

Virtual Nationalism in Comparative Context: How Unique Is the Hungarian Approach?

Zsuzsa Csergő – James M. Goldgeier*

After violence erupted in Yugoslavia in 1991, Western policymakers and scholars feared that similar conflicts might engulf Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. After all, given the history of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Yugoslav situation seemed depressingly familiar: once again, leaders of a kin-state believed that their ethnic brethren across the border should not be ruled by a different ethnic group. Seeking ethnic homogeneity and historical greatness, they desired to expel or kill minorities at home and adjust international borders, by force if necessary, in order to ensure, in Ernest Gellner's simple phrase, that the 'the political and the national unit should be congruent'.¹ With the iron hand of Soviet communism lifted, what was to prevent unresolved border disputes between Hungary and Romania, Hungary and Ukraine, Romania and Moldova, and Russia and Estonia from causing war throughout the region? The part of the world that sparked World War I, World War II, and the Cold War appeared poised for instability.

Despite fears that Central and East European's 'return to Europe' might bring about a return to the past, Europe today did not turn out to be the Europe of yesteryear. Although all three multinational federative states in the region (the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia) collapsed, violence was contained in the Balkans and a handful of isolated hotspots in the former Soviet Union.² The Russian army did not march to rescue

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¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983), p. 1.

² Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge, 1999).

Russians in Latvia; nor did the Hungarian military march across borders to reclaim the lost lands of the Holy Crown of Saint Stephen.

While nationalist violence in Europe after the collapse of communism was less widespread than many had initially feared, national agendas have remained important features in an increasingly integrated Europe. What has changed over time is that governments and other political actors that design national agendas in Europe are no longer operating in an exclusively state-dominated environment. By the end of the Cold War, the European Union had created a novel form of political interaction on the continent. Between a disintegrating Soviet empire and an integrating Western Europe, Central and East Europeans had options for pursuing national agendas that had not existed previously, and they also had severe constraints if they wanted to be accepted in the new Europe.

As political elites in places like Budapest, Bucharest, and Riga designed post-communist nation building strategies after 1989, the prospect of membership in the European Union (and NATO) was of utmost importance. The conditions under which these institutions promised to take these societies ‘back to Europe’, however, were not in every respect conducive to a smooth journey. International, regional, and domestic expectations pulled these governments in different directions.

To their domestic audiences, the new governments aspired to demonstrate their ability finally to assert national sovereignty after decades of satellite status in the Soviet camp. Yet in none of these countries was there consensus about what ‘the nation’ should be under the new conditions. Fundamental to the national conceptions of titular majority ethnic groups (those after whom the states were named) was the notion that the newly democratic state should represent *their* national aspirations.³ Many of the independent states of Central and Eastern Europe, however, encompass sizeable minority groups that challenged majority notions of nationhood and articulated competing notions of democratic sovereignty—demanding inclusive social contracts that would guarantee also *their* continued cultural reproduction. Minorities with stronger political resources asked for various forms of institutional autonomy. Most ethnic and national minorities also have kin-states in the

³ Mark R. Beissinger, ‘How Nationalisms Spread: Eastern Europe Adrift the Tides and Cycles of Nationalist Contention’, *Social Research* 63:1 (1996), p. 135.

neighbourhood that demonstrated varying degrees of interest in them. To make matters more complicated, many governments in the region had to juggle the dual roles of home state (in relation to their titular nation and national minorities living on their territory) and kin-state (in relation to their kin living outside their territory).

The international institutions that Central and East European states aspired to join were concerned primarily with security and stability in the neighbourhood. The remarkable growth in the adoption of minority protection documents in the 1990s manifested increased international recognition of the high costs, in the aftermath of the crises in the former Yugoslavia, of not finding viable solutions to questions of multinationalism, especially in situations that involve kin-states.⁴ Concerted international efforts in this regard from the beginning of post-communism demonstrated that minority protection remained closely related to questions of stability and security.⁵ Pursuing aggressive policies toward kin in neighbouring states was out of the question for Hungary and Romania; pursuing overly discriminatory policies toward ethnic minorities was out of the question for Latvia and Romania. As for Russia, thoughts of using violence to support ethnic Russians outside of the Russian Federation were incompatible with an agenda of closer relations with the West; furthermore, policies toward those Russians, especially in the Baltics, were constrained by Western support for these newly independent states and therefore made a Russian military strategy

⁴ These documents include: the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe's (CSCE) Copenhagen Document (1990), known also as the European Constitution on Human Rights, which included a chapter on the protection of national minorities; the Council of Europe's (CE) European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages (1992); the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National and Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992); the CE's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995), which is commonly considered a major achievement as the first legally binding international tool for minority protection; the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities (1998).

⁵ Gabriel Andreescu, for instance, comments on a Bucharest visit by the OSCE High Commissioner that the official was more interested in the situation of Hungarians than in the plight of the Roma, although the latter were much more politically vulnerable than the Hungarians. In Will Kymlicka and Magda Opalski (eds.), *Can Liberal Pluralism Be Exported?: Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2001), p. 275.

infeasible. Western pressure on the Baltic governments to accommodate Russian minority demands also weakened the grounds on which Moscow could have justified any kin-state intervention.

