

Updated 24 June 2005

National and ethnic minorities in Hungary

Several national communities have lived in the territory of Hungary since the foundation of the Hungarian state. The modern ethnic and linguistic composition of the country was basically established following the decimation and the movement of the population during the Ottoman occupation, with mass spontaneous migration or the organised resettlement of people in the 17-18th centuries. With the exception of the Slovene population on the western border, it was during these centuries that the minorities living in Hungary moved into the territory of today's country. Towards the end of the 19th century, non-Hungarian nationalities living within the borders of the country constituted more than 50% of the total population. Following the revision of the borders after World War I this proportion changed significantly. Some 33% of Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin (3.3 million people) actually reside outside the country's borders, while the number of minorities living within the borders has declined.

A common feature of the majority of Hungary's national and ethnic minorities is that, having lived within the framework of the Hungarian state for centuries, they profess a dual identity: their consciousness of being Hungarian is as strong as their nationality ties. Most left their original homeland and communities before the formation of a structured literary language, and as a consequence the languages and dialects they use to this day are in general archaic linguistic variations.

This lengthy historical coexistence is an important criterion in the definition formulated in the minority act. *"All groups of people who have lived in the territory of the Republic of Hungary for at least one century, who represent a numerical minority in the country's population, whose members are Hungarian citizens, who are distinguished from the rest of the population by their own languages, cultures, and traditions, who demonstrate a sense of belonging together that is aimed at preserving all of these and at expressing and protecting the interests of their historical communities"* (Act LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities, Chapter 1, Section 1, Subsection (2)) are national and ethnic minorities recognised as constituent components of the state. This act defines the Bulgarian, Roma, Greek, Croatian, Polish, German, Armenian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian and Ukrainian ethnic groups as national or ethnic minorities native to Hungary. A characteristic feature of the situation in Hungary is that the minorities live geographically scattered throughout the country in some 1,500 settlements, and generally they also constitute a minority within these settlements.

Census data of the national and ethnic minorities

Act LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities states: “It is the individual’s exclusive and inalienable right to take on and declare their affiliation to a national or ethnic group or a minority. Nobody is obliged to proclaim that they belong to a minority group.”

According to the 1990 census, in a population of 10,374,823, a total of 232,751 persons signalled minority affiliation, and 137,724 stated that their native language was one of the national or ethnic minority languages.

Data of the 2001 census show that compared to the 1990 figures, minority communities have grown in size. This indicates that people belonging to minorities have a stronger identity and are more willing to declare it openly. This is particularly true in case of the Roma minority: the number of Roma declaring openly their identity has significantly increased.

In 2001 a total of 314,000 people declared to belong to one of the thirteen listed national and ethnic minorities. Ahead of Germans, Slovaks and Croats, the biggest minority is the Roma community, numbering more than 190,000 people. The only minority whose size has unfortunately decreased is the Romanian community.

Researchers and minority organisations esteem that the true number of national and ethnic minorities is greater: individual groups are reckoned to comprise from a few thousand persons up to nearly half a million. According to these estimates, today, the minorities make up some 10% of the population. The difference between the estimated and declared figures can probably be explained by historical, social and psychological reasons related to the history of minorities in Central-Eastern Europe.

The answers to the four optional questions posed in the 2001 census help us to have a more nuanced picture on minority affiliation. People could indicate their mother tongue, their belonging to a minority community, their attachment to some minority culture and traditions as well as the fact if they use the given language in private life with friends (see table annexed).

The institutional framework

In the Hungarian Parliament, there is a Standing Committee for Human Rights, Minority and Religious Affairs. The institution of parliamentary commissioners includes among others an ombudsman responsible specifically for the protection of national and ethnic minority rights. This institution was set up in conformity with the provisions of the Constitution as well as the Act 59 of 1993. The minorities’ ombudsman is responsible for investigating any kind of abuse of minority rights that comes to his attention and for initiating general and individual measures in order to remedy it.

