

STEFANO BOTTONI

## The creation of the Hungarian Autonomous Region in Romania (1952): Premises and Consequences

This essay focuses on an interesting and still unexplored case of nationality policy in communist Eastern Europe: the Hungarian Autonomous Region in Romania. The creation of this region, along with the Yugoslav experiment, was the only example of integrative minority policy in the post-war Eastern Europe, and represented the attempt to solve a deeply rooted national question by giving administrative “autonomy” to Szeklerland, the predominantly Hungarian region of Transylvania. The ideological premises of the region, imposed on the Romanian Party by Soviet leadership in 1952, followed the Bolshevik pattern of territorial autonomy elaborated by Lenin and Stalin in the early 1920s.<sup>1</sup> The Hungarians of Szeklerland became a “titular nationality” provided with extensive cultural rights. Yet, on the other hand, the Romanian central power used the region as an instrument of political and social integration for the Hungarian minority into the communist state. The history of the Hungarian Autonomous Region (HAR) was also influenced by changes in the Soviet concept of the nation, which occurred in the latter period of Stalin’s rule<sup>2</sup>. As the ongoing ethnicization of Soviet social identity also meant re-emergence of traditional, Russian dominance the HAR could never become a strong counter-power in front of the Romanian Stalinist elite lead by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej.

On the basis of newly released Russian and Romanian sources, I analyze the genesis of this region between 1950 and 1952, focusing on the political

---

<sup>1</sup> See Terry Martin: *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. the debate held in the Spring issue of *Slavic Review* 2002 (the articles of Eric Weitz and Peter Blinsein).

and psychological impact of the HAR as concerns interethnic relations in Transylvania. The internationalist, ideological framework in which the communist regime tried to place the creation of HAR could not put an end to the persistence of both the Romanian and the Hungarian heritage of national symbols and mutual resentments, which could have easily been mobilized by the party. In the context of Transylvania, an area extremely receptive to nationalism, the mere appearance in the official public discourse of the term “autonomy” brought about an unexpected wave of ethnic tension.

*Shaping the soviet model: the 1950 territorial reform*

One cannot definitely answer the question when and by whom the idea was raised of establishing the Hungarian Autonomous Region in Romania. The Central Leadership (CL) of the Romanian Workers’ Party (RWP)<sup>3</sup> had proclaimed the solution of the nationality question in Romania on the basis of Lenin’s principles with a resolution passed in December 1948. However, the integral adoption of the Soviet model would have meant defining the nationality question in terms of administrative and territorial autonomy. The uncertain territorial “status” of the predominantly Hungarian Transylvanian counties, however, was raised following the radical administrative reform of September 1950, which reshaped the internal boundaries of the whole territory of Romania.<sup>4</sup> The twin-layered system of the inter-war period, (commune-county), was replaced by a territorial division organized entirely on the Soviet pattern (region-district-municipality-village).<sup>5</sup> The Soviet Union played a decisive role in working out the reform, just as with every other political decision in early 1950s’ Romania, and even the documents inspiring the administrative reform arrived from Moscow already translated into Romanian. The territory of Romania was divided into 28 regions (11 of which were in Transylvania) and 117 districts, officially named *raions* to follow the Soviet terminology. Economic considerations played the main role in determining the new administrative borders and identifying the new regional

<sup>3</sup> The Central Leadership was established after the “union” of the two workers’ parties (1948), and it was officially renamed Central Committee only after Ceaușescu’s seizure of power.

<sup>4</sup> Păiușan, Dorin – Ion, Retegan (eds.): *Regimul comunist din România. O cronologie politică 1945–1989* [The communist regime in Romania. A political chronology 1945–1989]. București: Tritonic, 2002. 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale* [The Romanian National Archives] (hereinafter ANIC), fond Comitetul Central al PCR (hereinafter: CC al PCR), Cancelarie, dos. 32/1950, 81/1950, 146/1950, 178/1950, 181/1950, 192/1950.

centers. Many of the newly appointed regional and district centers later became important industrial centers.

Furthermore, the borders of the territory historically named Szeklerland (Székelyföld), which had longtime belonged to Hungary until 1918 and between 1940 and 1944, were radically altered. The entire area was divided into two regions instead of the former four Szekler counties: the Braşov (renamed Stalin in 1950) region and the Mureş region, with its center Târgu-Mureş (Marosvásárhely), a town which had at that time a population of about 47,000 (35,000 Hungarians, 11,000 Romanians and about 1,000 Jews).<sup>6</sup> The Mureş region had a Hungarian majority (52%), though it also included Romanian districts such as Târnăveni and Luduş.

The party Commission led by the minister of interior Teohari Georgescu economically motivated the partition of the Szekler territory. According to a document issued by this body, Szeklerland's deep-rooted backwardness was mainly due to the lack of a modern industrial network. The party seemingly aimed at intensifying the economic relations between the more developed city of Braşov and its countryside.<sup>7</sup>

The party *nomenklatura* of the Mureş region was predominantly made up of Hungarians. In October 1950, the one hundred, most influential positions within the local apparatus were occupied by: 63 Hungarians, 28 Romanians and 6 Jews. Even the first party secretary of the province was a Hungarian, Mihály Nagy who, due to his over-zealous and brutal attitude during the first wave of collectivization, was later replaced by a Romanian, Nicolae Bota. The three secretaries were of Romanian nationality. And finally, there were 4 Hungarians and 4 Romanians out of the 8 members of the region's political committee.<sup>8</sup> Although Hungarians and Jews were over-represented in the local executive bodies, especially in the economic and financial field (21 Hungarians out of 25 party functionaries), the center attempted to obtain an "ethnic balance" within the local leaderships.

Although the ethnic balance in the Hungarian-inhabited region reflected Moscow's desires, it was from Moscow – and not from Transylvania –

---

<sup>6</sup> Árpád E. Varga: *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája. I. Kovászna, Hargita és Maros megye. Népszámlálási adatok 1850–1992 között* [Ethnic and religious groups in Transylvania. I. Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties in the official census 1850–1992]. Miercurea-Ciuc: Pro-Print, 1998. 302.

<sup>7</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 178/1950, 10–11 f.

