

When nationalism meets electoral schemes: the intricate situation of the Aromanian minority from Romania

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Abstract

The resurgence of ethno-centered, exclusionary types of nationalisms in Eastern Europe after the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 represents a multi-layered phenomenon with complex ramifications. The aim of this paper is to delve into an extremely complicated case surrounding a very peculiar minority - the Aromanians living in Romania. This analysis aims to show that although Romania's approach to minority representation is a non-essentialist one on paper, the reserved seat system is sometimes still laced with nationalistic overtones. As a minority with a highly debated historical legacy, the Aromanians lack legal recognition and are subjected to an assimilation process that is not always as soft as it might seem. If Romania is to continue its already protracted democratic transition solving the puzzle surrounding the Aromanians seems to be a key stepping stone.

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Despite a rather tumultuous start in the early 90s Romania has been slowly improving its institutional approach to minority protection (Bernd Rechel(ed), 2009: Ch. 13 M. Ram), owing in no small part to its growing international commitments. However, there are still rather blurry lines when it comes to defining who gets to be declared a minority and gain political representation. Furthermore, language rights packages represent a very contentious issue that are generally transcribed into public debate as threats to national integrity (as they are generally show-cased around the Hungarian minority). What seems to emerge is a rather fuzzy picture, that leaves room for potentially problematic case around minorities with very intricate backgrounds.

This paper will provide a case-study of a rather small minority that stands at a crossroads between multiple discourses and competing claims: the Aromanians² living in Romania. There is an interesting paradox at play surrounding the recognition of this minority³: recognized as a cultural minority by the Council of Europe in 1997 (which Romania has ratified in 2007), the Aromanians are subject to a soft assimilation process via an indigenization discourse, without being recognized as a minority of any sort by the Romanian state. Despite having sued the Romanian state as early as 2005, grass-roots organizations (mostly uniting around CAR - Council of Aromanians from Romania⁴) have failed to

secure any kind of legal recognition for the Aromanians.

The contentious stake here is that vocal Aromanian grass-roots organizations are striving for recognition as a "national minority" (Kymlicka&Opalski,2001:13-107) arguing that under the blurry Romanian legislation only this legal status will ensure cultural and linguistic protection (which is the aim of Romania's minority legislation projects⁵). Romania's monolithic approach is grounded in a historicist discourse claiming that the Aromanians are an integral part of an organically defined nation hence making their claim illegitimate for a number of reasons: Parliamentary representation is done through the regular channels (since they are equated to the bulk of the nation), language rights are not necessary since Aromanian is a dialect of Romanian and for the groups of Aromanians that are claiming descent from other nations representation is done indirectly via minority representations of those respective states. In addition, the Romanian politicians' second core argument is that since mass migration towards Romania in the interwar era was voluntary, the second/third/fourth generation Aromanians today cannot claim national minority status.

My main argument is that the Aromanian minority stands at a very dangerous crossroads between a circular legislation that aims to preserve the status quo of reserved seats system and the political value of nationalist rhetoric. Despite creating an over-representation of minorities (with the exception of the Roma, see Protsyk&Matichescu, 2010), the Romanian electoral system disenfranchises minorities from pursuing own agendas. On the other side of the spectrum, although Romania's stance towards minorities is in not an

² Methodologically, throughout this paper I have used "Aromanians" as an umbrella term. However, it must be clearly stated that a wide body of literature shows a very high degree of cultural and linguistic fragmentation within this community

³ According to Romanian sources about 26.000 individuals in 2006

⁴ Throughout this paper I will mostly use CAR as a reference point as it is not only the most vocal grass-roots organization, but also well-connected in an international network of Aromanian bodies.