Several politicians from among the 24 Hungarian members of the European Parliament have rich experiences in the field of minority protection. Hungary has been the first member country to send Roma politicians to the European Parliament. An Intergroup for Autochthonous National Minorities, Constitutional Regions and Lesser Used Languages was established on the initiative, and under the presidency of the leader of the Hungarian Socialist delegation to the EP. One of the eight vice-presidents of this intergroup is also a Hungarian MEP. As the Head of the Intergroup stated, members would focus their long-term activity on the possible elaboration and adoption of an EU Directive on minority protection. Two other Hungarian MEPs are the Deputy Heads of the Antiracism and Diversity Intergroup of the EP, formed in October 2004. In December 2004, another Hungarian representative established the „Roma Forum” of the European Parliament, which intends to carry out effective lobbying for the Roma, as well as to function as a bridge between the national authorities and the EP regarding Roma issues.

The main governmental agency in charge of minority issues is the **Office for National and Ethnic Minorities**, established in 1990. It is an independent state administrative body with national sphere of authority, and since October 2004 it has been operating under the supervision of the Minister for Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. This means that within the Government, this Minister is responsible for minority issues.

The Office for National and Ethnic Minorities is responsible for co-ordinating the implementation of the government’s minority policy objectives. Its field of action covers the issues of preserving and developing the identity, the language, the traditions and the cultural heritage of minorities. It continuously evaluates the situation of the national and ethnic minorities and the enforcement of their rights. It prepares analyses and minority policy concepts on which the government can base resolutions concerning the minorities. It facilitates the communication between the government and the minority organisations. The Office is involved in minority-related legislation and the preparation of amendments as well as in the drafting of government programmes designed to implement the minority act. In the 2005 state budget, HUF 334M have been allocated for the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities.

Since 2002, the structural framework for tackling **Roma integration issues** at governmental level has been strengthened. This means that the promotion of social inclusion and the fight against discrimination are dealt with separately from issues related to cultural autonomy or belonging to the field of “classical minority policy”. In 2002, a new Roma Political State Secretariat was set up in the Prime Minister’s Office to promote the social integration of the Roma. Two ministerial commissioners (education and economy), a ministerial chief advisor (culture) and a great number of Roma desk officers were appointed to ministries to facilitate co-ordination within, and between, the ministries and to give appropriate weight to the Roma issue. A consultative body named Council for Roma Issues and headed by the Prime Minister was set up with the involvement of prominent Roma and non-Roma personalities. Issues related to the cultural autonomy of the Roma as well as the preservation of Roma identity and culture remained in the competence of the Office for National and Ethnic Minorities.

In 2003, a new position for a Minister without portfolio was created in order to promote the equality of opportunities. This Minister supervised the work of a Government Office for Equal Opportunities, one of the Directorates of which dealt specifically with Roma issues. With the coming into office of Hungary's new prime minister in autumn 2004, this minister became the head of one of the top ministries responsible for youth, family, social affairs and equal opportunities. Thus the former Government Office for Equal Opportunities as well as the Roma Political State Secretariat that used to work within the Prime Minister's Office were integrated into this ministry.

Legal framework

The **Constitution of the Republic of Hungary** states that minorities living in Hungary are constituent components of the state. The Constitution guarantees the minorities the right to collective participation in public life, the nurturing of their own culture, the widespread use of their native languages, education in their native languages, and the right to use their names in their own languages.

In 1993 Parliament passed **Act LXXVII on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities**, which establishes individual and collective minority rights in the areas of self-government, use of language, public education and culture. Among collective rights, the act states that the minorities have the right to form local and national self-governments. An act aiming at the amendment of this act was adopted by the Parliament in June 2005: the modifications adopted aim at increasing transparency and facilitating the transfer of minority cultural and educational institutions under the competence of national minority self-governments as well as at modifying the system of minority elections (see below for details). The new provisions also make the creation of medium-level (county) representation of minorities possible. The law provides clear definitions among others on what shall be considered as minority public affairs, minority educational and cultural institutions, minority media, it specifies the scope of authority and the duties of the medium-level minority self-governments to be established, and it regulates the relationship between the local municipal governments and the local minority self-governments in a clearer and more definite way. However, the President of the Republic of Hungary sent the newly adopted act to the Constitutional Court and asked for their opinion on the constitutionality of the preferential seat provided to a member of the minority self-government in the municipal government.

