

Recent efforts in serving local minorities' demands in urban areas. The case of Budapest's 10th district

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The changes and the democratic development of Hungary have resulted, among others, in the legal regulations of the rights of minorities, corresponding to internationally recognized guidelines. The basic principles of the Hungarian legislation are summed up in *Act LXXVII of 1993 on the rights of national and ethnic minorities*. They determine the framework for implementing policies which are aimed at, or which resulted in the preservation of cultural identity, in the defence and representation of minorities' interests.

It is clear, that generally all laws are largely dependent on their implementing regulations. The application in practice, the transplantation into everyday context of these theoretical principles is happening at the local level of various settlements, rural or urban areas, differing in their ethnic composition, the number and variety of minority groups, the degree of their local self-organisation, the expression of their demands, requirements – or the failure to express them – even their demographic and social structure. On the other hand, the local frame of minority issues is ensured by local institutions, the local administration having a particular importance in this.

Another Act, which has resulted from the advancement of democracy – *Act LXV of 1990 on local self-governments* - represents the broad legal frame for the establishment of special administrative and elected bodies serving local minorities' interests. Local self-government employees and elected members are redefining their role in a new context and challenging old assumptions.

Beyond these general considerations I would like to introduce the strategy of the local self-government of the 10th district in Budapest (named Kőbánya), where an appropriate local authority staff – a team of specialists, and a Committee of elected members of deputies – have elaborated a strategy and are organizing the practical action. The Department of Human Rights and Minorities and the Committee for Human Rights and Minorities are offering a wide range of general services for the minorities living here, for the maintenance, practice and promotion of their specific culture, identity, where necessary, granting „extra-rights” for them, as specified in legal regulations. Understanding the importance of this field, its own role and function in establishing a frame of close and regular contacts between minority groups and local authority, of a composite partnership relation, the 10th district and its example provides a model – at least in Hungary – of how and to what extent the general legal opportunities could be implemented in a concrete, specific local reality, in a concrete, specific way.

The general description of the district: among the 22 – by this time 23 – administrative districts, what is called local self-government of Budapest, the 10th district, by its name Kőbánya=Stone-mine, could be considered as a traditional industrial area. Some decades before on the periphery, at the present time on intermediary way between the center and the outer area of the city. On its area of 32,54 km² owns 87.813 (almost ninety-thousand) inhabitants. Once was a typical workmen's quarter (and even in present has „more than 100 factory-chimneys”). It is not indifferent from the point of view of the composition and origin of its inhabitants the fact, that the district has several railway stations, giving access to the steadily growing territorial migration into Budapest.[\[1\]](#)

As regards the role and the characteristics – like ethnic composition, the ongoing process, the territorial specificities – of the 10th district, among others: in the 10th district, as theoretical calculations of the research carried out on 1992 demonstrate, the number of Gypsies (with permanent residence here) is approximately of 6 thousand. Among the ethnic and national minorities living in the 10th district can be found some few hundred Poles, whose ancestors have been settled here as industrial workers in the past century; they represent the largest Polish community in Budapest, having here the religious center, too:

the Polish Catholic Association. Characteristic for the 10th district as ethnic colour is the presence of a Greek community, arrived here by political reasons, much more compact in the early fifties. Now they live in diaspora, their number makes also some hundred. Almost every native minority group can be found here, not in high number, but sensible, of course, in other respects: for instance, the Germans, who asked for the teaching of the language in a district school as minority language; or, the Croats, who have initiated just in our days the local election of their minority self-government in the 10th district, too.

In the whole of Budapest, the largest ethnic group is the Gypsy, making nearly one-hundred thousand persons, and the German, approximately fifty thousand. The number of other groups as Bulgars, Armenians, Croats, Greeks, Poles, Slovenes, Slovaks, Serbs, Rumanians, Ruthenians, Ukrainians varies from a few hundred to a few thousand. According to recent estimation data the total number of ethnic and national minority population of Budapest exceeds perhaps one hundred sixty thousand persons, that is to say: 8,3 percent of the whole of almost 2 millions inhabitants of the capital. (I remind you, that there are 13 native minorities in Hungary, settled down and living here as population at least from one hundred years, their number represents approximately 10 percent of the country's total population of 10 millions.)[\[2\]](#)

It is true, that the proportion of ethnic minorities in Kőbánya is rather high, but even so only average compared to other districts of Budapest. However, the fact that this district pays special attention to the different strata of its minority population, dealing with the question on a higher level, in a planned way and over a long time horizon, applying operationalized solutions, elaborating and implementing complex package programs, can be attributed also to traditions in the cultivation of minority culture here. Minorities' cultural demands and educational needs are surveyed and monitored with the help of outside and local experts, possibilities are sought for cultivating, presenting and creating an awareness of their ethnocultural values, local minority initiatives and community life is supported, in order to stimulate local public life and develop local societies, hoping that the dynamic of minorities self-organisation will be capable of further joint efforts for articulating differing interests, to meet their requirements.