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http://www.dri.gov.ro/documents/lege_minoritati_forma_finala_guvern.pdf Last Accessed: 3rd April 2013 - Art 3-5 enshrined that any individual has the right to self-identification, and the state-mandated protection of identity

essentializing one, there is a very blurry legislation as to which groups gets to be a minority and enter into either direct electoral competition or the reserved seats system. Although in post-socialist Romania, nationalist rhetoric is not an outward force in electoral competitions, it still seems to be at least a latent hot potato: the 1999 history textbook scandal that lead ultimately to the fall of the Government on grounds of "Anti-Romanian feelings" (TRENCSENYI& PETRESCU& KANTOR IORDACHI&Petrescu,2001:Part 1, Ch. Razvan Paraianu) seems to point to an extremely complicated picture. In this equation the Aromanians seem to be torn between multiple stances: accepting assimilation and identifying with the Romanian nation, or pushing forward an agenda of recognition as a minority of some sort.

Competing stances - Are Aromanians in Romania *nationals* or *minority*? More importantly, *whose nationals* and/or *minority*?

Broadly speaking, there are two individual threads to be pursued here: the direct consequences of the electoral system itself and the impact of the nationalist-oriented rhetoric on an already circular legislation⁶. What stands out is that in the case of the Aromanians both seem interwoven in a very distinct fashion: essentialization not directly via state-definition of minorities, but by excluding Aromanians as a separate ethnic category in the census, and putting them under the over-arching category of "Romanians"(Tircomnicoiu,2011). This creates a very blurry classification that the Aromanians are a kind of a minority of the "homeland itself" due to particular historical contexts, a narrative that could adequately be labeled as a paradox between free choice of

identity and the objective requirements for considering the group as completely distinctive (K. Henrard (ed),2013-forthcoming: ch. by Andras Pap).

To begin with, I will first present the historicist arguments claiming that Aromanians are part and parcel of the Romanian nation. For the sake of space I will not present here this entire narrative, but focus on a few key issues that come up in the debates surrounding this minority: Latin ancestry, voluntary migration in the interwar (quasi-democratic meeting of representatives at Varia, Greece in 1923), ethnic identification. Even the most nationalistic Romanian researchers ultimately conclude that this minority is of clear Latin descent, though not part of the North-Danubian core that constituted the perceived background of the Romanian nation, but rather of a South-Danubian origin - latinized Greeks, Illyrians and Balkan Thracians. In a political sense, this historical reality has always been exploited as a kind of blood-tie specific for kin-minorities, a discourse which entered main-stream Romanian political debates in the late 19th-early 20th century. There is one important element to be noted here: in the interwar, despite no legal recognition, the Aromanians were granted language rights and offered state-financed minority language education (Iosif, 2011:136-137). Although such rights were clearly absent during communism, this legacy, coupled with a the known endogamous character of most Aromanian communities(Djuvara (ed.), 2012:165-170 ch. M. Demeter-Peyfuss), ensured that, in no small part, the Romanian groups maintained some of their linguistic and cultural individuality. On the other side of the spectrum, this has given rise to a very intricate backlash effect: scholars are claiming that beyond the Latin origin of the dialect, its systematization as a language was done under the influence and standards of Romanian (Djuvara(ed.), 2012:207-214, ch. M. Caragiu-Marioteanu) thus enhancing the essentializing view that Aromanians are part of an organically defined nation.

⁶ As of 2008, minorities that have a reserved seat are those represented in the National Council for Minorities. However, the minorities that are represented in this body are those who get Parliamentary representation in the elections!

