

RESUME

Autonomists and Centralists

In the 20th century both the fate and the status of Transylvania always reflected more than a potential Romanian-Hungarian conflict and more than a regional tension spot. Decisions about where it belonged, whether its *status quo* should be altered or a *status quo ante bellum* be reinstated always reflected the relations of strength between the European powers and followed the pattern of interests of the dominant power in the region. The politico-historical versions of this were „implemented with an either-or decision-making logic” (*Gyarmati*, 1997. 457), i.e. either Romania or Hungary was awarded the whole or part of the region. However, in Transylvania, even though its concrete expressions changed over time, many thought that with the principle of „Transylvania for the Transylvanians” the different nationalities living there (Hungarians, Romanians and Germans) should determine their fate and not be subservient to great-power despotism.

During World War II a number of British, American and Soviet experts preparing for the post-war situation were also inclined to make Transylvania an *independent state*. The British and American peace plans always regarded an independent Transylvania as part of an Eastern or Central European confederation, unlike the Soviet Union, which supported the plan for an independent Transylvania until summer 1944 because „control over the new state would provide the opportunity to exert pressure both on Hungary and Romania”. (*Zeidler – L. Balogh*, 2002. 57–58) The plan for an independent Transylvania was taken off the agenda definitively when Romania successfully left the fascist camp.

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The palace revolution in Bucharest on 23 August 1944 (which was referred to as the „Romanian pull-out” by contemporaries) created a new situation, not only with respect to the East European military and political position but also with regard to the population of Northern Transylvania. The Romanians were pleased about the turn and were looking forward to the future with great expectations. However, the state of war between Hungary and Romania and the appearance of the Romanian gendarmerie following the withdrawal of the Hungarian administration worried the Hungarian population, particularly since the authorities in Bucharest ordered the mass internment of the Northern Transylvanian Hungarians with reference to the armistice treaty of 12 September (Document 2). At the same time, a *double standard* was applied since the Romanians were not interned although they were also Hungarian citizens and thus formally they also belonged to a „hostile state” in the same way as Hungarians living there. Hungarian men (plus women and children on occasions) were deported to Földvár and other internment camps where they died in huge numbers at the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945.

In addition to mass internment, the atrocities of the various voluntary para-military detachments (which were generally called Maniu guardists) generated fear among the Northern Transylvanian Hungarians. The infamous murders by the guard led by Gavril Olteanu (Documents 46, 48), however, provided the necessary *excuse* for the Soviet commandment to expel the Romanian administration from Northern Transylvania on 12 November.

The civilian administration sent to Northern Transylvania from Bucharest was able to operate only in certain counties. The local Soviet military commanders expelled the first contingent of the Romanian administration in the Székely region (Doc. 8), Kolozsvár and Nagyvárad in a few days and they were prevented from getting into Nagykároly and Szatmárnémeti (Docs. 6, 7). After the occupation of Kolozsvár (11 October) the local Hungarian and Romanian left-wing forces (communists, social-democrats and the Hungarian People’s Union) took over the management of the town. Following the introduction of the Soviet military administration (8 November) their power was also extended to the northern part of county Kolozs. Although at the time the majority of the town’s population was Hungarian, a Romanian became mayor with a Hungarian as his deputy. However, the nationalist Romanians regarded even that as too much.

The Sănătescu government was concerned about the fact that the administrative apparatus sent to the capital of the region could not get established. (The headquarters of the *Governmental Commission of the Liberated Transylvanian Territories’ Administration*, which was set up to operate administration more effectively, was in Kolozsvár only on paper; in reality it all along worked in Bucharest.) At the beginning of November news was appearing about the local Soviet commanders expelling the already settled elements of administration. Although the resolution of expulsion of the 12th (Doc. 13) refers to the volunteers’ actions, in reality, as analysis of the events clearly shows, the Soviets *wanted to put pressure* on the Bucharest government in order to change the domestic balance of political power favourably for them.

