

THE INDIGENOUS STATUS OF THE HUNGARIAN LANGUAGE COMMUNITY IN THE CARPATHIAN BASIN. A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

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Abstract The notion of ‘indigenous’ as described in international regulations and resolutions is adjusted to the situation of the Hungarian language community in the Carpathian Basin, with special reference to the Hungarian minorities in the countries along the Hungarian border. The regional communities of the Hungarian minorities beyond the borders should be seen indigenous groups since 1920, with the flexible semantic extension of ‘indigenoussness’. Significant parts of the Hungarian language community were annexed to the newly formed non-Hungarian states. The then new state borders cut through natural geographic, and mostly homogenous Hungarian ethnic, ethnographic, regional cultural and dialectal territories. Those left behind the borders became indigenous, while staying on their homeland. This interpretation is based on the linguistic and cultural features of the minorities in question, to point to the human side of their historical developments and present state.

Keywords Hungarian minorities, indigenous, linguistic and socio-cultural factors, Paris peace treaty 1920

Introduction

In the present paper, I explain the notion of ‘indigenous’ adjusted to the historical and contemporary situation of the Hungarian language community in the Carpathian Basin, with special reference to the

Hungarian minorities in the countries along the Hungarian border. This interpretation is based on those socio-cultural and linguistic pragmatic factors that are activated by the description of indigenous peoples, although these politically based quasi definitions are constrained to the colonial empires and their post-colonial territories in the general legal discourse.¹ In my interpretation the notion of 'indigenous' described by the UN is extended to those peoples, territories and states which are not considered as colonies or former colonies, but show indigenous features in certain aspects. This situation can be experienced even in Europe, with many ethnic and linguistic minorities existing under nontypical 'colonial' rule with limited minority rights, suffering regular discrimination. I intend to interpret the notion of 'indigenous' adjusted to the circumstances of the Hungarian minorities beyond the borders, to better understand their situation and recognize their language rights, as well as minority rights in general. The Hungarian minorities beyond the borders, their regional communities should be seen indigenous groups since 1920, according to the description of 'indigenous', with its flexible semantic extension. Significant parts of the Hungarian language community found themselves overnight in newly formed non-Hungarian states, because of the Paris peace treaties that followed World War I in 1918–1920. The then new state borders cut through natural geographic, and mostly homogenous Hungarian ethnic, ethnographic, regional cultural and dialectal territories (even some villages were physically cut into two). Thus, communities existing in organic structures and practices for centuries were torn apart. Those left behind the new borders faced abruptly the expectations and laws of states with unknown, foreign cultures and languages as minorities. They became immediately indigenous, while staying on their homeland. This interpretation is based on linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics, focusing on the personal and communal fate of the given individuals and communities, and referring to the notion of territorial linguistic rights, defined by György Andrassy.

The present paper focuses on the indigenous features of the Hungarian minorities, other factors relevant in the linguistic and socio-cultural circumstances (e.g., like bilingualism, code switching, the relation to the state language and the other Hungarian variants) are not discussed here.

The historical situation of the Hungarian language community

The community of Hungarian mother tongue – apart from certain smaller groups – speakers lived in the Carpathian Basin, within the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom from the 10th century until 1920 (Fodor-Pók 2020). This situation continued to exist also during the Turkish occupation (the middle of the 16th century – the end of the 17th century), although the power relations and the inner dialectal and settlement structure suffered brutal changes.

From the perspective of indigenoussness, the following aspects are to be mentioned.

The territorial range of the Hungarian language community can be defined since the 10th century. This range changed during historical ages, but only to a smaller extent. On the other hand, the number of data increases through the centuries. The territorial range is not absolutely and not always homogeneous, still, the Hungarian language territory shows strong and stable homogeneity both in the linguistic and the ethnic aspect. Smaller inner and border regions with non-Hungarian ethnical and linguistic groups always belonged to the historical developments. To put it in another way, the greatest part of the Hungarian language territory in the Carpathian Basin is inhabited by Hungarian speakers since the 10th century.

