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Ideology, Organization, Opposition: How Domestic Political Strategy Shapes Hungary's Ethnic Activism

Increasingly, states around the world are becoming “ethnic activists”, intervening on behalf of ethnic and linguistic kin in other states and striving to maintain political, economic, and cultural ties with diaspora populations.¹ In post-communist Europe, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia and Romania have all embraced the role of “homeland” to ethnic kin in neighboring states by creating special legislation, often at the risk of exacerbating regional tensions. After decades of disengagement, states such as India, Mexico and the Dominican Republic have

¹ Following the recent and theoretically fruitful expansion of the term “diaspora” to include cases of populations stranded on the wrong side of new borders rather than forced or voluntary migrant populations, I use diaspora herein to refer to ethnic Hungarians across the border, as well as the terms “ethnic kin” or “co-ethnics”. See Charles King and Neil J. Melvin: *Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union*. Boulder, CO; Oxford, UK: Westview Press, 1998; Michael Mandelbaum (ed.): *The New European Diasporas: National Minorities and Conflict in Eastern Europe*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000 ; Rainer Münz and Rainer Ohliger: *Diasporas and Ethnic Migrants in Twentieth-Century Europe: A Comparative Perspective*. In Münz and Rainer (eds.): *Diasporas and Ethnic Migrants: German, Israeli and Post-Soviet Successor States in Comparative Perspective*. London, Portland: Frank Cass, 2003; Ilona Kiss and Catherine McGovern (eds.): *New Diasporas in Hungary, Russia and Ukraine: Legal Regulations and Current Politics*. Budapest: Open Society Institute/Constitutional and Legal Policy Institute, 2000; Rogers Brubaker: The ‘diaspora’ diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 28, Nr. 1, 2005.

brought presidential election campaigns to diaspora communities, created institutions for the maintenance of state-diaspora ties, and begun to act as advocates for their emigrants' rights in their new countries of residence. And long-standing ethnic homelands such as Germany have shifted their focus from the right of return to diaspora protection.

But why do states become "ethnic activists"? What drives states to risk interstate conflict and open themselves to new and unpredictable claims on their resources by extending special rights, benefits, and the protection of its institutions to residents and citizens of other states? Who benefits from the process of constructing diaspora populations as part of a global, transborder nation?

The case of Hungary and its policies towards the over three million ethnic Hungarians in neighboring states provides an excellent opportunity to investigate these questions. Since the treaty of Trianon in 1920, Hungary's engagement with its ethnic kin in Eastern Europe has been a highly symbolic and emotionally-charged issue, contextualized by historical episodes of irredentist policies, dictatorship, and conflict with neighboring governments over the treatment of the diaspora communities. Yet the intensity of Hungarian state responses to their plight has waxed and waned over time, reflecting the shifting interactions of elite politics rather than a reactive stance based solely on ethnic affiliation or support for nationalist projects. The contention of this article is that transnational ethnic affiliations are used by kin-state elites to further domestic political goals. Hungary's increasingly interventionist policy towards ethnic Hungarians beyond its borders from the late 1970s to the 1990s was driven primarily by the political strategies of right-wing elites. These elites utilized and co-opted transnational ties with the *határon túli magyarok* (HTM)² in part to benefit from the ideological and organizational resources to be reaped from such alliances.

Specifically, engagement with the diaspora issue offered these elites three potential avenues for party-building and electoral strategy: One was in crafting a political ideology based on the promotion and protection of the transnational or global nation, wherein elites "construct a legitimate locus of political power: the national homeland and its duties toward the

² To reflect as well the Hungarian framing of this category, I use the acronym HTM to refer to the ethnic Hungarians across the border.

historical nation of which it is a representative.”³ The continued existence of a diaspora that maintains its cultural identity and connections to the kin-state by resisting assimilationist pressures offers a defense against fears of cultural extinction or dilution and a source of national pride.⁴ The diaspora also keeps the influence of the mother country language and culture alive in territories that were once part of the state’s empire or colonial holdings, recalling the diaspora’s ties to historically-significant moments of past greatness and tragedy.⁵ Threats to the diaspora, therefore, are framed as threats to the unity, status, and survival of the nation embodied by the homeland or kin-state.

Building upon the rich symbolic value of the diaspora issue, a second strategic advantage stemmed from the creation through domestic legislation and foreign policy of new transnational political, economic and cultural connections to the diaspora and the co-optation of existing ties and organizations, which gave party elites more opportunities for organizational expansion. Finally, a third avenue involved the crafting of an “internally exclusive, externally inclusive” political strategy, which situated the nature of the state’s relationship with the diaspora at the center of political debates over identity and loyalty to the nation. This strategy puts political opponents on the defensive and has proven useful in deflecting criticism of other economic, social or foreign policy decisions.

This analysis challenges the argument that kin-state elites simply respond to appeals to their ethnic affiliation made by diaspora leaders or those advocating on their behalf.⁶ Normative commitments to prevent discrimination against their co-ethnics are widespread in Hungary, but there is clearly great variation in the intensity of those commitments and how they translate into policy. More specifically, the priority given to the

³ Charles King and Neil J. Melvin: *Diaspora Politics: Ethnic Linkages, Foreign Policy, and Security in Eurasia*. *International Security*, Vol. 24, Nr. 3, 1999.

⁴ Yossi Shain: *The Mexican-American Diaspora’s Impact on Mexico*. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114, Nr. 4, 2000.

⁵ Attila Melegh: *Globalization, Nationalism, and Petite Imperialism*. *Romanian Journal of Society and Politics*, Vol. 2, Nr. 1, 2003.

