

Multicultural Living at Local Level. The Example of Budapest

During the past years, the national minorities in Budapest appear to have set up a whole series of different civic circles, associations and organisations for the protection of their interests. A national expert analysis had, as late as 1990/1991, spoken of the rudimentary state of self-organisation in this field, but since then great progress has been made. Minorities seem to have become conscious of the fact that this is the path of the future for them: to step outside the sphere of private life and join in community-creating activities, which can be especially effective in ensuring the survival of minorities in big cities.[\[1\]](#)

Within the *Foundation for National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary*, efforts for organisation and activities can be divided into two groups: those dealing with traditions and the past (the amateur movement, church, research), and those concerning the present and the dynamics of the public life of minorities (publications, media, political events). Education is treated separately in this respect. The Foundation could play only a supplementary role in stimulating self-organisations: besides central government an increasing role is played at the local level by local authorities, district authorities and the municipality of Budapest.

In the case of Budapest, although the Gypsy organisations represent by far the biggest number of organisations, it would appear that the German minority unquestionably has the highest level of internal organisation, conscious representation of interests and spontaneous activity, and it is here that the demand for community life has become stronger. In their search for orientation, civic circles and twinning associations (with partner organisations in the country of origin) have been set up in various forms in practically all districts inhabited by Germans, but above all in the outer areas of Budapest that once made up the „Swabian ring”. Naturally, apart from interest groups, there are also traditional choruses, dance and choral groups, brass bands, traditional clubs and so on. The friendly circle, which groups its members according to their place of origin, represents a special form of community life for minorities who have moved to the city from villages.

A wide variety of minority organisations

In the case of the Gypsy minority the situation in Budapest is very varied, ranging from districts which have several well-functioning organisations offering many-sided and effective assistance (e.g. in the 7th District), and districts with branches of national Gypsy organisations, to others where we find the activities of one or two enthusiastic representatives, and yet others where there are no groups representing Gypsies at all. There is a great need for the establishment of Gypsy organisations in all districts with a high Gypsy population, following the model of organisations which are already representing Gypsy interests effectively. A number of districts also contain one of the traditional forms of self-organisation among Gypsies which is still a living tradition even in the city-environment: the Vajda, a kind of Gypsy chief. In some districts his role in organising and integrating the community is very important: in those places where „they have their Vajda”, fewer problems arose or arise in connection with the Gypsies’ traditional way of life, and he also settles any disputes arising among them.

A new solution in the efforts made by the national and ethnic minorities in Hungary to organise themselves is the establishment of their own foundation at minority or district level (such as the *Foundation for the Advancement of Gypsies in Ferencváros*, the *Foundation of Germans in Hungary*, or the *Foundation for Minorities in Kőbánya*, to mention only a few). In cases where a foundation has not yet been set up, it is only a matter of time, since most of them have such plans. Local history circles also play an important role in districts inhabited by minorities. One of their tasks is to preserve the minority language and culture, to present and create an awareness of the minority’s local history, but at the same time they also have a major role to play in shaping and cultivating a sense of local identity.

The many-sided activities of researching the minorities’ local history (organising exhibitions, holding collections, making inventories of objects of the past, establishing a local history collection or

museum house) are closely linked to the past of minority population living in the districts. It is interesting to note that the activities of local history circles are most prominent in the outer suburbs and especially those (also) inhabited by Germans. However, it is difficult to imagine a possible change of function (which may become necessary) in their social role, since their members have aged and at present they have difficulties in recruiting new members.

Special role of religious organisations

The role of the church and religion in maintaining minority awareness had always been important although it was stronger in the more distant past and had weakened in the last few decades. Today, however, a marked revival is taking place. The role of religious life, religion and the church in shaping and preserving awareness of identity is particularly important in the case of minorities in diaspora, living in the city environment. It can provide them, among other things, with the feeling of belonging to a smaller community. Besides being able to counterbalance the fragmenting force and effect of the big city, it also represents a valuable historical tradition for its members, a kind of continuity.

The link between religion and minorities has evolved in a special way in Hungary: frequently a particular minority is associated with a specific faith which has its own rites – generally in the mother tongue – services, sermons, hymns, religious instruction, or, in the case of a more universal religion, it implies the alternating use of two languages and services using various solutions. There are even cases where the religious awareness acts as a substitute for minority allegiance, although there are also examples in the literature of other cases where the desire to belong to a minority community can mean gaining relative independence and departing from the practice of the persons' own religion towards the practice of another religion, but one that is expressed in the mother tongue and linked to the individuals' own minority community.