Minority opinions are increasingly taken into consideration in the wording of legislation passed in the Republic of Hungary over the last few years, and modern acts have been created which are fully in line with today's requirements as regards guaranteeing the minorities' basic constitutional rights. Thus for example the Act on Radio and Television Broadcasting states that the public service media have a compulsory responsibility to prepare programmes presenting the culture and life of the minorities and to broadcast in the native languages.

The Act No 125 of year 2003 on Equal Treatment and the Promotion of Equal Opportunities was adopted by the Hungarian Parliament on 22 December 2003. The act prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, colour, nationality, national or

ethnic affiliation, mother tongue, disability, health state, religion or creed, political opinion, marital or parental status, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, social origin, property status, the conditions of employment (part-time or fixed-term employment), membership in an interest protecting organization or any other situation or characteristic feature. Discrimination includes direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, illegal segregation, victimisation as well as any instruction to commit any of these actions. Measures aimed at eliminating the disadvantaged situation of a well-defined social group (positive action) should not be considered as a violation of the requirement of equal treatment. The burden of proof has been reversed or shared: henceforth the respondent has to prove the application of the principle of equal treatment, but also the person who considers himself/herself wronged will have to prove the disadvantage suffered. Proceedings can be initiated not only by the private person concerned, but also by civil organizations. This is an act of general character and its text is not adapted to the specific needs of any particular social group. It entered into force at the end of January 2004. The body to monitor the enforcement of this act functions under the guidance of the Government and was set up at the beginning of 2005.

While Members of Parliament belonging to the different minorities sit on the benches of some of the parliamentary parties (including four Roma MPs), the question of guaranteed preferential representation for the minorities in Parliament has remained unresolved for some time; it is a matter which regularly appears on the agenda of the National Assembly and the Government. In 2004, Hungary sent two Roma representatives – so far the only Roma representatives at European scale – to the European Parliament. Several politicians from among the 24 Hungarian MEPs have rich experiences in the field of minority protection and are very active in this field. Hungarian MEPs hold leading positions in two newly created intergroups (the Intergroup for Traditional National Minorities, Constitutional Regions and Regional Languages and the Intergroup Antiracism and Diversity).

Hungary was admitted as a member of the Council of Europe on 6 November 1990; this date also marks the moment Hungary signed the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. It was ratified on 5 November 1992. In 1995 Hungary ratified the two most important documents of the Council of Europe regarding minority protection: the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Legal regulations in Hungary concerning the minorities are in accord with these two international conventions, and indeed in certain areas they actually provide broader rights to the minorities resident in the country. Hungary has undertaken to implement the optional regulations contained in Chapter III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in respect of the Croatian, Slovakian, German, Serbian, Romanian and Slovene languages. The Hungarian Government fulfils its obligation to present periodical national reports on the implementation of these two international conventions to the General secretary of the Council of Europe.

Minority self-governments

Prior to 1993 the public role of the minorities was played out in the frame of the various civil organisations. However, the Constitution as well as the Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities state that minorities have the right to establish their own local and national self-governments.

Minority self-governments are elected bodies that represent the interests of the given national or ethnic minority at settlement or national level. Local minority self-governments, unlike organisations operating in an associative form, represent not only their membership but also the entire minority community of a settlement.

The minority self-government system was established with the aim of guaranteeing cultural autonomy. Consequently, minority self-governments do not have the powers of authorities, and the local governments of settlements are not allowed to grant any regulatory competencies to minority self-governments. Minority self-governments have rights enshrined in law allowing them to make decisions in their own spheres of authority on the foundation, taking over and maintenance of institutions, particularly in the areas of local education, the local printed and electronic media, the nurturing of their traditions and culture. The objective is that minority self-governments become fully responsible for minority educational and cultural institutions and get all conditions necessary for this purpose.

