

## Why Ethnic Mobilization is Sustained: The Case of the Hungarian Minority in Romania

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### Abstract

The concept of sustained ethnic mobilization remains under-studied, with a majority of the focus being drawn to the initial factors initiating mobilization. Yet, there are instances globally where ethnic groups have engaged in mobilization, remaining active without fully completing the process of mobilization, or experiencing a decline in mobilization over time. The case of Hungarians in Romania serves as a key example of a minority group that mobilized during the immediate post-communist era while continuing to pursue its stated goals and objectives, maintaining broad support within the community. This article examines two theories of sustained ethnic mobilization, institutional and kin-state, to evaluate which is more effective in analysing the case of the Hungarian minority. Using these theories, the analysis focuses on domestic organizations and institutions, as well as the allowances provided by the Romanian governing system. Additionally, it examines the influence of the Hungarian government through two key forms of support: financial backing for cultural institutions and the provision of citizenship to Hungarians residing in Romania. The article comes to the conclusion that both approaches offer value in understanding why mobilization is sustained but in the case of the Hungarians, the role of institutions is paramount in allowing a group to retain mobilization, offering regional and conceptual implications.

**Keywords:** sustained mobilisation, Hungarians, Romania, ethnicity, social movements, ethnic mobilization.

### Introduction

Hungarian ethnic mobilization in Romania has largely been successful since the fall of communism in 1989, a feat that is uncommon throughout the post-communist space. While the origins of Hungarian minority mobilization trace back to the aftermath of World War I and the breakup of the Hungarian Empire, the post-1989 iteration is distinct in emerging from decades of repressive rule. Unlike minority groups that have either achieved autonomy or ceased mobilization altogether, the Hungarian minority in Romania has remained in a state of sustained mobilization. In this context, they have neither achieved their goal of autonomy for the desired region of Szeklerland, an area in eastern Transylvania where Hungarians constitute a local majority, or effectively advanced political and cultural representation to meet their objectives. All the while Hungarian institutions, such as schools, universities and political organizations have remained in place, supporting mobilization over time. This has ensured continued engagement from the Hungarian population and fortified a position within Romanian politics.

Since the onset of post-communist mobilization in 1989, the Hungarian minority in Romania has secured a foothold that has enabled gradual progress in political and cultural representation, while also fostering ongoing political engagement within the community. Meanwhile, the Hungarian government has provided fluctuating levels of support for the Hungarian minority in Romania since the 1990s, with a notable increase since 2010. Models of mobilization, such as Hroch's (1985) A-B-C model of mobilization may assume that the Hungarians should have completed the process of mobilization once they obtained mass support and established institutions. Hroch defines Phase A as cultural awareness, Phase B as national agitation (political or cultural activism) and

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Phase C as mass mobilization. While Hroch alludes to what follows Phase C, I define a clearer endpoint to better conceptualise my theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, as it removes the ambiguity surrounding the end of Phase C, allowing for a more precise exploration of why mobilization was sustained within the A-B-C framework, and extending Hroch's work in a meaningful way.

The Hungarian minority in Romania has remained in an ongoing state of political and institutional engagement since the 1990s. Hroch's model has a linear progression, from early mobilization with decentralized cultural and political initiatives, to a final stage which I view as mobilization culminating in the institutionalization of minority rights, the achievement of autonomy, or the consolidation of political and cultural representation (end of Phase C). However, the A-B-C model alone cannot fully account for the Hungarian case. I argue that, in certain cases, mobilization can remain active within Phases B or C for an extended period or indefinitely without reaching Phase C's conclusion and without subsiding. The Hungarian case illustrates sustained mobilization that evolves and adapts to shifting political contexts without achieving autonomy or complete institutionalization of minority rights. Therefore, I propose an extension of Hroch's framework to account for the state of sustained mobilization within these phases, challenging the notion of a rigid, linear process and better reflecting the complex realities of minority group politics.

To date, limited research has investigated the conditions under which minority groups have successfully sustained mobilization (see Koinova, 2015), defined as the ongoing ability of a group to secure resources and maintain collective action over time. This research carves out a distinct position within the academic literature, expanding the body of work on Hungarian mobilization in Romania (Brubaker, 2006; Kiss & Székely, 2016; Székely, 2018; Toró, 2016), while also developing two original theories of sustained minority ethnic mobilization: an institutional theory and a kin-state theory, both introduced and employed in this analysis. Among these theories, I argue that the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization best explains the case of the Hungarians in Romania. While acknowledging the importance of kin-state mobilization, the evidence remains limited for its role as the primary driver of ethnic mobilization within this case.

Lastly, I would like to highlight that while there is a subtle ethnic cleavage between Szekler and non-Szekler Hungarians, this does not amount to the Hungarian community in Romania not acting cohesively in their mobilization. Throughout the course of this study, interview respondents acknowledged certain distinct cultural characteristics, such as accents, traditions and symbols, that create a nuanced distinction between the subgroup and broader Hungarian community. While these differences continue to exist, it will be argued that it is ultimately the institutions that have successfully unified the population for sustained ethnic mobilization. As such, I recognize the subtle cultural cleavages between the communities but will view the Hungarian community in Romania as a cohesive political entity when analysing its sustained mobilization.

## **Institutional and kin-state mobilization**

Theories of ethnic mobilization have been well written about with a particular focus on the process of mobilization. Before discussing my theories of sustained minority ethnic mobilization I will offer a basic definition for ethnic mobilization. Olzak (1983, p. 355) defines ethnic mobilization as the process of a group organizing around features of an ethnic identity (language, customs, physical characteristics), to achieve collective ends. Olzak's definition offers important features which will be useful for this study. First, it aligns with Smith's (2009) conception of ethno-symbolism, emphasizing organization around markers of ethnic identity, as seen in the Hungarian minority in Romania. Second, it treats mobilization as a process, a critical perspective for examining how and where mobilization is sustained or remains incomplete, a point I explore through Hroch's (1985) framework. Third, mobilization is oriented toward collective ends. While the concept of collective ends is broad, I argue that although these goals may be initially undefined, they tend to become more concrete as mobilization progresses, thereby strengthening support and sustaining engagement. The collective ends may include increased political representation, protection and

promotion of minority language rights, further access to economic opportunities, or higher degrees of self-governance. Although these examples are merely indicative, each group must set clear, distinct objectives tailored to its circumstances to succeed in mobilization.