<sup>8</sup> *Arhivele Naționale Direcția Județeană Mureş* [The Mureş county branch of the National Archives] (hereinafter ANDJM), fond 1134 – CR PCR Mureş 1950–1968, dos. 4/1950, 1–2. f.

that dissatisfied voices were heard as early as 1951 concerning the execution of administrative reform, including the position of the Hungarian minority in Szeklerland. That is confirmed by a newly released Russian document on a discussion between Spandarian, the councilor of the Soviet embassy in Bucharest, and Teohari Georgescu on 14 May 1951.<sup>9</sup> After announcing that two Soviet experts were to arrive in order to supervise the people's councils' work and the process of "raionization", Spandarian reported to Moscow that, according to Georgescu himself, a communication breakdown had occurred between center and periphery in the period following the establishment of new local people's councils (1949–50). Thousands of orders and circulars were sent from Bucharest, which, however, were often contradictory and did not contain clear instructions. The Romanian Central Leadership even discussed whether it was more useful to send, in advance, pre-filled forms concerning the meeting agendas to the people's councils, or "authorize" the local leaders to fill in the forms by themselves. The two experts sent from Moscow asked Georgescu if the national minorities had been taken into account when appointing the new regional borders. This intentional question apparently surprised the minister, who replied very ambiguously: "We took this point of view into account. For example Mureş and Stalin regions were appointed so that they would cover most Hungarians. But practically it is a very complex matter because nationalities *do not live in a compact block* [my emphasis – S.B.] but are scattered and mixed with the Romanian majority. Therefore it is very difficult to appoint autonomous regions. We have examined the possibility of establishing them, but no concrete decisions have been made yet."<sup>10</sup>

#### *Preparing a new constitution (1950–52)*

The formation of the HAR was also connected to the preparation and adoption of a new Romanian constitution. During the months of administrative reform the Central Leadership began "modernizing" the text of the 1948 constitution. The new text had to reflect the achievements made in building

<sup>9</sup> Source of quotes: T. M. Islamov – T. V. Volokitina (eds.): *Vostochnaya Evropa v dokumentakh rossiiskikh arkhivov, 1944–1953* gg. T. 2. 1949–1953 [Eastern Europe in the documents from the Russian archives 1944–1953, Vol. 2, 1949–1953] Moskva-Novosibirsk: Sibirskii Khronograf, 1998. 185. doc., 530–532. (14 May 1951. From Spandarian's diary: talking to Teohari Georgescu about the reception of Soviet experts)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 532.

socialism, including the nationalization of enterprises in 1948 and the collectivization of agriculture, which had begun in 1949.

In the meeting of Secretariat hold on 28 June 1950 the general secretary of the RWP Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej said that the 1948 constitution had been worked out with the bourgeois elements of the formally existent Liberal Party, and therefore did not reflect the “dictatorship of the proletariat” but rather a “people’s democracy”<sup>11</sup>. So the new constitution, which was slated for adoption in 1951, was completely fashioned after the Soviet constitution of 1936, although it was obvious, as Miron Constantinescu pointed it out, that Romania still had a long way to reach the Soviet Union’s level of “socialism”.

At the end of the meeting a decision was made to set up an internal commission within the political committee, and that the commission’s work should not receive any publicity. The commission’s task was to prepare the draft constitution, which was then to be dealt with by the council of ministers. Legislation required the formal approval of the council of ministers. Nobody mentioned the nationality issue.

The matter, however, proceeded much more slowly than originally planned. Strong opposition in the country against the forcible collection of agricultural products may have been in the background. In some regions bloody peasant riots broke out. Only a year after the aforementioned secretarial meeting, in the summer of 1951, did the general secretary of the RWP turn to Stalin in a telegram to ask for help in the wording of the new constitution.<sup>12</sup> On 4 August 1951 Stalin sent a positive reply to the request from Bucharest, but suggested that the draft worked out by the commission appointed by the Central Leadership of the RWP should be presented to Soviet experts.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, a commission within the party leadership was established to re-draft the new constitution between August and September 1951. There are some unanswered questions concerning the preparation of the new constitution, as very little information exists at our disposal concerning the period

---

<sup>11</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 48/1950, 3–9. f.

<sup>12</sup> There is no trace of Gheorghiu-Dej’s request in the documents of the Central Leadership of the RWP, which I had the opportunity to look through in the National Romanian Archives. A footnote to document 208 in the volume of *Vostochnaya Evropa* is the source of information, 582.

<sup>13</sup> *Vostochnaya Evropa*, op. cit. 582.

between 10 October 1951<sup>14</sup> and 14 May 1952.<sup>15</sup> On the basis of available sources from 1951 and 1952, I present here an outline of the events.

In the fall of 1951, the 20 members commission led by Gheorghiu-Dej worked according to the timetable. In October, the Secretariat approved the formation of sub-commissions charged with the wording of different chapters: one of these collectives, charged with the study of “the national question in the Constitution” was to be led by Miron Constantinescu and the Hungarian intellectual László Bányai. At the same meeting, Iosif Chişinevschi admitted, “the chapters are modeled on the Stalinist Constitution, with some modifications”.<sup>16</sup>

On 22 November 1951 the commission met and fixed a two-week term for the preparation of the first draft<sup>17</sup>, and later in the same year,<sup>18</sup> the document entitled *Draft of a new constitution* was finally issued.<sup>19</sup> The draft proposal, enriched by hand-written annotations by Gheorghiu-Dej, must be regarded as a key-document. Taking into account that one cannot find any reference to HAR nor to the need to “emphasize” the solution to the national question, one can conclude that it was neither the Romanian nor the Hungarian communists who brought on the idea of an autonomous territory for the largest minority living in Romania.

In the following months the economic crisis was exacerbated by the surplus of money in circulation and oversized investments in heavy industry, especially in the military sector. Gheorghiu-Dej and his faction, who enjoyed the full support of Stalin at that time, were already preparing the launch of the campaign against the so-called “Muscovites”.<sup>20</sup> Taking into account the lack of documentation for the period comprised between December 1951 and March 1952, the preparation of the new constitution seems to have been interrupted. The explanation could be that the draft was sent to Moscow, and the Soviets’ objections (probably on the treatment of the national question) forced

<sup>14</sup> *Procesul-verbal și stenograma ședinței Secretariatului Comitetului Central*, 10 octombrie 1951. ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 41/1951. The party secretariat gathered on that day to discuss the preparation of the material necessary for the committee which had been asked to work out the new constitution.

<sup>15</sup> When Gheorghiu-Dej sent Stalin the “finalised” draft.

<sup>16</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 41/1951, 3.f.

<sup>17</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 53/1951, 3–4 ff.

<sup>18</sup> The draft issued by the commission in 1951 was without date.

<sup>19</sup> *Proiectul Constituției RPR* (without date). ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 88/1951.

<sup>20</sup> On Gheorghiu-Dej’ machineries against the Muscovite faction see the document 213 of the latest Russian collection of documents on Eastern Europe: *Sovietskij faktor v Vostočnoj Evrope 1944–1953*. T. 2. 1949–1953 [The Soviet factor in Eastern Europe 1944–1953, vol. 2, 1949–1953]. Moskva: Rosspen, 2002.