⁶ For example, see David Carment and Patrick James: *Secession and Irredenta in World Politics: The Neglected Interstate Dimension*. In David Carment and Patrick James (eds.): *Wars in the Midst of Peace: The International Politics of Ethnic Conflict*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997; David R. Davis and Will H. Moore: *Transnational Ethnic Ties and Foreign Policy*. In Lake and Rothchild (eds.): *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, Escalation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

state-diaspora relationship, the policy tools used to shape transnational support, and the level of involvement of the Hungarian state in supporting specific goals regarding the diaspora has differed significantly between regimes and governments. I contend that only when Hungarian political elites are able or willing to use the diaspora issue also as a *political* tool does official engagement with ethnic Hungarian communities increase significantly. The utilization of the diaspora as a political resource is a pattern that emerges repeatedly in the history of Hungary's diaspora politics, from the interwar period to the thawing of communist internationalism in the early 1980s to the recreation of right-wing nationalism by FiDeSZ in the late 1990s.

The following sections will trace the domestic political uses of the HTM issue over time, focusing on three periods in Hungarian politics when kin-state politics intensified: the late decades of communism, the early years of democratic transition, and the ascendancy of FiDeSZ in the late 1990s. In doing so, I will show how kin-state politics was used as an important tool of party and intra-group competition, and to what extent such a strategy succeeded or failed.

From silence to engagement

During the later decades of the communist regime, opening up space for a discussion of “national” issues, including the fate of the ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries, became a way for Party elites to develop new forms of legitimacy as the economic and ideological crises of the 1960s and 1970s eroded the promises of international socialism. The post-1956 social contract began to fail due to the country's staggering debt and global recession, and fractures deepened within the Communist Party. As a result, the old-guard communists came under increasing internal pressure to reform and the younger generation of Party elites began to search for allies among the influential cultural circles of writers and intellectuals. Reformers, such as Imre Pozsgay, realized the potential gain to be had in emphasizing nationalist themes of “traditional culture”, the “Hungarian nation” and “patriotism” more frequently in their public discourse.⁷ This was a large contrast to the early years of the Communist regime, when Party elites suffered from a kind

⁷ Ibid., 230.

of “programmed amnesia” about the discrimination and assimilation facing their co-ethnics in neighboring countries and moved to suppress public manifestations of nationalist sentiments.⁸

The internal critics of the regime eventually came to use the ethnic Hungarian issue as a way to ally with the Populist faction of the dissident intelligentsia. The plight of the HTM was of particular importance to the populist writers and intellectuals, which constituted one half of the long-standing division between Hungarian intellectuals, with the liberal-democratic and post-Marxist urbanists on the other side.⁹ Populists represented the voice of the rural, peasant, “authentic” Hungarian nation, and their writings were steeped in nostalgia for Hungary’s lost territories and greatness.¹⁰ Well-known populist writers and poets like Gyula Illyés, whose December 1977 article in *Magyar Nemzet* was one of the first to comment, even if indirectly, on the persecution of Transylvanian Hungarians, used their moral authority to criticize events in Romania and Czechoslovakia.¹¹ Although the populists were, at the least, ambivalent about communism, in general they had “made their peace with the regime.”¹²

Communists elites leaning towards reform as a way of saving the Party’s influence looked to gain political traction by giving in to some of the populist demands regarding the strengthening of Hungarian national culture within and beyond the border. There were signs that

⁸ Andrew Ludanyi: Programmed Amnesia and Rude Awakening: Hungarian Minorities in International Politics, 1945–1989. In Ignác Romsics (ed.): *20th century Hungary and the great powers*. Boulder, Co., Highland Lakes, N.J.: Social Science Monographs; Atlantic Research and Publications, Inc.; New York: Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1995.

⁹ János Kis: Nation-Building and Beyond. In Will Kymlicka and Magdalena Opalski (eds.): *Can liberal pluralism be exported? Western political theory and ethnic relations in Eastern Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 234.

¹⁰ Rudolf L. Tóké: *Hungary’s negotiated revolution: economic reform, social change, and political succession, 1957–1990*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 178.

¹¹ Richard Andrew Hall: Nationalism in Late Communist Eastern Europe: Comparing the Role of Diaspora Politics in Hungary and Serbia. *RFE/RL East European Perspectives*, Vol. 5, Nr. 5, 2003. See Gyula Illyés: Válasz Herdernek és Ady-nak [A Reply to Herder and Ady] *Magyar Nemzet*, December 25, 1977 and January 1, 1978.

¹² George Schöpflin: Opposition and Para-Opposition: Critical Currents in Hungary, 1968–1978. In Rudolf L. Tóké (ed.): *Opposition in Eastern Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

the population at large was becoming increasingly concerned with the situation of the ethnic Hungarians, as Radio Free Europe reporting and the exposés of Western diaspora groups highlighted the growing abuses of the Ceaușescu regime in particular. Those now driving Party policy began to adopt and validate much of the populist agenda in terms of its commitment to the Hungarian diaspora issue. For example, in 1984, 19 populist intellectuals wrote a letter to the Party requesting permission to start the Gábor Bethlen Foundation (for private aid to diaspora communities), to publish a journal and a volume on the history of Transylvania, start television programming for the ethnic Hungarians across the border, and asking for a senior government position on ethnic minority affairs.¹³ In the end, they got everything they asked for except the government post.¹⁴ By 1985, the Hungarian Studies Center (*Magyarsághutató Intezét*) was established and in 1986, and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences published a three-volume history of Transylvania (*Erdély Története*), which was strongly denounced as biased and nationalistic by the Romanian regime.¹⁵

By 1988, Hungary's policy regarding the HTM had begun to "emerge from the decades of silence."¹⁶ Party elites from the reform wing began to discuss concretely the limits and possibilities of what Hungary could do to affect positive change in the diaspora communities, while still refuting any border revision. The new policy was most clearly represented by the *Magyar Nemzet* article in February of 1988 written by Imre Szokai and Csaba Tabajdi, young and increasingly influential members of the Party's Foreign Affairs division. In the article, entitled "Mai politikánk és a nemzetiségi kérdés", Szokai and Tabajdi left behind the previously-inviolable idea that the treatment of Hungarian minorities

¹³ András Balogh: A kisebbségpolitikai rendszerváltozás kezdete [The beginning of minority policy transformation] In Csaba Tabajdi (ed.): *Mérleg és számvetés tizenhárom év után: A magyarságpolitikai rendszerváltás kezdete [Balance and Reckoning After 13 Years: The beginning of the transformation in ethnic Hungarian policy]* Budapest: Codex Print Kft., 2001.

