

REVIEW

ANDERS BLOMQVIST

Hungarian Elite Strategy and Discourse in Interwar Romania

Ferenc Sz. Horváth: *Elutasítás és alkalmazkodás között. A Romániai magyar kisebbségi elit politikai stratégiái (1931–1940)*¹
[Between rejection and accommodation. The political strategy of the Hungarian elite in Romania (1931–1940)] Csíksz-
ereda: Pro-Print, 2007.

In his dissertation,² Ferenc Horváth explores the political discourses, orientations and strategies of the Hungarian elite in Romania in the interwar period. The focus is on the Hungarian elite's responses and strategies in reaction to Romanian nationalisation efforts and to right-wing ideas and influences, especially from Nazi Germany, in the 1930's. The author's motives for studying the Hungarian minority elite is that it was the largest one in Romania and that its political activities constituted a serious threat [to the interwar status quo] because of its relations with the revisionistic homeland (Hungary). Apart from the more obvious revisionist ideas, the author points out different streams of ideas within the Hungarian minority, ranging from radical left to the extreme right, including the perhaps lesser known anti-Semitic ideas. This diversity of responses created a major challenge for the Hungarian

¹ This is the Hungarian translation of the German original; Horváth, Franz Sz.: *Zwischen Ablehnung und Anpassung : Politische Strategien der ungarischen Minderheitselite in Rumänien 1931–1940*. München: Ungarisches Institut, (Studia Hungarica: Schriften des Ungarischen Instituts München, 50), 2007.

² Defended at the Heidelberg University.

minority party to maintain unity and to mobilise the votes of all ethnic Hungarians in the elections.

In the introduction, the author gives an overview of the political strategies of the Hungarian elite in the 1920's as well as a theoretical and methodological orientation. The framework can briefly be described as the process of nation-building by the majority and the different reactions and positions taken by the minority.³ These positions are similar to the ideal-types taken from Ernest Gellner's typology (including migration, assimilation and irredentism), in which the last two positions have been extended by A. D. Smith's typology into four: isolation, communitarity, cultural autonomy and separation.⁴

This conceptual framework fits very well with the empirical findings, even though it is rather conventional. The study itself is also conventional, focusing on one ethnic group and its elite. However, it fills an important empirical gap in the research on the Hungarian elite, and the use of a conceptual model makes it possible to easily compare this research with research on other minorities.⁵ The study is based on solid and well-documented empirical work, including extensive primary research involving multiple sources, including documents, newspaper and private collections.⁶

The first chapter covers the beginning of the 1930's, when political ideas were very diverse: they ranged from left-wing young liberals open to negotiating with the centre in Bucharest, to a right-wing Christian direction that rejected any cooperation with the state and also espoused anti-Semitic views. The Hungarian party played a double role: they turned to Bucharest for redress against grievances, while also negotiating with Budapest in making future plans for autonomy.

³ For nationalist politics, see,

⁴ Gellner, Ernest: *Nationalismus und Moderne*, Hamburg, 1995; Smith, Anthony D: *The Ethnical Revival*. Cambridge, 1981. In this vein see also, Hirschmann: Albert: *Exit, voice, and loyalty: responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970.

⁵ Earlier studies: Mikó, Imre: *Huszonkét év. Az erdélyi magyarság politikai története*, Budapest, 1941.; Lengyel Zsolt K.: *Auf der Suche nach dem Kompromiss. Ursprünge und Gestalten des frühen Transsilvanismus, 1918–1928*. München, 1993; Bárdi, Nándor: "A romániai magyarság kisebbségpolitikai stratégiái a két világháború között. *Regio*, No. 2, 1997, pp. 32–67.

⁶ My only remark here is that ethnic demographic data has references to several secondary sources instead of one reference to the primary source. See for example on p. 65 regarding the Romanian census of 1930.

The second chapter describes events during the rule of the National Liberal Party (1934–37), an era in which the positions of the Hungarians became more unified as the Romanian nationalisation policy intensified. The Hungarian party advocated a policy of self-sufficiency and rejection, and hoped for revisionism. This rejectionism was demonstrated in 1937 with the “It is not possible”-debate initiated by Sándor Makkai, in which he stated that the life of a minority was unworthy of humans.⁷ This rejection showed that parts of the minority did not see their future in Romania, but instead desperately hoped for a change of borders. Right-wing ideas based on populism and Christian exclusiveness, combined with racial anti-Semitism and open support of the National Socialist propaganda, gained importance among the Hungarian elite. This was coupled with support for Nazi German foreign policy, in the hopes of gaining support for a revisionist program.

The last chapter focuses on the period of the Royal Dictatorship (1938–40), a time when the Hungarian minority formed its own national community. Its leadership had strong connections with Budapest. During this last phase, the relationship between Hungarians and Jews broke down as the Hungarian elite followed the anti-Semitic developments in Hungary, which had already imposed two anti-Jewish laws in 1939. The Hungarian elite in Romania and Hungary both supported Nazi Germany’s foreign policy – support which bore fruit in 1940 when half of Transylvania was annexed to Hungary. The long wait for this unification was depicted by the title of Imre Mikó’s book: *Twenty-two years*.⁸

In my view the dissertation is well written and based on original empirical findings. It convincingly demonstrates the diversity of Hungarian political positions and how they were influenced by Romanian, Hungarian and international political trends, especially from Nazi Germany.

In the following I would like to make some critical remarks and discuss some alternative views on this topic. These are not necessary direct criticism of the study itself, but rather alternative ways of approaching this topic.