Romanians to reformulate or to introduce new chapters. The whole question reappeared – as a secondary matter – only at the meeting of the Political Committee on 25 March 1952 in which Gheorghiu-Dej made the first public accusations against Vasile Luca.<sup>21</sup> The minutes of this meeting contain a statement by Gheorghiu-Dej on the necessity of appointing another commission made up not of party officials but of fellow travelers, intellectuals and politicians like Petru Groza.<sup>22</sup> Like its predecessor, this commission also worked out some “Guidelines for the issuing of the draft of the new Constitution”. The 8th point read, “The draft of the new constitution shall concretely define the national *moments* (sic)<sup>23</sup>”, but it did not enter into detail.

The turning-point had to come some weeks later, in mid-April, when Gheorghiu-Dej – along with his supporters (Apostol, Costantinescu and Chişinevschi) – was convoqued to Moscow by Stalin, who gave him the guidelines for the settlement of the Luca-Pauker-Georgescu affair. During that meeting, the last one Gheorghiu-Dej had with Stalin, the Soviet leaders (Stalin himself, Molotov, Berija and Mikojan) may have raised the issue of HAR too, even if recent historiography does not make any mention of it.<sup>24</sup>

On 14 May 1952 Gheorghiu-Dej sent a text to Stalin, which contained the second version of the draft. The deputy foreign minister, Vishinsky made the first remarks<sup>25</sup> and the following day forwarded the material to the Central Leadership, to Grigorian personally,<sup>26</sup> who made his proposals together with an expert named Gorshenin, and then forwarded the text to Molotov. Molotov handed the “reply draft” containing the proposals for modification addressed to Bucharest over to Stalin. According to the referenced Russian documentary collection, Stalin did *not* approve the document but *personally* amended it, and that was how he gave it back to Molotov. The Soviet Central Committee sent

<sup>21</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 25/1952, 17–19 f.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 18. f.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, 33. f.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Tismăneanu: *Stalinism for all seasons. A political history of Romanian Communism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. 128–129; see also Robert Levy: *Gloria și decăderea Anei Pauker* [Ana Pauker: the rise and fall of a Jewish Communist]. Iași: Polirom, 2002, p. 298.

<sup>25</sup> Vishinsky’s remarks: *Sovietskij faktor*, 632–635 (Document 243, not later than 25 May 1952. Vishinsky’s comments in connection with the draft constitution of the Romanian People’s Republic.)

<sup>26</sup> Grigorian was in charge of the committee responsible for international relations (especially with communist parties) in the CC of the CPSU from 1949. Information on the decision-making process is from a footnote to document 277. Commentary by Molotov to Stalin concerning the draft constitution of RPR and Stalin’s comments on the document (6 July 1952), see *Vostochnaya Evropa*, op. cit. 769–771.

this version to communist leadership in Bucharest on 6 July 1952.<sup>27</sup> What happened between Bucharest and Moscow in the spring of 1952, and how and whom raised the question of setting up the HAR? The sources are rather contradictory. A Romanian document allows us to conclude that during May and June a quiet struggle was going on over the formation of the Hungarian Autonomous Region between the two central committees.

On 12 June, when the draft constitution was being studied in Moscow, the Political Committee was having a meeting in Bucharest.<sup>28</sup> The committee led by the Hungarian top-rank apparatchik Alexandru Moghioroş (Mogyorós Sándor) submitted a report called '*Etapa I-a*', which dealt with administrative issues but made no mention about the possible formation of an autonomous region. A few days later<sup>29</sup> the same committee issued another report with the title '*Etapa II-a*' about the correction of administrative-territorial district making in the Romanian People's Republic.<sup>30</sup> "The principles and directives of the government and the party [concerning the establishment of districts and regions – S.B.] were not fully respected, because the majority of the regions were not strong enough to fulfill the tasks set by the Central Leadership of the Romanian Workers' Party. *On the other hand, the text of the draft of the new constitution contains the establishment of a Hungarian Autonomous Region which is to be formed in the area where Hungarian and Szeklers live in a compact block* [my emphasis – S.B.]"<sup>31</sup> "The HAR will include Ciuc, Târgu-Secuiesc, Sfântu-Gheorghe and Odorhei districts and also the eastern part of Racoş district from Stalin region. From the present Mureş region the district of Luduş and a few villages from the western parts of Reghin and Târgu-Mureş districts will be joined to Cluj region."<sup>32</sup> "This province will have a population of 656,000 inhabitants with 526,000 Hungarians and 123,000 Romanians. The area of the province is 1,419,000 hectares [14,190 square km – S.B.], of which 294,000 hectares is arable land."<sup>33</sup>

While there was no reference made to the HAR in the first report, in the second of a few days later the borders of the future region were described relatively precisely and also contained statistical data. All this leads us to believe

<sup>27</sup> *Vostochnaja Evropa*, op. cit. 583.

<sup>28</sup> CC al PCR, Cancelarie, ANIC, dos. 49/1952, 3. f.

<sup>29</sup> Certainly before 1 July, as according to the minutes of the Political Committee, it finished its work on that day.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 84–105.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 85.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

that the political game of the two party leadership was conducted behind the scenes: the Soviets, led by Molotov and Stalin, not only “polished” the text of the draft constitution, but made several essential changes primarily with regard to the establishment of the autonomous region, which was not liked in Bucharest. However, other documents in our possession contradict the above. The previously mentioned Vishinsky letter of May thoroughly criticized the draft handed in by the Romanian leadership and clearly mentioned the HAR, as if it had already been included in the draft sent by Bucharest.<sup>34</sup> Hungarian sources also indicate this. According to the records made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Budapest at the end of the year, Gheorghiu-Dej already said in his speech held at the Great National Assembly meeting on 26–27 March 1952 that the directives of the new draft constitution included the establishment of the HAR.<sup>35</sup> The author of the quoted diplomatic report may, however, have mixed up the chronology of events.

The original draft Gheorghiu-Dej sent to Moscow in May 1952 unfortunately is not included in the researchable documents of the Romanian Archives, thus we do not know what exactly the Soviets modified. What is sure is that Article 19 was reworded by Molotov and Stalin in the following way: “The Hungarian Autonomous Region comprises the area inhabited by the Hungarian and Szekler populations in a compact block and has an independent administrative leadership elected by the residents of the HAR”.<sup>36</sup>

The role in modifying the Romanian constitution played by the Soviets and personally by Stalin is in no way unique in the last years of Stalinism. Krzysztof Persak mentions with regard to the Polish constitution also rewritten in 1952 that Stalin *himself* “re-edited” the text already approved by the Central Committee of the Soviet Party.<sup>37</sup> Among other matters, the Soviet leader considered it important to include a paragraph, which talked about “Polish *national culture*” and “Polish *national revival*” (my emphasis— S.B.). This confirms the view expressed by some researchers that Stalin validated an ethnicized con-

---

<sup>34</sup> *Sovietskij faktor*, op. cit. 634.