As discussed, Hroch's (1985) work continues to be a cornerstone for mobilization research, offering a framework for understanding how the mobilization process unfolds. For this study, Hroch's work remains in the background, with a particular focus on Phase B (political or cultural activism) and Phase C (mass mobilization) as this is where mobilization has been sustained in the case of the Hungarians. While Hroch's model is a useful aid for my definition of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, its linearity cannot fully account for persistent mobilization over an extended period of time. As such, I define sustained minority ethnic mobilization as a state of mobilization, extending from Phase B through Phase C, in which a group could exist in one part of the process of mobilization for an extended period of time. This means that mobilization can persist within either Phase B or C, exhibiting characteristics of these phases over a protracted period. In this conceptualization, mobilization is not strictly linear; rather, it may fluctuate over time, potentially regressing from Phase C to Phase B, or simultaneously displaying features of both. It is only when a group completes set goals, such as the institutionalization of minority rights or achieves autonomy, that a group completes the process of mobilization. Theoretically, a group may continue to secure resources and sustain community engagement even after achieving key objectives. However, exploring such post-achievement mobilization lies beyond the scope of this analysis, as the Hungarian minority in Romania has not yet reached such outcomes.

Since the fall of communism in 1989, national organizations and elites among the Hungarians have remained influential in both Romania and Hungary. This continuity has enabled the development of state institutions, organizations and churches, fostering political and cultural representation, while in the case of Hungary, it has also facilitated efforts to engage with their cross-border ethnic kin, enhancing ties and strengthening support for the Hungarian minority in Romania. Accordingly, this theoretical framework will focus on institutional and kin-state mobilization, offering contrasting perspectives on why mobilization persists. The first theory will examine the role of ethnic institutions and the governance system in which they operate, while the second will explore the influence of the ethnic kin-state in sustaining mobilization. Although these theories may overlap, as mobilization is often complex and multifaceted, they offer distinct insights into the underlying dynamics that sustain mobilization, both in this case and in other contexts. This section will outline both theories and their application to the case study.

The theory of institutional mobilization focuses on the apparatuses of governing and, as the term suggests, the institutions of minority representation. Tilly's (1978; 2004) framework of mobilization is the basis for my theory of institutional sustained minority ethnic mobilization. While Tilly recognizes political opportunity structures (POS) as being key components in the emergence of mobilization he also acknowledges the importance of formal institutions in this process. The POS framework typically focuses on the initial triggers of mobilization, particularly in protest movements (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). However, the POS framework, while useful in explaining the emergence of mobilization, does not provide adequate analytical insight into the factors that sustain it over time. This limitation reveals a gap in mobilization studies, as it fails to fully account for the ongoing dynamics that allow mobilization to persist. In contrast, institutional conceptualization offers useful analytical insights. Once a group establishes institutions, such as political parties or cultural organizations that advocate for the group's interests, it creates the necessary structures to sustain mobilization. These institutions provide continuity, resources, and legitimacy, enabling the group to maintain mobilization efforts in the long term. Citing Meyer and Tarrow (1998), Lounsbury (2005, p. 73) frames this process as follows: "The institutionalization of social movements involves the transformation of contentious politics that involve tactics such as protest into more conventional forms of political action such as lobbying." Within institutionalist theory, not only are organizations associated with the group taken into account but the governing structure that they exist within. Both democratic and non-democratic systems can give rise to formal institutions, such as the numerous minority ethnic political parties that emerged after the fall of communism, as well as more informal political organizations like the *Sadval* Organization in Dagestan and Azerbaijan during the 1990s, which advocated for Lezgin autonomy.

In terms of sustained mobilization, the institutional theory developed in this study offers a comprehensive insight into why mobilization endures, in contrast to political opportunity structures, which focuses on the conditions under which mobilization emerges. The institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization posits that the establishment of institutions and organizations provides a foundation for mobilization to persist, supported by the governing system in which they operate. For example, a democratic system that allows for a minority political party to exist and participate effectively within the system by achieving some goals, gives the organization legitimacy for support. National elections, along with the establishment of formal associations, often play crucial roles in supporting collective actions (Tilly, 1978, p. 167). Tarrow (1998, p. 86) identifies electoral politics as one potential channel through which collective actors can mobilize, particularly in systems that offer opportunities for political participation. This dynamic helps explain the continued mobilization of Hungarians in Romania. At the same time, participating in such a system may constrain certain objectives of the group, such as achieving relative autonomy. Through this institutional theory, a group and/or organization may be successful in garnering resources and support while also being limited by the very institutions they exist within. Key indicators for this theory include widespread support, the capacity to secure resources, integration into state structures, the flexibility to pursue and redefine objectives, and the enduring nature of mobilization efforts. The institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization offers a conceptual foundation for analysing both democratic and non-democratic cases, particularly in the context of the Hungarian minority, which has maintained mobilization within Romania's democratic system.

For the second theory of analysis, this paper focuses on kin-state sustained minority ethnic mobilization. Liebich's (2017) work on kin-state nationalism provides a useful foundation for understanding kin-state mobilization. Liebich highlights that, particularly within the EU, redrawing borders is no longer an option for supporting ethnic kin. In this context, kin-states often resort to domestic instruments, such as symbolic cultural programmes or citizenship policies, to maintain ties and influence across borders. Although Liebich's work centres on kin-state nationalism, it can be expanded to and reinterpreted to focus on mobilization. Kin-states may take a more active role in supporting their kin in achieving objectives – or even in formulating objectives on their behalf. Whether this is done for strategic purposes does not diminish the significance of such actions. In a case where a kin-state is acting as the driver of mobilization they are the defining backer of cultural and political organizations igniting support of cross-border kin to achieve a defined goal.