The state's secondary core argument revolves around the fact that voluntary migration makes it illegitimate to request minority status. Although not framed as a nationalistic type of argument, this narrative points to a clear direction: while first/second generation immigrants might be acceptable as non-integrated, third/fourth generation ones, particularly those with a loose common descent, are forcefully assimilated. There are two important issues though at play within this secondary argument: firstly, the very nationalistic argument that common Latin descent, which implies a perceived facilitation towards assimilation, is taken to mean automatic desire for assimilation; secondly, in the case of the Hungarian minority non-integration is tolerated because this particular group has concrete political value as a show-case example for Romanian towards fulfilling its policy goals towards the EU and other international bodies. This type of argument, backed up by the historicist discourse of the Romanian Academy, seems to have gotten some firm ground with grass-roots Aromanian organizations that espouse the following view: if the Aromanians are a minority in their Romanian "home-land", hence non-assimilated, they would become "wanderers", which is normatively inconceivable!⁷ This line of thought clearly reveals the nationalistic rhetoric: nationhood and national affiliation taken as salient is the only normatively desirable legal existence. The striking paradox at play here is that this indigenization discourse revolves around the Aromanians as part of the ancestral core of the nation, which would, at least a theoretical level, make them somewhat suitable for indigenous people status! However, as they were not settled on the territory of Romania that line of thinking seems to be completely futile and not at all pursued not even by the most radical grass-roots organizations.

Moving on, I will now briefly outline some of the legal and political consequences

of this approach to the Aromanian minority, in the context of Romanian electoral legislation. Although the Romanian electoral system was not enshrined as an essentialist one with regards to minorities (King&Marian, 2012), the Aromanians were simply taken as an integral part of the Romanian *Kulturnation*, a view that was not challenged by any competing organizations. This approach seemed to have some sort of popular legitimacy within the Aromanian community itself, as one of the few existing large-scale surveys point towards a strong majority that self-identified with the Romanian nation (Kahl, 2006). However, some consideration must be given to the broader issue of self-identification in the particular case of the Aromanians. Although the legislation enshrines a purely individualistic approach to ethnic affiliation, Aromanian organizations that could provide sufficient data in order to register a minority party are faced with a daunting challenge: legally, they can only be ethnic-Romanian minorities. If an individual declares himself to be Aromanian, the census counts him/her automatically as a Romanian, making it impossible to claim Aromanian-Macedonian or Aromanian-Greek descent. This legal reality translates not as an essentialist approach to minority definition, but creates a salience of Romanian nationhood: by the proxy of common Latin descent, Aromanian identification cannot exist in the framework of any other national identity (taken also as salient), than the Romanian one.

The paradox at play is the following: although Romanian legislation enables self-identification, it creates clear delineations between the minority and the organizations (King&Marian, 2012:567). Consequently, even if grass-roots organizations, such as CAR, bring to the Central Electoral Bureau sufficient data to back up their registration as an NGO or party with representative claims, they are not allowed into intra-minority electoral competition for reserved seats, since an alternative (i.e. outside the umbrella of "Romanian minority") legal category does not exist. What follows

⁷ Declaration of Aromanian NGO, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/49694825/Problema-aromanilor>, Last Accessed: 23rd April 2013

logically is that such a grass-roots organization is stuck between Scylla and Charybdis: registration as an Aromanian representative body means going into mainstream electoral competition, registration as a minority unit within existing recognized ethnic groups is technically impossible, or would imply the fragmentation of the NGO/Party itself into small factions molded on some intra-minority ethnic boundaries. There is one more contentious point to be noted here about the Romanian electoral system: it seems to rest on the assumption that minorities are homogeneous and will always be represented by one political group (King&Marian, 2012:568). This mechanism transfers electoral thresholds on a proportional basis within minority groups creating the perverse effect that in the case of sharp intra-minority competition representation might be completely lost (King&Marian, 2012:565-570). Consequently, the aforementioned fragmentation of a hypothetical Aromanian NGO/Party in small-scale ethnic units would not gain much ground with minority constituencies that would fear losing representation at all. To further complicate the problem, national minorities such as the Greek one might not even recognize the existence of an internal Aromanian community, as this identity does not legally exist at all in Greece!