It was against this backdrop that in June 2001 the Parliament of Hungary adopted the Status Law, attracting significant attention from policy-makers in the region, European officials, and scholars of nationalism.⁶ In itself, the adoption of a kin-state law in Central Europe was by no means a revolutionary event. Other European governments, such as the Austrian, Italian, Croatian, Romanian, and Slovak, had also passed legislation that granted various forms of preferential treatment and benefits to their kin living in other states. The Status Law represents an example of a broader type of nation building strategy that we earlier described as ‘virtual nationalism’ or transsovereign nationalism.⁷ As an alternative to traditional nation state nationalism, this law intended to incorporate ethnic kin into the concept of nation and offer special economic and cultural ties without proposing to change borders or encourage population movements. Most Hungarian political elites remain aware that pursuing a more revisionist project would be unacceptable in Europe, and weak popular support for the far-right Party of Hungarian Justice and Life [MIÉP] shows that the population generally has no desire for such policies. Transsovereign nationalism shares the traditional emphasis that political organisation should occur along national lines; but instead of forming a nation state either through territorial changes or the repatriation of co-nationals within its political borders, the national centre creates institutions that maintain and reproduce the nation across existing state borders.⁸

The specific (tangible) benefits that the Hungarian law granted were also not dramatically different from those that had already been available for Hungarian minorities through existing forms of support. From 1990, Hungarian governments had established a range of institutions (governmental agencies and government-sponsored foundations) to link Hungarians living in neighbouring countries to Hungary and encourage

⁶ See <<http://www.htmh.hu/torveny.htm>> for the law and related documents and other literature, accessed 24 November 2004.

⁷ Zsuzsa Csergo and James M. Goldgeier, ‘Nationalist Strategies and European Integration’, *Perspectives on Politics* 2:1 (2004), pp. 21–37.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 26.

them to remain Hungarian ‘in their homeland’, in regions and settlements that ethnic Hungarians had historically inhabited. The underlying logic of the Status Law was consistent with a strategy, begun in 1990 and continued by all Hungarian governments since, that aimed to assure that Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin maintain and strengthen their Hungarian language and culture and to improve their socio-economic status. Through a complex set of indirect and direct methods, all Hungarian governments sought to facilitate ‘Hungarian-Hungarian’ interaction across the borders and also to influence neighbouring states’ policies toward Hungarian minority institutions in a way that would weaken state ‘ownership’ and strengthen the control of Hungarian minorities throughout the region over minority institutions of cultural reproduction. The expression most often used for these goals in Hungarian political discourse was the ‘virtualisation’ of state borders.⁹ The Status Law merely articulated the ‘spirit’ of this strategy in a more explicit and comprehensive form by officially declaring that the approximately 2.5 million Hungarians living in the states of Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine are members of the Hungarian ‘nation’, culturally defined. The law also outlined a comprehensive legal framework for linking members of this nation to each other across state borders, thereby strengthening their economic and cultural status.

I. Virtual Nationalism: A Uniquely Hungarian Project?

If the adoption of a kin-state law was neither a rarity in Europe nor a dramatic shift in Hungary’s kin-state strategy, then it is important to explain the reasons why this particular piece of legislation has received so much attention. Some analysts have argued that it reflects a promising post-modern nation building strategy.¹⁰ Others believe the law is

⁹ Zsuzsa Csergő and James M. Goldgeier, ‘Virtual Nationalism’, *Foreign Policy* 125 (July–August 2001), pp. 76–77.

¹⁰ George Schöpflin, ‘A Magyar státustörvény: Politikai, kulturális és szociológiai kontextusok’ in Zoltán Kántor (ed.), *A státustörvény: Előzmények és következmények* (Budapest, 2002), pp. 9–17; Brigid Fowler, ‘Fuzzing Citizenship, Nationalising Political Space: A Framework for Interpreting the Hungarian “Status Law” as a New Form of Kin-state Policy in Central and Eastern Europe’, ESRC Working Paper 40/02 (2002) <www.one-europe.ac.uk/pdf/w40fowler.pdf>, accessed 24 November 2004.

dangerous, not only to the region but to the entire Westphalian state system.¹¹ An obvious source of regional and international interest in this law was that its adoption brought Hungary's relations with at least two of its neighbours, Romania and Slovakia, to a low point at a time when all of these countries were lined up to join the European Union. These neighbours brought the case of the Status Law to European institutions for arbitration. Ukraine and Slovenia expressed remarkably little anxiety over the law, and Croatian officials even expressed agreement with it.¹² Of the two states that brought formal complaints against Hungary to the European Union and the Council of Europe, Slovakia had passed a kin-state law in 1997 that included many of the same benefits for which Slovak officials vehemently criticised the Hungarian law; Romania adopted a kin-state law in 1998.¹³ The vehemence of the opposition to the law on the part of the Romanian and Slovak governments can be explained by the dynamics of nation building strategies in the region in the aftermath of the communist collapse. The Hungarian effort to 'virtualise' political borders was highly problematic in an area where neighbouring states continued to place strong emphasis on maintaining their—in many cases newly acquired—territorial sovereignty.¹⁴ The legacies of past relationships between Hungarians and their neighbours—a history of dominance and subordination followed by reversals of fortune—contributed to Romanian and Slovak perceptions that the Status Law was merely a guise for the desire to reincorporate territories and 'imperial' ethnic kin that Hungary had lost through the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. Hungarians are a formerly dominant group in the neighbourhood and may be using EU integration to reclaim their earlier position.