While in Romania the bourgeois parties (the National Liberal Party and the National Peasants’ Party) were in power and the coalition led by the communists and the National Democratic Front (ODA) was in opposition, the situation was precisely the opposite in Northern Transylvania. After 12 November the ODA, supported by the Soviets, took over the administration everywhere, except in the counties of Szilágy and Máramaros. (Mainly Hungarians were in charge of administration in towns and counties with a Hungarian majority.) So the coalition of the left actually got into power here, whereas in Bucharest they still wanted to get into government. For that they had to wait until 6 March 1945.

While domestic political struggles were still underway in Bucharest at the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, the establishment of a structure of power unknown so far began in Kolozsvár.

As a first step, the Central Advisory Body of the ODA was established on 1 December 1944. The intention (and the *fear* in Bucharest) was that its influence would spread to all of Northern Transylvania. However, in reality it only had influence over Kolozsvár and county Kolozs; furthermore, it only had an advisory and not an executive

role. In the Kolozsvár *autonomists'* hopes, the CAB would have been in charge of a regional administrative structure, since they saw that the introduction of the Soviet military administration provided a good opportunity for the region to establish the framework of *administrative and political autonomy* vis-à-vis Bucharest centralisation. The Hungarians and Romanians on the left (communists and social-democrats) regarded autonomy of the region as a guarantee that the legal equality of the Transylvanian Hungarians and Romanians would actually be achieved. (The legal measures on languages issued in Kolozsvár and Marosvásárhely at the beginning of 1945 symbolised this by making the Hungarian and Romanian languages legally equal.)

This striving for autonomy was not supported by the *Romanian Democratic Union*, which represented the majority of Transylvanian Romanians. Although from time to time it participated in negotiations with the CAB, it tried to avoid even the appearance that it might be supporting moves opposing Bucharest and instead placed emphasis on Romanian sovereignty over Transylvania.

The Northern Transylvanian counties went their way independently of Bucharest between 12 November 1944 and 8 March 1945. They tried to be self-sufficient (sometimes even the idea of producing their own currency was raised) and to develop their inter-relations. Since Bucharest's *real control* over the region had ceased, the ten „republics” (the 11th county, Máramaros was mainly under Soviet-Ukrainian occupation from the beginning of January 1945) aimed to take their lives into their own hands. There was still no agreement in December between the Soviet military and political leadership with respect to whether a *regional government with executive power* could be established in Northern Transylvania (Doc. 21). However, the establishment of a quasi-government was approved at the beginning of February 1945, since the intensifying domestic political crisis again provided the opportunity to put pressure on Bucharest using the position of Northern Transylvania (or by supporting the autonomist tendencies there).

“The Parliament of Northern Transylvania” meeting in Kolozsvár between 12 and 15 February 1945 set up the *Northern Transylvanian (Central) Executive Committee* of the ODA, which represented the embryo of a *provincial government* (Docs. 38-41). Teofil Vescan jnr. (president) and Lajos Jordáky (co-president) headed the „government”. The eleven departments corresponded to „ministries”. The establishment of the „government” (which did not actually operate) greatly alarmed Bucharest, since they were afraid of losing Northern Transylvania for good.

However, in Bucharest King Michael soon learnt what the price of Northern Transylvania was. Soviet foreign affairs deputy commissar, Vishinsky, who arrived in the capital again at the end of February, told the king that they could regain Northern Transylvania only if the country had a „democratic government”, i.e. if he appointed their candidate, Petru Groza as prime minister. The king willy-nilly accepted this price. He appointed Groza prime minister on 6 March 1945 and the ODA government could be formed, which partially brought the communists to power. In return the administration appointed by Bucharest was able to return to Northern Transylvania soon after 8 March. Conventional centralism returned – now in a „left disguise”.

Bucharest again dictated to Transylvanians, both Hungarians and Romanians. The symbolic organisation of the autonomists was „self-dispersed” in June (Doc. 47).