Bilingualism among Hungarians during the original settlement is probable, a small part of the population (e.g. the military escort of the prince) spoke other languages. A considerable number of the certain ethnic groups (Cumans, Jazygians) immigrated into the Hungarian Kingdom during the Middle Ages, and though these groups preserved their ethnic identity and traditions, they changed their languages to Hungarian. On the other hand, the Saxons, settled on the northern and eastern parts of the Carpathian Basin preserved their German language. During the Turkish occupation of the middle parts of Hungary, later in the centuries of the Habsburg reign, and also during the Soviet occupation, the Hungarian language community maintained the Hungarian as the mother tongue without any uncertainty, in spite of the linguistic imperialism of the Habsburg and the Soviet empire.

This situation changed radically in 1918–1920. The newly formed states around Hungary severely constrained the rights of the minorities gained with the territories annexed to these states through their nationalistic and assimilative policies. The situation worsened by the communist political regimes because these ideologies neglected the rights of the minorities on internationalistic basis (for a general overview of the social consequences of the communist rule see Hankiss 1990).

The State Borders Set Up by the Trianon Treaty

The Paris (Trianon) peace treaty that closed World War I did not carry into effect the ideal (“national democratic states”) in most cases (Leonhard 2018:11–28), the new borders created immediately severe tensions, and not only in the case of Hungarian minorities. The basic facts of the Trianon peace treaty are the following

The Treaty of Trianon forced Hungary to renounce two-thirds of its pre-war territory (its area decreasing from 282,000 to 93,000 square kilometers, not counting Croatia) and one third of the Hungarian-speaking population, 3,327,000 people, in favor of other successor states of the Habsburg Empire. (The population of the country was reduced from 18.2 to 7.6 million)” (Fodor–Pók 2020:32, see also Romsics Ablonczy 2020a, b, 1999, 2007).

The resolutions of the winning powers have had serious and complex effects, for the Hungarian language community as well. Within the present argumentation, only some factors relevant from the perspective of indigenesness can be discussed here. These circumstances prevailed in 1918–1920, and determines the life of minority Hungarians today, too

- the existence, daily life of the Hungarian language community on the given territories
- the 1100 years continuity on the Hungarian language territory, including the ethnic genocide during the Turkish conquest, the mass migrations caused by the world wars and forced emigration or the

special situation of the Székely counties and the middle region of Erdély (Transylvania), these large regions having no direct geographical contact with the other parts of the Hungarian language territory, still, these conditions do not affect the indigenous character in any respect,

- the social, communal existence, language, culture, traditions and historical consciousness, formed and maintained through these 1000 years.

These circumstances clearly show that the state borders fixed in the 1920 Paris peace treaty cut through continuous Hungarian linguistic, ethnic economic regions, as well as geographic ones. The situation proves to be the same one hundred years later, along the Hungarian border, and in deeper areas, especially in Romania.

Slovakia (the Felvidék region) the border between Hungary and Slovakia is 668 km long. On the Slovakian side, there exists a 20–50 km wide region (Felvidék) from East to West with predominantly Hungarian population, produced by the 1920 peace treaty. The traditional, historical parts of this elongated region had their other halves, now on the other side of the state border, the border cut through traditional Hungarian ethnographic and linguistic regions. The southern region of Slovakia in question was almost totally inhabited by Hungarians since the 10th century “in 1991 98,1% of the Hungarians [in Slovakia] lived on the Hungarian language territory in the strict sense” (Lanstyák 2000:46). “It shows the dense character of the Hungarian settlement network, that the 77,2% of the Hungarians still lives in numerical majority” (Lanstyák 2000:51).

Ukraine (the Kárpátalja region) “According to the 1989 census, the majority of the Hungarians in Ukraine, 95,4% live in Kárpátalja (Sub-Carpathia), Hungarians are indigenous people only in this county” (Csernicskó 1998:33). “The Hungarian population in Kárpátalja formed a relatively homogenous block until the end of the 20th century, the settlement territory is one socio-cultural unit even today. [...] The ethnic Hungarians populate the southern, flatland zone. The ethnic distribution of the region began to dilute during the 1920–1930s, partly by planned, partly by spontaneous settling” (Csernicskó 1998:34).