Voters may establish local minority self-governments through direct elections that take place at the same time and place as municipal elections. According to act adopted in June 2005, only those Hungarian citizens are entitled to take part at the elections who have previously registered in the minority voters's register kept (and destroyed afterwards) by the chief administrator of the Mayor's Office. The registration requires the declaration of the voter on his/her minority affiliation. Minority candidates may be fielded exclusively by minority civil organisations whose statutes specify the objective of representing the given national or ethnic minority and that have been working for at least three years. Candidates will also be obliged to give a declaration on their language knowledge, on the knowledge of the minority culture and on the fact whether they had already been earlier members or office-bearers of the self-government of another minority. These declarations of the candidates are public. The aim of the registration of minority voters is to ensure that no one can intentionally misuse the system and minority self-governments be elected by, and composed of, people who really belong to national minority communities and feel genuine commitment to this cause.

Local minority self-government elections will be announced if there are at least 30 persons registered in the minority voters' register. Medium and national level self-governments will be elected in a system of electoral lists, by the members of local minority self-governments ("electors") at a subsequent round of elections to be held in March of the subsequent year.

Local and medium-level minority self-governments will be composed respectively of 5 and 9 members. The number of members of national minority self-governments will vary between 15 and 53 depending on the number of the local self-governments formed country-wide.

Whereas during minority self-government elections held in 1994 and 1995, 822 minority self-governments were formed, following the 1998 elections 1,367 local and 9 capital city minority self-governments were established across the country. This growing trend continued also in 2002 when elections were held for 1870 bodies. The number of minority self-governments operating on 1 November 2004 was 1827. This number in respect of the individual minority communities was as follows: Armenians 31, Bulgarians 31, Croats 108, Germans 340, Greeks 31, Gypsies/Roma 974, Poles 51, Romanians 44, Ruthenes 32, Serbs 44, Slovaks 115, Slovenes 13, Ukrainians 13. A total of 7,772 elected representatives work in these local minority self-governments. 5,273 of them were elected as independent candidates, while 2,499 persons were fielded by minority organisations.

In 2002, 1,372 minority candidates gained seats in the municipal governments: 549 of them belong to the Roma and 453 to the German minority. The mayors of 35 settlements are Germans, while Croatian, Slovak, Roma, Romanian and Slovenian mayors were elected respectively in 20, 12, 4, 1 and 4 settlements.

Local minority self-governments have extensive consultation rights in all issues affecting the local minority community and also the right of consent (veto right) in the adoption of all local municipal decisions affecting the minority community in the area of local public education including the appointment of a school principal, local media, the preservation of cultural heritage and the collective use of the mother tongue. Among the rights concerning cultural autonomy it should be mentioned that minority self-governments have the right to decide on their own structure and the way they will operate; they are allowed to make decisions concerning the minority's memorial sites, the dates of their local and national festivities, the prizes to be awarded as well as to found and to run cultural and educational establishments, schools, museums, libraries, scientific institutes, theatres and scholarships.

The national minority self-governments represent the given minority at national level: as partners of legislative and state administrative bodies, they are consulted in issues concerning the minorities they represent. National minority self-governments have consultation rights in draft legislation whenever minorities are concerned. They have the right of veto in legislation concerning the protection and the preservation of traditional historical minority settlements and architectural monuments as well as concerning the core teaching material used in minority public education. After the 2002 autumn elections, all the 13 minority communities have elected their national self-governments in the first months of 2003.

The last ten years have clearly justified the existence of the minority self-government system. The system is an efficient form of interest representation allowing broad minority participation in matters that concern them both at local and national level.

Minority education

Minority education – as a part of the Hungarian public education system – is expected to provide all services that are generally provided by public education as a whole. Moreover, their task is not simply to offer these services in the native language: it is also necessary to create the conditions for studying the native language and passing on the understanding of the culture and history of the people.

In the majority of minority families, the process of passing on the language has broken down; and the Hungarian language has become dominant. The different dialects spoken by the minorities do not lend themselves to regular refreshment, and thus their role in social communication is decreasing. This makes the role of the school in passing on the native language all the more important; the responsibility of educational institutes is all the greater.