¹¹ Stephen Deets, 'The Hungarian Status Law and the Specter of Neo-Medievalism in Europe', Paper presented for the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, 17–20 March 2004.

¹² Klara Kingston, 'The Hungarian Status Law', *East European Perspectives* 3:17 (October 2001).

¹³ Deets, op. cit.; Iván Halász and Balázs Majtényi, 'A magyar státustörvény a kelet-közép-európai jogi szabályozás tükrében' in László Szarka and Nóra Kovács (eds.), *Tér és terep* (Budapest, 2002).

¹⁴ The notion of transsovereign nationalism was developed in Csergő and Goldgeier, op. cit. 'Virtual Nationalism'. For a discussion of these competing strategies, see: Csergo and Goldgeier, op. cit. 'Nationalist Strategies and European Integration'.

The largest and politically best organised Hungarian minority populations reside in Romania and Slovakia. Although only Slovakia was newly established in the aftermath of the Cold War, both of these states were governed for the better part of the first post-communist decade by political elites who opted for a centralised, unitary nation state model and adopted cultural policies that antagonised their minority populations. Under such circumstances, Hungarians minorities became subjects of two conflicting nation building strategies. In their home states, majority nationalist governments designed institutional means for their cultural assimilation. In Budapest, consecutive kin-state governments designed means to help them maintain their Hungarian culture. The Status Law defined ‘Hungarians living abroad’ as primarily *external* minorities of their kin-state. The Romanian and Slovak opposition to the law defied this definition and upheld the position that Hungarian minorities are these states’ *internal* minorities.¹⁵ Beyond its obvious implications for territorial sovereignty, the question whether Hungarian minorities should behave as external or internal minorities raises a great number of other issues, including the proper source of governmental responsibility for supporting minority culture and equal access to resources.

The special attention that European institutions have accorded to the Hungarian Status Law can be explained in the context of the dominant security and stability framework after the Cold War. Finding a common European answer to the question of whether the Hungarian minorities should be considered primarily internal or external national minorities was less important from this perspective than assuring that the governments in conflict resolved their disputes peacefully. The essence of this approach was best articulated in the Pact on Stability in Europe signed in 1995, which sought ‘stability through the promotion of good neighbourly relations, including questions related to frontiers and minorities, as well as regional cooperation and the strengthening of democratic institutions’.¹⁶ Although post-Cold War European norms placed increasing emphasis on the principles of cultural diversity and minority protection, they continued

¹⁵ Zsuzsa Csergő, *Language and Nationalism in New European Democracies: Lessons from Post-Communist Romania and Slovakia* (forthcoming), chapter 3.

¹⁶ Quoted in Patrice McMahon, ‘Managing Ethnicity in Eastern Europe: the Effects of Globalization and Transnational Networks’, Paper presented for the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, 17–20 March 2004, p. 7.

to uphold states' sovereignty over their cultural policies. The duality in the European approach that promotes minority protection while upholding sovereign state rights is evident in the text of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities that the Council of Europe adopted in 1995 and is today commonly considered a major achievement as the first legally binding international tool for minority protection. On the one hand, the Convention specifies a number of minority rights and requires states to preserve and support minority cultures (even if it consistently refers to 'persons' and 'individuals' rather than groups that would benefit from such rights). On the other hand, the Convention emphatically reaffirms the primacy of the principle of state sovereignty in this domain, declaring:

[N]othing in the present framework convention shall be interpreted as implying any right to engage in any activity or perform any act contrary to the fundamental principles of international law and in particular of the sovereign equality, territorial integrity and political independence of States.¹⁷

On these grounds, West European actors consistently advocated policies that relied on bilateral agreements between a minority's home state and kin-state, coupled with accommodative domestic minority policies adopted in the minority's home state. Clearly, the unilateralism of the Status Law challenged the dominant European approach to kin-state issues. In its October 2001 report about the law, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission restated the principle that kin-state laws are acceptable only if they do not violate territorial sovereignty and that one state's extraterritorial provisions are only acceptable with the consent of the other state concerned.¹⁸ The same message was evident in the report issued by Eric Jürgens, a rapporteur that the European Parliament appointed to evaluate the Status Law.¹⁹

¹⁷ Article 21, quoted in Bruno de Witte, 'Politics versus law in the EU's approach to ethnic minorities' in Jan Zielonka (ed.), *Europe Unbound* (New York, 2002), p. 138.

¹⁸ 'Report on the Preferential Treatment of National Minorities by Their Kin-state', adopted by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) at its 48th Plenary Meeting, Venice, 19–20 October 2001, CDL-INF (2001) 19. <[http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2001/CDL-INF\(2001\)019-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2001/CDL-INF(2001)019-e.asp)>, accessed 23 January 2006.