Romania (the Erdély region) “According to the historical developments and the dialectal distribution, [...] there are four regions in Transylvania, based on the data of the 2011 census: 38% (475 000) in Székelyföld in three counties, 20% (248 762) in central Transylvania, (in Maros county without the Székely parts and in Kolozs county), 25% (302 641) in the third region, in the Partium and in the zone along the Hungarian border and in Szilágy county, and finally 17% (216 000) in the northern and southern diasporas and in the Bánság with less than 10% Hungarian proportion” (Péntek–Benő 2020:62). The Székely region is far from the Hungarian border, still the Hungarians are in numerical majority. The same situation prevails in the third region, in the Partium and along the border, with Hungarians in majority. In the other regions, Hungarians form a minority in their number. Viewing the overall picture, Hungarians are indigenous everywhere in Transylvania. The main phase of the Hungarian settling took place from the 10th century. The organization of the counties, the foundation of the Transylvanian episcopate (centered in Gyulafehérvár) took place at the beginning of the 11th century, during the reign of King Stephen (István) I (1000–1038). The Hungarian settling of Transylvania was completed in the 12th century. The immigration of Rumanians began in the 13th century, in southern Transylvania and in Máramaros (Péntek–Benő 2020:62).

Serbia (the Vajdaság region) “In Vajdaság “the second largest ethnic group is the Hungarian, their proportion was 339 491 (16,86%)” (Göncz 1999:37). The majority (86%) of the Hungarians live on a continuous territory in northern Bácska, along the Tisza river, and the middle part of the Bánát in 23 settlements. Another 14% lives in 21 villages in ethnic islands.

In Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria there are Hungarian diasporas, too, with similar circumstances (see Fancsaly et al. 2016, Szépfalusi et al. 2012).

The censuses in the states mentioned here were completed with partly different methodologies, and in different times. Thus, the data taken from the individual countries cannot be compared in every detail. Nevertheless, it can be pointed out that the borders drawn in 1920 cut through continuous Hungarian ethnic and linguistic communities. These communities lived on the same territory for centuries, spoke the same Hungarian language and language variety, preserving their traditions, practically without the presence of other ethnic and linguistic groups. There is no ethnic and

linguistic continuity between the Székelyföld or Middle Transylvania and the other parts of the Hungarian linguistic territory, but all the other features are present. With the conditions mentioned above, the Hungarian language community resides in the given territories for 1100 years continuously, in preponderant majority. In this sense Hungarians are indigenous in the Carpathian Basin.

The General Interpretation of ‘Indigenous’, Focusing on the Linguistic and Cultural Factors

The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues of the United Nations dealing with indigenous peoples works within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

According to the available documents, the discussions on the features of ‘indigenouslyness’ and on unified formation of the actions plans began in the 1980s, mainly by the elaboration and presentation of the Martínez Cobo Study. It has to be noted that no definition of ‘indigenous peoples’ has been adopted by any UN-system body except by the ILO, generally accepted by those in question (as stated in UN 2021). Nevertheless, the descriptions quoted here are often used as such definitions.

Jose R. Martinez Cobo, the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, states the following when discussing indigenous peoples

“Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal system” (Cobo 1982, UN 2021).

The main factors of long term historical continuity of being indigenous are the following

1. “Occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them”
2. Common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands
3. Culture in general, or in specific manifestations (such as religion, living under a tribal system, membership of an indigenous community, dress, means of livelihood, lifestyle, etc.)
4. Language (whether used as the only language, as mother-tongue, as the habitual means of communication at home or in the family, or as the main, preferred, habitual, general or normal language)
5. Residence on certain parts of the country, or in certain regions of the world
6. Other relevant factors” (Cobo 1982, UN 2021).

It is important that individuals recognize themselves as indigenous through self-identification, group consciousness, and they are accepted as members of the indigenous groups. “This preserves for these communities the sovereign right and power to decide who belongs to them, without external interference” (UN 2021).

Further on, the activities of the United Nations aimed at indigenous peoples focused mainly on the investigation and improvement of human rights among these peoples. The General Assembly of the UN accepted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, “giving prominence to collective rights to a degree unprecedented in international human rights law” (UN 2021).