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The events during the seven months from September 1944 to March 1945 have been judged differently by the Hungarian and the Romanian side, not only in present times but in those days, too. Hungarians did not perceive the appearance of Romanian and Soviet troops as *liberation* but as yet again an *occupation*. Regarding what happened after the front had moved on, the administration sent from Bucharest did not bring law and order for them but the contrary. The returning, revenge-thirsty gendarmerie was either an active participant in the anti-Hungarian developments or did not prevent them, although they had the opportunity. The autonomist aim between November and March was to achieve a *common Transylvania of two equal peoples*, or as writer Loránd Dáday from Dés put it, „the autonomous and self-governing joint and free republic of Transylvanian peoples”. (G. Molnár, 1993, 116) In 1946 the Kolozsvár writer, László Szenczei, thought that „This latest attempt at Transylvanian self-government [...] was the most ideal way of resolving the Hungarian-Romanian issue [...] ..” (Szenczei, 1946. 167)

In contrast, the Romanians expected the Romanian gendarmerie and administration to *re-establish law and order* and the reunion of the Transylvanian Romanian nation, divided as a result of the Second Vienna Award. The Romanian population regarded the decree of 12 November as *deeply unjust* and because of the way events were going became disappointed and frustrated. (The Berck Orthodox patriarch Teodor Sămărtean recorded on 14 January 1945: „Disappointed and with concern for the future do they, whom I meet, ask me every day what is going to happen to us and when the Romanian authorities are to return”. *Biserica Ortodoxă...* 1999. 361.) They thought that, after Romanian soldiers had shed their blood as allies of the Red Army, Moscow in an unjust manner (even though temporarily) was depriving them of the territory to which they had a „historic right”. They regarded the new authorities following the expulsion of the Romanian administration as the „survival of Hungarian rule”, under which, as a professional person presumably close to the Romanian Democratic Union in Kolozsvár wrote in his notes, „the Romanian population suffers from bitter persecution”. (*Lăcustă*, 1995. 25) In addition, they were convinced that, „under the mask of communism”, „Hungarian irredentism” was continuing. (*Dobrinescu*, 1996. 42) According to a report of 1 March 1945, the „irredentist Hungarians” (meaning those who got on with the Soviet military command) allegedly banned wearing the Romanian tricolour (imprisoned those who wore the national colours in their buttonhole) and banned all (Romanian) national manifestations. Furthermore, Romanians were obliged to hand in their official reports „*only in Hungarian*” (stress in original) and Romanians, especially professionals, were arrested, humiliated and insulted, being accused of fascism. (*Dobrinescu-Pătroi*, 2001. 15–16) Our only remark about these absurd accusations is that the majority of contemporary documents concerning administration and justice found so far are written *in Romanian*. The official use of Hungarian can be detected in practice only

in the four Székely counties at the most (Maros-Torda, Csík, Udvarhely and Háromszék). Concerning imprisonment under the charge of „fascism”, this was not a *specifically anti-Romanian* practice but an „accepted” way of dealing with anti-communist elements in the period throughout the entire region of occupied East-Central Europe.