¹⁹ 'Preferential Treatment of National Minorities by Their Kin-states: The Case of the

The scale of the law's potential impact on neighbourly relations in the region was another source of concern. Seven states neighbouring Hungary include ethnic Hungarian populations, and five of these states were newly established after the collapse of communist federations. Unsurprisingly, Western governments were particularly active in the mid-1990s in facilitating Hungary's 'Friendship treaties' with its neighbours. Realising the importance of such treaties, the Hungarian governments signed bilateral treaties with Ukraine, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria even before the EU made the bilateral resolution of minority issues a pre-accession criterion in 1994. Hungary's treaties with Romania and Slovakia (negotiations for which also began as early as in 1991) were the most difficult to conclude, as these two neighbours had the combination of large and politically well organised Hungarian populations and governments that pursued a traditional (culturally homogenising) nation state strategy. By the time the Status Law was adopted in 2001, Hungary had successfully concluded its bilateral treaties with these two neighbours and made substantive progress toward the European Union accession. The adoption of the Status Law in the absence of bilateral agreements on its legitimacy and the response from Romania and Slovakia highlighted the precariousness of good neighbourly relations based on the Friendship treaties.

Another reason for international interest in the Status Law was that the law's architects framed it as a uniquely progressive resolution of the Gellnerian dilemma (i.e. the incongruence of the political and national boundaries) within the EU framework. The ultimate goal was for all of Hungary's neighbours to join the EU (as Austria, Slovenia, and Slovakia have already done) at which point the Hungarian nation, while spread across state boundaries, would be under one supra-national Union roof.²⁰ Then-Prime Minister Viktor Orbán characterised the unprecedented potential of this approach:

I am convinced that the [Status Law] contains a number of novelties judging even by European standards and it also outlines a Hungarian concept about the Europe of the future. During the time of de Gaulle,

Hungarian Status Law of 19 June 2001', Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, Doc. 9813 (22 May 2003).

²⁰ Csergo and Goldgeier, op. cit. 'Nationalist Strategies and European Integration'.

the French thought that the European Union has to be a union of states belonging to Europe. During the time of Chancellor Kohl the Germans came to the conclusion that the Union has to be a Europe of regions. And now, we Hungarians have come up with the idea that the Europe of the future should be a Europe of communities, the Europe of national communities, and this is what the [Status Law] is all about.²¹

Despite such tempting reasons to view the Hungarian Status Law as a unique articulation of national aspirations, we take a comparative approach to this law, with the purpose of understanding the nature of the form of nation building that it represents. In the following section, we compare Hungary's nation building efforts abroad with those of Romania and Russia. Romania was one of the harshest critics of Hungary's Status Law, but it has sizeable kin communities abroad that could be the focus of a more robust, Bucharest-centered transsovereign strategy. Russia is a former imperial power, and like Hungarians in places like Transylvania, Russian minorities in the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union are often viewed as 'imperial minorities'.²² Each of the three states has pursued virtual nationalism to different degrees, and the extent of the differences were due primarily to the degrees of coherence in the kin-state's policies, the demand for support by minorities in the neighbouring states, and the role of the EU and the new norms in Europe in shaping state strategies.

At the time of its adoption, the Hungarian Status Law was seemingly the most coherent articulation of virtual nationalism and also a case in which a kin-state policy reflected broad consensus in the national centre and responded to, or at least was in line with, overwhelming demand by kin minorities. To be sure, there were strong disagreements in Hungary over the necessity of such a framework law as well as harsh debates about the political motives behind the Orbán government's insistence on adopting this law without proper consultations either with neighbouring governments whose citizens the law targeted or with leaders of the

²¹ BBC Monitoring Service, U.K. edition, Premier Outlines Hungarian Idea on Future European Union, 29 July 2001.

²² See also Beissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 135: 'The presence of groups associated with foreign states further injects a shadow of doubt surrounding their existence (in the case of Russians, Hungarians, and Turks, for instance) these groups are identified with former occupying powers'.

European institutions that were supposed to accommodate the law.²³ Evidence indicated that large segments of the Hungarian political elite and public did not support important provisions of the law. Numerous Hungarian minority leaders expressed criticism of the law.²⁴ Yet its adoption with an overwhelming majority of the votes (93 per cent) in the Hungarian parliament in June 2001 projected a high degree of consensus at least about the main purpose of the law, which was to provide support for Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries. The high number of applicants for Hungarian certificates indicated that the legislation responded to significant demand. In Romania, 700,000 cards were issued by mid-July 2003. These numbers suggest that a significant part of the ethnic Hungarian population outside of Hungary maintains a concept of shared Hungarian nationhood despite the separation of these territories from Hungary after 1918.

The current debate in Hungary about whether the Hungarian state should grant dual citizenship to Hungarians abroad raises significant questions about the relative coherence of the Hungarian transsovereign national strategy. This debate highlights the continuing political salience of the effort to find a proper definition for the relationship between Hungarians inside and outside of the state. The fierce disagreements that opposing political elites have voiced in this debate in Hungary and within Hungarian minority communities abroad also demonstrate that the nation building process can be divisive not only *between* national boundaries but also *within* the nation that it attempts to integrate. The strategy to construct a unified Hungarian cultural nation in the Carpathian Basin assumed away significant differences (regional and otherwise) that continue to assert themselves in the process and affect the effort to create a coherent policy.

