

Cultural and Educational Integration. National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary: Identity, Integration, and Diversity After the Regime Change

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the situation of national and ethnic minorities in Hungary from the regime change at the end of the 20th century to the present day. It presents the legal and institutional framework of minorities, including the model of cultural autonomy and the system of minority self-governments, which Hungarian regulation introduced in a pioneering manner in Europe. The paper analyzes the demographic characteristics of domestic minorities and the development of their identities, for example the fact that during the 2011 census significantly more people declared themselves to belong to a nationality than in previous censuses. The study also addresses the achievements and challenges of the social integration of minorities. It points out that despite the existence of legal frameworks and institutions, significant differences remain among the various groups: traditional nationalities (e.g. German, Slovak, Croatian, etc.) focus primarily on preserving their culture, while in the case of the largest community, the Roma, disadvantages experienced in education, employment, and living conditions constitute serious social problems. The study emphasizes the achievements of Hungarian minority policy, such as the broad provision of cultural rights and new forms of parliamentary representation, while also highlighting the further steps necessary to achieve full social inclusion, in line with domestic and international human rights norms.

Keywords

nationalities, ethnic minorities, cultural autonomy, social integration, Roma community.

1. Introduction

Throughout its history, the territory of Hungary has always been home to multiple nationalities; however, during the 20th century—especially after the Treaty of Trianon following the First World War—the population became more ethnically homogeneous (Romsics, 1998: 93–98, Kántor, 2014: 21–24). Population exchanges and expulsions after the Second World War, followed by assimilation during the decades of socialism, significantly reduced the

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proportion of traditional minorities (Kovács, 2001: 7–10, Halász, 2016: 31–34). Nevertheless, Hungary still displays considerable ethnic diversity today. According to the data of the 2011 census, 6.5% of the population (nearly 645,000 people) declared themselves to belong to one of the officially recognized nationalities. According to expert estimates, the actual minority population may be higher, possibly 8–10%, since many people have partially assimilated or did not declare their minority identity in previous censuses (Kemény and Janky, 2005: 223–225, Kántor, 2014: 97–99). The largest minority group is the Roma (Gypsy) community, which numbered more than 315,000 people according to the census, although some researchers estimate their actual number at around 700,000 or even higher (approximately 7% of the total population) (HCSO, 2013: 20–22, Kemény and Janky, 2005: 226–228). Other sizeable groups include the German nationality (nearly 186,000 people), as well as the Romanian, Slovak, and Croatian communities (in the tens of thousands) (HCSO, 2013: 23–26). The remaining historical nationalities—Bulgarian, Greek, Polish, Armenian, Rusyn, Serbian, Slovene, and Ukrainian—number only a few thousand, while the Jewish community is not officially classified as a nationality (as it is primarily defined on a religious basis) (Kovács, 2001: 18–20; Halász, 2016: 87). In recent decades, new non-ethnic groups have also appeared: since the regime change, the number of residents of foreign origin living in Hungary has increased significantly (140,000 in 2011 and already 226,000 by 2023), including Chinese, Arab, and African communities; however, legally they do not fall under the official minority category (HCSO, 2023; Kántor, 2014: 101–102). Following the regime change, the Hungarian state has paid special attention to ensuring the rights of national and ethnic minorities and to preserving their culture. In 1993, the National Assembly adopted the Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities, which recognized a broad range of collective minority rights and was considered one of the most comprehensive minority protection laws in international comparison (Halász, 2016: 45–48). The preamble of the Act emphasized that preserving the language and culture of minorities is not only their fundamental right but also an interest of the Hungarian nation and the entire state community. As one of the most important instruments for the enforcement of these rights, the Act designated cultural autonomy and the system of minority self-governments (Dobos, 2011: 19–21). The new Fundamental Law adopted in 2011 and the related nationality legislation further strengthened the status of minorities: Article XXIX of the Fundamental Law states that “every Hungarian citizen has the right to freely assume and preserve his or her national identity,” and the new terminology uniformly refers to the groups previously called national or ethnic minorities as “nationalities” (Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011, Act CLXXIX of 2011). Currently, 13 nationalities recognized by law live in the country, all of which have been

established in Hungary for more than a century; their members constitute the so-called historical minorities (Halász, 2016: 62–64).

2. Methodology

Our study is qualitative in nature and applies a descriptive–analytical approach (Creswell, 2014: 4-6). It primarily relies on publicly available official sources, including legislation, governmental and international organizational documents, as well as statistical data. In addition, we reviewed key academic works and research reports related to the topic (Halász, 2016: 15-18, Kovács, 2001: 6-9). Within the framework of the analysis, comparative and historical perspectives are also employed: we present the development of Hungarian minority policy after the regime change and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of current practice. Accordingly, the methodology is based on document analysis and a synthesis of the relevant scholarly literature, with particular attention to the domestic implementation of international norms and recommendations (Bowen, 2009: 27-29, OSCE HCNM, 2010: 7-10). The claims are supported by statistical data and credible reports, and for the sake of transparency, precise sources are indicated in every case.

3. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on Hungarian minority protection after the regime change emphasizes that the 1993 Minority Act was exemplary in international comparison. According to an early report by Human Rights Watch, the legislation “on paper provides the most far-reaching guarantees of minority rights in Europe” (Human Rights Watch, 1995: 1-2). The Act introduced a distinctive model of cultural autonomy for minorities, which has been examined by numerous analysts (Kovács, 2001: 12-15). Initially, international experts welcomed this broad recognition of collective rights and the establishment of minority self-governments as a form of minority self-determination (Council of Europe, 1999: 6-8, OSCE, 2000: 3-5). Over time, however, critical voices also emerged, pointing to shortcomings in practical implementation. For example, some studies indicate that several progressive provisions of the law were not fully realized in the case of the Roma community during the 1990s: certain local authorities failed to comply with their statutory obligations, and in some instances even hindered the enforcement of minority rights (Kállai, 2007: 74-77, Human Rights Watch, 1995: 9–11).

A significant portion of the literature addressing the situation of minorities in Hungary focuses on the Roma population, as they constitute the largest and socially most disadvantaged group (Kemény and Janky, 2005: 222-225 Ladányi and Szelényi, 2006: 39-42). Numerous sociological

and human rights studies have documented discrimination against Roma, segregation, and the occasionally inadequate responses of authorities to Roma-related problems in the 1990s and 2000s (Amnesty International, 2010: 17-21, Kállai, 2007: 81-85). In addition, comparative analyses have been conducted concerning Hungarian minority policy and other Central European models. These highlight that Hungary chose a distinctive path by creating non-territorial autonomy, in contrast, for example, to Romania or Slovakia, where greater emphasis has been placed on parliamentary representation of minorities or their territorial distribution (Kymlicka, 2007: 143-147, Kántor, 2014: 110-113).

The functioning of the cultural autonomy model (the system of minority self-governments) has been evaluated in many analyses over recent decades. Balázs Dobos and other researchers have pointed out that although the system provides an institutional framework for minority communities to preserve their identity, their actual influence over decisions affecting them has remained limited - particularly in the case of Roma communities, whose self-governments, due to a lack of resources and competences, have been only marginally able to contribute meaningfully to shaping social inclusion programs (Dobos, 2011: 156-158).

One important finding of research on the demographic processes of minorities is that by the beginning of the 21st century, the number of people identifying themselves as belonging to a minority had increased. According to analyses by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, between 2001 and 2011 the number of individuals who felt affiliation with one of the 13 minorities recognized by law increased by one and a half times (Hungarian Central Statistical Office [HCSO], 2013: 15-18). Particularly strong growth was observed in responses to questions on ethnic affiliation (+77%), while based on family language use, 38% more respondents indicated minority affiliation in 2011 compared to a decade earlier (HCSO, 2013: 34-36). This trend can partly be attributed to changes in survey methodology—specifically, the free declaration of self-identity and the acceptance of multiple identities—and partly to the strengthening identity consciousness and self-organization of minority communities over time (Kántor, 2014: 102-105, Tóth and Vékás, 2014: 368-372).

The phenomenon was analyzed in detail by Ágnes Tóth and János Vékás (2014), who pointed out that the largest proportional increases occurred among the Romanian and Roma nationalities, while some smaller groups (e.g. Slovene, Greek) showed a decline in census data. They emphasize that figures based on self-declaration do not necessarily reflect actual ethnic proportions, but rather the identity that individuals are willing to assume within a given political and social context (Tóth and Vékás, 2014: 385-388). Overall, the literature suggests that Hungary established stable

legal foundations for minorities around the turn of the millennium, and that the expression of minority identity has gradually become normalized; nevertheless, due to persistent social tensions and inequalities in everyday life, the topic remains a relevant field of research today (Halász, 2016: 187-190; Kántor, 2014: 231-233).

4. Theoretical Framework

The concept of national and ethnic minorities is defined through a variety of approaches; however, in Hungary the legal framework precisely delineates which groups fall into this category (Kymlicka, 2007: 143-147). Pursuant to Article XXIX of the Fundamental Law and Act CLXXIX of 2011 on the Rights of Nationalities, nationalities are communities that have been present on the territory of the country for centuries, possess their own language, culture, and traditions, and have preserved a sense of collective identity (Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011, Art. XXIX, Act CLXXIX of 2011: 1-2). The Act officially recognizes 13 such nationalities (Bulgarian, Greek, Croatian, Polish, German, Armenian, Roma/Gypsy, Romanian, Rusyn, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, and Ukrainian) and stipulates that members of these groups - provided they are Hungarian citizens - may exercise collective rights (Halász, 2016: 62-64; Kántor, 2014: 60-62). It is important to emphasize that Hungarian regulation links the exercise of minority rights to citizenship; thus, only persons holding Hungarian citizenship may belong to a nationality recognized by law (Kovács, 2001: 18-20). Through this approach, the legislator sought to protect historical communities; at the same time, this also means that newly immigrated groups (e.g. Chinese, Arab, African communities) and other groups wishing to define themselves as minorities (such as the Jewish community in Hungary) do not benefit from the collective rights provided by the nationality law, unless they become officially recognized as a nationality through a specific recognition procedure requiring 1,000 supporting signatures (Kántor, 2014: 101-102). (It should be noted that leaders of the Jewish community explicitly oppose acquiring nationality status, defining their identity primarily in religious terms) (Kovács, 2001: 18-20).

