

# ***Hungary and Cultural Diplomacy***

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## **The Historical Background**

One can talk of Hungary (also known as The Kingdom of Hungary) existing between the years 1001 and 1918. During this time, with the exception of the 150 year long Ottoman rule (1541-1699) and the Transylvanian separation (1540-1867), Hungary consisted of the whole Carpathian Basin. Between 1867 and 1918 Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a dual monarchy ruled by the Habsburg dynasty and Hungary itself. After the First World War, Hungary was forced to sign the Treaty of Trianon (June 4, 1920), which required multi-national Hungary to surrender 72% of its pre-war territory to partially reborn, neighbouring countries. Nearly one-third of the 10 million ethnic Hungarians found themselves situated outside the diminished homeland, and the country's ethnic composition was left almost homogeneous: Hungarians constituted around 90% of the population, Germans made up around 6%, and Slovaks, Croats, Romanians, Jews and Roma people accounted for the remainder. After the Second World War, the communist party, supported by the Soviet Union, held the reigns of power and worked with the Stalinist dictatorship from 1945 to 1956. The revolution of 1956 was a uniquely brave attempt by the Hungarian people to get rid of the regime and the Soviet occupation. The Soviet troops (the so-called "Warsaw Pact") quashed the revolution, and there followed a period of political repression that was only relaxed five years later. In 1989, after forty-four years of subjection, the Third Republic of Hungary was declared. In 2004, Hungary joined the EU together with seven other Eastern bloc countries, Malta, and Cyprus. This was the single largest enlargement of the EU in terms of people and landmass, though the smallest in terms of GDP. Since 2007, Hungary has also been a member of the Schengen Area. Due to the negative effects of

the present economic crisis on Hungary, the financial measures required to introduce the common European currency may also gather pace.

### **The need for Cultural Diplomacy within Hungary**

In the census of 2001, 3% of the population, 314.000 people, declared themselves as belonging to an officially recognized minority in Hungary. According to other estimates, however, it is actually 8-10%, with half a million of them Roma. The average size of Romani families is much larger than Hungarian families, but the average life expectancy is much lower, and the number of retired Roma is very small. This low life expectancy is the result of the Roma's unfavourable social circumstances and their tendency to have large numbers of children. The poor level of education among the Roma is a very serious problem: only 60 % of Romani children finish primary school, just 1.8 % graduate from grammar school and an insignificant 0.2 % have a higher education qualification. Most Romani people live in small settlements, so the closure of primary schools affects them particularly badly. A combination of poor employment opportunities and generous benefits does not encourage the Roma to find legal work. Therefore, social support is only given if the unemployed take part in communal work and their children attend school: Criteria that have generated a lot of controversy and debate in the Hungarian media and society in general. Hungary began to take steps in 1997 to improve the situation of the Roma by providing financial support and creating scholarships for Romani students. This program did not cover all regions and schools, however, and the education opportunities for the Roma is not the only problem that needs to be solved. In some cases, for example, situations may arise in which the treatment of the Roma is questionable and their Human Rights are disregarded. There is therefore an urgent need to create a consistent program in order to facilitate the integration of the Roma into society. What are the steps a country should take in order to improve the social circumstances and the social stature of their minorities? There is an immediate need for Cultural Diplomacy if we consider that countries attempt to solve the problems of their minorities without first getting to know more

about their culture and customs? Romani musicians are well known, but not much is known about Romani writers and artists. How can we expect two different ethnic groups to understand each other without first familiarising themselves with one another's cultures? This is a problem that is common to most of the Central Eastern European Countries who face very similar challenges.

### **The need for Cultural Diplomacy on an International Level**

Hungary's population is estimated to be around 10 million. An additional 5 million Hungarians are spread across the world, many of them in neighbouring countries including Romania (1,440,000), Slovakia (520,000), and Serbia (293,000). There are also Hungarian communities in the Ukraine, Austria and Croatia. How can Hungarians within Hungary effectively communicate with the Hungarian communities living outside the country? The need for Cultural Diplomacy between Hungary and its neighbouring countries is essential in order to create a better relationship between each nation and to find common ground. There are some good examples of bilateral cooperation between Hungary and its neighbours. Since 1999, for example, Hungary and Romania have had a bilateral agreement whereby they promote each other's literature, books, films, and other cultural work. In order to emphasize the importance of the cultural relations between the two countries, a Hungarian cultural centre was opened in the capital of Romania, Bucharest, and a Romanian cultural centre was opened in the capital of Hungary, Budapest (1992). It is important that this cultural relationship is nurtured alongside formal diplomatic relations, in order to promote new bilateral programs in the future.

