naturally incorporated the complexities of the hybrid cultures in which they lived; their identities were tied to locality, class, profession, and social status rather than to nationality, a

designation few villagers in such a milieu would have understood. To the extent that they did characterize something akin to a national identity, it was, for them, something mutable—something that could change with marriage, education, or military service.[4]

Convincing these Romanian peasants—at the very least, those who spoke Romanian and were Orthodox—they were actually something called "Romanian" was no small feat. In many ways, Romania's nation builders had to Romanianize the Romanians. This is not to say that the majority of the Romanian-speaking peasantry did not intuit or even profess a sense of Romanian national belonging; only that most would not have articulated or actualized it as did Romania's nation builders in interwar years. A modern national consciousness—one that could be mobilized and enacted for nation-building—had to be impressed upon the vast rural population. It probably rarely occurred to the Romanian-speaking peasants from the marshes of the Danbue Delta that they shared a common origin, homeland, and destiny with, say, the highlanders around the Western Carpathian's Bihor Massif, nearly 1000km away.

One way to achieve this was to fix nationality and ethnicity in space. Censuses and especially ethnographic and demographic maps affixed identities to particular territories, making visible (or invisible) one community or another and creating national taxonomies into which peoples could be neatly segregated. Beginning in April 1924, a series of statutes under the rubric The Regulations on Establishing Romanian Nationality aimed not only to establish the procedure for acquiring Romanian nationality but also to facilitate the recording and cataloging of the various populations in the new Romanian territories. Thus was created an inventory and topology of the Romanian nation using nationality lists, nationality registers, and nationality certificates (*certificate de naţionalitate*). In the process, not only minority but also a majoritarian national identity became codified and then inscribed in the legitimizing documents of state bureaucracies. Homogenizing projects and legislation generated an epistemological knowledge of the nation—quantifying and

objectifying the nation, from something abstract to something real, something living—with the aim, ultimately, to create a nation-state that was unitary, stable. The Romanian equivalent of Germany's *Ostforschung* created a veritable database of the nation's people, utilizing statisticians, demographers, sociologists, historians, cartographers, and, by the 1930s, racial anthropologists and eugenicists. Research on Romania's vast populations was coordinated by ominous-sounding centers or bureaucracies such as the Institute of Biopolitics, the Institute of Hygiene and Social Hygiene, and later the State Undersecretariat of Romanianization, Colonization, and Inventory. By the late 1930s, the policy of Romanianizaiton (*românizare*) became an organizing policy of the Romanian state, a policy that segued into deportations, resettlements, repatriations, and ultimately genocide.

If you can't beat 'em… force 'em to join you

The inherent difficulty of segregating large swathes of the country's population into neat ethnic categories, especially into categories that would show a preponderance of ethnic Romanians (and thus an indominable ethnic majority) circumscribed by state borders, led to the targeting of particular minorities for redefinition as majorities. Looming over this entire enterprise remained the "Hungarian problem" in Transylvania, namely that within Romania's new borders there were too many Hungarians, living too close together, in a region far too important; conversely, we could historicize the situation as a "majority problem," namely that there were too few Romanians, living too far apart, in a region far too important. It was therefore no coincidence that Romanian historians and scientists who undertook research in eastern Transylvania began to question the ethnic composition of the region and the ethnic origins of its Hungarian-speaking Calvinist and Roman-Catholic inhabitants, known as the Szeklers, who had lived there for centuries.[5] Throughout the interwar period and into the 1940s, a number of studies and monographs promoted the idea that most if not all of the Szeklers possessed a separate ethnic genealogy or "ethnogenesis" from the body of Hungarians who entered Europe from Asia. According to this

reinterpretation of the settlement and presence of Hungarian speakers in eastern Transylvania, the modern-day Szeklers were in point of fact denationalized Romanians from Transylvania, having been subjected to centuries of forced assimilation by Hungarian overlords, Hungarian administrative policies, and especially the Hungarian churches.

Geographer Sabin Opreanu, a mentee of the aforementioned Vâlsan, was among the first to suggest that the mass of Szeklers were none other than denationalized Romanians. He characterized the Szekler land as a "stratified space of confessions," in which younger Hungarian ethnic and religious elements lay atop much older Romanian Orthodox ones.[6] These older Romanian elements formed the basis of this population, making it Romanian, not Hungarian. By peeling away these linguistic and confessional layers, he claimed, one could uncover the latent existence of a Romanian ethnic and racial continuity within the region. Noted Romanian philologist and classicist Gheorghe Popa-Lisseanu subsequently claimed that the bloc of Szeklers was created through systematic Hungarianization policies directed from Budapest since the 18th century. The Szekler was simply a "stray Romanian," on the wrong path of history:

> Those who will come voluntarily back to the bosom of their mother are welcome; for those who will linger in their situation of today, we consider them rightfully consanguineous with us but of Hungarian language and law. We seek to show them in every way their true ethnic origin and to convince them of this.[7]

Eventually, "denationalization" (*desnaționalizare*) theories speculated that the entire body of Hungarians in eastern Transylvania possessed a Romanian ethnogenesis. These theories helped solve a statistical dilemma that had bedeviled Romania's nation builders since the country's postwar acquisition of Transylvania. Romania's majority makers used many of these theories—and extensive, state-sponsored research and fieldwork conducted in Romania's new territories—to deconstruct the ethnic genealogy of

minority communities, attempting to prove that a lost Romanian ethnos lay buried beneath their otherwise foreign customs, languages, and history. Other communities in peripheral regions such as the Timoc valley, Bukovina, parts of Moldavia, and Bessarabia soon became the object of similar questions and studies. As the threat of denationalization became part of a national cause linked to the very health and survival of the nation, the theories and discourses on the problem soon became invested with racial and biopolitical tropes. Denationalization theories, supported by serological work undertaken by Romanian racial anthropologists, proved useful tools for the recovery of populations that could now be labeled "lost Romanians." By the late 1930s and early 40s, the growing body of studies on the Transylvanian Hungarians and Szeklers would provide a template for new studies on other ethnic minority communities, such as the Hungarian-speaking Csangos of Moldova. In the case of the Csangos, such works proved to have significant, lasting impacts both on and within the community, leading to new, alternative historical narratives based in no small part on the purported scientific demonstrability of ethnic origins.

To acknowledge the phenomenon of denationalization was the first step toward legitimizing Romanianization projects as renationalization projects, especially in regions where putative non-Romanians represented statistical majorities. The emphasis on ethnic origins was crucial: Romanian political and scientific elites decried the forced assimilation of ethnic Romanians in the past yet simultaneously introduced a series of homogenization projects targeting the country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities. Rebranding Romanianization as a process of national recovery also mitigated the country's obligation to ensure minority rights, which the Romanian government had agreed to as part of the post–World War I settlement. In other words, the rights of minorities need not be upheld if those communities were, in essence, members of the ethnic Romanian majority, unwittingly and unjustly concealed as ethnic minorities. This process of national induction would have major implications for the ethnic majority-minority dynamic in Greater Romania, determining cultural and education policies, redrawing county and regional lines, influencing land

reform and appropriation of churches, and recategorizing populations in national censuses. Majority-making contributed to the political radicalization of the interwar period and informed the thinking and policies that would lead to some of the worst atrocities perpetrated against minorities in wartime Romania. This was certainly the case with the influence that race-based conceptions of the nation had on Antonescu's population policies—including sterilization, deportations, internal colonization, and population transfers—enacted during World War II.

Like race, ethnicity, and nationality, the terms "minority" and "majority" are fluid concepts with a tendency to reify. One is necessarily constructed against the other. When modified by adjectives ethnic, national, religious, or linguistic, these terms become overlapping and even more reflexive. Postulating the "majority question," retrospectively, is yet another way to examine national and ethnic imagining as a multi-way process and to challenge the "myth of homogeneity" in east-central Europe.

[1] R. Chris Davis, *Hungarian Religion, Romanian Blood: A Minority's Struggle for National Belonging* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2019).
[2] See Eric D. Weitz, *A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019),160–163.
[3] Gheorghe Vâlsan, forward to Sabin Opreanu, *Săcuizarea Românilor prin religie* (Cluj: Institutul de Arte Grafice "Ardealul," 1927), ii.
[4] Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), 40. See also Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008).
[5] Szekler(s) (Hu. székely [sing.]/székelyek [pl.]; Ro. secui) is the Anglicized (via German) ethnonym for the Catholic and Protestant ethnolinguistic subgroup of Hungarians in eastern Transylvania, a region historically part of the Kingdom of Hungary but part of Romania since

World War I (Northern Transylvania, including the Szekler-inhabited region, was ceded back to Hungary from 1940 to 1944). It is generally held that the Szeklers colonized the area around the eleventh century, though some theories place them in the Carpathian basin much earlier. Historically, the Szeklers were among the ruling nations of Transylvania, the Unio trium nationum, alongside the Saxons and Hungarians (and excluding the Romanians).

[6] Opreanu, *Săcuizarea Românilor prin religie* (Cluj: Institutul de Arte Grafice Ardealul, 1927), 16–17.

[7] Popa-Lisseanu, *Secuii și secuizarea românilor* (Bucharest: Tipografia ziarului "Universul," 1937), 62.

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