¹⁴ Tőkés, *Hungary's negotiated revolution*, 196–197.

¹⁵ Ludanyi: Programmed Amnesia and Rude Awakening. Also see Béla Köpeczi: Introducing a New History of Transylvania. *The Hungarian Quarterly*, Vol. XXVIII, Nr. 105, 1987. and Zoltán Szász: Notes on Transylvanian History. *The Hungarian Quarterly*, Vol. XXVIII, Nr. 105, 1987.

¹⁶ Csaba Tabajdi: Több évtizedes hallgatás után [After many years of silence] – Speech given on February 25, 1987 at the East Central Europe Club of the Karl Marx Economics University. In Tabajdi (ed.): *Mérleg és Számvetés*.

in neighboring countries was the “internal affair” of those states, and instead characterized Hungary as the mother nation and protector of a reluctant and threatened diaspora.¹⁷

The alliance with the Populists and increasing engagement with the HTM issue was also beneficial in deflecting other forms of criticism against the regime. First of all, it focused opposition criticism beyond the Kádár regime to the discriminatory actions of neighboring governments and helped to keep the focus of opposition criticism away from regime change, which was increasingly becoming the focus of the liberal, urbanist dissidents. While the urbanist intellectuals were seen as a small group of “clannish” and ineffectual elites, by the mid-1980s, they were considered much more of a threat to the preeminence of the Party. The Agitprop bureau had earlier “dismissed the populists as a single-issue literary lobby preoccupied with the human rights of Hungarian ethnic minorities.”¹⁸ In contrast, the “bourgeois radicals” among the urban intellectuals had numerous contacts with the West, made pointed critiques of existing socialism, gained increasing intellectual influence through *samizdat*, and offered open support Solidarity in Poland and other internationally-recognized dissident movements. By embracing the ethnic Hungarian issue more readily than the old guard Kádárists, the reformers were able to take advantage of the urbanist-populist division by privileging one set of non-party actors over another, thereby undermining attempts by the intellectual opposition to come together as a unified front.¹⁹

The reform communist-populist alliance benefited the more conservative opposition members and their group, the Magyar Demokrata Fórum (MDF), as well. The reform wing’s success in strengthening its position within the party eventually allowed it to offer the populists

¹⁷ “Although the HTM became citizens of other countries, they didn’t break away from the nation. Even if the borders left them, the mother country did not.” Szokai and Tabajdi: *Mai politikánk és a nemzetiségi kérdés* [Our current policy and the nationality question]

¹⁸ Tóké, *Hungary’s negotiated revolution*, 195.

¹⁹ The lack of unity became apparent at the MDF-dominated Lakitelek meeting in 1987. For more on the meeting at Lakitelek see Sándor Agócs and Endre Medvigy: *A Magyarország Esélyei: a tanácskozás hiteles jegyzőkönyve, Lakitelek, 1987. szept. 27* [*Hungary’s prospects: the official record of the conference, Lakitelek, September 27, 1987*] Lakitelek; Budapest: Antológia; Püski, 1991.

public legitimacy for their agenda of moral and national regeneration.²⁰ The sea change on official diaspora policy gave the populists an opportunity to broaden their organizational capacity just as the transition from one-party rule to some sort of political pluralism was beginning in earnest in the mid to late 1980s. By having the tacit support, and not just toleration, of influential Party elites, the MDF was able to hold meetings, such as the one held at the Jurta theater on the ethnic Hungarian situation which drew a crowd of almost 800, and to organize a large demonstration on June 17, 1988 in support of Hungarian minority rights in Transylvania.²¹ The MDF also arranged for the publication of the English-language “Report on the Situation of the Hungarian Minority in Romania” in 1988.²² The populists used their political leverage to publicize the HTM issue internationally more widely, and to push the reformers to make Hungary’s official stance more proactive. The ability of the populists to maintain credibility with the out-going regime as well as their popular support through a long history of concern for the cross-border Hungarians carried over into the transition period. They became major players in the Roundtable talks of 1989 and the “negotiated revolution” away from communist control. Using the momentum from the events of the late 1980s, the MDF eventually came to lead the first post-communist government elected in 1990.

The rise and fall of kin-state nationalism

In the early years of democratic transition, the MDF-led government predictably focused on “Christian-national” and ideological issues, many of which revolved around the ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries. Prime Minister Antall demanded that any progress on normalizing relations with neighboring governments be tied to specific guarantees regarding the Hungarian minorities and refused to officially denounce all intentions to revise borders. His public comments focused on highly symbolic, and often controversial, issues such as the commemoration of the Trianon tragedy and the rehabilitation of authoritarian interwar politicians. In perhaps his most infamous statement, he declared in 1990

²⁰ Schöpflin, *Opposition and Para-Opposition*, op. cit.

²¹ See Tőkés, *Hungary’s negotiated revolution*, 200.

²² Attila Ara-Kovács, Rudolf Joó: *Report on the situation of the Hungarian minority in Rumania: prepared for the Hungarian Democratic Forum*. Budapest: 1988.

that “I consider myself to be the prime minister of 15 million Hungarians”, a figure which included the 10 million Hungarians in Hungary as well as those who were citizens of the neighboring states.²³

The Forum’s appeal to transborder nationalism came not only from a commitment to the ethnic Hungarian issue, but played an important strategic role for the Party. Forum elites saw control over the evolving relationship to the ethnic Hungarians abroad as a means for defining domestic political debates about post-communist Hungary’s identity and role in the region. As it had in the past, the Forum attempted to generate ideological and organizational strength from its position on questions of the nation and the co-ethnics in neighboring countries. The diaspora issue also helped to define the movement and later the party’s character and ideological orientation. The fate of the ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries was a timely and relevant issue given the uncertain situation of the HTM in the region and the increased engagement of public figures in reaction to this leading up to the election in 1990. Public opinion in 1989 and early 1990 reflected these concerns, demonstrating a relatively positive reaction to diaspora members from neighboring countries migrating to Hungary, even as the refugee issue raised fears of an unsustainable influx of ethnic Hungarians. Eighty-five percent of those polled agreed that Hungary’s assistance was necessary because “they need our help” and seventy percent because “they increase feelings of Hungarianness”. Only 10 percent felt that the HTM were “not real Hungarians.”²⁴ Even more tellingly, 78 percent of respondents in a post-election survey indicated that whether or not a party “represents the best interests of *magyarság*” influenced their party vote.²⁵

