

INTOLERANT ROMANIAN YOUTH

A recent sociological survey shows, amongst others, that Romanian youngsters have strong prejudices towards minorities. The research called "The Values of Romanian Youth" was conducted for the British Council by ORICUM during March – June 2006. ORICUM is a project managed by youth and it aims at serving youth by offering a platform for sharing ideas on urban culture and style, entrepreneurship, education, music, dreams, art, career development.

The study aimed at setting the profile of Romanian youth aged 15-25 from small, medium and large cities in Romania. Participants in the focus groups were selected randomly, the criteria being age, gender and place of work/study so as to create as diverse a sample as possible.

Findings were not too rosy or encouraging: young persons in urban environments all over Romania do not seem to be as tolerant, proactive, action-driven, democratic-spirited and sensitive to diversity.

"Several chapters of our study act as alarm signals for all parties interested in Romania's future, for today's youth are tomorrow's leaders and citizens.", says the ORICUM Team.

Participants were given the results of the chapter on diversity from the Gallup study "Being Young in Romania" ("Tânăr în România"). "Most believe that the outcome of the survey reflects reality. Others are surprised that young people reject minorities on a collective level, without realizing that they actually accept members of those minorities, but on an individual level. In general, participants in the focus-groups were very eager to state: "this research doesn't represent me. I don't discriminate. "

Next, participants were given a confidential and personal questionnaire which measures the degree of tolerance with respect to religious, ethnic (Roma and Hungarians), and sexual minorities as well as towards persons with physical or mental disabilities.

Hungarians enjoy acceptance in the social sphere, but they are rejected from the intimate sphere (over half of the participants refuse to have a Hungarian as member of their family and approximately a third would reject a Hungarian as friend); Roma are rejected both from the personal sphere (8 out of 10 would reject a family member if he/she was Roma and 5 out of 10 disagree with having Roma as friends) and from the social one (one third of all interviewees reject Roma as colleagues and as citizens of Romania); religious minorities are definitely rejected from the personal sphere, but they are tolerated in the social realm.

Some are tolerant towards all minorities: "If we end up labeling people, we end up like Hitler sewing stars on people's sleeves". They all agree there is a lot of discrimination in Romania and that everybody rejects everybody. Still, discrimination is sometimes justified: "it would be very boring if we didn't fight", "there is no situation where discrimination is absent".

More than ten years of hate speeches against Hungarians by former extreme nationalist mayor seems to have the desired effects – young people in Cluj/Kolozsvár, northwestern Romania are the most virulent toward the ethnic Hungarian minority: "I could die hearing them talking ethnic Hungarian tongue in buses. They should all talk Romanian "; "They went too far with privileges. They want an ethnic Hungarian university financed by the Romanian government". However, the youngsters in Iasi, eastern Romania (Moldova), are not less tolerant about native Transylvanian Hungarians: "They aim at Transylvania. I am most bothered when going to counties throughout Romania and the ethnic Hungarians refuse to talk Romanian. I wonder what they would say if I swear them in Romanian"; the youngsters in Bârlad, southeastern Romania, strongly reject the idea to receive the ethnic Hungarians in their families: "They made a small Hungary in the center of Romania. They simply invaded us. Some 95% of the people living out there (i.e. Szekler Land) are Hungarians. They should comply with the wish of the majority population and should give up all claims and protests".

GERMAN SAXONS FADE AWAY IN TRANSYLVANIA

Old community dies on its feet – just as its heritage comes back into vogue, says Marcus Tanner of Sibiu/Hermannstadt in his article written for Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.

Since the 1980s, a community that has lived in south-east Transylvania since the 12th century has streamed out, leaving none but the elderly and the intermarried behind. "Twenty years ago there were 3,000 Saxons in this village," said Sam Hutter, a 60-year-old bell-ringer in Grossau – or Cristian, in Romanian –, one of the last. "Now we are 40." Survivors of the exodus include his brother and sister but the sister does not live nearby and the brother is old and sick. "I've only one friend left in the village with whom I can talk German," added Hutter.