As minority affiliation is a sensitive private issue, the local municipal government will organize and launch minority education only upon the initiative of parents. According to the law, the request of the parents of 8 pupils belonging to the same minority is sufficient, and it obliges the municipality to organize a class with minority education. In this case, declaring one's identity is voluntary, and it only helps people to benefit from some additional right.

The geographical dispersion of minorities can cause problems mainly at the level of secondary schools. The number of pupils wanting to attend a minority secondary school may not be sufficient in one settlement to run for them a secondary school or a class. However, in this case, too, the state is obliged to organize schooling at the request of the parents of 8 pupils. This can result in running one or two boarding secondary schools which receive pupils from a region or from all over the country. Altogether there are 26 secondary grammar schools and 14 technical schools or vocational training centres running minority education or teaching some minority language.

The Act on Public Education offers another possibility that can be a good solution in the case if there are no 8 minority pupils in the given settlement. This is a new form called *complementary minority education*, which makes participation in minority education possible also for those minorities that do not have a minority school. In this case, pupils attending normal school education elsewhere have special additional (afternoon) courses to study their minority language and culture. This instruction is recognised as part of the normal school system, and the certificate the pupils get here entitles them to pass the so-called maturity exam in the given subject and to enter higher education.

From the point of view of minority education, the 13 minorities living in Hungary can be divided into three groups. In the first group we have the bigger communities (Germans, Croats, Slovaks, Serbs, Slovenes, Romanians) that have had for decades a well-established system of educational institutions comprising state-run schools and nursery schools. It is understandable that these are the languages for which Hungary has made commitments under Part III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

With regard to different factors (process of linguistic assimilation, geographical dispersion, group sizes, etc.) Hungary has developed a system with three types of

minority schools. The most frequent type consists of schools where the minority language is taught as a second language in at least 4 or 5 lessons a week. The second type consists of bilingual schools where a significant part (at least 50%) of the subjects are taught in the minority language. The number of schools teaching all subjects in the minority language is rather low because of the lack of qualified teachers and the lack of children wanting to attend them.

According to the regulations, both local and national minority self-governments are entitled to take over a local minority school if they conclude an agreement with the local municipal council, which, as a rule, is the maintainer of educational institutions. If the national minority self-government wants to take over a school with regional or national coverage, this agreement should be concluded with the minister of education. In this way, minority self-governments become the maintainers of these schools. They can get the same forms and amounts of state subvention as municipalities, and they are entitled to submit project proposals to granting agencies under the same conditions as the former maintainers. So far one Croatian, one Slovak and two German institutions have been taken over by the respective national minority self-governments. By providing financial support to this trend, the Republic of Hungary tries to fulfil the recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, according to which Hungary should „continue to develop the system of minority self-governments, in particular by improving the conditions for the transferral of educational and cultural bodies and institutions to minority self-governments.”

Hungary is unable to ensure higher education in minority languages in all scientific fields. We only train teachers of minority languages and literature, but there are no courses in minority languages to students of other subjects or specialisations. However, bilateral agreements between the Kin states and Hungary ensure the full-time or part-time training of minority undergraduate and PhD students in their mother country. The diplomas obtained in the Kin states are accepted in Hungary. Another solution to the problem of the insufficient number of qualified teachers who would teach sciences in minority languages is the “importation” of teachers from the mother countries.

The second group comprises the small minorities that do not have a network of schools, just one school or even none. In order to teach the native language, they have some extra-school courses, the so-called Sunday schools, which constitute a special form of minority education and are organised outside the school system. In general the organisers of this form of education are the national minority self-governments, with financing from the Ministry of Education. Of course, the possibility of the 8 parents’ initiative is open also to these small minorities. In 2004, the Bulgarian, Greek and Polish communities launched their first educational institution in the form of complementary minority education explained above.

The third group comprises the Roma minority. Here the main problem consists not in the provision of mother tongue education, as 85% of the Roma population lost the use of the native language centuries ago and they only speak Hungarian. The primary aim of the Ministry of Education is to fight school segregation by promoting and also financially supporting integrated education.