Kin-state mobilization is the process in which an ethnic kin-state allocates resources and organizes efforts to support a cross-border ethnic group in achieving a political objective or set of objectives. While this term has been used in studies focusing on secessionist movements (see Nagle, 2013), this study proposes a novel theoretical approach that conceptualises kin-state mobilization as the primary driver of sustained minority ethnic mobilization. In this adaptation of the theory, it will look at the kin-state acting as the primary driver of sustained mobilization by garnering resources, massing political engagement and institution building. In addition, kin-states may directly fund the main cultural organizations that support ethnic identity. The kin-state theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization contends that cross-border minority ethnic political organizations utilize a cohesive ideology and depend on kin-state support to sustain mobilization; without such support, minority mobilization would neither exist nor persist. Motives for this may be due to strategic reasons for the kin-state to restore perceived ancestral homeland, ethno-symbolic support (Smith, 2009) for ethnic kin, or to liberate economically disadvantaged ethnic kin (Breuilly, 1993, pp 358–362). While only indicative, these examples reflect the rationale and methods through which a kin-state may support a cross-border group. To operationalize the kin-state theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, key indicators include direct material or political support, alignment with kin-state agendas, the creation of formal or informal institutions linked to kin interests, policies favouring kin-state influence, and the demonstrated durability of mobilization over time. As such this conceptualization of kin-state mobilization creates a foundation for analysis legitimized both through the methods the kin-state may employ and the motives for such actions. The combination of motives and methods show how kin-state mobilization may be sustained and the reasonings behind it. When paired with the theory of institutional sustained minority ethnic mobilization they offer compelling contrasts for the analysis of the case of the Hungarians in Romania.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology based on a series of 18 semi-structured interviews conducted in October and November of 2024. The interviews were conducted with leaders from the two main Hungarian political organizations in Romania, the *Romániai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség* (*Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania*), commonly known as RMDSZ,<sup>1</sup> and *Erdélyi Magyar Szövetség* (*Transylvanian Hungarian Alliance*), abbreviated as EMSZ. Additionally, interviews were conducted with Hungarian academics in Romania who work in the fields of political science or history, organizational leaders and non-expert Hungarians. The participants came from different parts of Romania, particularly Transylvania with Cluj-Napoca, Braşov, Sighetu Marmăţiei, Târgu Mureş, Covasna, and Harghita counties (Szeklerland) being represented. Interview participants are cited with their name when consent was given and only when their name, title and affiliation benefits the quality of the analysis, whereas non-expert respondents are cited with their age, location, and professional background when relevant for contextualization, while maintaining the individual's anonymity. The range of interview participants from various professions and geographic regions allows for a comprehensive analysis of the organizational structures and of why Hungarian mobilization has been sustained. The interviews conducted indicated a degree of saturation, with recurring themes emerging across responses. Participants were identified through personal contacts, snowball sampling, and referrals from organizational leaders. A few individuals who were invited to participate in interviews declined; however, there was no discernible pattern suggesting that their non-participation resulted in the omission of any significant group. To minimize the risk of over-sampling specific demographics, particular emphasis was placed on recruiting participants from diverse regions, backgrounds and demographic groups. The usage of interviews for research of sustained mobilization in the case of Hungarians in Romania allows for the analysis to engage with both professional expertise, academic perspectives and views from an everyday perspective. The methodology can be replicated in future research on sustained minority ethnic mobilization for cases elsewhere in the world.

Interviews lasted from about 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the length and quality of responses and the availability of the participant. They were conducted in English, with the exception of two organizational leaders who preferred to have the interview conducted in Hungarian with a translator they provided. The research questions were created by the researcher and adjusted based on the participant's expertise and organizational affiliations, meaning that the themes from the semi-structured interviews were retained but adjusted for individual participants. The research questions focused both on the individuals' views of national mobilization within Romania and kin-state instigated mobilization. Questions looked at the domestic structures of Hungarian organizations and how the Romanian government affects mobilization. Furthermore, questions looked at the impact of the Hungarian government and the influences it has on the Hungarian community in Romania. Interview responses are cited throughout the paper using both direct quotes and paraphrasing.

## Institutions and their efficacy

### RMDSZ

The history of the RMDSZ is crucial for understanding how the organization has been successful in unifying the Hungarian population in Romania and being the centre of sustained ethnic mobilization. The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania was founded immediately following the Romanian revolution in 1989. "[The] RMDSZ was founded as an advocacy group ... and an alliance with the ability of covering a wide spectrum of political ideologies. Along the way, it became an important political factor," (Kiss-Kozma, 2022, pp. 120–121). As noted by Kiss and Székely I.G. (2016, p. 592), the organization was initially interested in the strategy of institution

<sup>1</sup> The RMDSZ officially identifies as an organization that represents Hungarian interests as opposed to a political party. Although they differentiate themselves, they ostensibly act as a political party, through political campaigns and having mayoral and legislative seats.

building, underscoring the institutional argument of this article. As the organization grew into its role in Hungarian society in Romania, it became the central force for all cultural and political issues.

Following the revolution, a key factor contributing to the sustained support for the RMDSZ has been the Romanian constitution's requirement that a political party must secure at least 5% of the total vote to obtain parliamentary representation. However, the RMDSZ has consistently surpassed the 5% threshold since 1990, enabling it to compete as a regular political party. Throughout the interviews, participants cited the 5% electoral threshold as a key reason for the party's continued support, along with its perceived positive impact on the Hungarian community – particularly through policies advancing minority rights and initiatives supporting political and economic development in Hungarian-majority communities.

Before evaluating the effectiveness of the RMDSZ in sustaining mobilization, I will first establish evidence of its continued support by presenting the results of the parliamentary elections for the Chamber of Deputies. The election results below are evidence of the indicators presented for the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization: continued support and embeddedness in state structures. As previously noted, a political party that secures at least 5% of the vote in either chamber of Parliament qualifies as a standard party. Given that the Hungarian population constitutes just over 5% of Romania's total population, maintaining a vote share above this threshold is essential for effectively pursuing the community's objectives. Consequently, the table below demonstrates that the RMDSZ has consistently secured more than 5% of the vote, indicating sustained engagement within the Hungarian community and providing a foundational indicator for my theory of institutional sustained minority ethnic mobilization.