Even though the title indicates that the thesis is about strategies, I believe that the empirical parts of the study – based to a large extent on newspaper articles – are more accurately described as discourses and

⁷ Cseke, Péter (ed). *Nem lehet. A kisebbségi sors vitája*. Budapest, 1989.

⁸ Mikó, Imre: *Huszonkét év. Az erdélyi magyarság politikai története*, Budapest, 1941

debates in relation to possible strategies, rather than a full analysis of possible strategies at any given time. I think that the socio-economic aspects of these collective strategies as well as the personal interests of the leaders are not fully integrated into the analysis. Many of the leaders of the Hungarian minority had certain economic interests – for instance, some of them lost their property during the land reform of 1921. This was framed by the Hungarian party as a grievance of the whole Hungarian minority, despite the fact that some landless Hungarians actually received land as a result of the reform. The elite's economic interests are also reflected in the program of support received from Hungary, which – for example – provided financial support to specific ethnic Hungarian companies, indicating that the support was not always equally distributed within the Hungarian minority.⁹

The elite had strong ties with Hungary, and the minority received substantial economic support. They also filed grievances with the League of Nations. Members of the Hungarian elite always had political and economical incentives to portray the situation as grimly as possible, as a way to gain support. In the elite-driven dual processes of ethnic division in Romania, the Hungarian minority excluded itself and was excluded from the Romanian society, and opted for inclusion into the Hungarian political and cultural nation. In this process, economic factors played a role, as Hungary was expected to secure and restore the former economic and political position of the minority elite. However, in order to fully understand the political positions within this process it is also necessary to analyse the modes of revisionism within Hungary itself.¹⁰

I believe that relational and comparative approaches can be useful in understanding historical processes that are complex and involve sensitive national/ethnic issues.¹¹ The problem with focusing on one ethnic group is that the results can be inward looking and ethnocentric. How-

⁹ See for example the Hítel Akció within Keleti Akció MOL P 1077

¹⁰ Weaver, Eric Beckett: "Revision and its Modes: Hungary's attempts to overturn the Treaty of Trianon 1931–8" D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2008; Zeidler, Miklós: *Ideas on territorial revision in Hungary 1920–1945*, Boulder, Colorado, 2007.

¹¹ Constantin, Iordachi, "Entangled Histories: Re-thinking the History of Central and Southeastern Europe from a Relational Perspective. *Regio*, 2004, pp. 113–147; Werner, Michael and Zimmermann, Bénédicte "Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity" *History and Theory*, 45, February 2006, pp. 30–50.

ever, in this case I believe that the author's results can be used easily in comparative research, as he has applied a conceptual model.

It would be interesting to compare the results of this study with the Romanian minority during the dualist period, as there are some similarities: for example, the shift between active and passive politics, struggle for implementation of minority rights/laws, social and economic tensions within the minority party itself, development of cultural and political contacts with their home-state, international protests and propaganda, etc. This kind of comparison can show the continuity and effects of nationalistic politics, which I believe are important for understanding developments during the 1930's as well.¹²

Another way of doing comparative studies would be to compare relations between different ethnic groups.¹³ Even though this study includes both Jews and Hungarians, it focuses on the Hungarian standpoints vis-à-vis the Jews and not their relational aspects as viewed from both groups. I think that the finding about anti-Semitism among the Hungarian elite is an interesting aspect. However, in order to understand this development we must also view it from the Jewish perspective to see what their strategies and options were (e.g. migration, Zionism, communalism, isolation and accommodation). Because of the Holocaust, it is all too easy to impute a passive and victimised role to the Jews as early as the 1930's.

Regarding specific ethnic relations, I think it is also important to have a local perspective.¹⁴ In my research in Satu Mare,¹⁵ I did not come across any open anti-Semitism among the Hungarian minority in the 1930's. Hungarian-Jewish relations only deteriorated after 1940, and even then, some of the Jewish elite received some protection. I think that local studies are suitable for studying ethnic relations, as most of the literature on Hungarian, Jewish and Romanian ethnicity/national-

¹² Bíró, Sándor: *The Nationalities Problem in Transylvania*, Boulder, Colorado, 1992, covers both periods, but he is not as critical to the Hungarian rule as for instance Jászi, Oszkár: *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 1929, Chicago, 1929.

¹³ Glass, Hildrun: *Zerbrochene Nachbarschaft. Das deutsch-jüdische Verhältnis in Rumänien, 1918–1938*, München, 1996.

¹⁴ Brubaker, Rogers et al, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, Princeton, New Jersey, 2006; Hausleitner, Mariana: *Die Rumänisierung der Bukowina*, München, 2001.

¹⁵ In Hungarian: Szatmárnémeti.

ism mainly treat only one of the groups/categories. Our knowledge will increase if we apply comparative and relational approaches.

The author provides a short introduction to every chapter in which the general situation is described. What is somewhat lacking from these introductions is the factor of socio-economic development and particularly the impact of the economic depression. Instead of viewing right-wing ideas as an influence of German policy, these ideas might be seen more as reactions to the general socio-economic situation which affected the entire world. It is also important to note that the anti-Jewish laws and measures targeted the economic and social activities of Jews. I therefore believe that social and economic factors played an important role in the development of anti-Semitism.

To conclude, I think that the dissertation has made an important contribution to the study of the strategies and discourses of the Hungarian elite in interwar Romania and definitely fills an important gap. The conceptual framework works well with the empirical findings, which can easily be useful in making comparisons with other elites. However, I believe that the role of the socio-economic factor at all levels, for society in general, for the minority elite as a collective and for its individuals, needs to be taken more thoroughly into account in the analysis, in order to understand the strategies of the Hungarian elite as they range from rejection to accommodation.