

Strategies for Interethnic Conflict Prevention in Transylvania

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Thus far in the session, inter group conflict has been explored in two regions, the former Yugoslavia and the Three Country Region of the Southeastern Alps. Gene Hammel and Bob Minnich have called our attention to the extremely complex historical background to conflict there, and suggested ways underlying tensions might have been mitigated and interethnic clashes prevented. I would like to build on this by introducing to the mix a third region that is equally dogged by a history of hostilities.

Our previous speakers built for us a clear framework for locating not just the historical roots, but the structural requisites for inter group conflict in this part of the world. Much of what they have proposed about their zones applies directly to this other "land between" that I will be talking about, so hopelessly misunderstood and misrepresented in the consciousness of outsiders: from Bram Stoker to Henry Kissinger. In contrast with the other two presentations, however, I will be spending much less time on how inter group tensions in this region have developed historically and focusing more on specific suggestions regarding the prevention of future conflicts. In doing so, I am building upon the ideas and inspiration of numerous scholars who have sought to both untangle the knots of history in the Danubian Basin and to build a foundation for peace and justice in the region. Among them is Laszlo Kurti, whose briefing to the Congressional Human Rights Caucus on human rights in Romania in April, 1990 (Kurti, 1991) provides us with a baseline view set in the early post-Communist era of the roadblocks hindering the development of peaceful relations between Hungarians and Romanians. Given the often dismal prognosis regarding interethnic relations, it is worth noting that events that have taken place in central Europe in the last two years offer hope that the potential upsurge in hostilities forewarned by Kurti seven years ago may be averted. Yet rather than be lulled into complacency by such positive developments, we should redouble our efforts to design and implement localized proposals for action*.

Transylvania is located along that fracture line, partially real, partly perceived, that runs from the Baltic Sea through the north European plain, across the Carpathians and then, at the

Drava-Sava-Danube line, explodes across the former Yugoslavia to emerge somewhere in the Adriatic. The region is one of those quintessential hot zones of contention scattered like land mines across the European continent. It can be characterized as such today, primarily because of past efforts on the part of Imperial states (Ottoman, Habsburg, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Soviet), their pre-feudal predecessors and their nation-state successors, to consolidate control over territory and resources, to the advantage of one group over others. One result has been longstanding tension among populations, particularly Magyars and Romanians, and open hostility over the past century between the two modern nation states that have sought to encompass all of their children within their own political borders. As has occurred in so many other regions, vertical cleavages, such as class, have reinforced horizontal ones, such as ethnicity, with religious and cultural differences being constantly exploited as well to serve the interests of states and their ruling elite.

The twin prongs of Romanian-Magyar conflict in Transylvania have been incessant argument over historical rights to the territory and its resources, and state policies towards minority populations. From the Codex Triparticus in 1515 that proclaimed the three privileged nationalities (and excluded Romanians) to the early post-Communist anti-Magyar noisemaking of Iliescu and Funar, no political state governing Transylvania developed fair and consistent policies for dealing fairly with all of its constituent populations and promoting civic institutions that would deflect ethnic politics from playing out their ugly course. Ethnic nationalism has been the default key in the 20th Century for social mobilization and identity formation, struck again and again, because of the absence of compelling alternatives.

Given this history, it is astounding that the states of Hungary and Romania have actually taken substantive steps to create a new context for dealing with these problems. There is now nearly in place the first comprehensive treaty between the two states that addresses issues of minority rights and border guarantees. This was signed in Timisoara on September 16, 1996 and depends only upon the approval by the Magyar Parliament for full implementation*.

The document is far from perfect. There are certainly significant holes and ambiguities in the Treaty that will require concerted effort to repair. There are also large numbers of Romanians and Magyars, in and out of Transylvania, who opposed the treaty and will continue to demonstrate against it. There are also other peoples in the region, most notably the Roma, whose abuse and repression remains unaddressed politically and economically. Without social justice

and genuine citizenship available to all populations, a truly civil society has no chance of emerging in Romania. And as long as the economy of that country remains dysfunctional, any movement towards ethnic reconciliation will be fighting upstream.