**Table 1.** Romanian parliamentary elections Chamber of Deputies results for RMDSZ 1990–2024

Year	Total Vote	Percent of Vote
1990	991,583	7.23
1992	811,290	7.46
1996	812,628	6.64
2000	736,863	6.8
2004	628,125	6.17
2008	425,008	6.17
2012	380,656	5.14
2016	435,969	6.19
2020	339,030	5.74
2024	585,397	6.33

Source: Kiss et al. 2017 citing Central Election Bureau (1990–2016), Central Election Bureau 2020 and 2024

As shown in the table, the RMDSZ maintained substantial support throughout the 1990s, a trend largely attributable to the newly gained freedom to support a minority party – which was impossible during the communist era. Although the overall number of votes has declined over time – potentially due to demographic changes or reduced voter turnout – further research is needed to confirm this assumption. Nonetheless, the RMDSZ's consistent ability to surpass the 5% threshold reflects its continued support. This support persisted into the 2000s, which is particularly significant as it challenges the kin-driven theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, a perspective that will be examined in the international section. Notably, during the 2000s, when the Orbán government lost power and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) assumed control, the approach to supporting Hungarian minorities abroad shifted. This change underscores the RMDSZ's capacity to sustain support independently of political changes in the kin-state. The 2000s



were regarded as a low point in support from Hungary which points to the RMDSZ as being the sole factor in sustaining mobilization, indicating the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization.

Throughout the 2010s, the only instance of potential wavering support for the RMDSZ is evident in the 2012 election results. Although few publications address the reasons behind the reduced support that year, inferences can be drawn. Notably, during the 2012 election, there was a significant surge in support for an alternative, more hardline pro-Szeklerland autonomy party – the Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania (Erdélyi Magyar Néppárt, EMNP), a party that would go on to merge with the Hungarian Civic Party (*Magyar Polgári Párt*) to become the EMSZ. While the EMSZ and its precursors are important in this analysis of sustained minority mobilization, none of these parties matched the RMDSZ in electoral support or surpassed the 5% threshold required for standard political parties. Stroschein (2014) identifies this election cycle as a peak for the EMNP in local contests, and this surge may have impacted voter turnout in support of the RMDSZ. Given that the RMDSZ has a slim margin above the 5% electoral threshold, even a one-percentage-point loss of voters to an alternative party, or a decline in overall voter participation, could result in lower electoral support. Nonetheless, although the 2012 election represents a low point for the RMDSZ, it appears to be merely an issue of a single election cycle, as the party continued to retain support among its constituents in subsequent elections.

While the RMDSZ has experienced instances of internal fractionalization due to ideological rifts (Zakariás, author interview, 2024) – particularly in the early 2010s, when efforts to promote diverse political positions among Hungarians in Romania intensified as the RMDSZ consolidated power – they have successfully unified various ideological fragments. These range from right-wing factions focused primarily on autonomy for Szeklerland to liberal factions advocating a more pragmatic approach, emphasizing collaboration with Romanian parties. Even through the elite power bargaining that has occurred in the three and a half decades of the party's existence, the Hungarian electorate in Romania has been steadfast in its support for the RMDSZ. These institutional factors, particularly the 5% threshold, highlight the institutional argument, in which institutional rules fortify group support and political cohesion.

### Hungarians in Slovakia

One example cited in multiple interviews (2024) of why there is continued support for the RMDSZ was the case of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. As with the Romanian system, the Slovakian government requires a 5% electorate threshold for a party to be allocated seats while coalitions require 7% to 10% depending on the number of parties in the coalition. As of 2021, the Hungarian population has a population of 462,175, about 8.38% of the total population (Slovak Statistical Office, 2021). This alludes to the precarious position of the minority, teetering over the threshold but threatened by any potential political fractures. The Hungarian minority in Slovakia successfully retained political solidarity in the 1990s even through instances of party fractionalization. In the late 1990s, three of the parties formed a single party the SMK-MKP Party in the wake of an anti-coalition movement. By the late 2000s, the party saw a breakdown due to elite competition. “In Slovakia the ethnic Hungarian SMK split over a combination of coalition strategy (linked to conflict over how best to serve Hungarian minority interests) and elite rivalry, and the defeated party leader Béla Bugár’s moderate wing eventually formed the new Most-Híd (Učech, 2011, p.87)” (cited in Bakke & Sitter, 2013, p. 12). With the party split into separate parties, both parties had limited success with the exception of Most-Híd which won seats in the national council in 2010, 2012 and 2016. The party was part of the 2010–2012 Radičová, 2016–2019 Fico, and 2019–2020 Pellegrini governments before ultimately falling out of parliament amid the political fallout from the Kuciak murder – its decision to remain in the Fico government following the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak sparked significant backlash, contributing to its decline.

As mentioned in the interviews (2024), the breakdown of the political party left the Hungarian minority in Slovakia without representation, ultimately leading to a reduction of minority rights in the country, such as minority language rights. “In Slovakia the Hungarians do not have any representation in the parliament so they are unrepresented. From this view we are lucky,” (age 22,

2024). In another interview, the participant referenced some damage to minority rights:

In Slovakia the Hungarian majority party fell out of the parliament and the parliament made some decisions to forbid the Hungarian language in schools and city halls, so they lose their right to learn Hungarian or to teach the Hungarian language in schools. So we don't want that, we want to protect this right and we want to be represented. (age 28, 2024)

Although this participant suggests that the Hungarian minority has lost its right to language schools, this has not occurred. However, their statement reflects the concerns and anxieties within the Hungarian minority in Romania. The repercussions of the limited representation of the Hungarian community in Slovakia has continued to affect the population with ongoing proposals of limiting Hungarian language rights in the country (Euronews, 2024). This case was cited in the interviews as an example of what could happen if the RMDSZ lost popular support or split into smaller parties. As the following sections will show, the central role of the party is as a key component in majority coalition building with Romanian parties and increasing minority rights, and these essential roles have prevented the party from fracturing. If the party were to fracture, as the Hungarian party did in Slovakia, it could negatively impact the Hungarian population in Romania as a whole.

