

Hungary has ethnic goulash in the making

By Tom Hundley
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KOSICE, Slovakia — Darina Pouldafova-Tkacikova is the artistic director of the local Hungarian theater in Kosice, Slovakia's second city. She thinks, speaks and directs in Hungarian.

Her husband is Hungarian. Her children and grandchildren, who live in Budapest, are Hungarian.

You could forgive Pouldafova-Tkacikova for sometimes thinking herself Hungarian, but she happens to be an ethnic Slovak, a citizen of Slovakia born of mixed German-Slovak parents. No matter, the government of Hungary has come up with a way to straighten all of this out.

Antagonizing its neighbors and alarming the European Union, Hungary is putting the finishing touches on a new law that would grant something close to citizenship to an estimated 3 million ethnic Hungarians and their non-Hungarian spouses living in bordering countries.

The legislation was originally proposed by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban, but it has picked up broad support across the political spectrum and is expected to sail through parliament early next month.

Work identity cards

It will give ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring states special identity cards entitling them to work in Hungary and receive health care and pension benefits when they do. It will allow their children to study for free at universities in Hungary and receive generous stipends if

Where millions of ethnic Hungarians reside

The Treaty of Trianon in 1920 reshaped the borders of Hungary and relocated millions of ethnic Hungarians into bordering countries. A new Hungarian law would allow ethnic Hungarians to receive health and pension benefits when working in Hungary, study for free at Hungarian Universities and receive discounts when travelling in Hungary.



ETHNIC HUNGARIANS IN BORDERING COUNTRIES

Romania	1.6 million
Slovakia	567,000
Yugoslavia	345,000
Ukraine	163,000
Austria	33,000
Croatia	22,000
Slovenia	8,000

Source: East Europe GenWeb

they attend Hungarian-language schools in their own country.

Ethnic Hungarians also will get special travel discounts when they visit Hungary and free admission to all museums.

All of this may sound harmless, but in the ethnic soup of Central Europe and the Balkans wars have started over less.

As a result of Hungary having its borders redrawn after World War I, ethnic Hungarians repre-

sent Europe's second-largest minority population, with large concentrations living in Romania (1.6 million), Slovakia (567,000), Yugoslavia (345,000) and Ukraine (163,000).

Only Russia, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, can claim a larger number of its people living outside the borders of the homeland.

Ethnic Hungarians in the states bordering Hungary often enjoy a living standard higher

than that of the host population, but at the same time they have been subjected to frequent discrimination and harassment.

Another cause for concern in Budapest, Hungary's capital, is that while the nation is projected to join the European Union in the first wave of expansion sometime in the middle of this decade, it is unlikely that the neighbors in question—with the possible exception of Slovakia—will be serious candidates for admission anytime soon.

Borders to be sealed

"According to EU requirements, Hungary will have to hermetically seal its borders. What happens then to the Hungarian minorities on the outside?" asked Ferenc Dobos, a political analyst at the Ferenc Balazs Institute, a Budapest think tank.

Hungary's 1989 constitution obliges the government to "sense its responsibility for the fate of Hungarians living outside its borders."

Jozsef Antall, nationalist leader of the first post-communist government, set off alarms in the region when he proclaimed himself "prime minister of all Hungarians."

The present government says it is merely trying to do right by the large Hungarian population that through no fault of its own found itself outside the homeland's borders. But many suspect that Hungary, which still stewes over the 1920 Treaty of Trianon that trimmed its borders, is using this law to put a kind of symbolic stamp on the notion of "Greater Hungary."

Hungary's neighbors reacted to this latest initiative with predictable indignation. And Hungarian officials, worried that

the uproar could harm its chances with the EU, have gone into damage-control mode.

"Our neighbors did not understand the proposal correctly. We are not giving Hungarians outside our borders passports. It has nothing to do with citizenship. It's more like a student ID card or the membership card you would get if you joined a club," said Kinga Gal, vice president of the government's Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad.

Gal said the real intent of the law was to pre-empt a last-minute surge of immigration to Hungary before it became an EU member and had to tighten its border controls. By making Hungarian minorities feel less isolated and cut-off in their home countries, she said, they would be less inclined to move to Hungary.

A survey conducted by the Balazs Institute for the government indicated that one-quarter of those living outside the borders would move to Hungary if it appeared Hungary's border would be closed. The percentage was highest in Ukraine, where one-third said they would move, and the lowest in Slovakia, where the figure was 16 percent.

But if work, travel, education and social welfare benefits are made available, the number who said they would move dropped by half, according to the survey.

"We found that most Hungarians living in other countries don't feel a need to be part of Hungary. They want their rights as a minority in the country they live in, and they want to be left alone," said the Balazs Institute's Dobos.

Julia Torkosova, who works in a Hungarian-language book-

store on Kosice's main street, said she intended to stay put in Slovakia but that she would definitely apply for an identity card.

"Maybe I would never use this card in my life, but I am a member of this group of Hungarians who lives throughout the world, and this card is an expression of that," she said.

"For me, my country is the place where my ancestors lived and where I live now. We didn't immigrate to Kosice; we have always lived here," Torkosova said.

Program's huge price tag

The issue of national rights for Hungarian minorities touches an emotional chord and plays well in an election year, but one aspect of the new legislation that the government has not explored in depth is the potentially crippling expense.

"The real issue is the financial aspect of this law. We simply do not know how much it will cost. The government is offering all these benefits, but it doesn't say how it will pay," said Gustav Molnar, a political analyst in Budapest.

Erika Torzsok, an adviser on Hungarian minorities for the previous government, argues the new legislation is bad policy.

"The government didn't consult with the EU or with the neighboring countries, and now they've jumped into deep water," she said. "They've raised expectations that they will not be able to fulfill. They've created tensions between ethnic Hungarians and the host countries, and between ethnic Hungarians and homeland Hungarians who will see those outside the borders as a financial burden."

Printed in Chicago paper of 2001? Leisz Family Village of Peregu mare
(sent to Allie from Florence Leisz) now situated in Romania.