Given all of these cautionary notes, we must recognize that at no point in history have the two nations of Romania and Hungary had at the diplomatic level anything close to this opportunity for fostering the growth of civil infrastructure that might lead to an easing of tensions over Transylvania. We may find it hard to believe that some of the leaders involved actually possess the wisdom to see the potentially positive consequences, but life is strange, and sometimes the most human among us-- even an Ion Iliescu-- actually stumbles in the right direction. Given the political past of Romania and Hungary, and the headlong charge in wrong directions that has for so long characterized the diplomacy of those two nations, we should not allow our professional cynicism to dismiss the significance of this event, and the opportunities it presents-- particularly now, with the election in November 1996 of Emil Constantinescu as Romanian President. The relatively high level of approval given the treaty by peoples of both nations, in concert with their political representatives, indicates the ground, though filled with stones, may be as fertile for proactive efforts at peace as it will ever be. As a Romanian friend told me: "We don't have real caviar. We probably never will. But we have cabbage; so let's make cabbage soup".

But what in that cabbage soup can serve as a glue to hold people together in ways that co-opt, overcome, outcompete the deeply rooted bonds of ethnic nationalism that have held Hungarians and Romanians in their grasp for so long? In Bogdan Denitch's words: "what is to bind complex multiethnic states and communities into polities that could be legitimate parameters within which to make political decisions?" (Denitch, 1994:80) To push the Balkan culinary metaphor: who will be the cooks, what will be the ingredients, who will supply them, and what will be the recipe?

The task, as in all of those other zones of contention in Europe, is monumental. And as Eugene Hammel mentioned in regards to the tragic case of the former Yugoslavia, the "underlying structural problems in the achievement of peace... could have been overcome only with the most extraordinary luck and diplomatic skill." Yet I am compelled to ask what might have happened in Yugoslavia had a comparable breakthrough occurred when there was in place an international and academic community actually poised to respond? U.S. and Western

European foreign policy-makers at least have their attention now drawn to the region. International NGOs, such as the International Crisis Group and IREX, are currently prepared to participate in the process of building that elusive civil society of Havel's moral imagination. And there are plenty of social scientists with the knowledge and expertise and local connections to help guide programs of tension reduction, if they possess the will and persistence-- and are given the opportunity.

I would like to offer here two very concrete, very local proposals regarding conflict prevention in Transylvania. Underlying them are some simple concepts fundamental to mediation work. One is that the focus must be on the future and not just on the past, on addressing current needs of individuals and social groups, and not only on determining historical truth. If thousands of academic reports, hundreds of academics, and a century of argumentation over theories of Daco-Roman continuity cannot resolve that historical question, it is unlikely we will have much greater success in the millenium to come. We should neither abandon the task of inching closer to an understanding of "what happened", nor allow academic convictions to seal off pathways towards healing the consequences of those events. I hear Elie Wiesel's cry that history cannot be forgotten, but for East Europeans (who have an overabundance of it) it must not be remembered too much.

Another fundamental principle is that the benefits accruing to those playing the roles of brokers must be made secondary to the primary goal. If we as anthropologists privileged to know what we know about these peoples and their cultures are driven by potential personal and professional gains, the "stuff" that we carry with us can contaminate the process. So we must do something that does not come easy to academics, be prepared to dissolve egos and competition in a common effort in which the anonymous contribution ultimately will pay more dividends than just another item added to the resume, so that the best possible programs for conflict prevention can emerge.

That being said, here are two of my ideas proposed for implementation in Transylvania. They may well not be original nor entirely practical, but they might at least provide a starting point for discussion. As I describe them, I hope you will do two things: first, critically evaluate their potential to actually work , and second, think about other alternatives that might work better, in Transylvania or elsewhere.