### **Romanian government and the RMDSZ**

Since its establishment, the Romanian government has largely supported minority mobilization, something which is uncommon in the post-communist space. While other states sought to assimilate or suppress minority political movements and attempts at representation, the Romanian government set in its framework a path for minority political participation. Since 1989, Article 62(2) of the Romanian Constitution has ensured the right that minorities that do not meet the 5% threshold will be allocated one seat in the parliament. This was specifically noted by Dr. Toró Tibor (author interview, 2024), who asserted that the Romanian government's construction, particularly the guaranteed rights of minorities to form political parties, has created the current environment for political participation. This example supports the institutional argument as previously discussed, and serves as a key indicator of how Romanian institutions support minority mobilization. It also highlights the effectiveness of democratic institutions in creating a space for minority organizations to survive.

While there was a notable instance of ethnic clashes in Târgu Mureş in 1990 it ultimately did not culminate in protracted violent ethnic mobilization, as seen elsewhere in the post-communist space, notably the Ossetians in Georgia. This is largely due to how the Romanian government encouraged institutionalizing the Hungarian minority through the main political organization, the RMDSZ, and allowing them to participate in the political process. While the political opportunity framework helps explain the initial emergence of mobilization during the dissolution of the communist regime, its sustained albeit incomplete nature is best explained by the institutional limits within the Romanian system. This is largely due to the system's prevention of Hungarian autonomy in Szeklerland and broader constraints on full political and cultural representation. Yet, these institutional limits have not ended mobilization; rather, they have shaped it, enabling the RMDSZ to operate within the system and sustain influence as an integrated political actor. This dynamic reflects the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, where the structure of the state both constrains and enables mobilization by integrating minority institutions into formal political processes.

The perception of the Romanian state as a guarantor of Hungarian representation in the country was echoed by Székely Istvan (author interview, 2024), the Executive Vice President responsible for the social organization of the RMDSZ. He emphasised that the RMDSZ and Hungarian participation and representation are seen as in the interests of the Romanian state, as they help prevent potential backlash from the Hungarian community in the absence of such representation.

The existence of the RMDSZ is in the interest of the Romanian state. If the RMDSZ is cooperating with the Romanian state ... we retain our stability. Through the RMDSZ if there [are] problems



the state can act because there are politicians ... because we can retain the peace in our community ... The Romanian state looks at our party as security and not a threat. (Székely, author interview, RMDSZ 2024)

The existence of such a party, one that has retained continuity since the fall of the communist regime, allows the Hungarian minority to advocate for their rights through the system itself, discouraging any instances of violence or armed conflict. This underscores the institutional argument, as the Romanian state itself has allocated space for minority politics, allowing for the RMDSZ to be successful so long as it retains the support and engagement of the Hungarian population. As will be shown in the international section, this undermines any argument for kin-state mobilization as the Hungarian minority has continued to be successful in mobilizing through institutions (particularly the RMDSZ) in Romania.

One of the successes for the RMDSZ within the Romanian system has been their ability to build coalitions with Romanian parties. As highlighted in interviews with representatives of both the RMDSZ and EMSZ (Székely, author interview, 2024; Zakariás, author interview, 2024), the RMDSZ has established a significant role in Romanian politics by positioning itself as a mediator capable of forming coalitions with parties across the ideological spectrum (including both Hungarian and Romanian parties). This has allowed them to be successful in many initiatives for the Hungarian community that will be discussed in the following section.

Although the Romanian government has allowed the Hungarians to be successful within the governing system, it allows them to instrumentalise minority issues when necessary. In an interview with Toró (2024), he described Romanian President Bănescu as initially supporting Hungarian language education and allowing Hungarian to be the language of instruction from nursery school to university, and then a few years later would argue against minority rights. This demonstrates a duality in the inclusion of Hungarian political representation: while they are frequently granted the opportunity to negotiate for additional rights, they are also subjected to scapegoating during periods of heightened Romanian ethnonationalist rhetoric. Ultimately, the party's ability to navigate and operate successfully within the Romanian political system has been consistently highlighted in the semi-structured interviews (2024) as a key reason for their continued support since their establishment. This further indicates an institutional conceptualisation, showing that working within the Romanian system has allowed for some success in representation but likewise also has limited their ability to achieve certain goals.

### **RMDSZ support and effectiveness**

Since its creation, the RMDSZ has been successful in retaining the support of the majority of the Hungarian population in Romania and continues to be engaged with ongoing ethnic mobilization. A significant portion of its success can be attributed to its legislative achievements and its ability to maintain a positive perception among a large segment of the Hungarian population. The interviews revealed a consistently positive perception of the organization, expressed by everyday individuals, organizational leaders and academics, underscoring its continued role as the primary representative of the community. Moreover, this is evident in the electoral data presented above, which demonstrates the consistent support.

Since the 1990s, legislative achievements have remained consistent for the RMDSZ, reflecting the ongoing effectiveness of the primary force behind mobilization. At the same time, the organization continues to identify areas requiring further progress to increase representation for the Hungarian community, allowing them to continue ongoing community engagement and the existence of the organization. When looking at how the RMDSZ has been successful in maintaining support and keeping the community engaged in mobilization, it is important to acknowledge that Hungarians are not ideologically cohesive. Hungarians from Szeklerland generally lean toward more conservative ideologies, as evidenced by the emergence of the conservative EMSZ party in the region, which often emphasises issues related to preserving ethnic identity. In contrast, Hungarians living in urban, multicultural environments tend to be more inclined towards liberal perspectives. The ability for the community to continue to be a unified voting block and

cohesive politically is largely attributed to the successes of the RMDSZ. Székely (RMDSZ, 2024) acknowledged the complexity of having such a large ideological spectrum across the Hungarian community. This research indicates that the party's success lies in its capacity to act as a unifying representative for the Hungarian community, consistently achieving objectives related to cultural issues and securing resources. Early accomplishments included the introduction of Hungarian language education from preschool through university, while more recent achievements involved the adaptation of Romanian language instruction for Hungarian students, teaching it as a foreign language rather than a mother tongue. While Székely (RMDSZ, author interview, 2024) emphasised the party's role in securing state funding for Hungarian communities, the Hungarian interviewees primarily valued the party's efforts in advancing cultural representation for their community.