In international comparison, the Hungarian approach corresponds to generally accepted criteria of national minorities (shared cultural-linguistic characteristics, a distinct identity differentiable from the majority society, and long-term presence) (Council of Europe, 1995, Arts. 3-5, OSCE HCNM, 2010: 7-10). Hungary is a party to the most important international minority protection conventions and has signed and ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1995). The provisions of the Fundamental Law and the nationality legislation essentially transpose the principles of the Framework Convention

into domestic law (Halász, 2016: 85-88). Article XXIX (1) of the Fundamental Law declares the right to the free choice and preservation of identity, while the cardinal nationality law elaborates rights related to language use, culture, education, and self-government. The lawmakers guaranteed individual rights—such as the free use of one’s mother tongue in private life and, under certain conditions, in official procedures, as well as rights to minority education and name usage—while also recognizing collective rights that serve the preservation of collective identity (Kántor, 2014: 72-75). One such collective right is cultural autonomy, the essence of which lies in enabling nationality communities to independently maintain institutions (schools, cultural institutions, media), establish associations and self-governments, and receive state support for the preservation of their cultural heritage (Dobos, 2011: 19-23). Cultural autonomy is not territorial in nature (unlike territorial autonomies), but follows the principle of personal autonomy—meaning that minority rights apply to members of the community throughout the country, regardless of where they live (Kymlicka, 2007: 129-131).

From the perspective of the theoretical framework, the issue of political participation and representation is also crucial. According to classical democratic theory, the protection of minority interests is most effective when these groups have institutionalized influence over public affairs (Lijphart, 1999: 25-27, Kymlicka, 2007: 129-131). The Hungarian model offers two main mechanisms for this purpose: minority (nationality) self-governments and parliamentary representation (Halász, 2016: 160-165). Minority self-governments are discussed in detail in the following chapter; here it is sufficient to note that they function as forums of self-organization and instruments of cultural interest representation, providing communities with a certain degree of self-administration (Dobos, 2011: 73-75). Parliamentary presence is realized in such a way that, from the 2014 elections onward, nationalities may establish national lists; if they obtain a sufficient number of votes, they may—based on the principle of positive discrimination—secure a preferential mandate and send a representative to the National Assembly, or, failing this, delegate a nationality spokesperson. This arrangement ensures that minority interests can also appear in the legislature, although spokespersons do not possess voting rights (Kántor, 2014: 214-216). Currently, the German nationality has a representative with a preferential mandate in Parliament (since 2014), while the other 12 nationalities are represented by spokespersons (Hungarian National Assembly, 2023). The system of nationality representatives and spokespersons is novel in Europe and serves as a form of institutional guarantee that direct information and opinions on minority issues reach decision-makers (Halász, 2016: 168-170).

The theoretical foundations of Hungarian minority protection rest on the recognition of collective rights and the idea of cultural autonomy, in line with—and in some respects extending beyond—international norms (Halász, 2016: 187-190). The emphasis is placed on preserving minority identities (national self-identification, mother tongue, protection of cultural values) and on autonomy compatible with social integration (Council of Europe, 1995, Arts. 5–6, Kántor, 2014: 220-223).

Legal and Institutional Framework of Nationalities in Hungary

Hungary's constitutional and legal environment firmly enshrines the rights of nationalities and provides an institutional system for the enforcement of these rights. The most important pillars are the nationality-related provisions of the Fundamental Law, Act CLXXIX of 2011 on the Rights of Nationalities, and the system of minority self-governments (Halász, 2016: 55-58).

Constitutional foundations: The National Avowal of the Fundamental Law recognizes the nationalities living together with Hungarians as communities forming part of the country and emphasizes that their language and culture enjoy protection (Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011, National Avowal). Article XXIX - as already noted - guarantees the free assumption and preservation of identity and declares that Hungary ensures the right of nationalities to community self-government (self-administration) (Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011, Art. XXIX). These principles are elaborated in the nationality law.

Main provisions of the nationality law: The 2011 nationality law comprehensively regulates minority rights. It introduced unified terminology, replacing the previously separate concepts of national and ethnic minorities by referring to all groups as nationalities (Halász, 2016: 59-61). The law lists the 13 recognized nationalities and stipulates that any other group may obtain nationality status only if it meets the law's strict criteria (at least 100 years of historical presence, a distinct culture and language, and either 10,000 persons or 1% of the population—though at least 1,500 persons—who declare affiliation, with recognition initiated by a civil organization before the National Assembly) (Kántor, 2014: 64-66). The law defines the collective rights of nationalities across many areas of life, including:

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- **Language use rights:** Nationalities may use their mother tongue in both private and public life. In certain municipalities - where a significant proportion of the population belongs to a nationality - they have the right to conduct affairs with local authorities in their mother tongue, display bilingual place-name signs and inscriptions, and request officials who speak their language. The law and its implementing regulations also allow for bilingual forms and civil registers in affected municipalities at the request of the local nationality self-government (Halász, 2016: 92-96). These rights constitute important symbolic and practical guarantees of linguistic rights, although their actual implementation often depends on the initiative of communities and the cooperation of authorities (Council of Europe, 2016: 18-20).