<sup>35</sup> *Összefoglaló feljegyzés a székelyleföldi autonómia megvalósításáról és annak politikai visszhangjáról*. Magyar Országos Levéltár, a külügyminisztérium adminisztratív iratai, Románia, 1945–1964. XIX-J-1-k, 10. doboz, szám nélkül. 1952. december 23 [Summary report on the Szekler autonomy and its political echo. The Hungarian National Archives – Foreign ministry administrative files, Romania 1945–1964].

<sup>36</sup> *Vostochnaya Evropa*, 771.

<sup>37</sup> Krzysztof Persak: *Stalin as editor: the soviet dictator's secret changes to the Polish constitution of 1952*. Cold War International History Project, Washington DC. Bulletin no. 11, 1998. 149–154. The Polish constitution was formally adopted by the Polish Sejm on 22 July 1952.

cept of nation in his own empire in the last years of his power.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the respect for national forms (in that case, of minority national forms) also promoted the formation of the HAR in 1952.

The dispute at the Romanian Workers' Party Political Committee's meeting on 10 July 1952 shows, however, that several Romanian leaders, primarily the first secretary Gheorghiu-Dej, received the establishment of the HAR with reservation.

*"Let us go no further" – Gheorghiu-Dej's advice*

After Gheorghiu-Dej had received from Moscow the "modifications" to the draft constitution put forward in May, he summoned the Political Committee on 10 July to discuss the corrected text. The section of minutes recorded at the meeting relating to the role and status of the would-be HAR gives an excellent example of the "passive resistance" against Soviet pressure represented by Gheorghiu-Dej, who emerged strengthened from the political battles putting down the internal resistance in the spring of 1952. Emil Bodnăraş raised the question of linguistic rights to be granted to the new region: "It seems to be necessary to regulate the population's use of language at court proceedings (...). If a person who does not speak Romanian is elected how will the proceedings be held?" Miron Constantinescu added: "According to the Soviet constitution court proceedings are held in the mother tongue of the accused in every autonomous region. We can only gain from this in a political sense. Taking Azerbaijan's constitution as an example we may word it like this: The language of court proceedings is Hungarian in the Hungarian Autonomous Region, but in districts where the population is Romanian or of other nationality it is the language of that nationality". Then Gheorghiu-Dej replied: "Let us go no further. It is not by chance that the comrades have not made any more comments. Let us leave it so."<sup>39</sup> [...] Court proceedings are held in Romanian, ensuring the use of mother tongue. It is enough with our level of development."<sup>40</sup>

The Central Leadership's plenum called for the following day and providing information for a broader party membership, set aims concerning the work

<sup>38</sup> David Brandenberger: *National bolshevism. Stalinist mass culture and the formation of modern Russian national identity, 1931–1956*. Harvard: Harvard UP, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Gheorghiu-Dej referred to chapter 68 of the draft, which said: "In the Romanian People's Republic court procedures are held in Romanian, in the regions and districts where there is a non-Romanian population the use of the population's mother tongue must be ensured."

<sup>40</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 61/1952, 8–9. f.

process and the publicity campaign. At this meeting Liuba Chişinevschi brought up the issue of the autonomous region in a rather half-hearted speech, on the one hand showing that even in party leadership the establishment of the HAR was shrouded in secrecy, and on the other, reflecting the ambiguity concerning the status of the region, which was “like the others, yet different”.

“The autonomous region is not clear to me. I don’t know, but perhaps we would rather stipulate more precisely what this autonomous region means, what rights it has, because as we have put it, i.e. that every region has a people’s council and so does the HAR, so we should declare that it is not simply a region like the others.”<sup>41</sup>

Those present did not react to the proposal and immediately passed over to discussing the organizational issues regarding the propaganda campaign in connection with the constitution, which, as Gheorghiu-Dej had stipulated on 10 July, they intended to conduct on the Polish model, i.e. agitators trained especially for this purpose would lead meetings at all the forums (in workshops, collective farms, community centers, schools and residential blocks).<sup>42</sup> Curiously enough, the Romanian party leadership was not at all enthusiastic about the task of holding the text up for discussion. At the Political Committee meeting of 14 July Gheorghiu-Dej himself expressed concern for the popular reaction to setting up the HAR: “Our enemies will try to carry out diversions, especially on the national question”.<sup>43</sup> In order to prevent any disorder, the campaign attained massive proportions. In the only HAR territory between 20 July and 10 August about 17,000 agitators were mobilized, who held 3,200 meetings at 320 different “agitatory scenes” with the presence of 66,700 people (nearly 10% of the HAR’s whole population). Special attention was paid to the region’s center, Târgu-Mureş, where, according to the report on the campaign, the *whole intelligentsia* of the town managed to be included in the discussions.<sup>44</sup> The center instructed the regional agit-prop departments to stand up against any manifestation of chauvinism and at the same time to fight against the “reactionary tendencies” of the Catholic Church, which was still under the influence of the Alba Iulia Bishop Áron Márton, who had been imprisoned in 1949 and was venerated by many followers for his consistent anti-communism and his stand for Hungarian national rights.

---

<sup>41</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 62/1952, 4. f.

<sup>42</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 62/1952, 10. f.

<sup>43</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 65/1952, 26. f.

<sup>44</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureş, dos. 43/1952, 182–184. f.

A Russian historian recently spoke of the “games of Stalinist democracy” referring to the analysis of ideological and scientific debates which emerged in the Soviet Union during full-blown Stalinism.<sup>45</sup> The debate on the new constitution, encouraged by the Romanian party, looked quite similar to Soviet model. And, like in the Soviet Union during the first years of Stalin’s rule, the main problem for those in power was avoiding the potential danger hidden in the “flowering of ethnicity” generated by the public announcement of the creation of the HAR.

*The new draft constitution in the socialist public sphere*

The establishment of the HAR remained secret until the last minute. Even the regional first secretaries were informed only on 12 July, when Moghioroș sent them a copy of the definitive “draft”. The following day they were called together to Bucharest, along with Propaganda cadres, to be provided by Moghioroș and Chișinevschi with instructions for the campaign.

Due to the lack of any information concerning the nature of the HAR, when on 18 July 1952 newspapers published, on a full page, the new Draft Constitution and “held it up for discussion”, the Romanian public showed nothing less than utter shock. Three entire Articles (19–21) of the text dealt with the HAR.<sup>46</sup>

The campaign had to clarify the party’s indefinite standpoint on two key issues: 1) what justified the establishment of the region nearly four years after the nationality question had been officially solved; 2) what role did the expect for it to play within the framework of the Romanian state. The first commentaries appeared in press on 19 July. Yet, from the first days they followed line with the party’s official paper, *Scânteia*, which was mediated by two articles signed with the names of Chișinevschi and László Bányai. According to both authors, the establishment of the HAR “raised” the resolution of the Romanian nationality issue “on a higher level” on the basis of the Leninist-Stalinist directive. On the same day, the Bucharest-based, national Hungarian daily proudly empha-

<sup>45</sup> Alexei Kojevnikov: Games of Stalinist democracy: ideological discussions in Soviet sciences 1947–1952. In Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.): *Stalinism: new directions*. London: Routledge, 2000. 142–175.