The conception of the Department of Human Rights and Minorities in Kőbánya is to deal not with a crisis management welfare program: specialized departments and offices deal with each of these, focusing on the question, not on the ethnic group. Instead, we are working to create the conditions on a higher level for experiencing the minority status extra-rights, aiming even long-term results. At the same time, our aim and instrument in shaping interethnic relations is to organize positive actions promoting – wherever necessary – a gradual change of attitude for both the majority and the minority.

Our work began in the summer of 1993, and since then we have achieved good results. After a quantitative analysis and study of the minorities in the district, the next step was gaining a deeper knowledge of the characteristics of the area, the processes, problems, strata demands and possibilities, seeking out, mapping and formulating all these. It was on this basis that we were able to build our many-sided, complex but interlinked activity, which is based on a heterogeneous reality, on demands that differ for each minority and age group, and within these for the different levels of schooling.

The programs and activity to be presented in detail, exemplifying some relevant aspects of our work in the following, are based on these sociological insights.

1. One of such aspects of our activity, to be taken in consideration, are the contacts with local minorities' organisations: to enable a mutual confidence relationship, a flexible cooperation with them, was conceived as one of our main tasks. Having been that during the past years, the minorities in Budapest have set up a whole series of different civic circles, associations and organisations for the protection of their interest, we started to study the similar processes in the district. Here, as in another areas inhabited by a considerable Gypsy population there is a great need for the establishment of organisations representing Gypsy interests. Such associations could play an essential role in promoting the social integration of the steadily growing number migrating to Budapest, and in need of support in integrating into Budapest urban life.

Within the increasingly dense network of self-organisation, there have been a revival among the

minorities too in aspirations related to religious life. The dynamic church organizing activities, continuous creation of the conditions for religious life in the mother tongue are one of the indicators of the change which can be detected from various data sources (local government or even church reports, and regional data.)

As example of minority organizing itself on a religious basis (too), we have in the district the aforementioned Polish Catholic Association, established in 1992. Our relations with them are – one might say – close, we are participating reciprocally to our programs, festivities, celebrate together important moments of the Association's life. We understand that the Polish church built at the beginning of the century and raised recently to the status of parish church (in autumn 1992) form an integral part of the objective, deeply-rooted local past of the minority, one feature of the many-layered local identity, which is actively perceived as a value by the minority.

Furthermore, our contacts with different ethnic groups of local inhabitants, organisations, communities and the local spokesperson of the Gypsy population leads us to the role of mediator between local authority and the organisations, informal groups mentioned. We are receiving, transmitting the requirements, applies for support for (cultural) activities, we initiate measures, consultations, put forward proposals.

We set up funds and announced the opportunity to introduce applications asking for help of local self-organizing groups, clubs of minorities living here at district level or at smaller territorial segments of the district.

2. As everywhere in big cities, in this district of Budapest is distinguishable too the formation of territorial segments of deprived areas, where in the poor housing stock (once so called workers colonies), marginal neighbourhoods live people experiencing huge social, educational and employment problems. Within these particular spatial units the Gypsy inhabitants are increasingly concentrated. The spatially significant social problems have more and more ethnic dimensions. We can observe the gradual closing of this compact community in one of such deprived areas in the district (where children in the school are in 80 % Gypsies.) So, we pay a special attention to our contacts in this direction, supporting the school – its extra-funds-needing activities, club activities for youth or adults, summer camps for the children. This special attention means a special, positive discrimination. (I remind you that as regards the social, employment, housing etc. problems, these are special tasks of other departments of the local authority.)