The notion ‘indigenous’ is interpreted in a similar way in other international documents, for instance in the provisions of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989)

“This Convention applies to

[...]

(b) peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.” (C169).

The history of Central and Eastern Europe was rarely investigated from the perspective outlined above. The surveys approached the situation of minorities from the perspective of political history (e.g., Brubaker 1996), and discuss the main questions only broadly (Ekiert–Hanson eds. 2006) or outline the circumstances after 1920 with statistical data (Koulov 2013).

The Indigenous Features of the Hungarian Minorities

The excerpt quoted from the Cobo Study or the paragraph in C169 can be applied to European minorities without much modification. In these cases the term ‘autochthon’ is used as well, with similar interpretations – this is the case in the Explanatory Report for Regional or Minority Languages, elaborated by the Council of Europe (Explanatory Report 1992). From the legal perspective see the explanation of György Andrásy, for instance in his paper in the present issue.

The indigenous features outlined above can be recognized within the Hungarian minorities in specific forms. The regions left behind the borders were rural areas in general, with populations earning their living in agriculture, often in traditional self-sufficient livelihood. The factors of historical continuity in 1918–1920 were the following□

- the occupation of ancestral lands, in the legal, spiritual and emotional sense, with intimate relations to the land, to the country□
- the residing on the ancestral lands□ the Hungarian minority communities have resided on the same land for centuries□
- the common ancestry of those Hungarians living there, and the conscious knowledge of being Hungarians both in the ethnic and linguistic sense, aware of the thousand-year descent□
- the Hungarian mother tongue, focusing on the centuries old and stable rural dialects used as the habitual means of communication in everyday local life, with definitely monolingual speakers until the power change in 1918–1920□

- the cultural traditions, mostly Hungarian folk traditions of the local rural communities, from instruments to social behaviour.

Along these factors, the Hungarians found themselves in 1920 in a situation, whereby the new states were taken as foreign and conqueror by the new minorities. The measures and laws of the new states qualified the above listed indigenous factors as secondary, even harmful for the new majorities, questioning or even denying the historical continuity, and considered the Hungarian and other minorities as intruder enemies, on their own ancestral land. This complex relation of relations prevailed after 1990, with diverse degrees of efficiency, depending on the given state and historical period.

In contrast with western European states and their colonies and their indigenous and postcolonial features, the European, more specifically the Central European situation show differences. On one hand, the new states formed by the Paris peace treaty occupied certain territories and population that belonged to the former Hungarian Kingdom, using their military and police. On the other hand, these developments took place not in remote and unfamiliar regions, but with the extension of the ethnical majority regions to areas populated by adjacent other ethnic groups. The majority and minority communities did not differ significantly in their traditions, social system, economy, and culture, these characteristics fitted into the general European (Central European) historical developments at the end of World War I. With all these characteristics, local cultural and linguistic differences were present and evident for the communities in question. Because of these circumstances, the minorities, Hungarians in particular and the state majority society isolated themselves from the others using asymmetric counter concepts (Koselleck 1979). The states in question did these actions in certain forms, for instance by the deprivation of the citizenship of the minorities not only in individual cases but collectively, or by the regular declaration of the presumed administrative and moral superiority, signs of majority dominance in political and administrative power. Also, stereotypical fictitious declarations about the minorities have often been expressed, stating for example that Hungarian minority people are originally Slovaks or Rumanians assimilated by the Hungarian conquerors.

During 1918–1920 those Hungarians who found themselves outside the new Hungarian borders, immediately faced constraints on mother tongue use, even its prohibition. The factors that affect indigenous peoples and listed in the description of indigeneness have their real importance here, on these practical level. The dialect is the vernacular of those living in one region, it is used in spontaneous informal situations, with the highest skills, and with the deepest emotional relation. The sudden, abrupt transition to another, largely unknown official language resulted in a shock of communication vacuum, and degraded the mother tongue, more precisely the vernacular to the state of secondary importance or uselessness in the everyday practice. The communicative undervaluing and cultural isolation of the local dialect proved to be a crude and aggressive intrusion into the everyday life of the new minorities. Since the local dialect, the local vernacular is not only the instrument of the communal life of a smaller community, a village, but the cognitive and active medium of the everyday activities, the consciousness of linguistic and communicative traditions, the restrictions have had serious consequences.