- **Educational and cultural rights:** Every nationality has the right to learn and teach its mother tongue. The state may maintain nationality schools (bilingual or mother-tongue instruction institutions) or transfer their maintenance to nationality self-governments. In many locations, nationality kindergartens and schools operate - such as German-, Slovak-, or Romanian-language institutions - and there is also the possibility of nationality language-teaching schools, where the minority language and culture are taught alongside majority education (Kántor, 2014: 78-82). The law declares the principle of cultural autonomy: nationalities have the right to establish and operate their own cultural institutions (theatres, museums, folk houses, cultural centers, etc.) and to receive state support for this purpose (Dobos, 2011: 21-24). Accordingly, Hungary today has nationality theatres, museums, as well as national nationality libraries and media centers (Halász, 2016: 103-106).

- **Media and publicity:** Public service media are legally obliged to provide airtime for nationality-language programming. National nationality self-governments may determine the proportion and timing of mother-tongue or nationality-related broadcasts on radio and television (Act CLXXIX of 2011, §§ 21-23). The law guarantees regular programming slots for all 13 nationalities (Council of Europe, 2016: 21-22). In addition, nationality press outlets receive support; some national publications have appeared for decades (Kántor, 2014: 83-85).

• **Freedom of association and identity preservation:** Nationalities have the right to establish associations, civil organizations, and tradition-preserving groups. Numerous nationality cultural associations, dance groups, and choirs operate throughout the country, enjoying legal protection and financial support through grant schemes (Halász, 2016: 107–109). To coordinate and represent the exercise of these rights, the Hungarian system established nationality self-governments as the institutional custodians of cultural autonomy (Dobos, 2011: 25–27).

• **System of nationality self-governments:** Since 1993, nationalities have been able to establish their own self-governments through local and national elections. The system is multi-tiered:

• **Local (municipal) nationality self-government:** May be established in any municipality where at least 25 persons declared affiliation with the given nationality in the most recent census. Members are elected in separate elections by registered nationality voters. Local nationality self-governments cooperate with municipal authorities in performing cultural and educational tasks (Act CLXXIX of 2011: 56–61).

• **Territorial (county-level) nationality self-government:** May be established if at least ten municipalities in the given county (or the capital) have functioning local nationality self-governments. The territorial level performs coordination and interest-representation functions (Dobos, 2011: 68–70).

• **National nationality self-government:** Each recognized nationality is entitled to establish a national self-government, whose members are elected through an electoral (delegate) system by local representatives. The national self-government represents the highest level of nationality representation. Its tasks include maintaining institutions of national importance, consulting with the government on nationality matters, and nominating the parliamentary nationality spokesperson. Currently, all 13 nationalities have national self-governments; 12 of these cooperate within a joint federation (Kántor, 2014: 118–121).

Nationality self-governments have a special legal status: they are not general-purpose administrative bodies but public-law entities endowed with specific rights (Halász, 2016: 118–121). They do not levy taxes or perform classical administrative functions; however, they possess co-decision, consent, or consultative rights in all matters affecting the preservation of the given nationality's identity (Dobos, 2011: 73–75). For example, the reorganization or closure of a nationality school requires the consent of the relevant nationality self-government (Halász, 2016: 132). Local governments are obliged to cooperate with municipal nationality self-governments and ensure their operating conditions (office space, support). National

nationality self-governments maintain regular contact with the government: the National Assembly has a Committee on Nationalities, in which, alongside nationality spokespersons, the presidents of national nationality self-governments participate with consultative rights (Halász, 2016: 165–168). This ensures continuous dialogue between the legislature and nationality representatives (Kántor, 2014: 214).

The financing of minority self-governments is guaranteed by the state budget. Each year, a separate allocation is provided for the operation and tasks of nationality self-governments (Halász, 2016: 176). The funding system has expanded in recent years: between 2014 and 2018, annual state support increased significantly, and institutional funding was doubled for each nationality. However, the distribution of funding remains a subject of debate, as it is partly based on the maintenance of institutions rather than on population size, which paradoxically disadvantages the largest Roma community (having fewer institutions and thus receiving less support despite their large numbers) (Dobos, 2011: 156–158). This problem has been highlighted by nationality leaders and international observers alike, who have called for a fairer allocation formula to strengthen Roma self-governments (Council of Europe, 2016: 35–36).

Overall, Hungary's minority legal framework is forward-looking even by European standards. The nationality law provides a broad range of cultural autonomy rights, and the system of nationality self-governments offers an institutionalized form for exercising collective rights (Halász, 2016: 187–190, Kántor, 2014: 220–223). Over recent decades, many elements of the system have proven viable: there are successful examples of nationality self-governments taking over the maintenance of schools, organizing vibrant cultural life, and effectively representing community interests at local or national forums (Dobos, 2011: 201–205). At the same time, the system is not free of challenges—particularly resource constraints, shortages of qualified professionals (e.g. nationality teachers), and the sometimes paternalistic attitude of politics, which can hinder the work of self-governments.