The MDF government also utilized kin-state nationalism as a way to deflect growing criticism by the opposition MSZP and SZDSZ of its controversial policies on media reform, the slowness of privatization, and relations with neighboring countries. The MDF’s commitment to creat-

²³ See speech by Antall at the third MDF party congress, “Folytatta munkáját az MDF III. Országos gyűlése – Antall József beszéde”

²⁴ Endre Sik and Bori Simonovits: Jelentés az MTA Kisebbségkutató Intézet Nemzetközi Migráció és Menekültügyi Kutatások Központja által készített közvelemény-kutatássorozat három hullámának eredményeir I. TÁRKI, October 2002. 12–13.

²⁵ H.D. Klingemann, T. Kolosi, and P. Róbert: Hungarian 1990 Post-Election Survey. *Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung an der Universität zu Köln*, www.gesis.org/en/data_service/eastern_europe/data/codebook/cb2486.pdf, 58.

ing a “Christian Hungarian middle class”, the pro-agriculturalist agenda of its Smallholders’ (FKGP) allies, and its inexperience in governance made it reluctant to embrace privatization and foreign investment.²⁶ The governing coalition responded in part by attempting to claim ownership of the diaspora issue. As a way of discrediting the administration’s most vocal critics, MDF leaders suggested that the liberal SZDSZ was not “national” enough or sufficiently concerned with the fate of the diaspora. The SZDSZ was forced to defend itself against accusations that it was “un-national” (*nemzetietlen*), “anti-national” (*nemzetellenes*), and “cosmopolitan”, the latter often a catchword for inauthentically Hungarian and/or Jewish.²⁷

Organizationally, Antall was able to use meetings of the World Congress of Hungarians (MVSZ) in Budapest and new institutions created to support the HTM, such as the Government Office of Hungarian Minorities Abroad (HTMH) and Duna Television, to bolster his position and lock out the influence of opposition parties. Antall was invited to give a keynote speech at the August 1992 MVSZ meeting in Budapest, where he enthusiastically embraced his role as the prime minister of all Hungarians.²⁸ In contrast, the SZDSZ was criticized for not attending the gathering as an organized party.²⁹ The HTMH, which replaced the Secretariat for Hungarian Minority Affairs in May of 1992,³⁰ also became a gateway for diaspora members more aligned with the MDF to influence Hungarian policy.³¹

However, other political and institutional factors limited the extent to which the MDF was able to capitalize on its enthusiastic and often controversial engagement with *nemzeti* rhetoric. In particular, regime change brought a new context of increased political competition and

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 290.

²⁷ András György Lengyel: Szent-Iványi István: a laptalan a nemzetietlenség vádja [István Szent-Iványi: the accusation of being un-national is baseless] *Magyar Hírlap*, September 8, 1992.

²⁸ Michael Shields: Hungary backs its exiles. *The Independent*, August 20, 1992.

²⁹ According to Szent-Iványi, the SZDSZ was not invited, although individual delegates attended various sessions. See Lengyel: Szent-Iványi István: a laptalan a nemzetietlenség vádja.

³⁰ By Government Decree 90/1992, dated May 29, 1992. In the spring of 1990 the HTM Secretariat was split off from the National and Ethnic Minority Office by the Antall government.

³¹ Tóth, Judit: Diaspora Politics: Programs and Prospects. In Kiss and McGovern (eds.): *New Diasporas in Hungary, Russia and Ukraine*, 116.

economic transformation in which the domestic costs and benefits of utilizing the diaspora as a strategic resource became more uncertain and more complex for elites. The “deregulation” of politics in Hungary combined with the general instability in the East European region opened up space for various political interests to present alternative visions for how they could best improve their co-ethnics’ quality of life without sacrificing the gains of Hungary’s economic and political transition.³² This debate served to undermine somewhat the ideological ownership of the diaspora issue by more extreme, right-wing nationalists in Hungary, who had not yet learned to exploit the institutional biases towards majoritarian politics in Hungary’s constitution.³³ At this stage of transition, no one group had a monopoly on the policy debate over Hungary’s co-ethnics, particularly as other pressing problems took attention away from symbolic politics.

The government’s focus on co-ethnics who were not citizens of Hungary began to alienate many domestic constituents, who would have preferred to see that concern turned inwards to Hungary’s own economic and social problems. The MDF did not build a broad base of support for its conception of national priorities, and failed to tie the diaspora issue to other economic, social and regional issues that voters considered important. Instead, MDF leaders presented Hungary’s diaspora policy, particularly in the foreign policy sphere, as a potentially losing proposition, in which conditions for Hungarians on both sides of the border would progress together or not at all. Domestic constituents and opposition elites, in contrast, expressed concerns that the MDF’s diaspora policy was jeopardizing Hungary’s international standing, including backing from the EU and NATO, and its long-term economic and political stability.

Public opinion in Hungary eventually rebelled against the MDF’s symbolic politics, leading to the party’s defeat in the 1994 elections. Polling data from the years leading up to the election demonstrate that while the MDF was considered the party most likely “to improve the

³² The term “deregulation” in this sense is taken from Valerie Bunce: *Subversive institutions: the design and the destruction of socialism and the state*. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 11.

³³ Attila Ágh: Early Consolidation and Performance Crisis: The Majoritarian–Consensus Democracy Debate in Hungary. *West European Politics*, Vol. 24, Nr. 3, 2001.

situation of ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries,”³⁴ the government’s overall support had deteriorated significantly, as had public support for an intense engagement with the HTM issue. In the weeks before the elections, Antall’s positive job performance was only at 31.5 percent,³⁵ and only 22.3 percent strongly felt that the goal of improving the situation of ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries was personally important to them.³⁶ The defeat of the MDF government and the electoral success of a left-wing coalition led by the MSZP in 1994 clearly reflected these opinion and demonstrated the limits of support for kin-state nationalism as a political project during the transition.