The circumstances outlined above accounts for the application of the notion ‘indigenous’ in the description of the minorities’ language rights in Central Europe. On one hand, the states around Hungary with Hungarian minorities accept international resolutions on Human rights, on minority rights, including the rights of indigenous people, or even the indigenous status of the minorities on their territory. But on the other hand, in practice the situation often differs. To take one example, in Slovakia, Ukraine or Romania, all pupils have mother tongue classes from the first grade. From the majority perspective these classes are Slovakian, Ukrainian, or Rumanian mother tongue classes, for majority and minority pupils uniformly. For long decades, the Slovakian, Ukrainian or Rumanian mother tongue classes were and are taught with one basic methodology for every pupil, planned for pupils with Slovakian, Ukrainian or Rumanian mother tongue. Minority pupils are taken as if they would speak the language of the majority on the mother tongue level, like pupils who have these languages as their mother tongue. There is one curriculum, one textbook for all. Since minority children do not speak the state language as well as the Slovakian, Ukrainian or

Rumanian pupils, this system leads to frustration, low level bilingual knowledge and serious drawbacks in professional training, finding a job and in social integration in general. The other result of this practice is the hidden process of assimilation—the pupils with Hungarian (or other minority) mother tongue and Hungarian indigenous status are changed implicitly into Slovakian, Ukrainian or Rumanian indigenous persons, since they have the mother tongue classes elaborated for the others (for an outline of the question see Vančo 2017). Therefore, all descriptions, investigations and regulations should concentrate on the practice that comes from general legislation. The actual state of the socio-cultural factors in the everyday life of minorities may show serious deficiencies, even besides the adoption of general laws.

Summary

In my linguistic and socio-cultural interpretation of the minority Hungarians, the notion of ‘indigenous’ as described in international regulations and resolutions is adjusted to the historical and contemporary situation of the Hungarian language community in the Carpathian Basin, with special reference to the Hungarian minorities in the countries along the Hungarian border. The notion of ‘indigenous’ described by the UN is extended to those peoples, territories and states which are not considered as colonies or former colonies, but show indigenous features in certain aspects. The Hungarian minorities beyond the borders, their regional communities should be seen indigenous groups since 1920, according to the description of ‘indigenous’, with its flexible semantic extension. Significant parts of the Hungarian language community found themselves overnight in newly formed non-Hungarian states, because of the Paris peace treaties that followed World War I in 1918–1920. The then new state borders cut through natural geographic, and mostly homogenous Hungarian ethnic, ethnographic, regional cultural and dialectal territories (even some villages were physically cut into two). Thus, communities existing in organic structures and practices for centuries were torn apart. Those left behind the new borders faced abruptly as minorities the expectations and laws of states with unknown, foreign cultures

and languages. They became immediately indigenous, while staying on their homeland. This interpretation may not harmonize with the strict legal interpretation of 'indigenusness', although it is based on the linguistic and cultural features of the minorities in question, to point to the human side of their historical developments and present state.

As for the indigenous or autochthonous developments, reflections, and self-reflections in Europe, it can be stated that the tensions originating from the indigenous status in the majority – minority relations were not dissolved by globalization, multilingualism, nor by intercultural or interlingual developments, or by democratic political systems (see the investigations presented in Gardner–Marilyn eds. 2012). The multilingual approach in the literature applies indigenusness to individuals, thus atomizes the communities, although language and culture only exist in communities. The situation in south Tirol or among the Sami show that the socio-cultural factors included in the concept of indigenusness are as strong as the majority language and culture or the effects of globalization (see Pietikäinen 2012). Linguistic and cultural decisions are usually local acts, based on the traditions, and cultural memory of the local ethnic or language group. And this is the everyday and long-term practice in the case of the minority Hungarians.

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Endnotes

- 1 In the present study, 'postcolonial' is a non-activist, non-critical term used for the scientific description of the discussed historical situation with a process-like character.