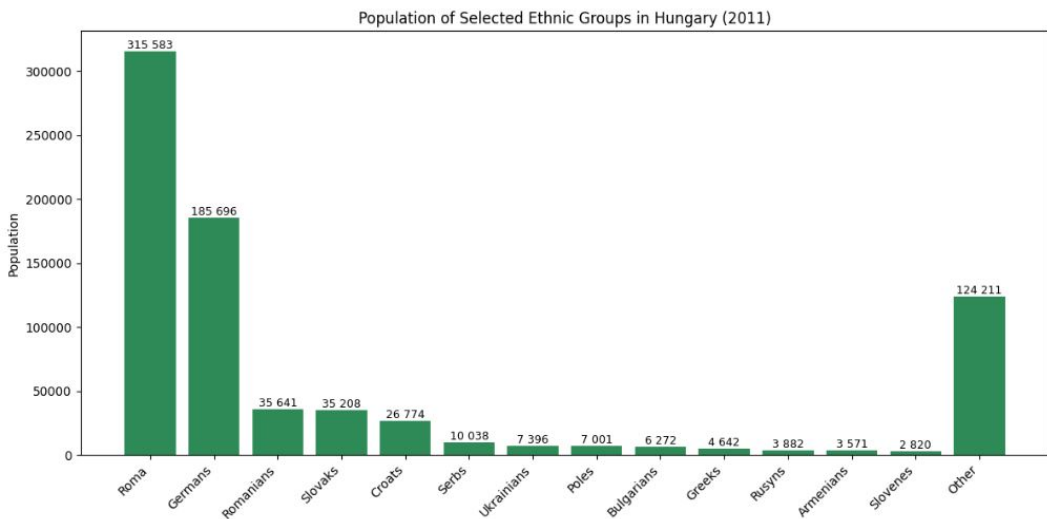
5. Demographic Conditions and Identity

Population data and distribution: The most recent census, conducted in 2011, provided a detailed picture of the nationalities living in Hungary. According to official data, 6.5% of the total population—644,524 people—declared themselves to belong to a recognized nationality (Hungarian Central Statistical Office [HCSO], 2013: 16–18). Among respondents, the Roma (Gypsy) community constituted the largest group, with more than 315,000 people, followed by Germans with approximately 186,000 (HCSO, 2013: 20–23). The population size of the other nationalities is significantly lower: the

Romanian and Slovak communities each number around 35,000, Croatians about 26,700, Serbs around 10,000, while the Ukrainian, Polish, Bulgarian, Greek, Rusyn, Armenian, and Slovene communities are each in the range of only a few thousand (HCSO, 2013: 24–30).

It should be noted that the census was based on voluntary self-identification and allowed the indication of multiple (dual) identities—many respondents chose to declare both Hungarian and nationality affiliation. As a result, the statistically recorded number of persons belonging to minorities increased compared to previous censuses (Tóth and Vékás, 2014: 368–371, HCSO, 2013: 15).

Figure 1: *The population size of individual ethnic groups in Hungary according to the 2011 census, based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH)*



(Source: The chart was prepared by the author on January 10, 2026)

The chart shows the population size of the largest nationality communities. It clearly illustrates that the Roma community stands out (315,000 people), Germans occupy second place with nearly 186,000, while the remaining nationalities are considerably smaller: Romanian and Slovak communities around 35,000, Croatians around 26,000, and the rest (Serbian, Ukrainian, Polish, Bulgarian, Greek, Rusyn, Armenian, Slovene) numbering only a few thousand (HCSO, 2013: 20–30). The category “other, not recognized” (124,000 people) includes, for example, Jewish, Russian, Chinese, Arab, and other communities in Hungary that do not possess official nationality status (HCSO, 2013: 31, Kántor, 2014: 97).

These data highlight that the Roma minority is by far the largest ethnic minority in Hungary. The actual proportion of the Roma population is widely debated: while the census identified it as 3.2%, some sociological surveys

estimate their share at around 7–8% (Kemény and Janky, 2005: 223–225; Ladányi and Szelényi, 2006: 41–43). This discrepancy is partly due to the fact that a significant portion of Roma are Hungarian-speaking (Roma in Hungary speak Hungarian as their primary language, with only some - mainly older generations - using Romani or Beás), and many refrain from declaring Roma identity in official contexts out of fear of discrimination (Kemény, Janky and Lengyel, 2004: 56–59; Tóth and Vékás, 2014: 372). At the same time, recent decades have witnessed a strengthening of Roma identity, with increasing numbers—especially among younger generations—openly and proudly embracing their background (Kállai, 2007: 88–90).

The non-Roma nationalities (Germans, Slovaks, Romanians, Croatians, etc.) experienced a sharp decline in numbers during the second half of the 20th century due to assimilation; however, following the regime change an “identity renaissance” has been observed (Kántor, 2014: 102–105). In the 1990s many people became aware of their family roots and began to revive their nationality culture. For example, in the 2011 census the number of people declaring German nationality was three times higher than in 1990, as many previously assimilated or concealing individuals chose to acknowledge their identity (HCSO, 2013: 22; Tóth and Vékás, 2014: 375). Similar trends can be observed among the Romanian and Serbian communities (Kántor, 2014: 108). At the same time, some small communities—particularly where demographic renewal is weak—have shown decline; for instance, census data for the Slovene and Greek minorities indicated decreasing trends compared to 2001 (HCSO, 2013: 28–29).