When asked about the key issues for the RMDSZ, participants highlighted challenges primarily related to “schools and cultural projects”, as stated by a 44-year-old participant (2024). The emphasis on schools and cultural projects was a recurring theme in multiple interviews and discussions, highlighting the RMDSZ's focus on cultural initiatives. While the party views itself as often successful in securing funding for Hungarian communities, its success – at least for certain segments of the community – is best measured by its ability to preserve Hungarian identity and achieve cultural goals, such as Hungarian language schooling and support for Hungarian churches. This underscores the importance of national symbolic resources (Smith 2009), suggesting that the RMDSZ strategically emphasises cultural issues to maintain its support base but also successfully garners resources for the community. This reinforces the institutional argument, suggesting that an organization like the RMDSZ can achieve multiple objectives, both by advocating for resources and supporting the cultural preservation of the community.

On the issue of Szeklerland autonomy, in interviews with representatives of the EMSZ and RMDSZ (2024), Zakariás and Székely both asserted their support for autonomy for Szeklerland but to what degree should autonomy be achieved appears muddled. While EMSZ would support as much autonomy as possible with their own bank and governing system, without secession, the RMDSZ is noted as being divided on what autonomy specifically entails. In the interview with Székely (RMDSZ, author interview, 2024), he voiced his support, suggesting that the party supports autonomy but that it is not a key issue. This shows that the issue of Szeklerland is more of a symbolic resource (Smith, 2009) and an important cornerstone of elite rhetoric, allowing them to claim they support autonomy, but never truly act to achieve it. This demonstrates the position of sustained mobilization, one in which the institution exists to achieve goals for the community it represents, but where it uses an issue like Szeklerland as a symbolic narrative to retain political cohesion in the community. Given its position as an advocate for Hungarian political identity, stated support for Szeklerland autonomy acts as a way to reiterate its leading position in achieving cultural representation for the Hungarian community.

In terms of sustained mobilization, the issue of Szeklerland serves as a key example of why mobilization remains incomplete. Without a cause like Szeklerland autonomy, the RMDSZ would have less justification for its continued existence as a political representative of the Hungarian minority. Because this issue remains embedded in the party's doctrine, it lends the organization legitimacy as a pioneer of Hungarian concerns, while also enabling it to address more attainable, everyday issues. According to Zakariás (author interview, 2024), although Szeklerland continues to be a relevant issue, it is increasingly viewed by younger generations as less tangible or more conceptual. Consequently, it has become a symbolic issue used to mobilise Hungarians, enabling them to pursue more achievable objectives, such as addressing concerns related to language education.

The issue of Szeklerland will continue to be a nonstarter for the Romanian leadership as they claim it violates the Romanian constitution and the territorial integrity of the state. This certainty from the Romanian leadership allows the RMDSZ to continue to claim they seek autonomy while understanding that it will likely not be achieved. This acts as a sort of covert power sharing agreement between the RMDSZ and the Romanian leadership, giving them a place at the table for smaller issues, allowing them to beat the drum about autonomy while understanding it is unlikely to come to fruition. The setup allows for mobilization to persist without becoming a case like that

of the Hungarians in Slovakia, but assuring certain goals are out of reach.

As mentioned, there have been alternative Hungarian parties in the past. Currently, the EMSZ fills that role and tends to be more ideologically conservative. In an interview with the president of the party, Zakariás (author interview, 2024) described its purpose as to give an alternative to the Hungarian community. While only attracting a small percentage of the Hungarian vote, they play an important role in mobilizing local support and electing Hungarian mayors as members of the EMSZ. Székely (RMDSZ, author interview, 2024) acknowledged their role, stating “We need them (the EMSZ),” and highlighting their importance in achieving further support. Although the RMDSZ is the focal point for achieving goals and mobilizing the Hungarian population, its position as a power broker for smaller parties and organizations is fundamental to sustaining mobilization.

The RMDSZ remains central in supporting alternative organizational efforts, continuing to back local minority institutions and collaborate with cultural organizations, such as the EMKE (Transylvanian Hungarian Public Cultural Organization, *Erdélyi Magyar Közművelődési Egyesület*). While originally founded in 1884, reflecting the long complex history of the Hungarians in Transylvania, the organization currently acts as a point for allocating funding for cultural initiatives for Hungarians in Romania. While a large portion of the funding comes from the Hungarian government (EMKE, author interview, 2024), they also partner with the RMDSZ. This organization provides support for local initiatives and archives material related to Hungarians in Transylvania. This is another example of national organizational leadership being home-grown, albeit with some support from the Hungarian government. Organizations such as the EMKE and the RMDSZ exemplify the influence of cultural symbolism, as elites and intellectuals shape the symbolic narrative, thereby fostering ethnic nationalism and enhancing group engagement.

### **The RMDSZ and sustained mobilization**

The RMDSZ has continued to be the centre of sustained mobilization since the fall of the communist regime. In that time it has garnered mass support from the Hungarian community carving out a position within Romania politics. “They really do a good job ... when the vote comes they [make] alliances and with each alliance we get some benefits ... but you will not see spectacular ground-breaking benefits” (male age 36, 2024). As highlighted in this quote the RMDSZ’s success, and limitations, have been in their ability to be a part of majority coalitions while also reigning in their aims of achieving some of their loftiest goals. Issues like further equality in Hungarian language schooling have been heralded by supporters and cited as reasons for continued support, while an issue like autonomy for Szeklerland remains perpetually out of reach giving them reason for continued existence and why mobilization continues. Cultural issues such as minority language schooling and autonomy for Szeklerland indicate the important role of symbolic resources (Smith, 2009) in mobilization. The Romanian government’s commitment to allowing minority institutions, combined with the RMDSZ’s national successes and its capacity to address local issues such as schools and churches, serves as both a driving force behind sustained mobilization and an Achilles’ heel in completing the process of mobilization.