²³ See also Zoltán Kántor, 'Status Law and "Nation Policy": Theoretical Aspects' in Zoltán Kántor et al. (eds.), *The Hungarian Status Law: Nation Building and/or Minority Protection* (Slavic Eurasian Studies no. 4; Sapporo, 2004); Myra A. Waterbury, 'Beyond State and Nation: External Minorities and the "Death" of Irredentism in Europe', Paper prepared for delivery at the 'Political Minorities and Political Boundaries Conference', Yale University, 18 May 2002.

²⁴ For a collection of documents and essays reflecting controversies about the law in Hungary and the neighbouring countries, see Zoltán Kántor (ed.), *A státustörvény: Dokumentumok, tanulmányok, publicisztika* (Budapest, 2002).

II. The Romanian Approach: In Pursuit of States as ‘Cornerstones of the New European Edifice’

Elsewhere we have compared the Hungarian approach to other types of nationalist strategies.²⁵ Here we first compare Hungary’s approach to the policies of Romania. We then turn to a discussion of Russia.

At home, the post-communist Romanian government pursued a traditional nation state approach to consolidate its authority. Simultaneously, this government applied for membership in the European Union membership, and the current regime has made serious efforts to satisfy the conditions of accession by 2007. Unlike Hungary, but similar to many other post-communist states, Romania views the EU not as an alliance of communities and regions but rather as an alliance of strong states interacting with one another primarily for economic benefits. In the words of Romanian President Ion Iliescu:

The State is undoubtedly one of our oldest legacies here in Europe. It has been to this day the foundation of the rule of law both at home, within the states, and abroad, in the relations among them. The making of the European states, as an expression of the free and sovereign will of the respective peoples and nations, covers the largest part of our continent’s political history. [...] The aim of change is not the dissolution of states but rather their adaptation or even radical modification, if this is required, so that they suit the new processes at home and the requirements of international integration. The states still represent the cornerstones of the new European edifice. Their identity may change, but not by weakening their contents and significance, or even by dissolution, but through enhanced relevance and functional differentiation.²⁶

Yet Romania, like Hungary, is itself a kin-state, with Romanians living in Moldova, Ukraine, Serbia and even Hungary, and it too provides benefits for Romanians abroad. It makes dual citizenship available to ethnic Romanians abroad, and it provides them with cultural and educational assistance. Why then does Hungary behave more markedly as a kin-state than Romania?

²⁵ Csergo and Goldgeier, op. cit. ‘Nationalist Strategies and European Integration’.

²⁶ Ion Iliescu, *Integration and Globalization: A Romanian View* (Bucharest, 2003), p. 73.

Demography is one obvious source of the different kin-state strategies. Hungary has little reason to fear internal challenge from sub-state national groups because nearly all of the non-Hungarian ethnic communities that live in Hungary today are highly assimilated. The exception is the Roma, who have limited resources to challenge the government.²⁷

A second difference lies in institutional legacies, more specifically in the process of modern state- and nation building. Differences in institutional legacy have important implications also for the centrality of particular territories to national myths and the extent to which these territories became part of the ‘homeland’ component of national loyalties. The state- and nation building process began earlier in Hungary than in Romania; therefore the sense of common Hungarian ‘nationhood’ emerged before the border changes of the post-World War I period. The ethnic Hungarians who remained outside of Hungary after 1918 already had participated in a unitary process of Hungarian nation building and became reluctant members of a minority that focused its energies on the revisionism that marked Hungarian politics in the interwar era.²⁸ The construction of greater Romania with a unitary concept of nationhood began in earnest only after 1918.²⁹ The ethnic Romanians who remained outside Romania after 1918 (or became incorporated only for the interwar decades) could not become part of a Romanian unitary nation state project. These Romanian speakers could not develop a strong sense of common Romanian nationhood.

During the same interwar period that made modern unitary nation building possible for the first time for the Romanians, the Hungarians focused all of their energies on revisionism, on trying to reclaim lost territories. The most valuable of these was Transylvania, a territory of central importance in Hungarian national myth-making and which also gained central importance in Romanian national myth-making. Hungary regained part of Transylvania in 1940 under the Second Vienna Accord

²⁷ Zoltán Bányai, ‘Ethnic Mobilization without Prerequisites: The East European Gypsies’, *World Politics* 54:3 (April 2002), pp. 277–307.

²⁸ For the history of relationship between Hungary and Hungarian minorities, see: Nándor Bárdi, *Tény és való: a budapesti kormányzatok és a határon túli magyarság kapcsolattörténete* (Bratislava, 2004).

²⁹ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Ithaca, 1995).

signed with Adolph Hitler, but Romania re-acquired these lands after World War II. In the Hungarian case, Transylvania and southern Slovakia were part of the Hungarian kingdom for centuries and remain central to the Hungarian national story. In Romania, on the other hand, where the writing of a unitary national story began only after 1918, the places that are outside of current Romanian borders were never fully incorporated into the national story. Although the first modern Romanian state created at the end of the 19th century incorporated part of contemporary Moldova, this state failed to apply the modernisation-cum-cultural-homogenisation formula successfully in this region. When this territory became part of the Soviet Union, its Romanian-speaking population remained overwhelmingly illiterate and very poor, and they were uninterested in Romanian nationhood.³⁰

The notion of Hungarian nationhood persisted among Hungarians left outside of Hungary during the communist period, even during the harshest communist regimes in Romania and Czechoslovakia—perhaps precisely because of the relentlessness of these regimes. By contrast, ethnic Romanians living in Romania’s neighbouring states either assimilated to the majority culture in significant numbers (as in Hungary, Serbia or Ukraine) or became subjects of separate nation building processes (as in the Soviet Republic of Moldova).

