



LETTER FROM BUCHAREST

Nicolae's Children

Above the school doorway, a chiselled inscription in both Hungarian and Romanian, reads 'Secondary School No. 2, founded by Istvan Bathory in 1579'. In the Transylvanian capital Cluj, where Hungarians constitute about a quarter of the population, the school's weathered inscription is now illegal. Since the local elections earlier this year, Romanian ultra-nationalists call the shots in City Hall. The new mayor asserts that even bilingual signs on traditional Hungarian institutions such as schools or the Hungarian National Theatre implicitly undermine Romania's national sovereignty.

In Transylvania, home to nearly two million ethnic Hungarians, the population is polarised along ethnic lines. With nationwide elections approaching in the Autumn, many are asking whether democracy is possible at all in the reigning climate of tension and suspicion.

The Cluj vote was a critical test for democratic forces competing against the roar of nationalist demagoguery. In the election's first round, no party managed to capture an outright majority. But a pact between the ultra-nationalist Party of Romanian National Unity (PRNU) and the National Salvation Front (NSF) in the

second ballot tipped the scales just enough to give the nationalists a slim majority. The PRNU, the political arm of the far-right 'cultural' organisation *Vatra Romaneasca* (Romanian Hearth), appealed to Romanians to vote strictly along ethnic lines. Its chauvinistic propaganda portrayed the opposition Democratic Convention as the mouthpiece of the Hungarian minority whose one ambition was to return Transylvania to Hungary.

Petru Litiu, the Democratic Convention's defeated candidate, sees the source of the PRNU's victory in its crude, anti-Hungarian propaganda, a campaign fuelled by the powers-that-be in Bucharest. "The apparatus of the communist regime is still very much alive," says the retired Romanian Air Force colonel. "The ultra-nationalists and the NSF preside over a very professional system of disinformation. We have nothing comparable to combat the manipulation and distortion of historical anxieties."

The Romanian ultra-nationalists rely upon support from two major constituencies. Itself a cosmetic remodelling of the old nomenclatura and security forces, the PRNU enjoys the loyalty of the middle- and higher-level representatives of the transformed system—from doctors and lawyers to army generals. Among the rank-and-file population, the nationalists depend largely upon first generation Romanians in Transylvania, those resettled here from eastern Romania under Nicolae Ceausescu's policies of forced assimilation.

The ultra-nationalists have stopped at nothing to undermine whatever tenuous solidarity may exist between the region's co-inhabitants. During his short tenure of office, Mayor George Funar, a former small-time communist party leader, has banned international conferences, limited the jurisdiction of Hungarian schools and torpedoed ethnic Hungarian-run joint ventures.

Vice-Mayor Liviu Madrea sits at his desk in city Hall, the Romanian

tricolor billowing from the balcony outside his window which looks on to December 22 Street. In theory, he says, the PRNU has no objections to ethnic Hungarian demands for schools and bilingual street signs. But first, he insists, the "separatist, revanchist Hungarians must prove their loyalty to the unitary Romanian state". This, essentially, means abandoning claims to minority rights.

The Hungarian minority party, the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (HDUR), has struggled to rise above the Romanian nationalists' blatant provocations. As the second largest party in the Bucharest parliament, the HDUR's co-operation with Romanian democrats in the Democratic Convention will be the key to mounting a challenge against the NSF and PRNU in the Autumn election.

The question of minority rights is implicitly tied to the fate of democracy in Romania. Ethnic tension provides just the excuse that the Bucharest regime needs to maintain its strong-arm, centralised control over the state and the political process. The upper echelons of the army, the refashioned security apparatus and the nomenclatura see a safe future for themselves only in a country wracked by ethnic conflict.

The war in former Yugoslavia has demonstrated how pitifully ill-prepared the international community is to guarantee the inviolability both of borders and minority rights. For both governments and minorities in eastern Europe, the sad lesson is that they must fend for themselves, abandoning any notions of regional self-determination or democratic concepts of federal and confederal states. In Cluj, every young Hungarian able to get his or her hands on a job or scholarship in Hungary has packed their bags. One way or another, Ceausescu's dream of a homogenous Romanian national state may yet become a reality.

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