<sup>46</sup> Proiectul noii Constituții al RPR [The new Constitution project of the Romanian People’s Republic]. *Scânteia*, 18 July 1952.

sized in its editorial that the new Romanian constitution was based on the Soviet constitution of 1936.<sup>47</sup>

The article published on the following day is more noteworthy as it was the first manifestation of a *discursive paradigm*, largely exploited in the following years. It underlined the opposition between the old “feudal-bourgeois”, pre-1918 Hungarian discriminative nationality policy and the also oppressive, Romanian nationality policy in the interwar period, with the “democratic” policies of the post-1945 system, which resulted in a broad application of minority rights.<sup>48</sup>

The range of issues discussed in the press in the following weeks grew significantly wider.<sup>49</sup> Special emphasis was laid on celebrating the unprecedented harmony formed among nationalities due to the new system<sup>50</sup> and on another theme which the Szekler minority was especially sensitive to: the autonomous region from the perspective of cultural and social-economic development.

Along with rigid and mechanical explanations, the official propaganda also tried to use a more human tone by putting socialist poetry to the service of the cause:

*S hol a völgyeket a / Maros szeli át,  
dolgozó magyar nyer / autonómiát,  
közös birtokunkban / tágabb térre lép.  
Így forr jobban össze / Az ország s a nép.*<sup>51</sup>

(And where valleys are cut / through by the Maros / the working Hungarian becomes / autonomous / in our common land / his steps become wide / thus do the country and / the people reunite)

<sup>47</sup> Az új Alkotmánytervezet szentesíti a nemzeti kisebbségek egyenjogúságát [The new Constitution project guarantees equal rights to national minorities]. *Romániai Magyar Szó*, 19 July 1952.

<sup>48</sup> A RNK nemzeti kisebbségei teljesen egyenjogúak a román néppel [The national minorities in the RPR have equal rights to the Romanian people]. *Romániai Magyar Szó*, 20 July 1952.

<sup>49</sup> This is clear from the quantity of articles published in the local press. Only between 20 July and 10 August, 79 commentaries and reports concerning the reasons for and practical consequences of establishing HAR were published in *Vörös Zászló* which were coordinated by the agit-prop department of the CC. ANDJM, CR PCR Mureş, dos. 43/1952, 189. f.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. report about Aita Seacă/Szárazajta. According to the writer severe riots of an ethnic nature took place in this village in 1940 when Hungarian forces moved in northern Transylvania and introduced a Hungarian administration, and then in 1944 when the so-called Maniu guards, i.e. Romanian para-military units moved in to prepare the Transylvanian area, which had been reconquered from the Hungarians by the Soviet and Romanian units, for Romanian administration. Hazánk nemzeti kisebbségeinek virágzó élete [The flourishing life of our national minorities]. *Romániai Magyar Szó*, 11 December 1952.

<sup>51</sup> Imre Horváth's poem Törünk egyre feljebb [Going further and further] written in honour of HAR. *Romániai Magyar Szó*, 6 August 1952.

The area of the HAR was more or less industrially undeveloped, economically backward, cold, mountainous, historical Szeklerland far from any transport junctions. The population was promised such prosperity as would end massive migration to more developed parts of Transylvania and to Bucharest. The comparison between the situation of national minorities in capitalist countries (including Yugoslavia) and that of socialist countries was another reoccurring theme of propaganda. In the light of Stalinist culture, Bucharest had good reason to send clear warnings to the Hungarians. The most direct message was published in *Scântea* on 30 July. The effusive and doctrinaire article was written for party activists. It attempted to convince the majority about the establishment of the HAR “corresponding to the fundamental interests of the working Romanian people”, and went on to warn Hungarians that comrade Stalin also said “autonomy does not mean independence”, on the contrary, regional autonomy is “the most concrete form of unity”.<sup>52</sup> The *Romániai Magyar Szó* delivered a similar message some time later.<sup>53</sup>

Official propaganda did not consciously describe the region as an exclusively Hungarian region but as an *integrative structure*, where every nationality can feel at home. The message intended for Jewish readers was solemn: “József Frankel, a 19-year-old worker has achieved equality in this system for the first time, because while the old system built gas chambers for the likes of him this system has provided equality for all, independently whether they were born Romanian, Hungarian or Jewish”.<sup>54</sup>

### *The establishment of the new local power and the “side effects” of the HAR*

The establishment of the HAR seemingly did not evoke much enthusiasm in the party’s local apparatus. On 18 July 1952, when the new draft constitution was officially announced, the regional Political Committee held an extraordinary meeting in Târgu-Mureş, where Nicolae Bota, the outgoing Romanian first secretary, suddenly announced at the end of the meeting that in the framework of the new constitution the party was also planning to establish a Hungarian autonomous region, which was “the correct way of resolv-

<sup>52</sup> Crearea RAM – un nou succes al politicii naţionale leninist-staliniste a partidului [The creation of the HAR – a new success of the Party’s leninist-stalinist policy]. *Scântea*, 30 July 1952.

<sup>53</sup> Az Alkotmánytervezettel kapcsolatban válaszolunk olvasóink kérdéseire [We answer to our readers for what concern the new Constitution project]. *Romániai Magyar Szó*, 9 August 1952.

<sup>54</sup> Új üzem Marosvásárhelyen. Encsel Mór fémárugyár [A new factory in Târgu-Mureş, the Encsel Mór steal factory]. *Romániai Magyar Szó*, 11 December 1952.

ing the nationality issue in the spirit of Leninist and Stalinist teaching”.<sup>55</sup> Only Alexandru Cărdan, the outgoing Romanian president of the regional people’s council asked – without receiving any explanation – in which language would the minutes of meetings be recorded. He tried to ascertain who would occupy the leading positions. Local officials, for a good part Romanians before 1952, were obviously concerned about receiving the ideological directives from the center while meanwhile executing the necessary “ethnic” change in the *nomenklatura* of the new, massively Hungarian region.<sup>56</sup>

Looking at the list of names of the new *nomenklatura* dictated by the deputy minister of interior, the Hungarian-born János Vincze, it can be clearly seen that with the establishment of the HAR there was primarily a *symbolic* change among party officials on an ethnic basis. The new first secretary of the region, Lajos Csupor, and the president of the regional people’s council, Pál Bugyi, and their deputies were mostly Hungarians.<sup>57</sup> Lajos Csupor’s career was a good example of the unprecedented social mobility the communist regime offered to loyal minorities: he came from a poor family living in a suburb of Târgu-Mureș, had worked there as a tailor and joined the Federation of Young Workers at the age of 18, in the early 1930s.<sup>58</sup> After 1944 he played an important role in organizing the Communist party in Szeklerland, and in 1950 was appointed as first secretary of the Brașov region and also took part in the military repression of peasant riots in the former Trei Scaune county, a largely Hungarian-inhabited territory. After 1952, thanks to his complete loyalty to the Stalinist structure he called to lead, Csupor could remain party leader in the HAR for 9 years, a remarkable feat for a first-generation official.