Rebuilding the Hungarian Right

After post-communist Hungary’s second peaceful democratic election in 1994, it appeared that the political influence of the nationalist Right was on the wane. The new social democratic government promised a more technocratic and less ideological approach to the co-ethnics across the border. The MSZP-led coalition focused on concrete goals, such as modernizing the cross-border subsidy system and funding cultural and entrepreneurial endeavors in ethnic Hungarian communities. Most significantly, the new government was determined to normalize relations with the neighboring governments in order to ensure that Hungary’s European Union membership was kept on track. Within two years, the new government had signed basic agreements with both Slovakia and Romania.

By 1998, a major shift on diaspora policy seemed unlikely: Yet that year, MSZP and SZDSZ lost a hard-fought election to a new right-wing coalition, led by the Federation of Young Democrats (FiDeSZ), a party which had barely made it over the five percent parliamentary threshold in 1994. Between 1994 and 1998, the politics surrounding diaspora

³⁴ In April 1994, 45.29 percent of those polled considered the MDF most likely to improve the HTM situation. H.D. Klingemann and Gábor Tóka: 1994 Hungarian Election – Pre-Election Studies 1992–1994. *Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung an der Universität zu Köln*, www.gesis.org/en/data_service/eastern_europe/data/codebook/cb3056.pdf. (Accessed: January 2, 2004), 174.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁶ As a contrast, 91.9 percent felt that increasing pensions and social benefits were important. *Ibid.*, 45, 195.

policy became a highly contentious and central point of opposition and criticism of the government. In just four short years, the political Right in Hungary had been remade and strengthened and the political and rhetorical focus on the diaspora and questions of the nation were renewed and intensified.

A major factor behind this shift was the party-building strategy of FiDeSZ, which revitalized the Hungarian right and consciously utilized the diaspora issue as a political resource. The victory of FiDeSZ in the 1998 parliamentary elections began a crucial intensification of Hungary's ethnic activism, which eventually resulted in the controversial 2001 "Status Law." The conditions of Hungary's democratic transition provided a relatively open and fluid political field, in which new political organizations could emerge and challenge more entrenched parties. For such parties, which lacked other kinds of historical or ideological legitimacy, a discourse of national identity and the symbolic politics of a borderless ethnic nation and cultural pride offered one avenue of potential electoral success.

The HTM issue represented a partial solution to the ideological and organizational barriers that FiDeSZ faced in challenging more entrenched political forces. In the early 1990s, FiDeSZ's main distinguishing characteristics were its youth (the original party charter capped membership to those 35 and under), and its unflagging anti-communism. However, neither of these attributes gave the party a long-term ideological basis on which to build a distinct party platform, especially while the traditional liberal and conservative ideologies were already represented by the more well-known SZDSZ and MDF. Complicating matters was the successful reconstitution of the former Communist Party into the social democratic MSZP. The MSZP's evolution into the most formidable opposition party and a potential coalition partner for parties on the ideological Left further encroached upon FiDeSZ's position as an anti-communist, left-wing party in opposition to the conservative MDF.

FiDeSZ was also somewhat disadvantaged by its outsider status, having had little connection to historically-salient political divisions and parties. This difference was apparent as all the other parties of the Center-Right – the Smallholders', KDNP, MIÉP, and MDF – were part of "an interrupted historical trend in the country" which harkened back to parties and movements of the interwar period or to intellectual trends that

survived Communism intact.³⁷ FiDeSZ had to compete with the historical legitimacy of these other parties and with the parties to the far Right of FiDeSZ, such as the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP), which were known for their strong and often extreme language of nationalism, irredentism, and Hungary's rightful place in history. FiDeSZ met this challenge by transforming itself from a "neo-liberal conservative" party focused on individualism and free market policies to a "traditional conservative" party more skeptical of economic reforms and committed to the principles of family, nation, religion and culture.³⁸

As an opposition party during the MSZP-SZDSZ government from 1994–1998, FiDeSZ moved to claim "ownership" of the status of the nation – an issue with which the party could attack the legitimacy of the Left and fortify its own unique identity. FiDeSZ first began to attack the MSZP's economic reforms, tying the Socialists' modernization project to a betrayal of the country's morality, national culture, and middle-class values. The party then went further by changing its name to FiDeSZ-MPP (Magyar Polgári Párt – Hungarian Civic Party) during its 1995 party congress and adopting a new discourse of representing a broad right-wing "civic" or "bourgeois" Hungary. Party leaders criticized the MSZP government for failing to provide moral leadership and argued that its reform policies were "criminal" because they had "consumed, squandered and discredited the opportunities, hopes and challenges which the miracle of the regime change signified – or would have signified – for the nation."³⁹

The idea of a "civic" Hungary endangered by the Socialists' policies also framed FiDeSZ-MPP's critique of the government's diaspora policy. MSZP was accused of selling out the Hungarian nation and squan-

³⁷ Ivan T. Berend: *The Political Right in Eastern Europe in Historical Perspective*. In Joseph Held (ed.): *Democracy and Right-Wing Politics in Eastern Europe in the 1990s*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1993. 122.

³⁸ Kenneth Ka-Lok Chan: *Strands of Conservative Politics in Post-Communist Transitions: Adapting to Europeanization and Democratization*. In Paul G. Lewis (ed.): *Party Development and Democratic Change in Post-Communist Europe*. London, Portland: Frank Cass, 2001.