The fortress church of Grossau

The Hutterers have lived in Grossau, just west of Sibiu/Hermannstadt/Nagyszeben, for centuries, says Sam, though whether they came with the first wave of German settlers in the 12th century, or in the subsequent wave in the 18th century, under Maria Theresa, he cannot tell. But the Hutterers clearly flourished in Grossau before the mass migration started to Germany, for a monument to the last century's war dead shows a long list. Life was insecure for Transylvanian Saxons. For centuries, the danger of attacks from the Ottoman Empire forced local people to encase their churches in high protective walls, which survive to this day.

Inside these fortresses, Saxons built towers and cellars to store hams for sieges. Grossau's cellar is still there, though when Hutter heaves open the heavy wooden door, it leads only to a cavernous cellar that has long lain empty. Hutter rings the bells to a church that is more or less empty, too. "Sometimes there are no more than 15," he said. "In the winter, it can be even less." There is no one to help him keep the old clock in the tower in order; it takes all his ingenuity to keep it running. At least the church survives, its services performed by visiting Lutheran clergy from Hermannstadt. The parsonage has been sold. The rest of the Saxon infrastructure in the village is gone, including shops and inns where, so Hutter recalls, Saxons sat on one side and Romanians the other.

These days the prevailing influence in the village is not Saxon or Romanian. It is Roma. When the Saxons left Transylvania in the 1980s and 1990s, lured by German laws offering instant citizenship to people of ethnic German descent, Roma were moved into the empty homes. Hutter remembers the hullabaloo this caused, when older villagers in Grossau accused the incomers of stealing tools, doors and even whole roofs. Now it has quietened down. "They don't bother me," said Hutter, flapping a hand in the direction of a nearby bar frequented by a young Roma crowd.

A walk through the village reveals the extent of its ethnic transformation – a process replicated throughout this part of Transylvania. Grossau may look like a slice of old Germany, with quaint old German sayings inscribed in Gothic letters on the fronts of several houses, but most people seen on the streets are Roma. Not everyone feels grief-stricken about the death of the Saxon world in Transylvania. At Michelsberg, south of Hermannstadt, the church looks even more idyllic than its counterpart in Grossau.

Dating from the 12th century, it must have been built shortly after Saxons first came to Transylvania, at the invitation of the kings of Hungary. But a mass of war memorials sited in the church serve as a reminder that Saxon history has another side to it.

(Continues on page 3)

Romanians are less troubled by memories of the dark side of Saxon history. At a garage in Sibiu, mechanics recalled departed Saxon workmates only with pride and regret. They were great guys – hard workers – the Romanians said. They "could do anything". They kept in touch with some, years after they had left for Germany. And for Hermannstadt's go-ahead town council, led by a popular Saxon mayor, Klaus Johannis, the Saxon connection is simply a boon.



Hermannstadt/Sibiu/Nagyszeben

The town looks like a construction site, as workmen rush to sandblast old buildings, repave streets and repair the town walls ahead of a January deadline, when Sibiu takes up its role as European capital of culture for 2007.

As part of the restoration, signs reading "Hermannstadt" have been put back on main roads leading into town. The tourist office overflows with nostalgic accounts of life in the Saxon heyday and maps of Saxon villages.

Saxon heritage has never been more in vogue – certainly not since the 1940s, when the communists began their half-century of rule in Romania. But no amount of official promotion can halt the slow decay of a community that has no heirs and of the 60,000 remaining German-speakers in 2002 – down from 800,000 a century ago – precious few are children. Most are like Sam Hutter, getting on a bit, and married to Romanians.

Sam Hutter has no ambition to migrate to Germany, a country he has never even visited. While he is in good heart, Grossau's church, memorial, ham tower, clocks and bells will all have their protector and historian.

ROMANIAN PRIME MINISTER REJECTS AUTONOMY ON POLITICAL GROUNDS...

In response to the legal claims for autonomy of the 1.4 million strong Hungarian community of Romania, Premier Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu said on 23 October that he supports the local autonomy and the decentralization, which should not be considered ethnically speaking. "In 2006's Europe and out of Romanian accession to the European Union in 2007, these nationalist-like measures are useless. Romania and the entire Europe have another vision. This narrow vision based on ethnic criteria is outdated," Tăriceanu said.

