

Briefing on the Current Conditions for Human Rights in Romania

Congressional Human Rights Caucus

Congressional

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First, I would like first to express my appreciation for the opportunity to join you in today's session. As a cultural anthropologist specializing in ethnic conflicts and nationalistic movements in Eastern Europe, I feel I can best contribute by addressing my remarks specifically to the intersection of these areas; my colleagues here from the human rights organizations and other institutions will cover the areas of their expertise.

As a scholar I am deeply distressed by the violent aftermath of the revolution that deposed the Ceausescus. The extraordinarily vicious hostility between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania calls for the combined expertise and urgent efforts of scholars, human rights activists, legislators and other concerned citizens, as represented by our meeting today.

With a view toward taking such steps, it seems especially important now to suggest several historical causes that may help to account for the prolonged and seemingly pathological hatred between these two groups. A brief recapitulation of the salient points at issue will, I hope, be useful as a basis for further informed deliberations.

What we are seeing now is, I think, a complex mosaic of interethnic strife whose roots run very deep. I will touch upon seven interrelated primary areas in my remarks: economic, political, educational, religious, mythical, administrative and international.

To begin with, let me point out that the manifold grievances of Hungarians and Romanians against one another are not of recent vintage. Some-- such as the historical dislocations of populations and feudal privileges-- date back as far as the eighteenth century; others are the result of the mismanaged economy and ideologies of the Ceausescu and Kadar

regimes. Nonetheless, many of these sensitive points were severely exacerbated during the past decade of economic setbacks, official curtailments of human rights, and a consistent lack of basic consumer goods in Romania.

1) **ECONOMIC:** We must remember that more than forty years of dictatorial Stalinist rule yielded irrational, if not downright perverted, policies of forced collectivization and widely uneven development. Industrial complexes were constructed in locations lacking energy sources or available potential labor, one important consequence of which was an unwanted influx of laborers into previously ethnically homogeneous areas of Transylvania. As might be expected, such dislocations caused enormous resentment in both populations, giving rise to ethnocentrism, superiority/inferiority complexes and racist prejudice.

2) **POLITICAL:** Under Ceausescu's tyrannical rule, Hungarian, German and Serbian institutions, publications and rural home-based industries were strangled, and the use of their mother tongues prohibited. Ethnic schools and press were eliminated as were newspapers and other media; intellectuals and community leaders were intimidated, jailed and tortured, under the assumption that minority issues would thus eventually cease to exist. The outrage experienced by Hungarians at these most egregious violations of human rights cannot be underestimated, for they cut into the heart of the very meaning of culture.

3) **EDUCATIONAL:** After the revolution, Hungarians felt-- from their perspective justifiably-- entitled to re-open their own elementary, secondary and higher educational institutions. The very first slogans to appear in demonstrations in February and March, for example, demanded the reinstatement of schools under Hungarian control: they were met with immediate resistance and even provocation. For these actions were perceived by Romanian local leaders as threatening to their own established educational system and policies.

4) **RELIGIOUS:** Let us also recall that religious devotion on the part of minorities was seen by the former regime as tantamount to a declaration of nationalist sentiment. Accordingly, parishioners and leaders of Hungarian Protestant and Catholic churches (as well as those of the German Lutheran churches) were targeted for constant harassment. These wounds are, obviously, far from healed; in fact, they are in danger of giving rise to more of the fanaticism and violent confrontations we have already begun to witness.

5) **MYTHICAL:** The Ceausescu government, as you well know, promoted a state propaganda that intensified the historical myth of Daco-Roman continuity, according to which

only Romanians are entitled to take their rightful place in Transylvania, as the true heirs to 2,000 years of habitation of that much contested terrain. Hungarians, on the other hand, have defended their own equally powerful claims of entitlement to that land-- during World War II with fascist and chauvinistic propaganda-- by asserting their primacy, considering the Romanians to be usurers. Because of this historical controversy, both governments felt entitled to seize regions in Transylvania, twice realigning its borders since World War I. Survivors of these realignments and believers of these myths on both sides share a sense of grave injustice, each seeking to rectify the perceived abrogation of their 'historic rights.'

6) **ADMINISTRATIVE:** The county administration system under Ceausescu favored Romanian-inhabited areas while diminishing the importance of ethnic areas, a reversal of what happened during World War II under Hungarian control. And in 1967 the last strong foothold of Hungarian autonomy-- the Maros Autonomous Region-- was eliminated. It is clear that the lack of indigenous administration representing the interests of the local group leads in many instances to violent outbursts.

7) **INTERNATIONAL:** The current crisis should not be dismissed as a simple historic border dispute; rather, it represents the plight of the largest ethnic minority in Eastern Europe. And, although directly it involves Hungary and Romania, we must realize its potential for drawing the United States and Soviet Union, as well as their allies, into an international arena whose volatility may undermine the future of democracy in that part of the world.

Why the Current Conflict?

As I hope to have shown, the legacy of fascism and, subsequently, Stalinism is endemic to the present conflict between Hungarians and Romanians in Romania. Toward an explanation of the outbreak of recent violence I would like to suggest the following:

- 1) The institutionalization of violence--either through militarization or with the dismissive sense of "well, it's the way of life here"-- intensifies the escalation of conflict.
- 2) Ethnic polarization-- that is, a deeply rooted tendency to see all experiences in terms of "I'm Hungarian, You're Romanian"-- during a crisis heightens as the conflict intensifies.
- 3) Hungarians see Romanians as enjoying all economic and political power, a status achieved under Ceausescu's state nationalism. Consequently, they view the post-Ceausescu state

as an opportunity for instant reversal of prior griefs. The disparate allocation of power and resources between ethnic groups occupying the same territory is perceived to be an advantage to the group in the leading position due to general shortages, the lack of strong leadership and economic deprivation.