3. The need for learning the language of the minorities in schools coming within the competence of the local government: there are big differences in Hungary among the different minorities as regards the teaching of the language. In some cases, such as the German and the Slovak minorities, the institutional conditions for learning the language are provided at all levels of the educational system, in other cases only one of the links in the chain is functioning, and in still others the teaching of the language is solved outside of the institutional framework, through informal education (as Sunday-schools). Teaching of the Gypsy language (a dialect of it), culture, and history is a special case, the tasks here have not yet taken shape, even at theoretical level.

Having been striking differences in the interest shown by different minorities in different areas in the learning of languages, we initiated a comprehensive research in the district to find out where, in which of the schools and what minority language are requested to be taught. The empirical research was carried out by the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research, Regional and Minority Studies Department. As a result we managed to start in one of the district's schools the teaching of the Gypsy language (more precisely one of its most spoken dialects.) The research revealed an equally live interest among the pupils, disregarding their minority or majority status, in cultures and languages met in their environment. We try to fulfill this interest, offering multifold opportunities to get in touch and acquainted with different elements of native minorities' culture. The selection of means depend on whether children or youth are concerned: these include gatherings with entertainment, organisation of performances to present customs, traditions and costumes of a given ethnic group, competitions, quizzes, and other activities rewarded with prizes. For instance, each year we announce a drawing competition for children on the theme of otherness: drawings expressing valuable thoughts were submitted for these, even brought to exhibition abroad, in

Wolverhampton. This Christmas, local Polish, Greek and Gypsy children are to present the folk costumes of minorities in Hungary. Each year we organize/finance lifestyle or talent quest summer camps for young Gypsies. We launched a club for Gypsy young people in the district, which exerts a big attraction for young people.

4. Dealing with aspects of ethnic coexistence. In recent years we have been frequently confronted at the varied levels of social contact with questions of the coexistence (cohabitation?) of the minority and majority, the Gypsy and the Hungarian population. Whether openly or unspoken, relations between the communities with different culture and values are assuming different „temperatures” in our everyday social practice, which appears to be growing: it is not unusual to hear of local conflicts aggravated to such a point, that keeping a distance out of prejudice or even excluding a group from local society appears to be a „peaceful” manifestation by contrast... We consider that it is extremely important in our economic environment overshadowed by unemployment, in our immediate and wider region for both Hungarians and Gypsies to become increasingly aware that we can find a common language, a tone of tolerance, openness, approach and affection in these relations by paying attention to each other’s demands, otherness and values and at the same time also to the expectations of the social norms.

This conviction led us to announce a competition for writings about personal experience in the field of Gypsy – Hungarian relations, about the positive social experiences, examples of which have always existed and always will, but of which far less mention is made, perhaps because this is the natural thing. We received numerous and very valuable materials. We have published the best of these in reviews and in a volume entitled: „A true story”. This is an extraordinary book in many respects: it is an extraordinary genre on this theme since it is not a uniform analysis or a collection of reports, but it is nevertheless a volume of fact-finding, „true” stories of analytical force. These writings of various length, dealing with personal experiences of Gypsy – Hungarian coexistence and real life situations written not by professional writers but amateur Gypsy and Hungarian contestants can be classified in the personal confessions domain in the literature of non-fiction.

This real cross-section of society presents numerous positive examples of the colourful relations, a rich network of mutual contacts which in places gives a glimpse of the possibilities in the search for new path. The writings from various places and times draw on the memory of the generations living today and embrace also the geographical characteristics of coexistence. The overall picture that emerges is not idealized, indeed it even includes dramatic or distorted events, nevertheless we believe that the authenticity of these writings has a stimulating effect and the forwardpointing character of the lessons they teach is indisputable. We believe in their force as an example and have published this volume in the hope that its message will reach a wide audience.

5. The mutual interest shown in each other’s culture, everyday life, customs and values, in minorities’ spiritual heritage in Hungary could be felt very strongly in persons of different ages, both children and adults, among both minority and majority residents. We are striving to create regular, planned opportunities adapted to the needs of the different strata and the sociological and demographic characteristics for this „intercultural change”, a kind of acculturation, which at the same time provides a complex possibility for the cultivation of identity. We consider, that the more dynamic contacts between the cultures, in the spirit of approaching Europe, is an indication of the growth of openness in our society, that is, of a relaxing of its closed state.