In the capital city of Transylvania, Cluj-Kolozsvar, a multitude of Non-Governmental Organizations have sprung up over the past seven years. As Bob Minnich, Steve Sampson, and others have so correctly pointed out, it has unfortunately been assumed by many in the West that any NGO-- as an expression of civic awareness-- is as good as any other in terms of fertilizing the soil for pluralist democracy (Sampson, 1995). Of course this is not the case. In the past, many voluntary organizations of Cluj, as those documented by Minnich in the Three Country Region, have been manipulated by secular and clerical authorities (sometimes in competition with each other) in order to further ethnic nationalist agendas. Indiscriminate support (however innocent) of such groups by outside agencies, may therefore actually promote interethnic tensions and strengthen ethnic divisions. Oftentimes exclusivist groups, supported by elites with superior authority and resources, have sufficient funds to develop active and growing memberships. The current hyper-nationalist mayor of Cluj-Kolozsvar, Gheorghe Funar, epitomizes how power structures can divert scarce resources to such organizations that perpetuate ethnic antagonisms. In contrast to such groups are those voluntary associations that transcend, because of the common interest that unites them, ethnic and religious divisions and political partisanship. One such ethnicity-transcending NGO is the group called DAO. Founded in 1990 and formally registered by the Cluj municipality as a civic association in July 1991, DAO's formal name is "The Association for Initiation into Traditional Oriental Spirituality". The process of organizing DAO began almost immediately after the revolution. The founding group was composed of nine individuals: three physicians, three professors, a student, a writer, and a translator-poet. Three were women, one Magyar, one Jew, one Frenchman. The original membership list consisted of seventy individuals: twelve physicians, six nurses, nine university professors, six lyceum professors, eight lyceum students, twenty-five university students, nine engineers, nine other professionals. Seven Magyars, one Jew, thirty-seven females.

In their original petition to the municipality, the founders of DAO stated that the association is guided by the following principles: "a) being organized on the basis of the free consent of its members; b) to propagate respect for human dignity and freedom; c) to stimulate fundamental research into the principles of traditional eastern spirituality; d) to militate for access to the authentic literature of this field and for the knowledge of traditional oriental spirituality through the offering of courses and symposia with the participation of specialists in the field." (I:4)

Since its founding, DAO has provided hundreds of Clujeni with a multitude of occasions for participating in activities that enlarge and expand their social identities-- thus weakening what Eugene Hammel identified as those "links between easily identifiable and traditionally marked social categories (like gender and ethnicity) and particular loci in the socioeconomic system." The group's activities have been viewed, not surprisingly, with suspicion and official concern. One member, a 39 year-old Magyar professor of Chemistry at a Cluj lyceum, recounted how some residents of the city have misunderstood the intent and character of DAO, dismissing it "in a hostile tone" as an exotic religious cult. She says "in our association each person embraces the belief that his or her conscience dictates... Our association is not a sect, is not a religious association...The fact that over the last three years I have had the opportunity to be among people with similar interests has made me have greater patience and to accept more easily my fellow creatures as they are." These are precisely the kinds of ideas and cultural ties that can buttress other kinds of social bonds (such as between neighbors, age mates) that have proven too tenuous in themselves elsewhere (such as in the former Yugoslavia) to resist pressures towards polarization in times of crisis. Perhaps most notably, DAO has managed to mobilize members of one of the most alienated segment of the Transylvanian population-- the youth-- and fill the vacuum in ideas, noted by Bogdan Denitch (1994:96), "about how society should be organized... and about how people should live their lives" .

Voluntary associations have long been the subject of study of social scientists, who have distinguished different types, identified their functions, and understand their internal dynamics. Certainly we could play a role in identifying and securing support for those, such as DAO, that have such a potentially important role to play in regions such as Transylvania. As both of our earlier speakers noted, it is clear that one of the most critical tasks in building civil society in Eastern Europe is how to couple economic development with the emergence of civil infrastructure. In even more specific terms: how can power and control of resources be shifted away from local exclusivist elite into the hands of new social networks whose members would not immediately benefit from exploitation of ethnic nationalist animosities. A key is to prevent this from being perceived as a direct attack or threat, and to craftily "co-opt" the leverage from those power elite. To offer a suggestion on how this might be done, let me shift the venue north to the provincial town of Sighetul Marmatiei/Maramarossziget.