Language loss poses a serious challenge for almost all nationalities: among younger generations, many no longer speak their ancestors’ language fluently and communicate primarily in Hungarian. The extent of assimilation is illustrated by the fact that in 2011 only about 13% of those with nationality affiliation indicated the minority language as their mother tongue (HCSO, 2013: 34–36). Most—especially Roma—are primarily Hungarian-speaking, with their connection to the minority expressed mainly through cultural identity (Kemény and Janky, 2005: 226–228).

Territorial distribution and communities: The vast majority of nationalities in Hungary live in dispersed settlement patterns, meaning there are no contiguous territories predominantly inhabited by a single nationality (unlike in Slovakia or Romania, where larger regional minority blocks exist) (Kántor, 2014: 110–112; Halász, 2016: 92–95). There are a few exceptions at the local level: among Serbs, Lórév is the only village where they form a majority (Halász, 2016: 94); Slovenes live in a more compact community in the western border region known as the Vendvidék (around Szentgotthárd) (Kántor, 2014: 113–114); Croatians form notable groups in

some southwestern villages (e.g. in the Ormánság) (Halász, 2016: 96); and Romanians are traditionally present mainly along the eastern border (in Békés and Hajdú-Bihar counties) (HCSO, 2013: 26–27). Germans (Swabians) and Slovaks are found across many parts of the country - well-known examples include Swabian villages in Baranya, Tolna, and Pest counties, as well as Slovak villages in the Pilis region and Békés county - but they, too, generally live as minorities within their settlements (Kántor, 2014: 115–118).

The Roma population, relative to its size, is likewise not concentrated in a single contiguous area, although its proportion is higher in poorer regions of northeastern Hungary and southern Transdanubia, where in some villages Roma may even form a majority (Kemény and Janky, 2005: 229–231, Ladányi and Szelényi, 2006: 57–60). Nationally, approximately 60–70% of Roma live in villages, often in segregated streets or settlements, reflecting the geographical dimension of social exclusion (Kemény, Janky and Lengyel, 2004: 71–74; Kállai, 2007: 101–103).

Identity and assimilation: Education and family socialization play a decisive role in preserving nationality identity (Kántor, 2014: 123–125). Where nationality education has been successfully maintained (e.g. German, Slovak, Croatian schools), linguistic and cultural identity tends to be stronger (Halász, 2016: 141–143). At the same time, mixed marriages and urbanization significantly accelerate assimilation (Tóth and Vékás, 2014: 378–380). In large cities - especially Budapest - all nationalities are present, but primarily in the form of cultural associations: nationality clubs, dance houses, and study groups in the capital play an important role in sustaining identity within a predominantly Hungarian-speaking environment (Kántor, 2014: 128–130).

The Jewish community deserves special mention: although it is not officially recognized as a nationality, Budapest has a substantial Jewish population whose identity is organized on religious and cultural grounds (Kovács, 2001: 18–20). They, too, form part of Hungary's diversity, with their own institutional system (schools, cultural centers), but they do not fall under the scope of the nationality law (Halász, 2016: 88).

In demographic terms, the proportion of minorities in Hungary is relatively small, yet their social and cultural significance is considerably greater (Kántor, 2014: 131). The historical nationalities constitute an integral part of the country's cultural heritage, and their traditions enrich national culture (one may think of Swabian folk music, Slovak and Palóc traditions, or Serbian Orthodox monuments) (Halász, 2016: 201–203). The Roma community represents one of the largest Roma populations in Europe, and its integration is not only a domestic issue but also a challenge on a

European scale (Council of Europe, 2016: 11–13). In the following section, issues of social integration will be discussed in greater detail, with particular attention to Roma-related challenges and minority policy measures.

6. Social Integration and Challenges

In the field of social integration of minorities in Hungary, a mixed picture emerges: on the one hand, there are well-functioning practices and positive examples, while on the other hand, in certain areas—especially in the case of the Roma population—significant disadvantages and tensions persist (Kántor, 2014: 218–223; Council of Europe, 2016: 7–9). This chapter first reviews the general situation and the integration experiences of nationality communities, and then addresses the challenges of the Roma minority in a separate subsection, as these issues form a deeper and more complex problem area.

In general, it can be stated that the integration of traditional nationality communities (Germans, Slovaks, Croatians, Romanians, etc.) into Hungarian society has mostly taken place peacefully and without major conflict (Halász, 2016: 185–188). Members of these groups are typically bilingual and possess a dual identity: they are at the same time loyal Hungarian citizens and proud of their nationality heritage (Kántor, 2014: 224–226). In most cases, serious discrimination does not arise in everyday life. According to international and domestic surveys, a large part of the Hungarian population views the “historical nationalities” positively and tends to regard their presence as a form of cultural enrichment (Council of Europe, 2016: 12–13). Cooperation between minority self-governments and majority local governments is typically constructive; in many settlements they jointly organize cultural festivals and commemorations (Halász, 2016: 190–192).