Reports of such nature (which largely determined the opinion of government circles in Bucharest and parties on the right) usually originated from various *civil and military intelligence services*. These institutions (or their „experts”), however, viewed events in a nationalist and chauvinist way and thus the *reports lacked much reality*. Several examples could be mentioned to demonstrate this. One is a report by the *Informația Secret Service* (Serviciul Secret de Informații) in Torda, which says that the Kolozsvár ODA conference in February was a constitutional assembly, its professional committees without any authority were „government circles” (“*cercurile guvernamentare*”), and the Hungarian People’s Union was a „chauvinist and revisionist” party, which was set up by Arrow Cross and other right-wing elements „hiding behind the mask of democracy”. (*Nastasă*, 2002. 52–55) The file containing the Northern Transylvanian reports by the Chief Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie is similarly biased in regarding MNSZ (The Hungarian People’s Union) (actually MADOSZ, because they did not notice that there had been a change of name) as a „Hungarian irredentist” organisation. Romanian intelligence agents and their informers still had the thinking characteristic of the inter-war period; in addition, the shock caused by the Second Vienna Award also increased their prejudices. For the sake of precision it must be remarked that how someone judged events not only depended on nationality but also on *party political sympathies*, since the communists, „independent of nationality”, condemned the activity of the „reactionary” gendarmerie and accepted the introduction of the Soviet military administration with enthusiasm. This is understandable, since they hoped thereby to increase their political influence and ensure that their previously marginal small group would in practice shape events (it turned out later that they were right). Incidentally, certain people in the Kolozsvár group (Goldberger, Vescan „Filu”, Sándor Jakab, Edgár Balogh and others) supported the „attempts at independence” against Bucharest for only *political-tactical reasons* and only as long as they were against their main political opponents, general Sănătescu and later Rădescu (and their governments). However, as soon as the ODA got into power, and thus the Romanian Communist Party, they conformed to the centralisation policy of the Party (note the „self-dispersal” of the Northern Transylvanian ODA Executive Committee). The central leadership in Bucharest, at least according to sources revealed so far, accepted (although did not support enthusiastically) the Kolozsvár group’s attempts at *decentralisation* until the end of Soviet military administration, since they interpreted it as *political tactics* against the „reactionary” governments. However, later on the members of the Kolozsvár group, who were active in shaping events, were side-lined because the leadership of the RCP regarded their manoeuvres as a danger to national unity. (At the Bucharest meeting of the Northern Transylvanian prefects on 29 March, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu stated the following: „What we are doing is nothing else but an **administrative, political and national switch on**”. *Dobrinescu – Pătroiu*, 2001.)

However, some of the Hungarians in leading roles in the Kolozsvár or Northern Transylvanian political events (including István Lakatos, Ferenc Bruder, Lajos Jordáky and Gyula Simó) continued their struggle against nation-state centralisation *with honest conviction*. They fought against Bucharest not for tactical but *strategic reasons*, in order to try to increase and strengthen the independence of the region gradually. Their efforts bear the *hallmarks of political and territorial self-government* but the Romanian parties, independently of their ideological standing, rejected federalism. In addition, the moves of Lakatos and the others were actually in contradiction with the 1923 constitution, which came into effect after 23 August again and which accepted the framework of a united nation state.

With respect to current Romanian literature on the matter, two fundamental problems can be observed in all the essays we have reviewed. One is that they rely on sources *exclusively in Romanian*. Since these sources are documents issued by an institution of Romanian state power, they lack the information which would indicate the thinking, intentions and aspirations of the Hungarian minority *first hand and credibly*. These institutions of power mediate that *distorted image of Hungarians* which we discussed above.

The other problem is that in most cases the authors do not apply *any source criticism*, therefore they accept even the most improbable contemporary rumours as *facts*, provided they can be fitted into their constructed historical framework. An example is Marcela Sălăgean from Kolozsvár, who, referring to sources of contemporary Romanian archives in an earlier study, states: „... the Transylvanian [sic] Hungarian People’s Union followed the instructions of the temporary Hungarian government in Debrecen in order to gain all the administrative, political and economic power in Northern Transylvania with the long-term aim of keeping the Transylvanian territories occupied on 30 August 1940”. (*Sălăgean*, 1993. 64, 66) In support of this statement, the roles of the Central Advisory Body and the ODA Northern Transylvanian Executive Committee are misinterpreted because they are seen as a *governmental authority over all Northern Transylvania* acting on Soviet orders. In the case of these two organisations of a consultative nature the chronological order is regularly mixed, i.e. the ODA Northern Transylvanian Executive Committee is said to have been formed in November 1944 and thus the suggestion is that the Soviets laid the basis of the administration of a *de facto* independent state already in the first days of military administration. (*Tărău*, 1996. 89, *Tărău*, 1997. 226–227, *Vultur*, 1994. 201, *Sălăgean*, 2002. 72, 84) Various authors not only regularly mix up the two bodies, which had very different competence (the Central Advisory Body and the Executive Committee), but MADOSZ is also usually regarded as one with MNSZ (Hungarian People’s Union) or sometimes with the Northern Transylvanian ODA. (*Sălăgean*, 1995. 66)