4) Ethnocentric perception is a major contributor to group hostility resulting in a "mirror-imaging" ("We see them as bad; they see us as bad" and, subsequently, both see each other in negative terms through such hostile images and myths). I should emphasize, however, that stereotypes themselves do not necessarily force ethnic groups into violent confrontation but they may be an important catalyst in separating groups from each other as well as reinforcing aggressive tendencies and conflict. Rational dialogue between the adversaries can not be forthcoming while such extremist, "tribal" perspectives persist on both sides.

5) It must be realized that most Hungarians favor some form of autonomy, but differ considerably in their view of the urgency of the situation and the methods that to be used to achieve it. These differences form the basis for the rapid formation of Hungarian political organizations-- such as the Christian Party, Szekely Party, MADISZ, and RMDESZ-- following the Romanian revolution. Party leaders-- as well as the Hungarian state-- are, I think, responsible for the lack of a unanimous and unambiguous declaration of their goals for autonomy, for democratic renewal and the rejection of separatist and irredentist claims.

6) The military and the police (as well as the former securitate) are both a cause of and object for ethnic clash. Let us recall that the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (who in 1980 received the "Man of Peace of the Year" award from India) made certain that no officer with ethnic connections would be elevated to higher rank. Since the army and police are an integrating force of Romanian ethnicity, they favor Romanian claims, and subsequently generate ethnic resentments. Thus, the current militarization of Romanian society both reflects and promotes ethnic divisions in the society at large.

7) As indicated by the current emergence of political factions-- many of extremist nature such as Vatra Romanesca, Peasant, and Christian Democrats-- party differences reflect distinctions in the hierarchical ethnic configuration of Romanian society. The preponderant ethnic cleavage in Romania has created a multiparty system that exacerbates conflict by mirroring that ethnic division.

Recommendations

As a strategy for conflict resolution, third-party involvement is, I believe, necessary. While there are many ways to offer assistance-- for example, through mediation, arbitration, facilitation, monitoring, adjudication and direct involvement-- a combination of mediation and direct economic assistance may be useful on the part of the United States government. For these reasons, then, I would like to urge you to consider the following recommendations:

A) The establishment of a fact-finding mission of independent researchers to conduct a thorough investigation of the status of ethnic minorities in Romania. Its aim should be to discover those local-level political, economic and cultural factors that contribute to the escalation of interethnic conflict and regressive nationalistic propaganda.

B) An on-going dialogue among targeted groups to take place on a regular basis under Congressional auspices, funded through independent sources to investigate minority rights in Eastern Europe. The establishment of such a task force, under United States Congressional support, may facilitate the adequate protection and representation of civil and human rights of minorities there.

C) The assistance of the U.S. Congress in the creation of a Ministry or Department for Nationality Affairs in each country, coordinated directly by the Parliament, to work closely together to resolve these and other aggravated issues. These Ministries, then, could be directly responsible to international organizations such as Helsinki Watch, Amnesty International, and the Congressional Human Rights Caucus.

D) That the United States press the provisional Romanian government to seek out and bring to justice remaining securitate (former state-secret police) members as equivalent to war criminals, many of whom may well be implicated in current ethnic violence. This act should be also extended to those who encourage violence and manipulate ethnic conflict.

To facilitate conflict resolution and to reduce potential ethnic conflict in the future, the following points should be urged immediately upon the involved parties in Hungary and Romania:

1) Such ubiquitous and deep-seated ethnic conflict cannot be neutralized simply by rewriting the constitution. The new Romanian state must provide autonomous status to a minority administration and culture;

2) Equal status must be guaranteed to all minorities and their respective regional self-governments. Such regional representations might provide arenas for stating and resolving grievances and ethnic rivalry as well as aiding the decentralization of the Bucharest government;

3) The 'Great Romanian' and local nationality chauvinisms should be strongly opposed;

4) Conflict should be solved through democratic discussions and self-criticism, through public discourse and the media.;

5) The Government should utilize the services of ethnic leaders and specialists into state mechanisms to enable implementation of policies concerning these groups;

6) Opportunity for social, economic and political mobility should not be tied solely to ethnic group identity or ethnic party membership;

7) Introduction of government reforms, preferential programs and an increase in public expenditures are needed to meet the needs of ethnic populations in, such areas as health, education, saving and loans, business opportunities and land allocation;

8) Identification of 'superordinate goals' requiring collaboration among ethnic groups should be encouraged. The role of regional and ethnic parties should be enhanced to pave the way for greater cooperation among competing ethnic groups;

9) Hungarians and Romanians must be persuaded that Transylvania as a region has no future as a separatist or totally independent federalist state;

10) Both sides must acknowledge that successful negotiation requires moderation and self-criticism, mutual respect and the desire to consider a rational, middle-road solution in tandem. In closing, it is evident, of course, that the foregoing recommendations cannot succeed unless individuals realize the importance of education-- both formal and informal-- in combatting prejudice and racist stereotypes at home, in the schools and at the workplace. Parents and educators should be encouraged to teach children tolerance and respect for each others' culture, emphasizing similarities rather than differences. Such efforts would go far towards countering John Stuart Mill's 1861 prediction that "democracy is next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities."

With the unfolding spirit of democracy, the new powers in Budapest and Bucharest must, I believe, discard the dangerous myths of the past and consider their common future together if they truly wish to signal an end to their historic and current controversies. In order to convince each other of a desire to establish genuine democratic relations, both countries must demonstrate

an understanding of present realities. The United States and the Soviet Union may be potential partners in enabling the participants to find a "cure" for the pathological strains of reactionary nationalism and support efforts toward a peaceful Mitteleuropa for 1992 and beyond.