According to a survey carried out by the Ministry of Education in 2000, almost all Roma children complete the eight classes of the primary school. This is a significant improvement, since at the beginning of the seventies and the nineties this proportion reached respectively only 26% and 75%. However, a great number of these children finish their primary school studies only after the compulsory schooling age, and their studying in secondary grammar or vocational schools is not satisfactory either from a quantitative or from a qualitative point of view. Some 84-85% of Roma children completing their primary education go on studying at secondary level, but only one fifth of them choose schools providing a secondary school leaving certificate that would allow studies in higher education. The majority of Roma secondary school pupils get qualified in subjects that provide them with only limited chances for employment. Less than 1% of Roma hold higher educational certificates. Preparatory classes to improve the chances of young people and studies starting at 0 level are held in several higher education institutions with the support of the Ministry of Education. For seven years now, a well established system of scholarships for Roma students has been effectively stimulating Roma youth to attend secondary and higher education. The number of grantees was about 26,600 in the first semester of the 2004/2005 academic year.

The success of pre-school and school education establishing the equality of opportunities for the Romany community is to a large extent dependent on the professional quality of teacher training and further training. With support from the Ministry of Education, several institutions of higher education have introduced – within the framework of departmental, special college or independent programmes – Romany studies (Romology) in order to improve the understanding and awareness of students.

The Ministerial Commissioner for Roma Issues in the Ministry of Education promoted the setting up of a National Network for Integrated Education and initiated the introduction of a new *per capita* educational financial support called “integration normative support”. The network, in operation since January 2003, contributed to the start of nearly fifty programmes that aim at promoting the integration of socially disadvantaged and Roma children.

Cultural life

The last few years have seen much progress in the minorities organising their own affairs and in developing self-awareness. The numerous minority civil organisations, associations, clubs and ensembles are proof of the high level to which the right of association and assembly is conducted.

Cultural institutions in settlements that also have a minority population are obliged to ensure that the cultural demands of these minorities are met. Besides this, the independent minority cultural institutional system has greatly strengthened over the last decade. The national or regional network of minority museums and libraries, the nationality theatres, the numerous cultural associations, cultural centres, community houses, clubs and art societies all help in preserving the cultural traditions of the minorities. Cultural institutions created specifically for the minorities have emerged such as the Institute and Library of Bulgarian Culture, German community centres, the National Roma Information and Cultural Centre, the Centre of Slovak Culture, etc. Regularly organised

specific events such as the festival of books or the festival of minority theatres help spread information on the culture of minorities.

From the early 90s on the minorities began to establish minority research institutes to study their own traditions, history and present-day situation. The organisational framework of these research institutes is very varied: some operate on the basis of a civil initiative, others have contacts with a national self-government or some university.

The Hungarian State supports minority access to the means of mass communication. Programmes for the 13 minorities are regularly broadcast both in the Hungarian Radio and the Hungarian Television. The native language television programmes for the minorities are complemented by regular Hungarian-language magazine programmes about the minorities that also serve to inform the wider general public. The national self-governments of the national and ethnic minorities independently decide on the principles for the use of the available airtime at their disposal for public service broadcasting. Minorities may delegate – on a rotational basis - one member for one year to the Boards of Trustees of the Hungarian Radio and the Hungarian Television.

At least one nationally distributed newspaper per minority receives full state support for publication purposes. In 2004, this translated into a financial support of HUF 204M being provided to 20 nationally distributed newspapers for the 13 minorities. Besides minority national papers other press organs give news about the minorities, thus for example minority supplements carried by the national press and native language supplements in local newspapers.

As for the training of journalists, every year, the Ministry of Education distributes scholarships to train minority youngsters in their mother countries. Journalists working for the minority media are mainly recruited from among those who graduated in the mother country as journalists.

With state support, the National Foreign Language Library gets newspapers and periodicals from the mother countries of the minorities. All minority self-governments maintain contacts with the press of their mother countries and have access to their materials either directly or through the relevant embassies.

