

Challenging Legitimacy or Legitimate Challenges: Minority Encounters with a State in Transition

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In my research I was interested in understanding how the dynamic between the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians (DAHR) — the political party representing the Hungarian minority in Romania — and the Romanian State was changing in the context of European enlargement. My work is based on three separate fieldtrips to Romania in 2000 and 2001, for a total of five months, to interview members of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians (DAHR). This research with the political elite in Romania provides insight into how politics intersects with culture.

The DAHR are a political party in Romania that emerged from the revolution of 1989 and the uncertain political climate that followed. In the early 1990s the Hungarians in Romania felt vulnerable and, in response, decided to organize themselves politically. Throughout the past fifteen years, the DAHR has sought recognition for the Hungarian community in Romania. Since the Hungarian minority is regionally concentrated in Transylvania, the Romanian State has looked upon them suspiciously and has even suggested that the Hungarians might be a threat to Romania's territorial integrity.

The reasons for perceiving the Hungarians as a threat are complex and linked to historical, cultural, and political factors. Transylvania is a region that has been part of both Hungary (pre-WWI) and Romania (post-WWI) and the Romanian State therefore feared that the Hungarians might have secessionist aspirations. In order to temper this perception of threat, the DAHR has strategically aligned their goals with those of the European Union and its support of regional integration. The underlying premise, on the part of the DAHR, is that inclusion within Europe's borders will loosen the political implications of being a minority within Romania. They believe that as part of Europe, the Hungarian minority will be allowed to exercise regional autonomy while simultaneously *not* being considered a threat.

As a political strategy, the DAHR situates their claims within the global processes already impacting state sovereignty in Romania in order to counter what they perceive as a centralized and nationalistic Romanian state. The DAHR's claims for autonomy within Romania are directed toward changing traditional bases of legitimacy based on ethnicity and are carefully framed as "democratic claims." By engaging international bodies, namely the European Union, Hungarian politicians have placed pressure on the State to devolve powers to the regions. This "recognition" of Hungarian claims by international bodies, such as the EU, has also increased the legitimacy of these claims within Romania — highlighting how global forces can be used to further democratic goals within states.

My research provides insight into how "cultural difference" is used as a strategic political discourse by minority groups and to what effect. Some questions that I ask include: Does the DAHR's approach actually enhance the self-determination of the Hungarian community in Romania or does it erode their autonomy by increasing ethnic and regional differences? How does the Romanian state respond to Hungarian demands for recognition? How has the legacy of empire in Romania influenced notions of

belonging to the European project? Does this legacy also influence Romania's reaction to Hungarian claims for autonomy? How are minorities represented within formal representations of the State, such as the constitution, and how does the DAHR seek to change them? Does the degree of freedom from the nation-state associated with the pressures of globalization involve relinquishing local identity for a pan-European notion of citizenship? Or by challenging the nation-state, does the possibility for European enlargement simply strengthen ethnic and regional identities?

This research is particularly timely as Romania's accession talks with Europe intensify in the run-up to a potential 2007 admittance date. Through a narrative approach, my research provides in-depth insight into how the possibilities generated by "Europe" have moderated a relationship between a territorially based national minority and a nation-state engaged in a transition to democracy.

Romania is a qualified success story in a region that has historically been impacted by violence, and my research contends that the DAHR has played a central role in consolidating democracy in Romania. By outlining the political implications of recognizing territorially based national minorities, my research suggests that when democratic legitimacy is evaluated against the acceptance of "just rule," minority rights and democratic consolidation are interrelated processes.

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