At the same time, the integration of these communities is influenced by assimilation and demographic decline. Over recent decades, state policy has primarily focused on guaranteeing cultural rights, while economic integration has received comparatively less attention (Kántor, 2014: 229–231; Council of Europe, 2016: 14).

The Situation of the Roma Minority and Integration Challenges

The integration of the Roma population in Hungary is one of the most complex and pressing social problems. Roma communities lag behind the majority population in education, employment, housing, health, and social perception, creating a cumulative and self-reinforcing disadvantage (Kemény & Janky, 2005: 232–235; Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006: 39–44). Numerous government strategies have been launched to address these issues, with

mixed effectiveness (Government of Hungary, 2011: 7-9; European Commission, 2020: 10-12).

Education and segregation: Roma pupils are overrepresented in disadvantaged and segregated schools. In *Horváth and Kiss v. Hungary*, the European Court of Human Rights established that Roma children were systematically misclassified as having mild intellectual disabilities, constituting discrimination (ECtHR, 2013, §§ 102-108). Although segregation is prohibited by law and policy measures were introduced, de facto segregation persists due to residential patterns and free school choice (Council of Europe, 2016: 24-26). Educational attainment has improved slowly, but early school leaving remains widespread, especially after the compulsory schooling age was lowered to 16 (European Commission, 2020: 17-19).

Employment and poverty: Roma employment rates remain substantially below the national average. Despite improvements during the 2010s, the employment gap remains around 20-25 percentage points (European Commission, 2020: 21-23). Poverty rates are extremely high: 75-80% of Roma in Hungary live below the poverty threshold or experience severe material deprivation (FRA, 2016: 32-35). Public employment schemes provided short-term income but rarely resulted in sustainable labor market integration (Council of Europe, 2016: 27-28).

Discrimination and prejudice: Discrimination remains a major barrier to Roma integration. EU-wide surveys confirm widespread discrimination in employment, housing, and access to services (FRA, 2016: 39-41). The Council of Europe has expressed concern about persistent anti-Roma stereotypes and stigmatizing public discourse, warning that such rhetoric undermines trust and social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2016: 15-16).

Housing and health conditions: A significant share of Roma live in segregated settlements with substandard housing and inadequate infrastructure. These conditions contribute to poorer health outcomes and lower life expectancy (FRA, 2016: 44-47). Despite EU-supported housing and settlement programs, progress remains limited and structural disadvantages persist (European Commission, 2020: 26-27).

Integration policy and programs: Over the past decade, the Hungarian government has sought to apply an integrated approach to Roma inclusion. The already mentioned National Social Inclusion Strategy (2011-2020) provided the overarching framework, encouraged by the EU Roma Framework Strategy (Government of Hungary, 2011: 5-8; European Commission, 2011). Its implementation was supported by a multi-level governance mechanism: the Roma Coordination Council - bringing together

Roma self-government and civil organizations - was established to monitor progress, and an Inter-Ministerial Committee for Social Inclusion coordinates Roma-related issues across ministries (Government of Hungary, 2011: 12–15). From 2017 onward, nine thematic working groups (education, employment, health care, etc.) were created to develop proposals (European Commission, 2020: 13–14). Numerous concrete programs have been implemented: scholarships for Roma students (Útravaló program), labor market training (ROMA ERNYŐ projects), and community development initiatives (e.g. Sure Start Children's Houses for early childhood development) (European Commission, 2020: 18–20). In 2011, the government also concluded a cooperation agreement with the National Roma Self-Government (Government of Hungary, 2011: 16).

Despite these efforts, experts point out that the institutional system is overly bureaucratic, fragmented, and not always effective at the local level (European Commission, 2020: 29–31; Council of Europe, 2020: 9–11). The National Roma Self-Government itself has not always proven effective in representing Roma interests, due to internal political divisions and limited competences (Council of Europe, 2020: 21–22). As noted earlier, Roma self-governments primarily focus on cultural tasks and lack direct influence over social or economic development decisions (Halász, 2016: 176–178). Consequently, the role of civil society remains crucial: numerous Roma civil networks monitor integration programs and draw attention to shortcomings when necessary (European Commission, 2020: 32).

Positive developments: Alongside the challenges, it is important to highlight some achievements. In recent years, the proportion of Roma intellectuals has increased; today there are many Roma teachers, doctors, engineers, as well as police officers and soldiers—previously a rarity (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016: 52–54). The number of Roma students in higher education is slowly rising, partly due to Roma colleges for advanced studies and mentoring programs (European Commission, 2020: 24–25). Successful Roma figures (artists, athletes) have also appeared in public discourse, which may help reduce stereotypes (FRA, 2016: 55). Integration models such as the Tanoda programs (after-school support for disadvantaged children) have proven in many settlements that personalized attention can improve Roma students' performance and chances of further education (European Commission, 2020: 19–20). Within the police, the establishment of a Roma liaison network (involving Roma police officers) has helped prevent some conflicts and strengthen community policing (Council of Europe, 2020: 18).