There is steadily growing awareness of the fact, that our country’s cultural variety is a value, and that a different kind of culture not only separates, sets people apart, but also binds them together. A familiarity with the specific values of the minorities, the characteristics of their traditions and customs, thinking, and behaviour, however natural it may be, for certain occupational groups is not an end in itself: teachers, public servants and other specialists, who come into contact in their profession and daily work with people and communities belonging to different minorities are coming to feel the need for a more thorough knowledge of these matters, that goes beyond mere good-will and empathy.

Arising from this real need and serving the demand for practical further training, the Department for Human Rights and Minorities, and the Committee with the same profile launched in the autumn of

1993 the Kőbánya People's College for Minorities' Studies, planned to last for two years, operating on the basis of the traditional people's college principle (is open to all those interested). It consists of a series of lectures, discussion evenings and related cultural events. Publicity has been given in all districts of Budapest and in all the minority associations and organisations. Studies started with 50 participants in the first group. In the first academic year lectures covered Gypsies, Poles, Greeks, Bulgars, and Slovaks living in Hungary, as well as more general aspects of the minority question (minority Act, conflict management). In the second academic year all the minorities not covered in the first year will be examined: Germans, Rusyns, Serbs, Slovenes, Croats, Armenians and Ukrainians.

In form, the course, consists not only of the 8 lecture-days in a year (these are held one day each month with lectures on the level of university postgraduate training, given usually by outstanding experts of each national and ethnic minority), other suitable forms are also used. While this undoubtedly has the character of an intellectual experience, the transfer of knowledge is approached from the angle of the practical work, in keeping with the combination of goals. The possibility is provided for the presentation of all national or ethnic minorities found in Hungary and they also have the opportunity to introduce themselves, as the lecturers are invited from the ranks of the minority concerned. Although the certificate to be given at the end of the second year serves „only” to certify participation, it is our hope that the value of the people's college for minorities' studies, its effectiveness, direct or indirect practical benefit will be felt many times over, not only in our field of competence, but also in the treatment of the problem and the resolution of conflicts. The participants in the pioneering Kőbánya initiative can serve the people of the district by contributing to the creation of a better atmosphere.

Opportunities for intercultural meetings organized by our Department are the events of intellectual nature such as district exhibitions of works by Polish, Gypsy and Greek artists in Hungary, and literary evenings held with the participants of Gypsy writers, poets and actors renowned in Hungary.

6. A new solution in the efforts made by the national and ethnic minorities, or in their interest, in Hungary, is the establishment of their own foundation, at minority group or at district level. We could mention here again the example of the 10th district, where the local self-government set up the Foundation for Minorities in Kőbánya.

Perhaps none of these aspects presented here taken alone would be sufficient, but taken together, they have a combined effect. We also make use of the possibilities provided by the modern mass media in expanding the scope of programs aimed at ethnic coexistence and the shaping of harmonious relations. Linked to this theme we have published two books this autumn: one is a scholarly work directed at a narrower audience (and in fewer copies), while the other (already mentioned) is intended for a wider public.

Shaping the role and activity of our team – we have achieved these since 1993 summer – after the elections of the local minority self-government – we are looking forward to new cooperation forms, with other minority organisations, bodies in our district.

[1] Roads in district carry very heavy traffic, and the area is bordered by two main underground lines of the capital. It is crossed by compulsory transit roads to east and South.

Mentioning briefly some other characteristics of the district – even they are not very strongly linked with the minority strategy of the local government – as regards the main economic sectors: has almost every type of industrial activities: chemistry, food, textiles, electronics, some of them of national importance. Main employers: are industrial, services, trade, white collar professions. ¼ of population are children, another ¼ are retired persons. Main natural resources: previously stone – under the surface extends the great old stone-mine tunnel. The exploitation of stone ceased in 1930. „People's Grove” is an 100 hectare green zone, smaller parks comprise another 100 hectares of green area. Regional development priorities of the local authority: social policy, combatting pollution, small local development

of schools, maintaining the level of development, stopping the recession and the decline of great enterprises. Promotion of local multicultural values of minorities living here from the past.

[2] These figures exceeds from estimations or from newly carried researches, theoretical calculations, having been well known, that the census statistical data are not effective, they don't reflect the much higher real number. For instance, in the census carried out in 1990, only 8 123 Gypsies declared themselves as such in Budapest, and only 2 609 Germans did the same in the capital, while the real numbers are as high as in the text above mentioned, according ot estimations of their organisations and to some calculations.