Reconciliation In Transylvania Runs Aground

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Plans for a park to illustrate the improvement in Romanian-Hungarian relations have been scuppered before the foundation stone has been laid.

When in late July Romania's Foreign Minister Andrei Plesu and his Hungarian counterpart Janos Martonyi agreed to build a "historical reconciliation park" in the Transylvanian town of Arad, their initiative was seen as a symbolic gesture, designed to illustrate how relations between their two peoples have improved in recent years.

But this month the planned ceremony to lay the reconciliation park's foundation stone failed to take place as a result of opposition from both Romania's left and its ultra-nationalist opposition. Moreover, this failure is but the latest of a series of recent setbacks to Romanian-Hungarian relations.

In mid-September the Hungarian consul in the central Romanian city of Cluj was accused by the city mayor of being a spy and asked to leave the country. Moreover, the expulsion followed an increasingly acrimonious war of words during which Romanian opposition politicians have warned on a near daily basis against Hungarian "revisionism".

In addition, according to a recent opinion poll, more than 58 per cent of Romanians believe that the Hungarian Democratic Federation of Romania (UDMR), the party which represents the country's 1.6 million Hungarian minority, is plotting against the country's stability and unity. The war in Kosovo and the unstable situation in neighbouring Serbia have raised fears of a conflict between Hungarians and Romanians over Transylvania, an ethnically mixed region which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until its demise in 1918.

Heightened tensions do not, however, mean imminent conflict in Transylvania. Instead, they are but a sign that an election is approaching in Romania. Indeed, the row over the reconciliation park says as much about internal Romanian politics as it is about Romanian-Hungarian relations.

According to the Hungarian-Romanian decision, the reconciliation park was scheduled to include two main elements: a monument commemorating the execution by the Austrians of 13 Hungarian generals in Arad in 1849, and statues of Romanian historical figures from Transylvania.

The monument to the generals, known as "Hungarian Liberty", was unveiled in Arad in 1890 to commemorate the Hungarian "martyrs" who fought for their country's independence. However, after World War I, when Transylvania became part of Romania, the new authorities decided to dismantle it, on the grounds that the generals were responsible for massacring some 40,000 ethnic Romanians - charges which the Hungarians deny. For the past 75 years the statues have been stored in a military fort where their physical condition has deteriorated.

Many Romanian politicians have attempted to make political capital out of the monument. "The monument to the 13 generals has a profound anti-national and anti-Romanian character," the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR) said in an official statement. According to the latest opinion poll, PDSR, the main opposition party, is the favourite to win next year's parliamentary elections. PDSR leader and former Romanian President Ion Iliescu warned that the Hungarians are "setting a trap" to make claims on Transylvania.
Ever ready to show his ultra-nationalist outlook, Greater Romania Party (PRM) leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor said that the intention to reinstate the monument is comparable to "demanding that the Jews erect a statue of Hitler at the Auschwitz concentration camp". Another opposition party, the Party of Romanian National Unity (PUNR), condemned the agreement, describing it as "humiliating for Romania's national dignity".

Even the Democratic Party, a member of the ruling coalition, criticised the decision to reinstate the monument, saying that it would "bring back the tragic memory of a Transylvania where the national rights of Romanians were not recognised". Moreover, the Democrats on the Arad town council joined the opposition in supporting a resolution opposing making available the land earmarked for the park.

In face of such opposition the Romanian authorities backed down. Citing poor health, the Premier Radu Vasile cancelled his planned visit for the inauguration of the reconciliation park and delegated the task to a junior member of the government.

Shortly after Vasile's decision, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban arrived in Arad on where he attended a ceremony commemorating the 13 generals and a play on the generals staged by the Oradea Hungarian-language theatre. However, he, too, decided not to take part in the official ceremony the next day and no foundation stone was laid at the reconciliation park.

The same day, a Hungarian delegation headed by Justice Minister Ibolya David attended a mass in memory of the generals and later laid wreaths at an obelisk commemorating Hungarian heroes. Meanwhile, some 100 Greater Romania Party sympathisers and other nationalists shouted obscenities and protested against the presence in Romania of the Hungarian delegation.

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