Fulfilling Moscow’s expectations, Hungarian officials had to play a key-role in the local apparatus; their proportion shows a growing trend in the last months of 1952. At the opening of the first regional Party conference (January 1953) the composition of the Party and the people’s council leaderships showed 17,583 Hungarians (81.4%) and 3,880 Romanians (18%) of

---

<sup>55</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureș, dos. 43/1952, 131. f.

<sup>56</sup> According to the nationality data of the 1956 census, the population of HAR amounted to 731,387. 565,510 (77.3%) were Hungarian and 146,830 (20.1%) Romanian. Varga, *Erdély*, 36.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 114. f.

<sup>58</sup> Biographical data on Lajos Csupor was published by *Romániai Magyar Szó*, 20 November 1952, under the title Csupor Lajos harcos élete [The fighting life of Csupor Lajos].

the 21,598 registered party members (2.9% of the HAR's population<sup>59</sup>).<sup>60</sup> Thus, Hungarians were somewhat over-represented as compared to the ethnic composition of the region. There were even larger differences at the January 1953 conference, where, of the elected Regional Committee, 41 out of 50 and 10 of the 11-member Political Committee were Hungarians.<sup>61</sup>

With regard to the Party's social influence, data at our disposal reveal an elusive picture. The widespread assertion that the Party encompassed the whole country tightly seems to be contradicted by the fact that in 1952, of the HAR's 428 villages, 77 had no Party organization, especially in the Romanian settlements of districts Reghin and Târgu-Mureş.<sup>62</sup> In other villages the Party organizations had to be closed as a result of the national purification campaign started in 1949. Thus, it is true that the Party became more rooted in areas with a Hungarian majority, but the penetration of the revered party-state into the local social sphere must be treated in a different manner.

The next important question is what was really meant by administrative/territorial autonomy. Can we talk about the Hungarian party apparatus's autonomy to any extent following the establishment of the HAR? In fact, the establishment of HAR provoked quite a paradoxical situation. On the one hand the center kept political and repressive power and control in its hands. On the other hand, the Party itself was aware of the fact that the word 'autonomy' had not lost its meaning for the Transylvanian Hungarians, neither as a consequence of the trauma of World War II nor resulting from the internationalist rhetoric of communism. In view of the fact that officially taboo subjects such as nationality rights and autonomy were publicly raised, the propaganda campaign involuntarily became a catalyst of national conflicts in an area where rivalry between Romanians and Hungarians – more exactly a mutually exclusive nation-building – had deep, historical traditions.

The reaction of local Party sections to the formation of the HAR, which had been kept secret until the last minute, was of great surprise. Although internal debates and meetings were often held during mess time on Sundays,

<sup>59</sup> The number of party members as compared to the population did not differ from the nationality ratio (there were about 600,000 party members out of a population of about 18 million), although it was rather low as compared to the social composition of HAR: the number of industrial workers alone amounted to more than 33,000 in 1952. ANDJM, CR PCR Mureş, dos. 1952/43. 227. f.

<sup>60</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureş, dos. 51/1952, 1–10. f. (Tabele statistice lunare cu privire la membrii și conducerea de partid.)

<sup>61</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureş, dos. 1953/64.

<sup>62</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureş, dos. 1952/51.

giving many inhabitants – including Party members – a good occasion to not take part in it, the participants, especially the Hungarians, sharpened the debate with “tendentious questions” about the use of Hungarian national symbols, especially that of the flag, and the use of language in army units stationed in the territory of the HAR. Some asked what money would be issued in the region.<sup>63</sup> There were rumors at many meetings of a Romanian and Hungarian population exchange in the near future with the clear intent of creating an ethnically homogenous Hungarian region.<sup>64</sup> Although the authorities immediately denied such unfounded talks (*zvonuri*), still the meetings involuntarily became the starting point for “false news” which spread verbally among the population.

The word “autonomy” seems to have produced a conditioned reflex in some Hungarians who thought it was a move towards reannexation by Hungary. Just like the reannexation of Szeklerland by Hungary in 1940, the memory of which was very much alive in the collective consciousness, the Romanian population (whether they were born there or settlers) again became “aliens”. And, there were some cases where the local Hungarian majority publicly threatened or insulted the Romanians.<sup>65</sup> In the district of Reghin, with its Romanian majority, panic broke out with people bitterly whispering that “the Hungarians will again be at the helm”.<sup>66</sup>

The “1940 syndrome” was not limited to Romanians and Hungarians. Many ministry and Bucharest Party officials spent their 1952, summer holiday at Băile Tușnad (Tușnad spa) in the heart of the HAR. According to a local legend, upon hearing the news of the establishment of the Hungarian Autonomous Region, many cut short their holiday and returned to the capital on the first available train.<sup>67</sup> Even if the story is entirely a product of Szekler folklore (although it seems more than that), letters to the editor published in *Scânteia*, a source above any suspicion with regard to ideological loyalty, showed what shock and deeply rooted fears of the Romanian population evoked by the establishment of the HAR.

Between 18 July and the middle of September two organs with close ties to the Party, *Scânteia*’s readers’ page (Secția scrișori) and the Legal Committee

---

<sup>63</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureș, dos. 43/1952, 185. f. (Raport informativ, 10 August 1952)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> The report of the regional council contains several concrete cases of verbal aggression: Nota informativă, 10 August 1952. ANDJM, CR PCR Mureș, dos. 43/1952, 190–191. f.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 191. f.

<sup>67</sup> József Gagyi: Határ, amely összeköt [A border that unifies]. *Regio*, No. 3, 2003. 141.

of the National Council of the Democratic People's Front<sup>68</sup> scrupulously collected everything that emerged from the 'filter' of several thousand meetings held in every corner of the country. The letters sent to *Scânteia*, including more than 5,000 proposals for constitutional modification (with full name and address), well demonstrate (with less manipulation than might be assumed) "society's" response to the proposal of "power".<sup>69</sup> In this case the large number of opinions and proposals in connection with the HAR allows us to conclude that the autonomous region was the most questionable and dispute-raising issue in the whole propaganda campaign. The opinions expressed reflect the ethnic tension between Hungarians and Romanians, which rarely filtered into official public opinion during the Gheorghiu-Dej era.