Romanian historiography in the service of national self-construction seems to be unable to handle something which questions the centralised Romanian nation-state regarded by it as ideal, and in this context is placed Budapest, which continuously „gives instructions from the background and in secret” and directs „break-away efforts”. (*Șandru*, 1995. 404)

We must state critically that we are witnessing *the birth of a new, false historical myth* when in the writings of some Romanian authors we read that concerning the issue of Transylvania in the days after 23 August the Council of Ministers in Budapest ordered that, depending on the future military situation, „all the Transylvanian Hungarians should organise around a communist party, cooperate intensively and strongly with the occupying Soviet authorities, more so than the Romanians. In this way they [i.e. the Transylvanian Hungarians – authors’ remark] can gain the favour of the Russian military authorities, making it difficult to unite Transylvania with the Romanian state”. (*Constantiniu*, 1998. 56) According to the original Romanian source, the coded instruction was forwarded to the Hungarian embassies and a leader of a Romanian foreign representation in Finland, George Caranfil, got hold of it in a mysterious way. (*Constantiniu*, 2001. 68–69, *Sălăgean*, 1993. 66, and 2002. 149, *Vultur*, 2002, *Tărău*, 1995. 89) It is a nice story (at least from a Romanian point of view) but it is *not true*. The Council of Ministers did in fact have a meeting on 24 August, but there even Bucharest’s pull-out was not on the agenda. In addition, being aware of the ideological orientation of the political leaders in the Horthy era, it can be stated that the anti-communist, anti-Soviet and Nazi-friendly Sztójay cabinet and Regent Miklós Horthy would have never made such a decision. As far as we know, the only Romanian historian who expressed doubt concerning authenticity of the source was Florin Constantiniu himself who published the ominous document way back in 1973 (although in an annotated form). (*Constantiniu*, 1998. 56. and 2001. 69.)

In order to get closer to resolving the many issues, two questions must be asked. 1) Why did a significant part of the Northern Transylvanian Hungarian population feel drawn to the extreme left (the communists) and the Soviet occupiers? 2) On what basis and with what intentions did the Kolozsvár political group introduced here (which was rather heterogeneous) determine its politics between November 1944 and March 1945?

In effect, the answer to the first question has already been partly given. Atrocities committed after the return of the Romanian administration and the implementation of „*restitutio in integrum*” a priori excluded in our opinion the possibility that that Hungarian population would accept another change of political power with quiet deference. Due to the inter-war policy on minorities of the Romanian historic parties, then the „revenge-thirsty” press statements in the autumn of 1944 and the activity of the administration, some Hungarians (primarily the urban population) *believed* the communist propaganda advocating national equality of rights and the remedy of grievances, partly because they were disillusioned by the anti-minority and nationalist parliamentary system of the inter-war period and partly due to the left-wing press, which enjoyed a monopoly, i.e. non-ideological factors can be detected in the background. The MNSZ (Hungarian People’s Union) was considered an organisation of *interest protection* with a peoples’ front character, and that was the reason why a large part of the provincial population lined up behind the organisation.

It is more difficult to answer the second question, since contemporary sources are ambiguous in this respect. The leaders of the Central Advisory Body are called *autonomists* in several articles and non-public documents. In his study, which has often

been referred to, Gusztáv Molnár writes that „the *intention* to create *political self-government*” intensifies when the Northern Transylvanian conference is convened in February. (*G. Molnár*, 1993. 127. Our italics.)

We think it is possible to understand the intentions in Kolozsvár more correctly if events are described with contemporary notions, as stated at the beginning of our study. As expressed earlier, Zoltán Magyary interprets decentralisation, of which political self-government is a version, as *autonomy*. In this case we can see that a group (otherwise rather heterogeneous), even if involving different considerations, attempted to provide *political self-government* for the region (Northern Transylvania as a first step and all of Transylvania in the long run), taking advantage of a rare political opportunity.