³⁹ József Szájer: *Van más választás: Polgári Magyarország*. [There's another choice: civic Hungary] – speech made at the 8th FiDeSZ congress, April 19, 1997. Reprinted in József Szájer: *Jogállam, Szabadság, Rendszerváltoztatás: Beszédtek, Írások, Dokumentumok, 1987–1997* [*Constitutional State, Freedom, and Regime Transition: Speeches, Writings, Documents, 1987–1997*] Budapest: DAC Alapítvány, 1998.

dering the rights and opportunities of millions of Hungarians in order to please the West and to continue with its neo-liberal reforms. The perfect context for these critiques came as the Horn government went forward with its plans to normalize relations with the neighboring governments of Slovakia and Romania. The controversies surrounding the Basic Agreements provided a forum for FiDeSZ-MPP to expand its ideological critiques and make alliances with other right-wing elites within Hungary and across the border.

The contentious plenary debates in the Hungarian parliament over the treaties exposed the MSZP government to intense criticism and began to erode the elite consensus on diaspora policy. During debate over the basic agreement with Slovakia, for example, Horn's actions were called "treason"⁴⁰ and the treaty itself "Hungary's third Trianon."⁴¹ FiDeSZ-MPP took advantage of these tensions. The party moved quickly to form alliances with other right parties that had spoken out against the Socialists' economic reforms and lack of "nemzeti content". The year 1995 began with the government's formation of a 6-Party Consultative Committee of Minorities Beyond the Border, which cooperated on parliamentary declarations, budgetary decisions, and participation in European forums regarding the Hungarian diaspora.⁴² Within a few months, this broad-based consultation was dead. On September 7, 1995, members of FiDeSZ-MPP, the MDF and the KDNP held a press conference where they presented an itemized critique of the MSZP's approach to the diaspora issue and announced their new institutionalized cooperation to oppose the government's policies.⁴³

The criticisms enumerated at the press conference and at numerous other times by FiDeSZ and its allies faulted the MSZP-SZDSZ

⁴⁰ Gyula Horn: *Azok a Kilencvenes Évek...* [Those 1990's...] Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1999. 36.

⁴¹ Quoted in Margit Besseney Williams: *European Integration and Minority Rights: The Case of Hungary and Its Neighbors*. In Ronald H. Linden (ed.): *Norms and Nannies: The Impact of International Organizations on the Central and East European States*. Lanham, Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. 237. The treaty was finally ratified on June 13, 1995. Slovakia's parliament took over a year to ratify.

⁴² In Hungarian: Hatpárti Határon Túli Kisebbségi Konzultatív Bizottság. See László Lábodý and István Íjgyártó: *Kormánypolitika – pártpolitika – határon túli magyarok* [Government policy – party politics – Hungarians beyond the border] *Magyarország politikai évkönyve* [The political yearbook of Hungary] 1996.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

government for subordinating the interests of the HTM to the goals of Euro-Atlantic integration and a more conciliatory foreign policy. While Prime Minister Horn lauded the fact that the signing of the Basic Treaties meant that “Europe is with us”⁴⁴, his detractors saw the treaties and his refusal to allow HTM representatives to sit at the bargaining table as a sign of weakness and misplaced priorities. “Under the magic spell” of Euro-Atlantic integration into NATO and the European Union, the MSZP government had forgotten about its responsibility to its co-ethnics in neighboring countries.⁴⁵ The Socialists’ acquiescence to the demands of Western Europe put Hungary into the position of having to “apologize for every basic demand made on behalf of the Hungarian nation”, such as autonomy for the diaspora communities.⁴⁶ Instead of dealing with the reality of ethnic tensions in the region, the government “hides the problems of the HTM under a bushel in front of its Western partners.”⁴⁷ The Socialists were stuck instead in the “late-Kádár era mentality”, which only served the interests of the state and the political interests of the Socialist party while giving short shrift to protecting the interests of the Hungarian nation.⁴⁸

The Right’s intensifying criticism of the Socialists also provided an opportunity for FiDeSZ to form alliances with members of the HTM communities dissatisfied with the MSZP’s stance on the diaspora issue. The government’s most vocal domestic critics, including FiDeSZ-MPP and the FKGP, “found an almost natural alliance with the disaffected ‘radicals’ of the HTM, [i]n the spirit of the motto, ‘whoever criticizes the government is our friend.’”⁴⁹ Early in 1996, FiDeSZ made its associ-

⁴⁴ Horn: *Azok a Kilenvenes Évek...* [Those 1990’s.], 38–40.

⁴⁵ Varjú Frigyes: Pártolándó autonómiaörekvések: Németh Zsolt a liberális és konzervatív értékek harmóniájáról, a kormány paternalizmusáról és a határon túli magyarságról [Supporting endeavors towards autonomy: Zsolt Németh on the harmony of liberal and conservative values, the paternalism of the government, and Hungarians beyond the border] *Magyar Nemzet*, June 5, 1996.

⁴⁶ Quoting FiDeSZ-MPP representative, Zoltán Rockenbauer in Tibor Moldoványi: Határtalan Érdekeink [Our borderless interests] *Magyar Nemzet*, August 3, 1996.

⁴⁷ Rockenbauer, *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ See Rockenbauer, *Ibid.*; István Bundula: tényleg csak tíz és fél millió magyar miniszterelnöke: Csapody Miklós, az Országgyűlés külügyi bizottságának tagja [He is certainly only the prime minister of ten and a half million Hungarians: Miklós Csapody, member of the foreign affairs committee of parliament] *Magyar Narancs*, August 3 1995, and Frigyes: Pártolándó autonómiaörekvések.