The opinions of Hungarians appeared less frequently in the columns of *Scânteia* as they could not express their views properly in written Romanian. Nevertheless, they aired their opinions with regard to the modification of the constitution. The majority of proposals referred to broadening the linguistic rights of the minority, with many proposing full bilingualism of geographical names, administration (including the railways) and the legal system.<sup>70</sup> Dominic (Domokos) Horváth suggested that conscripts of Hungarian nationality in the army should have the opportunity to use their mother tongue in training.<sup>71</sup>

More specific, and likewise, significant requests were made by Party members, moreover, by the members of local Party leaderships. Dezideriu (Dezső) Klein would have liked the Transylvanian unit of the *Editura de Stat's* (State Publisher) Hungarian section to move from Cluj to Târgu-Mureş, and a weekly in Hungarian to be published for the Medical and Pharmaceutical Institute. Ioan (János) Bolyai, a member of the people's council of the town of Odorheiu Secuiesc in the heart of the HAR, proposed that "the defense of

<sup>68</sup> Comisia juridică consiliului central – FDP The People's Front in communist countries was a mass organisation under the Party's direction, which was mobilised at general and local elections and, here, on the occasion of adopting the new constitution.

<sup>69</sup> According to his cabinet chief, Gheorghiu-Dej attributed great significance to readers' letters sent to the press as they helped him to assess the general atmosphere in the country. Paul Sfetcu: *13 ani în antecamera lui Dej*, Bucureşti: Ed. Fundaţiei Culturale Române, 2000, 83.

<sup>70</sup> Answering Gheorghiu-Dej a certain Iosif Condes, for example, suggested that paragraph 69 on the language used in courts should be modified so that proceedings "should be held half in Romanian and half in Hungarian in order to avoid the need for interpreting". ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 143/1952, 70. f.

<sup>71</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 142/1952, 204. f.

the Romanian people's independence" in paragraph 17 be amended by "(the Romanian people's) and the national minorities' independence".<sup>72</sup>

Other national minorities and ethnic groups living in the country also showed interest in an autonomous administrative region –Germans<sup>73</sup> living in the Arad region asked for an autonomous region, as did Jews from Iași.<sup>74</sup>

The Romanian majority was surprised and uncomprehending in its response to such a "flourishing" of minorities, which questioned with the party's approval one of the unwritten principles of the modern Romanian national identity, i.e. territorial homogeneity as the guarantee of a *unitary and national-type* state. "The constitution proclaimed the HAR, though it can be found in *our territory*. We are not a *federal* republic but a people's republic."<sup>75</sup> Other letters blamed the Party for not defending Romanian interests: "Why was the HAR needed? Why are the borders of the Romanian People's Republic not defined in the Constitution? Is HAR under the Romanian People's Republic (RPR) or Hungary's jurisdiction? If it is under the RPR's jurisdiction, why an autonomous region? Is the autonomous region a *state within a state*?"<sup>76</sup>

Other people, such as Teodora Popescu from Târgu-Mureș, wrote to *Scânteia* about the rumors all over town that Romanian classes would be closed-down and that Romanian pupils' catchment area would be moved to other regions.<sup>77</sup> From among proposals for "concrete" although radical solutions, the idea of a Party member from the Bacău region, which was next to the HAR, excels – the issue could be solved by a *population exchange* between Romanians and Hungarians.<sup>78</sup>

### *Propaganda and everyday life in the HAR*

How did the more or less official accounts and the party propaganda relate to everyday life in the Szeklerland after the building-up of the HAR? Let me take the case of the Medical Faculty in Târgu-Mureș, the only institution of higher education in the HAR along with the small College of dramatic art. The proletarian and "national", that is to say Hungarian character attributed to the Medical faculty demonstrates how complicated the situation really

<sup>72</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 143/1952, 58. f.

<sup>73</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 142/1952, 12–29. f. (Buletin n. 14.)

<sup>74</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 142/19526.f. (Sectia scrisori, bulletin de sinteza 25 iulie 1952.)

<sup>75</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 142/1952, 4. f.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 5–6. f.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 10. f.

<sup>78</sup> ANIC, CC al PCR, Cancelarie, dos. 143/1952, 210. f.

was. According to propaganda, the Party recruited the new urban elite at this university from the ethnic Hungarian worker class. But the gap between myth and reality emerged in May 1953, when the first Party secretary Lajos Csupor had to inform the Soviet consul in Cluj visiting Târgu-Mureş about the university's difficulties and primarily the inter-ethnic conflict, which was still on the agenda.<sup>79</sup> The regional Party committee, which had examined the operation of the university in the previous months, stated no less than three different nationalist groups, "the anti-Romanian Hungarian chauvinists", "the nationalist Jewish Zionists" and the "anti-Semites", active in the institution of barely 1000 students. The authorities were disturbed by "the many open and disguised enemies of the system" among students and lecturers. In addition, 54% of students came from families considered lower and middle bourgeois, who were allowed to finish their studies even after the exposure of right-wing deviations.<sup>80</sup> Csupor also disapproved of the fact that many of the lecturers were Hungarian citizens and some had supported the Arrow Cross party or the Horthy system. Professor Putnok was a member of the Arrow Cross until 1944, while another noted lecturer from Hungary, Professor Dezső Miskolczy "received sums of money from Áron Márton in 1945–46". In tune with the paranoid spirit of the time, Csupor also blamed Putnok for "not following Soviet science in his work and looking down on Pavlov".

These undesirable persons, added Csupor, think they are indispensable due to their professional knowledge.<sup>81</sup> He also accused them of having "secretly sabotaged equipment" since 1945, i.e. they had been allegedly hiding important equipment for years. He mentioned Professor Pál Pete as an example, who "appointed kulaks to the clinics". The nurses' behavior was also worrying; the majority were nuns and it also happened that they refused to give blood to help North Korea. Assessing the results of the class struggle, Csupor gave Akulov important data; in May 1952 eight Zionist and 163 students of

<sup>79</sup> Cluj, 20 May 1953. Akulov's meeting with Lajos Csupor about nationality problems and the position of the Catholic church. *Vostochnaja Evropa*, op. cit., document 318.

<sup>80</sup> Presumably here Csupor refers to the fact that in the 1952 reprisals students and lecturers qualified as "bourgeois" or "reactionary" were more severely punished in Cluj.