Although the initial internationalist period of the communist period tried to foster similarities across the region, Hungary and Romania developed significantly different variants of ‘applied Marxism’, particularly after the 1960s. Hungary had a relatively liberal version of one-party rule under the Kádár regime, which allowed for higher degrees of economic and cultural freedoms than the totalitarian regime of Nicolai Ceausescu’s Romania, the most repressive government in Central and Eastern Europe. The Ceausescu government pursued aggressive ‘nation state’ policies, including harsh policies of assimilation toward minority groups in Romania.³¹ Against this backdrop, the nationalist policies of the

³⁰ Cristina Petrescu, ‘Contrasting/conflicting Identities: Bessarabians, Romanians, Moldovans’ in Balázs Trencsényi et al. (eds.), *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies* (Budapest, 2001), pp. 153–178. For a comprehensive study on Moldova, see: Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, 2000).

³¹ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu’s Romania* (Berkeley, 1991); Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*

post-Ceausescu government in Romania, especially during the first tenure of President Iliescu (1990–1996), were not surprising to those who viewed nationalism as a continuation of communist centralising practices in the cultural sphere. However, the transsovereign strategy that the post-communist Hungarian government began after 1990 was not a continuation of communist practices. The Kádár government had downplayed the significance of nationalism and made comparatively little effort to maintain kinship ties with Hungarian minorities outside Hungary's borders. It appears that, at least in the case of Hungarians, the post-communist national project was able to build on a shared national myth constructed before 1918 that survived even during the period between 1918 and 1990. This continuity helps explain the continuing strength of Hungarian minority demands for kin-state support after 1990 and also raises an important theoretical question about nationalism: once modern nation building proceeds long enough to create a sense of common nationhood in a population, what does it take for this 'nation' to be undone after dramatic institutional changes, such as border changes?³²

Finally, there are differences between these cases in the areas of elite choices, both in the kin-state and among ethnic minorities in neighbouring states. Governments in Hungary and Romania have changed character during the post-communist period, with socialist-liberal and centre-right coalitions taking turns in Hungary, while in Romania, the more consensual Democratic Coalition government replaced that of Iliescu, who returned to power with a 'change of heart' in his second term. But differences in governing periods do not seem fundamental, appearing to affect more the degree of emphasis on national unity and uniqueness rather than determining whether nation building policies should continue. While some parties have shown greater flexibility than others on nation building agendas, governments of any stripe in both Hungary and Romania must respond to the pressure from the EU to solve any potential conflicts of interest peacefully and accommodate minority cultural demands.

More important in terms of elite choices are the demands made by ethnic brethren in neighbouring states. The Hungarian minorities in

(Berkeley, 2003).

³² See also: Zsuzsa Csergő, 'National Strategies and the Uses of Dichotomy', *Regio* (2003), pp. 95–101.

Slovakia, Romania, and Serbia demand the Hungarian government's attention and assistance in ways that the Hungarians living in Austria and Slovenia do not. There are no similar demands articulated by Romanians in either Moldova, a country in which Romanians are the ethnic majority, or in Ukraine. Although many Romanian cultural elites in Bucharest consider Romanians in Romania and Moldova to belong to one nation and the Romanian government expresses clear interest in supporting the cultural reproduction of these Romanian minorities, the Romanian-speaking population of Moldova and the Romanian minorities in Ukraine, Hungary, and Serbia so far have not indicated strong interest in a robust transsovereign nation building project. Whether or not kin communities demand the attention of the kin-state is a key determination of the strength of a virtual nationalism agenda.

III. Russia: The Dog That Didn't Bark

With 25 million ethnic Russians living outside the Russian Federation, many feared that it would only be a matter of time before Moscow moved aggressively to ensure that the rights of Russian minorities in places like northern Kazakhstan, Crimea, and the Baltics were protected. While the Russian government was sporadically threatening toward Latvia and Estonia in the 1990s, overall the strategy not only has been a virtual one, but a very weak virtual one. The historic lack of coherence of an ethnic Russian identity, the economic advantages of Russians living in the Baltics compared to their brethren in the kin-state, the desire of Russia to maintain close relations with the West, and the failure of the Russian military to subdue Chechnya have all combined to weaken any serious efforts by the Russian government to support ethnic kin, even if the rhetoric of support remains strong.