## **Kin-state mobilization analysis**

### **Fidesz, Orbán and the Hungarian government**

Hungarian support for minorities abroad has not been consistent throughout the post-communist period – beginning in the 1990s with early cultural support, ebbing in the 2000s and only intensifying after Fidesz (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége, or Alliance of Young Democrats) reassumed power in 2010. Prior to the current government, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) formed a coalition government with the Alliance of Free Democrats – Hungarian Liberal Party (SZDSZ), replacing the first Fidesz-led government in 2002. This shift in leadership resulted in a reduced focus on supporting Hungarians abroad compared to the previous Fidesz administration. From 2002–2010 the MSZP approach was to help minority institutions find resources to sustain themselves

rather than to have Hungary build and maintain them (Waterbury, 2018, p. 24). This points to the inconsistency of the support from the Hungarian state and indicates that the RMDSZ has been the central force in sustaining mobilization.

The Orbán government's return to power in 2010 marked a turning point in Hungary's engagement with Hungarian minorities abroad, making it a critical case for examining how kin-states can actively shape and sustain minority mobilization beyond their borders. This shift, marked by an increase in support beginning in the early 2010s, was highlighted in several semi-structured interviews (2024). Fidesz holds a significant place in the perceptions of the interview participants, emerging as synonymous with the Hungarian state and reflecting the predominantly positive view held by a majority of Hungarians in Romania toward the party. When non-expert participants were asked to differentiate between Fidesz, Orbán, and Hungary, many viewed them as indistinguishable. Several participants referenced the pre-Orbán era, highlighting the absence of support for the Hungarian minority during that time. This contrast underscores a perception of post-2010 Hungary as fundamentally different from its earlier iteration, shaped by the increased support associated with Orbán's leadership and Fidesz's policies. In the Orbán era, support for Hungarian minorities has been rooted in ideology – Hungarian nationalism and territorial identity tied to the entirety of the Carpathian basin, validating support for Hungarians abroad for Fidesz supporters.

Since 2010, Hungarian support has primarily taken two forms: financial assistance for cultural projects (in addition to churches and private enterprises) and the provision of dual citizenship to Hungarians in Romania, enabling them to obtain Hungarian passports. Beginning with Hungarian financial support, which has a particular focus on cultural institutions. According to *Daily News Hungary*, the Hungarian government has spent over 400 billion forints or 995 million euros in support of Hungarian communities abroad since 2010, with a significant portion directed toward ethnic Hungarians in Romania (Woods, 2022). This highlights the post-2010 increase in support when contrasted with the governing strategy in Hungary in the 2000s.

Hungarian identity and political organization are closely tied to language schools and churches, which not only serve as centres for community organization but also provide key issues to advocate for, such as increased funding and enhanced minority rights related to these institutions. The Fidesz government recognises this dynamic and utilizes these institutions as channels for financial support. Funding for churches in particular enjoys a special status, which reduces scrutiny from the Romanian government, as foreign funding is often viewed as a potential catalyst for ethnic unrest. Similarly, as asserted in multiple interviews (2024), Hungarian support for minority language schooling is driven by the desire to improve facilities and ensure the continued existence of these institutions, indicating the kin-state mobilization argument. In an interview with a female research student (age 31, 2024), she emphasised that schools are a focal point, with curricula designed to reflect the Hungarian government's worldview. While the informant's claim cannot be substantiated, it underscores Hungary's recognition of the central role Hungarian language schools in Romania play in preserving the community's cultural identity.

A representative of EMKE (author interview, 2024), an organization that acquires funds for cultural projects pertaining to the Hungarian community in Transylvania, emphasised that a significant source of their funding comes from the Hungarian government. EMKE acts as a bridge organization, funding youth programmes, cultural *houses* and events that support Hungarian cultural figures and organizations in Transylvania. The organization's funding is an example of the Hungarian government's support for various initiatives, facilitated through an intermediary organization in Romania. However, this assistance primarily functions to fortify existing cultural programmes and the preservation of Hungarian identity, rather than serving as the primary driver of sustained mobilization. Notably, the organization was founded in Cluj-Napoca, underscoring the domestic roots of such cultural initiatives.

The official stance on Hungarian financial support is outlined in a 2024 grant document, which states that its aim is “to promote the prosperity of Hungarians living outside the borders of Hungary in their homeland, to foster and develop their multifaceted relations with Hungary, and to strengthen their sense of Hungarian national identity” (Bethlen Gábor Alapkezelő Zrt., 2024, p.

1, author's translation). An interview participant from Braşov (age 40, 2024) described applying for small grants for cultural activities in which he received money to purchase a guitar, highlighting an instance of a smaller project aiding Hungarian cultural activities. A Hungarian pastor from Braşov (2024) stated that for larger projects the Hungarian government gives funding through grants that churches apply for. He claimed that "They do this because they want to keep Hungarians, Hungarian in Romania" (2024). This view, while depicting the motives behind funding projects, does not go as far as being the driver of mobilization but rather additional insurance for the Hungarian government that the minority will continue to be Hungarian. While acknowledging the importance of the financial support, one interviewee asserted that mobilization would be much harder without Hungary but would still exist (age 36, 2024). As this informant highlights, Hungary plays a role in allocating resources to cultural institutions, reflecting a kin-state mobilization argument. However, this support does not serve as the primary driver of mobilization but rather functions as a mechanism to ensure the preservation of Hungarian identity and cultural traditions across the country, through support for schools, churches and cultural projects. This shows that in the case of the Hungarians in Romania, Hungary, as the kin-state, is not the primary funder of institutions, and does not engage in mass support or specify objectives, all of which would be necessary for the kin-state theory to be proven. This reveals that Hungary acts as a supporter for existing mobilization rather than the primary driver.