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The peace treaties that attached Transylvania to Romania (1920 and 1948) granted broad rights to Transylvanian ethnic minorities. Romania assumed full responsibility to provide these rights. These international obligations have never been observed by the Romanian state. But on the contrary: governmental oppression of ethnic minorities caused that the more than 50% (1918) of non-Romanian inhabitants of Transylvania decreased below 25 % (2002).

In fact, most of the German minority (which at the outset numbered around 800,000 souls) as well as the majority of the substantial number of Jewish people left after the Second World War, were displaced or allowed to emigrate against a hard-currency exit fee during Ceaușescu's time. Today only a fraction of them, a few tens of thousands remain in their homeland.

As a result of the depletion of the ethnic groups mentioned, the entire weight of the Romanian nationalist policy fell upon the only substantial remaining minority, namely the Hungarian people. This tendency has even strengthened since 1989. As a consequence of discrimination, humiliation and abuse, between 1992-2002 the Hungarian community in Transylvania lost about 200,000 people.

The only way to stop this process and to finally warrant full and factual equality for Romania's Hungarians is to provide them autonomy.

WORRIES ABOUT THE SITUATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN ROMANIA

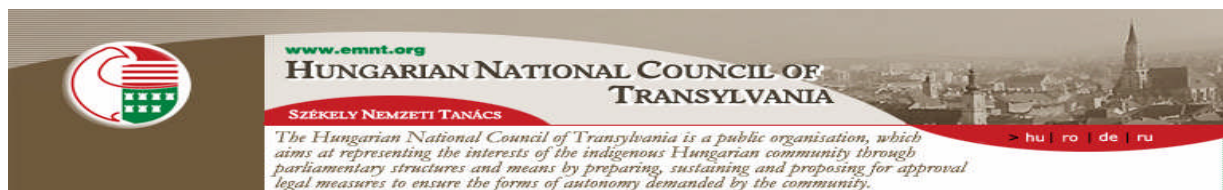
The European Commission's country report on Romania, published on 26 September 2006, evaluating the progress registered by Romania and Bulgaria on the accession to the European Commission, corroborated the two countries' accession to the EU early January 2007.

The report accounts for a limited progress in the field of ethnic minorities' protection. For example, the report said "Some worries still exist" related to the ethnic Roma situation. The report noticed that Romanian Parliament still discusses the draw law on the statute of the ethnic minorities and the settlement of principles of equality, non-discrimination and multi-culturality. This legislative process should be closely monitored. The new national plan for labor force recruitment passed in August 2006, ensures actions concentrated on minorities, including the ethnic Roma. The law to prevent and punish all forms of discrimination was amended to meet the European standards on the independence of the National Council to Combat Discrimination. The administrative capability of the National Agency for Ethnic Roma improved once with the development of its regional offices. The agency started to implement projects of community development which could bring about a significant and steady contribution to the improvement of ethnic Roma status.

Some worries still exist on this issue. The projects are slowly implemented. The social inclusion of the ethnic Roma remains a structural problem. The general living conditions are still inadequate. The measures for labor force recruitment should be subsequently developed and implemented. Adequate resources for ethnic Roma strategies and policies are not always ensured, especially at a local level. The Romanian authorities have not yet proved that zero tolerance policies are enforced on racism against the ethnic Roma population. Romania still accounts for cases of institutional violence against the ethnic Roma and aggressions against them, as well as police raids and evacuations of ethnic Roma without ensuring alternative dwellings. The level of awareness of ethnic Roma situation and of the government strategy to improve the ethnic Roma situation, especially at the level of local communities, is very low. The local authorities should be supported in drawing up projects on community development and should bring solutions in the issue of legitimacy of the locations and other issues. The institutional framework to implement the National Strategy for ethnic Roma is not enough efficient and aims to diminish the decision-making capability of the National Agency for Ethnic Roma, or ANR, and of the ethnic Roma representatives for efficiently taking part in decision-making process in the relevant fields. Romania's preparations in this field should be speeded up and continued after the accession.

Previous Transylvanian Monitor issues are available at:

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