At the beginning of the 90s several minority research journals were launched, and research projects and high-level conferences held by university, higher educational and museum research groups, the Minority Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Teleki László Foundation's Central European Institute also draw attention to the question of the minorities.

Measures promoting the social integration of the Roma minority

From an economic viewpoint one can consider the integration of the minorities living in Hungary as complete, with the exception of the Roma minority. They were hardest hit by the recession of the 1980s and the transition to a market economy. Currently the unemployment rate among Roma is still much higher than the national average, and in the

smaller settlements of disadvantaged regions it can go up to 90-100%. Long-term and youth unemployment are also far more common in the Roma community.

The Roma are exposed to multiple factors that unfavourably influence their state of health. Thus the life expectancy of the Roma population is 10 years less than that of the non-Roma. In 1971 two thirds of the Roma population lived in isolated slum-like neighbourhoods with no comfort at all. With the improvement of housing conditions, this proportion decreased to 14% by 1993, still this makes up thousands of people living without running water, electricity and other conveniences.

The Roma policy conducted by the Hungarian Government is characterised by continuity based on the results of earlier years. On the basis of the analysis of the implementation and efficiency of the medium-term package of measures passed by the government in 1997, 1999 and 2001, a new package was adopted in 2004 on the medium-term measures intended to improve the living standards and social position of the Roma population (Government Decree No 1021/2004). The main areas of the package include the enforcement of equal rights, the extenuation of prejudices, the elimination of segregation in education, the improvement of the quality of education, the development of employment opportunities, better access to, and development of knowledge on, computer sciences, the improvement of life quality, health and housing conditions as well as the preservation of Roma culture, identity and languages. The government decree defines the ministries responsible for the implementation of the tasks and the deadlines by which the tasks have to be implemented. This work is co-ordinated by the Inter-Departmental Committee on Roma Affairs.

Co-sponsored by the European Commission, the World Bank and the Open Society Institute, a very important regional conference entitled 'Roma in an Expanding Europe: Challenges for the Future', took place in Budapest on 30 June and 1 July 2003. The conference was intended to raise public awareness about the economic development challenges and opportunities faced by Roma and to support systematic policy reforms, especially in education, employment, health and social protection. Upon the proposal of the conference, an international initiative called The Decade of Roma Inclusion will be implemented between 2005-2015 in eight Central, Eastern and South-Eastern European countries with the financial support of the World Bank and the EU with the aim of accelerating actions to improve the economic status and social integration of the Roma population by developing appropriate policies to achieve these objectives, and by monitoring performance in meeting them. As part of the programme, a Roma Education Fund was set up with its programme office based in Budapest.

Hungary's Roma policy stands at the forefront of international attention. During the EU accession process, chapters dealing with minority rights and minority protection in the European Commission regular reports on Hungary's accession recognised the achievements that the country made, but also mentioned the necessity of continuing the policy to improve the position of the Roma community. Hungary has never considered that these efforts should be made only for the sake of the EU accession. This is an extremely important issue that has to be dealt with in the long run in order to develop social cohesion and to ensure the well-being and the welfare of all the citizens of the country.

System of financial support

The state provides financial support for the self-organisation and activities of the minorities through a multi-channel system that splits operational and programme costs, respectively the support available to the minority self-governments and to civil organisations.

With the 2005 amendment of legal provisions, the financial support to national minority self-governments becomes part of the budgetary chapter of the Parliament. Money allocated to public foundations appears in the budget of the Ministry for Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, and support for the local minority self-governments and minority educational programmes is included in the budget of the Ministry of the Interior. Support available to minority civil organisations is provided on the recommendation of Parliament's Committee for Human Rights, Minority and Religious Affairs.

Support allocated to the minority self-governments increased. In 2005, the amount allocated to the 13 national minority self-governments is HUF 914M. Support to local minority self-governments amounts to HUF 1,306M in 2005. Since 2003, a new item has been supporting minority self-governments to take over and maintain already existing minority educational or cultural institutions or to found new institutions of this kind.