It must be remarked that this effort was not new in the 20th century. After World War I attempts were made on both the Hungarian and the Romanian sides to achieve regional autonomy for Transylvania. With the disintegration of historical Hungary, a *Transylvanian Hungarian Council* was set up in Kolozsvár which declared on 16 December 1918: „the Transylvanian Hungarians do not recognise any other factor as managing their fate than the body they have elected, the *Transylvanian Hungarian Government Commission*”. (*Mikes*, 1996, 185. Our italics.) At the same time the Transylvanian Romanians also set up a regional administrative body, the Consiliul Dirigent, the *Governing Council* of Nagyszeben. Neither survived for long. In reality, the former only existed on paper, while the latter already fell victim in April 1920, before the signing of the Trianon Treaty, to the French-type Romanian strategy of creating a strictly centralised nation state.

In the inter-war period, Bucharest *centralisation* (which the nationalist, anti-minority course tried to justify with notions of „national area gain”) violated not only the specific interests of the Transylvanian Hungarians but also those of the Transylvanian Romanians. However, the latter did not really „rebel”, since they also profited. Although the *Transylvanian Party* founded after the Second Vienna Award can be regarded as representing Transylvanian Hungarian regional aspirations, it is obvious that striving for interests separate from Budapest during the war was not possible.

For some time the autumn of 1944 seemed to provide a favourable opportunity for achieving a long desired, if not full but certain degree of independence for the region – more precisely in its *northern half*. (There were also some at that time who dreamed about an independent Transylvania, but they did not count among the determining personalities of the events.) For those who thought soberly it was obvious that the successful Romanian and the failed Hungarian „pull-out” determined the end of Budapest’s rule. (However, because the door was left slightly ajar by the armistice, at least until the spring of 1946, the Hungarians of the Partium hoped with reason to get back under Hungarian jurisdiction.) After that, the question was how they could moderate Bucharest’s power. The historical situation then favoured the autonomists. Although the governments led by generals and representing the national parties in Bucharest clearly stood for the earlier centralism, the Kolozsvár political group, which tried to shape events (as far as the Soviets allowed), some *in honest conviction*, some

only for *tactical* considerations, opposed this. Fortunately for them, as described above, the occupying Soviets, *due to their momentary great-power interests*, supported the Kolozsvár autonomists against (“reactionary”) Bucharest. (It must be remarked that in our opinion it was out of question, as some thought earlier, that the Soviets would have supported the establishment of *real autonomy* between November 1944 and the following March. The creation of *real autonomy* in Northern Transylvania could not be imagined under the conditions of military administration. In addition, the Stalinist type of state excludes the existence of any form of autonomy or self-management.)

The group, called *autonomists* by us, actually represented the principle of *political autonomy and administrative decentralisation* against Bucharest, even though they were sometimes careful not to publicise it. (Criticising the Nationality Statute, writer László Szenczei declared: „We do not think that a central administrative body such as the ministry of nationalities can really make decisions about thousands of concrete complaints. *Decentralisation* is needed here...” *Világosság*, 17 December 1944.) This was also represented by the Northern Transylvanian ODA Executive Committee (although events did not enable it to have real authority in all of Northern Transylvania). It is no wonder it had to cease operations with the left coalition gaining power. Instead of the new power centre attempting to redistribute „certain central governmental rights” after 6 March, it, on the contrary, continued to represent traditional Bucharest centralism. We must agree with László Szenczei who disappointedly wrote in the spring of 1946: „As long as the government does not abandon the principle of centralism, the centralised state created to a French pattern, it is actually following the path of its anti-democratic and dictatorial predecessors”. (Szenczei, 1946. 169)

Finally we think that sufficient sources have recently become known such that with analysing the reviewed period, *sine ira et studio*, we can leave various *false myths and illusions* behind. Our research shows that, in relation to the Kolozsvár developments during the Soviet military administration, opinions which maintain that they were connected to the anti-Romanian underground work of „irredentists filtering into the communist party” and that their work was prompted by Budapest at the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, are no longer defensible. What really happened was that under the difficult conditions of Soviet occupation a *group representing anti-centralisation, administrative decentralisation and Transylvanian regionalism* tried to shift events in a better direction in circumstances of constant political manoeuvring.

It was not their fault that their project proved unsuccessful, but we are convinced that their activity provides a lesson for our times, too.