This legal reality greatly hinders the Aromanian cause as the state has the straight-forward argument of indirect representation. What CAR and other organizations are striving for is recognition of the Aromanians as a "minority of a Balkan regional people"⁸, by arguing that migration towards Romania was done more on economic grounds, rather than some nationalist ethos. It is exactly here that the Romanian arguments blend become very blurry: although acknowledging that the Aromanians are clearly distinct from the Balkan nationalities, they are not granted any special status, but rather forcefully assimilated into Romanian main-stream

electoral legislation. One interesting parallel can be drawn that shows the very specific nature of the Aromanian case: when the Tartar minority representatives separated from the Turkish ones in the early 90s, they were granted reserved seats. Outwardly, the Tartars seem to be in a comparable position: a regional identity without a kin-state, but a clearly delineated language, inhabiting a plurality of states with existing minority representation in Romania (such as Russia and Ukraine). However, this group was acknowledged as being different from the Russian minority and granted its own channels of representation. This points clearly towards the direction that in the case of the Aromanians there are more important factors outside the voting system itself (for in-depth analysis Reynolds, 2006) - i.e. some sort of assimilation.

Last but not least, some attention must be given to the issue of political entrepreneurship. King and Marian argue that one of the key perverse effects of the Romanian minority representation legislation is that it allows great maneuvering room for crafty, well-connected politicians aiming to secure a comfortable seat in Parliament (King&Marian, 575). Although acknowledging the validity of this argument, in the case of the Aromanians I argue that it holds no bearing: the singular case of the PD-L member Costica Canacheu (which has proven Aromanian descent!) does not make CAR's case an instance of political entrepreneurship. For instance, the documented case of George Becali who did indeed pursue minority-politics (King&Marian, 2012:581), but via the Italian minority rather than the Aromanian minority (which he proudly claims descent from) inside which he would probably have enjoyed even more popularity and gained more support, clearly indicates that CAR is not pursuing some entrepreneurial agenda. Furthermore, since the Romanian law permits any citizen to cast a vote for any political organization, if CAR were indeed just an instance of minority-entrepreneurship it could just go into mainstream politics and by using some prominent

⁸ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/49694825/Problema-romanilor>, Last Accessed: 23rd April 2013

personalities gain representation through the main-stream national channels. However, such a project seems to be completely absent from the agenda of Aromanian grass-roots organizations.

Conclusions

The situation of the Aromanian minority in Romania seems to be at a crossroads between a plethora of issues: internal division of the community itself, nationalist rhetoric pervading Romanian politics, unclear scientific conclusions on the history of the minority and unclear places within other minorities. Competing stances towards this minority seem to be the common denominator, prompting various legal statuses throughout the plethora of states the Aromanians inhabit: forceful assimilation in Greece hence barred identity, soft assimilation in Romania, partial recognition in Albania, national minority status in FYROM and so on.

Despite the fact that the Council of Europe recognized the Aromanians as a cultural and linguistic minority, the vagueness of this document with regards to defining "national minorities" put this particular group in a problematic position. In the case of Romania there seem to be two intertwining arguments: a nationalistic argument, grounded in a historicist discourse, claiming assimilation into the Romanian nation, which has been legally enshrined in the census by denying the possibility of self-affiliation to alternative groups such as Macedonian-Aromanian, Albanian-Aromanian etc. Although boundaries of the minority are not directly drawn by the abusers themselves in the case of Romania, the Aromanians seem to have less of a freedom of choice when it comes to self-ascribed identity (K. Henrard (ed), 2013-forthcoming: ch. by Andras Pap). This case seems to be less a direct consequence of the electoral system, as is the case of some small-scale Hungarian organizations, but more linked with a soft assimilation process made by a particular way of conceptualizing the census. When it comes to an in-between

recognition such as cultural-linguistic minority, the Romanian state's argument seems even more fraught with nationalism - the Aromanian dialects are purportedly systematized under the templates used for the Romanian language hence cannot be granted distinct rights. The common Latin descent seems to be a catch-phrase used to legitimized almost every kind of discrimination.

All things considered, breaking out of this intricate equation seems a daunting challenge for Aromanian grass-roots organizations. Political lobby seems to be insufficient, and needs to be joined with a growing body of scholarly studies in order to stand any chance of success.

Short personal description

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