<sup>81</sup> Csupor himself acknowledged this. Referring to the position of the university at the regional bureau meeting on 9 February 1953, Csupor already complained about the Hungarian professors, whom he regarded as politically unreliable, although adding that they "were good professionally and the Ministry of Health was of the opinion that they should stay". ANDJM, CR PCR Mureş, dos. 68/1953, 48–56. f.

kulak family background “were thrown out” [sic!], however they still had 300 students of bourgeois origin.<sup>82</sup>

Another ideological front was represented by the offensive carried out against the social influence of churches and neo-protestant sects. The arrest of Bishop Áron Márton in 1949 and the launch of the movement of peace priests did not lead to breaking down the Catholic Church, yet the Șumuleu/Csíksomlyó Fair held on Whit Sunday every year remained a severe problem for the authorities. In 1953, for example, the regional Party leadership, having discussed actions against the planned fair, ordered the mobilization of all Hungarian theatres (including the Hungarian theatre in Cluj which was outside the region) and six mobile cinemas with the aim of keeping the masses away from the church function, which was regarded as hostile.<sup>83</sup> As in the Soviet Union, the spread of religious sects and chiliastic movements was an instinctive and irrational response by society to the cultural crisis determined by pressure of totalitarian ideology.<sup>84</sup>

Examining archive documents with regard to exclusions from the Party in 1952–53 gives us an informative picture about the spread of religious sects in the HAR. At every weekly politburo meeting tens of people were excluded from the Party up to the first half of 1953. The reasons were varied, but charges of corruption, sexual immorality or belonging to one of the forbidden sects (Sabbatarian, Jehova’s Witnesses, Pentecostals) were the most frequent. The activity of the sects and their social radicalism (for example, the refusal to carry arms and to take part in the collectivization of agriculture) puzzled representatives of local power. It is worth noting that Stalin’s death (5 March 1953) catapulted the spread of anti-system rumors in Romania. Lajos Csupor characterized the situation at the beginning of April to Akulov, the Soviet consul in Cluj: “Hostile activity has strengthened a lot recently, especially on behalf of the Catholic church and the sects. They encourage the peasants not to work, not to give in their produce and not to pay taxes. Jehova’s Witnesses mean a special problem since they call

---

<sup>82</sup> *Vostochnaja Evropa*, document 318.

<sup>83</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureș, dos. 70/1953, 2–11 f. The first item on the agenda of the special bureau meeting held on 18 May 1953 was “the discussion of actions against the planned fair”.

<sup>84</sup> On the social crisis in post-war Soviet society Elena Zubkova: *Russia after the War. Hopes, illusions and disappointments 1945–1957*. London–Armork, NY: Sharpe, 1998. Similar, large-scale phenomena were reported in Romania. For the Szekler region see the study by József Gagyi: *A krízis éve a Székelyföldön. 1949* [1949. The year of social crisis in the Szeklerland]. Miercurea Ciuc: Pro-Print, 2004.

for peace, but accept the defense of peace only without arms and bloodshed. The agents of the sects have conducted this type of hostile activity with some success at the military garrison in Târgu-Mureș. Stalin's death gave the opportunity for some to announce the upcoming end of communism. A professor at the Medical faculty told his students that Stalin had actually been dead for a long time."<sup>85</sup>

At a Party meeting a few days later Csupor talked about a characteristic aspect of anti-religious struggle, the traveling exhibitions on the origin of mankind. "In order to combat mysticism 154 meetings and exhibitions have been organized on the origin of man where 8,000 people participated. As a result six remained of the 20 Jehova's Witnesses in Praid/Parajd, although their number increased from 108 to 140 in Ocna de Jos/Alsósófalva and Ocna de Sus/Felsősófalva."<sup>86</sup>

As mentioned before, along with religious emotions, continuous nationalist manifestations and rivalry between ethnic groups were also considered dangerous and the authorities tried to break them with all means. Hungarian leaders appointed in July 1952 were aware of the fact, to use Zoltán Szövérfi's words, "that the nationality issue is the most important question for regional Party organizations, especially here in the HAR".<sup>87</sup>

But it was not at all easy to make the HAR and especially its administrative center, Târgu Mureș – a typically provincial, petty-bourgeois "eat-well town" – into a "proletarian city". Despite all efforts (see, for example, the myth generated around the Géza Simó furniture factory, "the biggest furniture factory in East-Central Europe" where, to intertwine the social and national content of propaganda, almost all workers were Hungarian), reality was bleaker than the press depicted it. A constant shortage of housing proved to be the gravest problem without doubt. According to a 1951 document, and thus before the HAR, 72,000 residence permits were approved mainly as a result of the establishment of Târgu-Mureș as the capital of the Mureș region in 1950.<sup>88</sup> Due to the overcrowding with state and Party offices, in the

<sup>85</sup> *Vostochnaja Evropa*, op. cit. 768 (document 318)

<sup>86</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureș, dos. 68/1953, 51–52. f. (Meeting of activists. Lajos Csupor's report on the Party's activity from January 1953.)

<sup>87</sup> ANDJM, CR PCR Mureș, dos. 69/1953, 127. f. (Minutes of the bureau meeting on 10 April 1953)

<sup>88</sup> ANDJM CR PCR Mureș, dos. 42/195, 12. f. (Activity report of the economic sector of the party's Regional Committee in the last months of 1951).

mid-50s the locative space *pro capite* fell down at 4,2 m<sup>2</sup>, and forced co-habitation became also part of the everyday life in Târgu-Mureş.<sup>89</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The collective memory of Hungarians living in the HAR preserves the years following its establishment as a period of cultural development, however paradoxical it may seem when taking into account the high level of ideological pressure, the massive political reprisals and the extremely low standard of living suffered by most of the population in the first decade of the communist regime.

The role of “cultural ghetto” Moscow attributed to the HAR perhaps offers the most suitable explanation.<sup>90</sup> The Romanian authorities were aware of the fact that a reprisal against Hungarians, at least in the first period, would give rise to the suspicion of oppressing nationalities. The administrative umbrella represented by the HAR made the preservation of a particular kind of Hungarian cultural tradition possible for the local majority.

Universities, newspapers, reviews, folk-dance groups, professional and amateur theatres played an outstanding role in reproducing elites and preserving the Hungarian identity. At the same time, the national forms of “greenhouse” Stalin offered to the Hungarians of Szeklerland should have softened its socialist content: the “little Hungary” represented by HAR should have strengthened the loyalty to the Romanian state. But the population’s enthusiastic reaction to the Hungarian revolution of 1956, which was the first major political test for the region and its leadership after the death of Stalin, displayed all the internal contradictions of the “Hungarian policy” imposed by Stalin on Romania. The coexistence of a Romanian “civic” identity (being a loyal citizen of the Romanian state) and of a Hungarian “cultural” one (feeling part of another community) proved to be an illusion. As a logical consequence, the Romanian communists led by Gheorghiu-Dej, who had never been enthusiastic about the HAR, decided to eliminate this “alien body”, and practically dismantled it in december 1960 by reshaping its borders.

---

<sup>89</sup> ANDJM CR PCR Mureş, dos. 114/1955, 12. f.

<sup>90</sup> This is strongly underlined by Walker Connor: *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy*. Princeton: Princeton UP 1984. 340–342.