Within the increasingly dense network of self-organisation, there has been a revival among the minorities, too, in aspirations related to religious life. The dynamic church organising activities, continuous creation of the conditions for religious life in mother tongue and its system of relations are key indicators of change which can be detected. Our interviews also confirm that religious life is reviving among the minority population and that demands are being expressed more firmly. It is true that this does not apply to the whole populations, but there are also young people and children among the practising religious minority. There are also examples of some minorities organising themselves on a religious basis, such as the Poles and the Germans. Those of their churches which are still operating represent local urbanistic values on the one hand and at the same time also form an integral part of the objective minority past, representing one of the aspects and features of the many-layered local identity which is actively preserved as a value by the minority although it is often unknown or not consciously recognised by the members of the majority nation, i.e. public consciousness. Minorities with their own specific religion which differs from that of their surroundings, include the Bulgarian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic or Pravoslav faith.

Co-operation in the area of religious and church life is an integral part of relations with the mother nation: for example, a priest came from the mother country to the Croats in Budapest and organised religious instruction in the mother tongue. Religious life in the mother tongue has also strengthened in places where its earlier, deeply-rooted traditions had disappeared in the recent past. In the Catholic church of Soroksár (Budapest, 23th District), where mass was first held in Hungarian in 1904 after being held in German for the previous 180 years, German is once again being used for mass every three months and on church holidays'.

Language, culture and education issues

There are big differences among the different minorities with regard to the teaching of the mother tongue: in some cases, such as the German and Slovak minorities, the institutional conditions for learning the language are provided at all levels of the educational system, from kindergarten through primary and secondary school to university; in other cases, only one of the links in the chain is functioning; and in still

others the teaching of the language takes place outside the institutional framework in the form of informal education.

In a number of districts in Budapest there are schools teaching a minority language, or with teaching in a minority language. These are operated by the district local government or the municipality, or in some cases by foundations, or they are attached to an embassy.

Teaching of the Gypsy language, culture and history is a special case: the tasks here have not yet taken shape even at the theoretical level. Very differing and contradictory conceptions have arisen although they are undoubtedly all guided by the well-intentioned aim of making Gypsies aware of their ethno-cultural values. With regard to the subject of institutional differences in language teaching, there is a striking difference in the demand and interest shown by the different minorities.

Contacts with the mother nation

Hungary not only tolerates but recognises and supports the demands of minorities for contact with the mother nation. Within this general and theoretical situation, relations between the different minorities and their mother nations have evolved in different ways: the interest has not always been mutual and not always organised, in some cases remaining at individual and family level. Besides contact with the mother nation, there also appears to be a parallel strengthening of ties of the same nature with 'related minorities' living in neighbouring countries.

The national and ethnic minorities settled in Hungary for at least a century do not have the same origin, awareness of identity, and ties to the country or nation of origin. In addition, the nature and intensity of the ties are obviously determined by various important factors, such as the image of the mother nation internationally and in Hungary, the common past with the country concerned, whether there are disputed issues or relations have developed in a positive way.

Manifestations of intolerance

The problems and conflicts arising from coexistence may manifest themselves in different forms, as do the responses to them. The urban manifestations of intolerance arouse intolerance and dislike in some, and anxiety and fear in others. Absorbing people of foreign ethnic origin who are appearing in growing numbers as a result of international population movements is not a simple issue. Their adjustment and integration depends on many concrete circumstances: the country's present economic situation; the characteristics of the values of the specific ethnic group shaped by their own particular social and cultural traditions and their harmony or disharmony with the values of the host nation; existing negative prejudices; the positive or negative image of the ethnic group concerned (apart from the political complexity of the issue).

Intolerance may go as far as xenophobia, one of the most brutal forms of which is the skinhead movement. In districts of Budapest with a high Gypsy population, there is a strong anxiety and fear among Gypsies of the skinheads. Skinhead groups are appearing in places and, although according to our informants there have not yet been open conflicts, this obviously has an influence on the Gypsies' sense of well-being. This explains that there are already organisations handling issues like civil rights and ethnic conflicts.

Important aspects of ethnic coexistence are: the nature of the national and cultural identity; the contact between cultures; and frictions and conflicts between ethnic groups. Frequently contradictions arise from the differences between cultures and their norms of social coexistence, and the way these are resolved.

The leaders of more than one minority organisations have made proposals to set up a small centre in Budapest, not necessarily or exclusively of a cultural nature, but also carrying out economic activities

and striving to be self-supporting, which would at the same time be a focus for their intellectual energies and an important workshop for the minority. The demand for cultural autonomy is manifested in the desire for the self-government and self-management of affairs, and now there is hope to achieve it by setting up local and national self-government.

[1] On the background of the wider European and national picture, the meeting considered the challenges of multicultural living at the local community level. Two examples were presented in the plenary session at Fordhouses&Oxley Community Centre: Budapest, host of the last East-West Conference and Eastern partner in the ECOS cooperation programme, and Wolverhampton, current host city and ECOS lead partner. Maria Demeter Zayzon, a sociologist and head of the Department of Human Rights and Minorities in the Mayor's Office of Budapest's 10th District, gave an outline of new demands in the self-organizing civil society of minorities in Hungary's capital city based on original research.