⁴⁹ Lábodý and Ijgyártó: Kormánypolitika – pártpolitika – határon túli magyarok.

ation with more radical members of the RMDSZ, Romania's main ethnic Hungarian political organization, a central part of the new network of intellectual and political clubs, societies, associations, and salons that the party sponsored. For example, Bishop László Tótkés, one of the most prominent and vocal members of the Hungarian minority in Romania and honorary chairman of the RMDSZ, was invited to participate in the opening of FiDeSZ's foreign policy club, where he stated his agreement with FiDeSZ's approach to the HTM issue and criticized the Socialists during a press conference held with Orbán and other FiDeSZ leaders.⁵⁰

These transborder alliances were crucial to FiDeSZ's development because they helped to counteract party's limited organizational capacity, which stemmed from FiDeSZ's unique origins as a protest movement created by a small, informal elite. As one analyst described the party, FiDeSZ "was originally a movement of independent groups formed in a completely autonomous way based on principles of direct democracy and collective leadership."⁵¹ The party lacked an extensive, state-wide organization which could help overcome its narrow electoral base, modest infrastructure, and lack of connections in the world of media and business elites. By the mid-1990s, FiDeSZ had one of the lowest percentages of party membership, the lowest number of regional and local offices, and the lowest number of total members.⁵² Following the 1994 election, FiDeSZ had been forced to staff each county office with only one employee and relied on a small, centralized group of core officials to carry out almost all party functions. In fact, FiDeSZ had been known as the "answering machine party", because it had offices with answering machines, but no networks of supporters to answer the phones.⁵³

⁵⁰ "Transylvanian bishop's reconciliation proposals met coolly in Hungary", as provided by *BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts*, February 19, 1996. Global NewsBank. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

⁵¹ Bill Lomax: *The Structure and Organization of Hungary's Political Parties*. In Paul G. Lewis (ed.): *Party Structure and Organization in East-Central Europe. Studies of Communism in Transition*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1996.

⁵² In 1994, FiDeSZ had only 2.6% party membership and 37 regional and local party offices. See James Toole: *Straddling the East-West Divide: Party Organization and Communist Legacies in East Central Europe. Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 55, Nr. 1, 2003.

⁵³ This characterization is attributed to József Torgyán, the leader of the Smallholders' Party. See James Toole: *Straddling the East-West Divide: Party Organization and Communist Legacies in East Central Europe. Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 55, Nr. 1, 2003.

All this contrasted with the organizational style of the old Socialist elite, which relied on less formal rules, a weaker executive, and a vast network of personal connections and local organization. While the MSZP also had a small membership base, it had nearly twice as many nation-wide offices as any other party and an extensive mid-level bureaucratic infrastructure.

A growing engagement with the diaspora issue helped FiDeSZ to take advantage of its oppositional role and to solidify its position on the Right of the political spectrum. FiDeSZ-MPP acted strategically to position itself as the center of an emerging Center-Right bloc. The Young Democrats integrated and out-maneuvered its rivals, provided a viable alternative to the Left-wing bloc represented by MSZP and SZDSZ, and concentrated its ideological and organizational base. FiDeSZ-MPP was able to overcome its early rivals through a combination of co-optation and cooperation. In 1995, the FKGP and its fiery leader József Torgyán became the most visible and popular opposition party based largely on its vocal criticisms of the government's privatizing reforms.⁵⁴ By the end of 1996, however, FiDeSZ-MPP had begun to edge out the Smallholders' as the most popular opposition party. Torgyán had become too controversial a figure outside of his main supporters, mostly the rural poor and others hurt by the economic reforms, turning would-be supporters off with radical rhetoric reminiscent of the previous government's unpopular nationalism. FiDeSZ leaders worked during this period to split off factions from the MDF and the KDNP. The party lured the more moderate members with membership in FiDeSZ's "Civic Alliance" and with promises of electoral cooperation, which served to further radicalize and isolate the FKGP. FiDeSZ also showed its willingness to cooperate with the Smallholders on certain issues, such as the fate of the ethnic Hungarians and the question of foreign ownership of

⁵⁴ See András Kovács: Did the Losers Really Win? An Analysis of Electoral Behavior in Hungary in 1994. *Social Research*, Vol. 63, Nr. 2, 1996; and Brigid Fowler: Concentrated Orange: Fidesz and the Remaking of the Hungarian Centre-Right, 1994–2002. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 20, Nr. 3, 2004, 87. Another poll done between October and November 1995 showed MSZP and FKGP almost tied in support (14.1% and 13.7%, respectively) "if the general election was held next Sunday". Data from TÁRKI: Hungary Study in ISSP (International Social Survey Program) 1995 National Identity Survey Codebook. 146.

land, which both parties opposed.⁵⁵ By 1997 and the run-up to the 1998 parliamentary elections, FiDeSZ-MPP had clearly won the struggle for dominance on the right of the political spectrum.

Once in power, FiDeSZ reinvigorated a discussion of diaspora policy by offering a form of kin-state nationalism that could make Hungarians feel good about being Hungarian and their unique cultural and linguistic status. In combating the “specter of national death” that many intellectuals and analysts have commented on,⁵⁶ FiDeSZ’s nationalism invited the younger generation in particular to learn about and take pride in the larger cultural nation that transcended Hungary’s borders. Orbán stated his intent to combat the nation’s “inferiority complex”⁵⁷ and lack of education about the HTM communities, earning his HTM policies a large measure of respect from activist and advocacy communities that had felt somewhat ignored during the MSZP government.⁵⁸

FiDeSZ offered a new approach to the HTM issue by treating the diaspora not as a “problem” or “burden” that had to be dealt with, but as a positive attribute for Hungary and the entire region.⁵⁹ FiDeSZ policymakers made a point to emphasize the importance that culturally-autonomous HTM communities integrated into the larger Hungarian nation could play in Hungary’s future. In 2001, Orbán invoked not only the symbolic importance of the HTM, but their ability to increase Hungary’s strength and standing in the world as well:

There were times when it was the Hungarians beyond the borders who kept our souls alive. My hope is that one day Hungarians in Hungary will

⁵⁵ Fowler: Concentrated Orange, 90. Fowler argues that FiDeSZ possessed a high degree of “party-ness”, which she defines as “clarity about the organizational goals of seats and office and a willingness among party elites to subordinate personal considerations in pursuit of them.”

⁵⁶ See László Deme: Liberal Nationalism in Hungary. *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 32, Nr. 1, 1998; and György Csepeli and Antal Örkény: The Changing Facets of Hungarian Nationalism. *Social Research*, Vol. 63, Spring, 1996.

⁵⁷ Deme: Liberal Nationalism in Hungary.

⁵⁸ Tamás Papp, Office Manager, Hungarian Human Rights Foundation. Personal interview, April 24, 2003.; Balázs Széchy, Department of Strategic Analysis, Government Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad. Personal interview, April 28, 2003.