Like Hungary, the Russian national myth is tied up in imperial history. But unlike Hungarians, Russians never developed a coherent national identity separate from their imperial one. Only some lands outside the Russian Federation are important for a Russian national myth, especially Ukraine—given that the Russian national story begins in Kievan Rus. Russia over the centuries expanded into all sorts of lands clearly not Russian in character. Nor does the Russian language play a

similar role as a national marker. There are many non-Russians who speak Russian. During both the Tsarist and Soviet periods, rulers sent Russians to far-flung places in the empire to help control the territories. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, however, there was little that tied Russians across the region together into a common understanding. Scholars even debate what term to use to describe Russians—Russian-speaking or ethnic Russian—and there are different words for ‘Russian’—ethnic and civic—in the Russian language itself.³³

Institutional legacies also vary across the region. David Laitin has described well the differences in Russian language use in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet period. In Ukraine, Russian language was used relatively equally with Ukrainian. In Kazakhstan, upward mobility required use of Russian. And in Latvia and Estonia, the native languages were used extensively. Thus after breakup, Russians in different parts of the former empire found themselves in very different situations. Those speaking Russian in Kazakhstan are not at a disadvantage; in Ukraine, the situation is more mixed; whereas in Latvia or Estonia, learning the native language is critical for advancement.³⁴

There are numerous scholars who have explored the puzzling question about why the last Soviet government in 1990–1991 did not attempt to use massive force to keep the Union together (there were limited uses of violence in the Caucasus and the Baltics prior to breakup). At the moment of collapse, the non-Russian republics had a great opportunity to break free because of the nature of the Yeltsin government in Russia. Boris Yeltsin’s primary focus was defeating Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev’s political position was president of the Union; without Union, Yeltsin as president of Russia was supreme. Furthermore, Gorbachev had become the darling of the West by promoting democracy and markets; Yeltsin sought the West’s attention by being even more pro-democracy and pro-market. Yeltsin’s focus was on Russia’s prospects as an independent country, and especially on economic growth. He kept ties to

³³ See for example: Nikolai Rudensky, ‘Russian Minorities in the Newly Independent States: An International Problem in the Domestic Context of Russia Today’ in Roman Szporluk (ed.), *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY, 1994); David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, 1998); Neil Melvin, *Russians Beyond Russia: The Politics of National Identity* (London, 1995).

³⁴ Laitin, *op. cit.*

the other republics by forming the Commonwealth of Independent States, but at least in 1992 the Russian government's attitude was that those living in the Russian Federation were citizens of Russia; those living in other republics were citizens of those republics.³⁵ And in the most important non-Russian republic, Ukraine, support even among Russians for independence was quite strong, with a majority in Russian-dominated Crimea voting yes in the December 1991 referendum on Ukrainian independence.³⁶

The most liberal pro-Western figures in the Russian government began to lose their influence and position by the end of 1992. As Yeltsin sought to maintain control politically, he began to adopt more nationalist positions, including toward the diaspora. One of the most important questions concerned Russians living in the Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. When the Soviet Union collapsed, over 100,000 Red Army troops were stationed in the Baltic Republics. Russia had quickly agreed to an 31 August 1993 deadline for withdrawing troops from Lithuania, which had a small ethnic Russian population and no important Russian military facilities. The other two countries had significant Russian populations (which in turn made the Latvians and Estonians more nationalist); Latvia also had an important Russian radar site and Estonia a nuclear submarine facility.

The West played an important role both in constraining the more discriminatory impulses in Latvia and Estonia as well as the more extreme impulses in Russia. Latvia and Estonia were desperate to join NATO and the European Union. They had been forcibly brought into the Soviet empire even though the United States and its partners had never officially recognised their incorporation. Determined to be protected from future Russian revanchism, the two countries were careful not to violate Western principles as they proceeded to build their nation states. Even so, Latvia has tried to limit the numbers of Russians becoming citizens in the hope that most will leave and thereby shift the demographic balance. But due to Western pressure, Latvia until recently supported schools conducted in

³⁵ On the Gorbachev-Yeltsin battle and the role of the West, see: James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C., 2003), chapters 2–4. On the last point, see: Melvin, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–12.

³⁶ Evgenii Golovakha, Natalia Panina, and Nikolai Churilov, 'Russians in Ukraine' in Vladimir Shlapentokh, Munir Sendich, and Emil Payin (eds.), *The New Russian Diaspora: Russian Minorities in the Former Soviet Republics* (Armonk, NY, 1994), p. 64.

Russian language and the citizenship law has been amended over time to allow children born after Latvian independence from the Soviet Union to become citizens if their parents so desire.³⁷

The schools issue may prove troublesome in the future. Latvian law now requires that Russian-language schools (and other minority language schools) provide bilingual education. The new bilingual curricula were introduced in 2002–2003, against tremendous Russian opposition.³⁸ But while Russians oppose restrictions of this sort, those living in the Baltics prefer to remain there. Economic life is much better than it is in Russia. While five million Russians immigrated to Russia in the 1990s, most of these were from Central Asia, where life was not as good.³⁹

As for the Russian government, Yeltsin's desire for good relations with the United States proved decisive in getting him to proceed with troop withdrawal. In 1993, Yeltsin was in a fight for his political life, culminating in his assault on the Russian parliament building in October. He then was confronted with the surprising performance by ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in the parliamentary elections of December. But while Yeltsin had to cover himself politically with the right at home, relations with the United States depended to a huge extent on what he did on this issue because of the importance of the Baltics in American politics, especially on Capitol Hill. With promises of Western financial assistance for officer housing for returning Russian troops as well as for dismantling the radar site in Latvia after a transition period, Yeltsin reluctantly but decisively fulfilled his pledge to withdraw.⁴⁰

Under President Vladimir Putin, the general thrust of the Russian government has been to seek greater and greater control. Within the borders of the Russian Federation, this has meant eliminating opposition in the Duma, the media, and in business. In foreign policy, it has meant a shift of Russian resources to an almost exclusive focus on relations with

³⁷ Aurel Braun, 'All Quiet on the Russian Front? Russia, Its Neighbors, and the Russian Diaspora' in Michael Mandelbaum (ed.), *The New European Diasporas: National Minorities and Conflict in Eastern Europe* (New York, 2000), p. 124.