Part of the post-1989 opening to the East has been seized by Western entrepreneurs who have seen opportunities for considerable short term profit. Much of this activity, and the formulation of relationships with East Europeans, has gone unregulated. In the private sector this is not surprising, but it is disconcerting that there has not been more careful scrutinizing of joint venture partners and business grant applicants for qualities other than entrepreneurial aptitude. In the same way that "any NGO is thought to be as good as any other", so too is there the mistaken idea that "any talented venture capitalist" is as good as any other. For one thing, the playing field is hardly level. Much of the domestic capital currently available for investment is in the hands of those few who benefited materially from the centralized economies of the Communist era, i.e. members of the nomenclatura . Not surprisingly, the latter typically assume the highest profiles in international business contacts. They or their family members are most likely to develop these contacts and gain access to grants for developing skills in accounting, marketing, computer use, and so on. Furthermore, such individuals are quite likely to remain closely linked to entrenched power structures that more often than not, can be counted on to play ethnic nationalist cards in a pinch.

The problem is how to develop new kinds of socio-economic networks that both contribute to economic development and ethnic reconciliation, without jarring extant power structures and ruling elite into destructive reaction and defense of their interests. One option is to encourage the development of multiethnic business ventures by the simple strategy of giving them special advantages in gaining access to loans, training, and information. In multiethnic Sighet, there currently exists a cut-throat atmosphere regarding business development-- and a deep resentment of the advantages monied former nomenclatura have. Although interest in business development is high, capital is insufficient to support all but a small number of business enterprises. Modest amounts of venture capital, training programs, and information could be made available to enterprises composed of people of mixed ethnic backgrounds (Magyar, Romanian, Ukrainean)-- tapping into the many mixed marriage partnerships that lack almost any other means of socioeconomic and community support. Entrepreneurs I know there tell me that the multiethnic criteria should not be based solely on the identity of the owners, but also on the makeup of their workers. This would shift some leverage away from the upper management echelon to the working base, and also be more likely to promote maximal diffusion of interethnic cooperation within the community.

A perfect example of such an enterprise is a small but flourishing photography studio in Sighet currently owned and operated by a Magyar couple, who have four employees-- two Magyar, two Romanian. The owners, hardworking and honorable people, are genuinely interested in building a sense of community citizenship that overarches ethnic bonds-- and are realistic enough to know that profit sharing is a crucial spur to that process. Identifying such enterprises and offering them modest financial support seems a simple but effective way of nourishing a healthy sense of civic identity.

The owners of the photographic studio tell me that the most difficult problem to overcome in such a program is the local administration and supervision of the enterprises. Any local person, however honorable, selected to serve as coordinator for such a program (with discretion to nominate candidates for grants), would be put in a nearly impossible situation, with immense pressures to support family and friends-- and therefore likely to reinforce ethnic lines and entrenched local power relations. One way to resolve this might be the building of "integrity networks" connecting individuals in neighboring cities and towns. These multiethnic networks would be made up of respected and trusted individuals living in different communities, who would serve as program administrators in communities other than their own. Such people tend to know each other, and the network could build itself, with minimal interference from the outside, and serve as a counterbalance to entrenched, exclusively ethnic power structures.

These are just two, admittedly tentative, proposals for action that might, if implemented broadly, contribute to the reduction of ethnic-based tensions in Transylvania. In devising them, I have drawn on knowledge gained over almost a quarter century of involvement in the region. Thousands of other social scientists, including many of you in attendance, possess comparable insights into the local conditions of dozens of other zones of potential conflict in Europe. What remains for us to do is to pool that knowledge, share local strategies, and refine the theoretical frameworks that illuminate specific processes.

*In December, 1996, the Hungarian Parliament ratified the Hungarian-Romanian bilateral treaty, and since that time a number of other agreements have been signed. Relations have continued to improve, led by diplomatic cooperation in efforts to incorporate both nations into NATO and the European Union. Since the decision in July to admit Hungary (along with Poland and the Czech Republic), but "delay" the admission of Romania, the Hungarian government has continued to champion Romania's eventual inclusion. A joint communique from

Prime Ministers Horn and Ciorbea issued in March, 1997 spoke of a "new chapter" in Hungarian-Romanian relations, a sentiment echoed in June by Romanian President Emil Constantinescu's depiction of "relations between the two countries" as a "model" for other Central Europeans to follow. Progress continues to be made in the area of educational reform and civil rights regarding minority populations in Transylvania (e.g. bilingual signs, minority language instruction, opening of provincial consulates) in spite of incidents provoked by extremists. One must wonder how this extraordinary movement towards interethnic reconciliation might have been further strengthened and consolidated had there been in place established mechanisms of harm reduction in local communities.

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