In international comparison, Hungary actively participates in EU Roma integration initiatives and regularly reports on progress (European Commission, 2020: 6–7). At the same time, international monitoring bodies

(e.g. the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the Council of Europe) continue to urge lasting structural changes. In its most recent (fifth) report, the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention noted that although an extensive institutional system exists to promote Roma integration, its effectiveness is questionable: the large number of programs and bodies can be opaque, insufficiently coordinated, and inadequately measurable (Council of Europe, 2020: 10–12). The report emphasized that Roma self-governments should be more strongly involved in social policy decision-making, as they currently lack direct influence precisely in the most critical areas (employment creation, housing) (Council of Europe, 2020: 22–23).

Roma integration in Hungary is a long-term, intergenerational process. While there are encouraging signs (improving employment indicators, stronger civil society presence, the reduction of certain segregation practices), substantial efforts are still required (European Commission, 2020: 33–34). Without the social inclusion of the Roma community, Hungarian society as a whole cannot develop harmoniously; therefore, this remains a strategically important field for the future (Council of Europe, 2020: 25).

7. Conclusions

The situation of national and ethnic minorities in Hungary has undergone significant changes over the past three decades. In terms of legal and institutional frameworks, the country has developed an exemplary system: the nationality law and related measures guarantee a broad range of collective minority rights, cultural autonomy, and special forms of political interest representation (Halász, 2016: 185–190, Kántor, 2014: 219–223). The conditions for preserving the mother tongues and cultures of the 13 recognized nationalities are in place -nationality schools, media outlets, and self-governments exist, all of which contribute to ensuring that these communities' identities endure as integral parts of the Hungarian nation (Halász, 2016: 140–145). Coexistence between minorities and the majority population has been largely peaceful and constructive over recent decades, without serious conflicts (Council of Europe, 2016: 7–9). This is also due to the fact that Hungarian society has accepted and integrated these communities: today they are natural components of the country's diverse cultural fabric (Kántor, 2014: 224–226).

At the same time, the study has shown that formally existing rights and institutions do not always resolve practical problems. The sustainability and real influence of the system of minority self-governments present a mixed picture—while for some nationalities (such as Germans or Croatians) self-governments successfully operate schools and cultural institutions, in

the case of the largest community, the Roma, self-governments are unable to make a substantial contribution to addressing severe social problems (Halász, 2016: 176–178, Council of Europe, 2020: 21–23). This raises structural questions in minority policy: there may be a need for a carefully considered expansion of competences and resources where needs are greatest (for example, in Roma social inclusion), potentially even in the form of positive discrimination (Kántor, 2014: 230–232).

Demographic trends indicate that the proportion of minorities within society is slowly increasing or stabilizing, thanks to the growing prevalence of open identity declaration (Tóth and Vékás, 2014: 385–388). This is a positive development insofar as the more open embrace of diversity enriches the nation and mitigates the effects of forced assimilation experienced in the past (Halász, 2016: 201–203). The education and upbringing of younger generations are crucial, as an integrated and tolerant outlook can only be strengthened in this way. Continuous sensitization of the majority society is also necessary - for example, the values of nationalities living in Hungary should be incorporated into educational curricula so that all students can learn to recognize and appreciate them (Council of Europe, 2016: 16–17). Steps have been taken in this direction, but according to experts, further efforts are still needed (European Commission, 2020: 33–34).

The issue of Roma integration is particularly critical and cannot be postponed. Improving the situation of Roma is not only a human rights obligation but also an economic and social interest—it is increasingly recognized that the successful education and employment of Roma youth can alleviate labor shortages in certain sectors and enhance economic performance (European Commission, 2020: 5–6; FRA, 2016: 52–55). Achieving this, however, requires complex and sustained programs that support disadvantaged families from early childhood onward, continue through school years, and extend into the labor market (European Commission, 2020: 17–27). While the current framework of integration policy exists, strengthening monitoring and evaluation is essential to improve effectiveness (Council of Europe, 2020: 10–12). It would also be important to involve representatives of the Roma community more closely in the planning and implementation of programs, ensuring better alignment with real needs (Council of Europe, 2020: 22–23).

In conclusion, it can be stated that Hungary has developed a stable and, by European standards, advanced system of minority rights over recent decades. The idea of a multi-national Hungary is now a natural part of constitutional identity - nationalities are equal members of the Hungarian political community (Halász, 2016: 187–190). Overcoming remaining social and economic challenges will be a longer-term process, but trends indicate progress (Kántor, 2014: 231–233). To strengthen social cohesion, continued

dialogue between the majority and minorities, as well as the promotion of tolerance and mutual respect, remain indispensable (Council of Europe, 2016: 18–19). If Hungary is able to capitalize on its cultural diversity - the linguistic skills, international connections, and creative values of nationalities - it will benefit the entire nation (European Commission, 2020: 6). In the coming years, the goal should be to ensure that, alongside legal guarantees, the vision of “harmonious coexistence of nationalities with the majority nation” is realized in everyday reality as a shared national value and a cornerstone of social peace.

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