³⁸ Ojars Kalnins, 'Latvia: The Language of Coexistence', *Transitions Online*, September 1, 2004 at <www.tol.cz/look/TOL/home>, accessed September 2004.

³⁹ Lowell W. Barrington, Erik S. Herron, and Brian D. Silver, 'The Motherland is Calling: Views of Homeland among Russians in the Near Abroad', *World Politics* 55:2 (January 2003), p. 310.

⁴⁰ For further discussion, see: Goldgeier and McFaul, *op. cit.*, chapter 7.

neighbours. But while Russia has sought to increase its leverage in the region (outside of the Baltics, which now are secure in the EU and NATO), it remains unclear what the government intends to do with that leverage. The Russian economic presence has increased, and there are strong economic linkages between Russians across borders, but the policy is not designed specifically to support the diaspora; it is designed to strengthen the power of the Russian state. It is hard to imagine that countries that became independent at the end of 1991 will lose that independence, especially since Russia remains relatively much weaker than it was in the Soviet period. But greater control by the Russian government over the countries of the region would undoubtedly affect the position of Russians within those other states.

Conclusions

The main lesson learned from a comparison of the Hungarian Status Law with the kin-state approaches of Romania and Russia is that the Hungarian approach is, for a variety of reasons, a particularly strong form of virtual or transsovereign nation building. Virtual nationalism is relevant in all those regions of the world where people maintain common national stories across political borders. In many cases, people move across state borders and take their national stories with them. In others, such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, shifting state borders have created populations that perpetuate shared notions of nationhood. The 2001 Hungarian Status Law became a special instance of such virtual nationalisms due primarily to the scale of its potential regional impact, the degree of coherence it projected, and the ways in which it encapsulated many of the consequences of past and current competing constructions of state and nation: past reversals of dominance and subordination, and current claims for mutual ‘national homelands’. Many of the concerns that the Status Law raised in 2001 have lost their relevance: its architects were replaced in 2002 by a new Hungarian government that revised the law in response to European pressure; Hungary and Slovakia joined the EU; and the Romanian government, in its effort to follow suit, has made significant efforts to improve its minority policies.

The seemingly high degree of coherence in the Hungarian nation building strategy that the Status Law manifested at the time of its adoption is also seriously questioned by the controversies of the dual citizenship debate in Hungary. Moreover, the debates over minority autonomy in neighbouring states also have brought to the fore significant sources of fragmentation among the Hungarian minority political elites. Nevertheless, the controversies surrounding the questions of dual citizenship and minority autonomy do not fundamentally challenge a relatively strong consensus among Hungarians that the Hungarian state should remain an active kin-state and that a common EU framework should allow Hungarians freely to interact across political borders. A comparison with Romania and Russia indicates that this consensus is not a common characteristic of all virtual nationalisms in the region. A key condition for the coherence of virtual nationalism is the legitimacy of the strategy both in the kin-state and among co-nationals across the border. Legitimacy also involves the degree to which the political leadership in the kin-state as well as among minority groups is broadly accepted in these populations. Virtual nationalism requires a community outside the borders that actively defines itself as part of the same cultural nation, as well as a national centre that is both culturally and economically attractive. Failure to mobilise minorities outside the border on both the cultural and economic level makes transsovereign nationalism difficult if not impossible.

The Hungarian-Romanian comparison suggests that mobilisation is more successful where the kin minority participated in a robust nation building process before its separation from the kin-state. The same comparison also indicates, however, that in such conditions the formerly dominant status of the current minority marks it as an ‘imperial minority’—one suspected of undying nostalgia for lost glory and hope for another reversal of fortunes.⁴¹ Consequently, competition for the mutually claimed cultural space continues. At the same time, the case of the Russian minorities raises the question whether ‘homeland’ territoriality plays a similar role in all situations where border changes result in a shift in relations of ethnic dominance and subordination. Although the Russians living in the states established after the collapse of the Soviet Union had developed Russian identity before the Soviet collapse, with the possible exception of the story of Kievan Rus there was no Russian (non-Soviet)

⁴¹ See also Beissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

national myth that could have linked these Russian minority groups to their current home lands, i.e. the settlements in which they live today in post-Soviet states. Consequently, the Russian minorities could not articulate ‘national homeland’ claims similar to those of Hungarian minorities outside of Hungary. The comparison suggests that the potential strength of virtual nation building also depends on the role that the territory on which kin minority live today plays in a unified national story.