⁵⁹ Csaba Lőrincz, Chief Advisor to the Foreign Affairs Committee of Parliament, former Deputy Head of Foreign Affairs Ministry. Personal interview, May 22, 2003. Also Széchy, interview.

look at territories beyond the borders and Hungarians there not as those who have to be helped but those who are the great power reserves for the Hungarian economy and the Hungarian community in the Carpathian basin... [Material support for the HTM] is not help but investment, since in the long term, it is obvious that the power of a 10-million-strong Hungarian community is far exceeded by the power of the Carpathian Basin's Hungarian community of 14 million people.⁶⁰

The FiDeSZ government was also eager to combat criticisms that the renewed emphasis on the HTM question would jeopardize Hungary's EU accession. A member of Orbán's foreign ministry argued in a 1999 article that "the Hungarians beyond the border are not a burden that hinders our integration, but just the opposite: with the appropriate policy, [the HTM] can be an asset."⁶¹ The HTM were often referred to as the most peaceful of the region's national minorities, the "standard bearers of democracy and political stability" for the entire region.⁶²

As the head of the governing coalition from 1998, FiDeSZ moved to formalize its cross-border connections and took diaspora clientelism to a new extreme. Beginning with its campaign promises made in front of HTM communities before the 1998 election, FiDeSZ supported and encouraged the more radical wing of ethnic Hungarian political parties, particularly within the RMDSZ. According to Hungary's largest daily newspaper:

During the last government cycle, FiDeSZ openly stuck up for the radicals of RMDSZ, granted serious material support to the organizations, enterprises and foundations of the "reformers"- of course against the leadership

⁶⁰ Hungarian premier says status law is "national reunification" across borders. *Hungarian Radio*, Budapest, as provided by *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, October 25, 2001. Global NewsBank at <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

⁶¹ András Klein: Néhány gondolat az Orbán-kormány külpolitikájáról [Some thoughts about the Orbán government's foreign policy] *Pro Minoritate*, Vol. 7, Nr. 1, 1999.

⁶² See speech by Zsolt Németh: A határon túli magyarokról szóló törvényjavaslat parlamenti vitája [Parliamentary Debate about the Draft Law on Hungarians Living in Neighboring Countries] reprinted in Zoltán Kántor (ed.): *A Státustörvény: Dokumentumok, Tanulmányok, Publicisztika* [*The Status Law: Documents, Essays, Articles*] Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2002.

of the “moderates” - and allocated members of the populist wing paid positions from Hungary...⁶³

FiDeSZ allied itself with like-minded ethnic Hungarian leaders, in particular those that focused on autonomy demands and had little hope for accommodation from the majority governments. The party and its allies actively opposed the moderate wing, which “pursues a strategy of small steps and legal security attainable through the tools of a constitutional state.”⁶⁴

Finally, the Orbán government wasted little time in tapping into existing transnational networks by changing the nature of governmental offices and non-profit organizations in Hungary that deal with HTM policies and subsidies. New personnel were installed in the ministries dealing with minority and HTM affairs, and on the boards of trustees of the largest public foundations which administer grant money to the HTM communities, such as the János Apáczai Foundation, which has a budget of 1.2 billion HUF per year.⁶⁵ In addition, the FiDeSZ government moved the HTMH from the administration of the Prime Minister’s office to that of the Foreign Affairs Ministry. This signaled the offices’s new status as a top priority of Hungarian foreign policy and the latitude being given to Zsolt Németh, FiDeSZ’s Foreign Affairs State Secretary and a long-time passionate activist for HTM support and autonomy.⁶⁶ The FiDeSZ administration also tied the HTM communities more closely to the Hungarian government by institutionalizing the World Congress of Hungarians (MVSZ) into a semi-official organization, the Hungarian Standing Conference (MÁÉRT), that would serve as a consultative body of global Hungarians. FiDeSZ made good on its promise to give diaspora organizations more access to Hungarian state decision-making in February of 1999 by creating this forum that

⁶³ Zoltán Tibori Szabó: RMDSZ: szakítópórába – Mítoszvá válhat a romániai magyarok egységes politikai képviselője [RMDSZ: trial separation – The Romanian Hungarians’ unified political position may become a myth] *Népszabadság*, August 14, 2002.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Erika Törzsök, Director, Center for Comparative European Research. Personal interview, April 30, 2003; Zsolt Udvarvölgyi, Chief Advisor, Secretary for Minority Affairs, Office of the Prime Minister. Personal interview, 23 May 2003.

⁶⁶ Széchy, interview.

would serve, in the words of Zsolt Németh, as “a kind of integration deal between Hungary and Hungarians beyond the borders.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

This article has outlined some of the concrete ways in which Hungary’s diaspora politics and policies have been driven in large part by the domestic political strategies of party elites. Using the state’s relationship to the ethnic Hungarian communities in neighboring states as a political resource, right-wing elites, in particular, were able to generate ideological legitimacy, increased organizational capacity, and a way to discredit opponents and realign the balance of political power. This narrative demonstrates that kin-state nationalism and ethnic affiliations that cross borders are not monolithic or necessarily waning phenomena, but dynamic forms of political and social identification that are utilized in various ways when other paths of political legitimacy are inaccessible. The discourse of protecting Hungary’s transborder nation and the cultural-linguistic heritage that it represents offers parties one mode of governing legitimacy. Yet this strategy is not without its costs, as the defeat of the MDF government in 1994 and FiDeSZ’s narrow loss of power in 2002 demonstrated. Particularly when it appears that other state interests – such as economic recovery, political stability, and regional integration – may be jeopardized by the state’s increasing ethnic activism, voters may be hard-pressed to choose those outside their borders over their own pragmatic needs. This is one possible lesson of the decreasing support for more recent attempts to intensify Hungary’s diaspora policy, particularly in regards to the diluted “Status Law” and the failure of the referendum on dual citizenship for members of the regional diaspora in December 2004.

⁶⁷ Ethnic Hungarian forum takes institutional form. *Hungarian Radio*, Budapest, as provided by *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, 21 February 1999. *Global Newsbank*. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.