Educational and cultural cooperation is particularly important with the Slovak Republic, the full territory of which was part of the Hungarian State prior to the Treaty of Trianon. Since the independence of Slovakia in 1993 problems still occasionally arise between the two countries. Hungarians are the largest ethnic minority in Slovakia, making up 9.7 % of the population (520,528 people) according to a census conducted in 2001. They are mostly

concentrated in the southern part of the country, near the Hungarian border. After the Slovak Republic became independent, the rights of the minorities were gradually restricted. The 1995 State Language Law, for example, provided the legal framework for the official and exclusive use of the Slovak language not only in official communications, but also in everyday commerce and in the administration of religious bodies. The Law was seen by the Slovaks as declaring the Slovak language as the country's official language, but was viewed by others as a means of reasserting the position of the Slovak language over Hungarian and Czech. Four years later, however, the government adopted the Law on the Use of Minority Languages, which allows the use of minority languages in official contacts under special circumstances<sup>1</sup> (this remains a cause for controversy). The adoption of the Language Law was regarded as the last barrier to be overcome in order to be considered for EU membership.

It is important to note that the recent emergence of bilateral conflicts took place after the Slovakian elections in 2006. Following these elections the Slovak National Party (SNS) joined the government, and its strong rhetoric became integrated into the rhetoric of the Slovakian authorities, something which has constantly met with criticism from Hungarian politicians and even from the European Union. As a direct result of the SNS's presence in the Slovak government the leader of the Party of Hungarian Coalition (MKP) Béla Bugár, who represented a more conciliatory political approach, was replaced by Pál Csáky, who can be seen as more radical leader of the Hungarian community. Béla Bugár represented the kind of politics that could have meant a more sustainable Slovak - Hungarian relationship, and was able to secure the Slovakian vote. Csáky, however, has a more nationalist standpoint. Since the elections in 2006, Slovak-Hungarian political relations have suffered from frequent verbal attacks that have provoked the radicals of both countries. Another challenge that the Slovak - Hungarian relationship might face is the Hungarian elections in 2010. According to the present polls<sup>2</sup> the right-wing party Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Union), with the support of some nationalist groups, has a convincing lead over the currently governing MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party). If the Fidesz party were to return to power a more explicitly

state-orientated rhetoric may emerge, which would do little to improve bilateral relations.

Some argue, however, that the real problem does not lie between the Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia, who have lived alongside each other for hundreds of years, but in the attitude of the Slovakian and Hungarian politicians. These critics believe that minority issues are misused for electoral gain, provoking trouble in both societies and encouraging extreme nationalism. Whether these quarrels in between the minority-majority communities are incited by politics or are caused by cultural and historical differences, educating both sides about each other remains an important part of a sustainable solution. Cultural Diplomacy can help future generations develop mutual trust and look beyond nationalism. The Cultural Institute of Hungary in Bratislava along with the Slovak Institute in Budapest organize several cultural programs such as music concerts, exhibitions and film festivals with Hungarian and Slovak universities and other institutions. There is a vast need for cultural interaction between Slovak and Hungarian people.

The Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for Hungarian culture and education inside and outside of Hungary. It currently has educational and cultural agreements with governments in 150 countries, 50 of which are constant working partners. For example, The Ministry of Education and Culture organized the German Cultural Season in 2006-2007 called Ungarischer Akzent, a program series with a wide range of art and cultural activities. This type of program series has become a tradition in Europe following several successful seasons in France (2001), Italy (2002), the Netherlands (2003), Great-Britain (2004) and Russia (2005). The season also gave a fresh new outlook on the German-Hungarian relationship, leaving behind the Puszta-Paprika-Piroska cliché and acquainting the Germans with modern Hungarian culture. In terms of numbers, the Ungarischer Akzent Season attracted 1000 artists and 400 programs in 170 German cities. Another good example of the cultural cooperation is the Haydn Year which will be staged in 2009 by Austria and Hungary to celebrate the 200th birthday of Joseph Haydn. Haydn, the first maestro of the Vienna Classic era, was the

conductor of the orchestra of Prince Eszterházy Pál and later Eszterházy Miklós (the Eszterházy family was a Hungarian noble family with ancient origins) in Kismarton from 1761. One of the basic points of this cooperation is the Austrian-Hungarian Haydn Orchestra, conducted by Fischer Ádám. The Liszt Year will also take place between the two countries in 2011.

We can therefore see that Hungary faces challenges both inside and outside of its borders in ensuring that cooperation and interaction between different cultures is constructive. The examples of cultural diplomacy initiatives shown above illustrate that action is being taken to address these areas. What is needed, however, is a much more serious consideration of the potential for cultural diplomacy, and a more coherent policy that facilitates this activity.

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