Beyond its support for cultural projects and institutional support, Fidesz maintains a political relationship with the RMDSZ; however, this relationship remains constrained by democratic norms, limiting the extent of its direct support. As discussed, ideologically, the RMDSZ plays a more centrist role, attempting to appeal to the spectrum of ideologies that exist within the Hungarian community in Romania. When paired with the right-wing nationalist ideology of Fidesz, there is a wide gap between views on issues like the EU and Russia's war in Ukraine. In the interview with Székely (RMDSZ, 2024), he recognised that the two parties do not see eye to eye on all issues, this stands in contrast with the EMSZ, which is more empathetic to right-wing issues. For the RMDSZ, politics within the EU and support for Ukraine are paramount. The RMDSZ retains representation in the EU, viewing it as fundamental to their work. Additionally, as a minority within a county that borders Ukraine (where there is also a Hungarian minority) the party recognises the volatility of the situation and supports Romania's position in supporting Ukraine. As a Hungarian minority, their differences in views on issues such as Ukraine and the EU puts them in a precarious position by not being in complete disagreement with their kin-state but still having constructed a platform and ideology of their own over their three decades of existence. Ultimately, Fidesz holds a limited political role in this context, focusing primarily on cultural projects and the support of cultural institutions, negating the argument for purely kin-state driven mobilization.

The second aspect of Hungary's support for the Hungarian minority in Romania is the provision of dual citizenship. The 2010 amendment of the Hungarian Nationality Act allowed for Hungarians living abroad to obtain dual citizenship. One of the stated objectives of the amendment was to establish cohesion amongst the domestic and foreign Hungarian communities. Of the semi-structured interview participants (2024), all of those that offered to discuss their citizenship details confirmed they have citizenship of Hungary and Romania. A survey commissioned by the Eurotrans Foundation, conducted by SoDiSo Research and reported by *MTI-Hungary Today* (2024), indicates that over 60 per cent of Romanian Hungarians have acquired Hungarian citizenship. This highlights the prevalence of dual citizenship within the Hungarian minority in Romania.

The purpose of dual citizenship suggests a mutually beneficial relationship between the Fidesz, who initiated the amendment, and the Hungarians in Romania who have acquired it. For those that have citizenship it makes travel to Hungary much easier and provides access to grants. While on the other hand Fidesz gains access to a voting block that has a much more favourable view of the party. Ioniță (2022) writes that a survey conducted of those Hungarians in Romania that voted in the 2022 Hungarian elections, over 90% supported Fidesz. While Hungary's dual-citizenship policy under Orbán does offer a transnational electorate, this initiative complements rather than supplants the sustained mobilization driven by Romania-based minority institutions, such as the RMDSZ. Fidesz's funding programmes, through small grants and support for Hungarian-language schools and churches, serve both to reinforce cultural identity and to secure additional votes from

the diaspora. This symbiotic relationship reflects Fidesz's dual objectives of expanding its electoral base abroad and preserving Hungarian cultural identity beyond the nation's borders.

### **Kin-state analysis conclusion**

As this section has shown, Fidesz, the ruling party in Hungary, has retained a strong influence in Romania, offering both financial support for cultural projects and Hungarian citizenship for Hungarians in Romania. Although this has been effective in increasing the favourability of the party and rejuvenating and sustaining Hungarian cultural institutions in Romania, it is not the driver of mobilization. Prior to Orbán taking power in 2010, there was little to no influence from the Hungarian state, a time in which progress was made in furthering political and cultural representation of the Hungarian community by the RMDSZ. Once Orbán began pursuing these projects in the 2010s, mobilization was already established, allowing for the increase in funds coming from abroad to act as additional support for organizations that already existed amongst Hungarians in Romania. Politically, Fidesz does not share a cohesive platform with the RMDSZ, showing that while they are both Hungarian by identity, they simply see each other as separate cross-border institutions both sharing the goal of supporting the Hungarian minority in Romania. As such these pre-existing patterns of domestic mobilization would continue to exist without financial support from Hungary and simply act as a way to fortify existing cultural institutions.

### **Conclusion**

As this article has shown, the Hungarian minority in Romania has been successful in sustaining mobilization since the fall of the communist regime in 1989. This is attributed to the success of the RMDSZ in retaining broad support in the Romanian system while also due to the limits set by the Romanian government. As depicted, the Hungarians are in a state of sustained mobilization with strong support and a long-established institution in the RMDSZ, but remain unable to achieve their goals of autonomy for Szeklerland, and continue to identify more places where representation needs to be expanded. The analysis showed the value in the institutional theory of sustained minority ethnic mobilization, in which domestic institutions are necessary for mobilization to continue but also prevent the Hungarians from completing the process.

In contrast, the analysis of the theory of kin-state sustained minority ethnic mobilization showed the efficacy of kin-state governments, while also that it is not the primary driver of Hungarian mobilization in Romania. As illustrated, the Hungarian government has effectively created a framework for continued support through cultural institutions, passports and grants, each of which help to retain Hungarian identity in Romania. If the RMDSZ was absent, this could be effective in triggering or even sustaining mobilization, indicating the relevance of the kin-state sustained mobilization theory. In this case, however, the RMDSZ remains the most effective institution for attracting support, and in the absence of support from the Hungarian government, they would likely continue to be effective in garnering support through votes due to provisions granted by the Romanian government and due to their actions in supporting local issues. Nonetheless, the analysis has shown that the concept of kin-state sustained mobilization still has substantial value in analysing similar cases in the post-communist space and around the world.

Future research on sustained minority ethnic mobilization should examine the efficacy of kin-states in contexts where domestic infrastructure, such as organizations like the RMDSZ, is absent. This may help sharpen the conceptualization of kin-state sustained minority ethnic mobilization. Likewise, future research on kin mobilization, particularly in states where no ethnic group makes up a majority, may show different avenues in which organised cross-border kin can help to sustain mobilization, an example may be cross-border kin parties. As demonstrated in this article, the role of institutions and kin-states are fundamental in the study of sustained mobilization. Their absence may provide a critical explanation for why mobilization either completes its process or fails.



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