The single largest amount of specified minority-targeted budgetary support goes on supporting education for the minorities. The Ministry of the Interior provides complementary normative support for maintaining minority educational institutions to municipal governments running such programmes. From the same ministry, small settlements can get support for the operational costs of minority education if their disadvantaged conditions would prevent the settlement from organising such education. Minority educational activities and projects (Sunday schools, summer camps, teachers' further training, research into minority education, etc.) can get supported from the Ministry of Education through calls for applications.

The Public Foundation for National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary and the Public Foundation for the Roma in Hungary are also important institutions of the budgetary minority financial support system.

The Public Foundation for National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary supports programmes, activities and press organs that protect the identity of the minorities in Hungary, and that serve to nurture, pass on and preserve their traditions, languages, material and spiritual culture. In 2005, this Foundation has at its disposal HUF 543M.

The Public Foundation for Roma in Hungary organisation is primarily engaged in supporting the development of small enterprises and employment as well as health care programmes assisting families and small communities. A sub-programme of the Foundation grants scholarships to Roma students. In 2004, this organisation could distribute support in a value of HUF 1135M.

With the establishment of the public foundations the government has not only involved representatives of minorities in the decision-making process, but has created the opportunity to realise task-financing which takes into consideration the different situations and demands of the minority communities.

Contacts with the Kin-states

The Government of the Republic of Hungary welcomes the contribution of the Kin-states and language nations to the strengthening of the language and the cultural identity of the minorities living in the country. The Government endeavours to ensure that the minorities serve as a bridge between Hungary and the mother nations.

Efforts to establish good neighbourly, amicable relations and co-operation are reflected in the fact that besides signing up to multilateral international conventions, the Republic of Hungary has signed bilateral agreements and conventions with the mother countries of many of the minorities (Slovakia, Romania, the Ukraine, Slovenia, Federal Republic of Germany, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro). In line with bilateral conventions, inter-governmental minority joint commissions have been established to discuss topical minority questions, to assess the realisation of obligations deriving from the convention, respectively to draft suggestions for their own governments. The representatives of the minorities concerned also participate in the work of all the joint commissions.

The Republic of Hungary undertook obligations in the Framework Agreement on the Protection of National Minorities not to obstruct persons belonging to national minorities in practising the right to establish cross-border relations freely and in peace, and to maintain contacts with persons with a shared ethnic, cultural, language and religious identity, or with a common cultural heritage. The minority act states that persons belonging to minorities have the right to maintain relations both with the state and community institutions of their mother country and language nation, and with minorities living in other countries. Local minority self-governments have the right to maintain relations with any foreign or mother country minority organisation and association, as well as the right to conclude co-operation agreements. The minority organisations conduct cultural activities, for which they can establish institutions – within the legal framework – which are entitled to maintain international relations.

According to a national survey conducted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1998, one of the most important areas of the activities of the national minority self-governments has been the establishment and the development of relations with the mother countries. In the last few years, relations between the minorities and their respective mother countries have started to blossom. These contacts are evidenced in a variety of forms from the operation of jointly maintained schools, through youth exchanges, educational and cultural co-operation and support, to ‘twin’ contacts between settlements and entrepreneurial initiatives linking the two countries.

The acceptance and practical implementation of legal regulations designed to protect the minorities and improve their situation, the programmes of successive, democratically

elected Hungarian governments since 1990 prove that Hungary pays particular attention to the assertion of national and ethnic minority rights, that it values the cultural variety that dates back centuries in this country, and that it considers the minorities' existence, the preservation of their languages, traditions and cultures as an important element of social and cultural life. Over the last decade the consistent aim of domestic minority policy – based on consensus – was to establish a minority-friendly environment for the national and ethnic minorities in which they could preserve and pass on their cultural identity, and live freely with rights enshrined in law.

The Hungarian Government considers the conscious nurturing of the culture of the minorities not only as a duty deriving from international commitments it has undertaken, but also as a long-term national interest. It supports the strengthening of the identity of minority groups, the development of the minority self-government system, and the implementation of the cultural autonomy of minorities. The cultural diversity of the country is a common value of all the citizens.