THE QUEST FOR CONVERGENCE
IN HUNGARIAN-ROMANIAN RELATIONSHIPS:
A MULTI-ACTOR APPROACH AND THE TRANSFERABILITY
OF GOOD PRACTICES

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Abstract. More than three decades after the fall of communism, Hungarian-Romanian bilateral relations are yet to become convergent. Although ethnic conflict was generally avoided, genuine "deep" reconciliation does not yet exist. This is not to say that daily interaction between Hungarians and Romanians are tense; indeed, most everyday interaction functions well. However, the lack of emphasis on reconciliation at both political elite and public levels and the frequency and intensity of nationalist short-tempered reactions to even minor ethnic tensions are worrying. Based on a critical review of both academic and policy-focused literature and personal interviews with scholars and policy makers, this paper argues that the underwhelming progress in both bilateral relations and reconciliation is due to the absence of political will and vision to create substantial rapprochement, irresponsible instrumentalization of historical facts for political purposes, and national identity construction processes using (and abusing) ethnicity only

Keywords: ethnic relations, reconciliation, Hungarian-Romanian relations, Franco-German relations, bilateral relations, UDMR/RMDSZ, national identity.

Introduction

This paper offers an account of Hungarian-Romanian relationships at more than three decades after the fall of communism. Although benefiting

from an international context supportive of rapprochement in bilateral relations, achievements remain fragmented. Disagreements over historical facts coupled with cynical political instrumentalization of divisive issues, make reconciliation difficult. While already institutionalized, bilateral structures of cooperation have not been backed up by either political will or commitment ensuring their sustainability. As Salat (2020) aptly points out, "reconciliation does not merely happen with the signing of a treaty". It takes political will and vision, sound and purposeful institutional design, appropriate funding, as well as an effort to fill cooperation structures with relevant content. Furthermore, for reconciliation to work it needs to reach deep into all strata of society.

The fall of communism created an extraordinary political moment for countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Either by popular uprising or elite negotiations (or both), countries in this region embarked on a strenuous journey to democratic transformation under international influence exerted by Western Europe and the United States of America. EU and NATO integration provided solid conditions for development, but also for improving cooperation between member states (Grabbe 2006). Two neighbouring post-communist countries, Hungary and Romania have never had such opportunities to develop their bilateral relationship within the milieu of several international organizations and multinational entities (Balázs 2020). However, bilateral relations are not on par with the existing opportunities.

This study explores the causes of this underperformance and several options for the way ahead. Its structure is as follows. First, the Franco-German reconciliation model is proposed as a starting point and a contextualization factor for a broader discussion about bilateral convergence and reconciliation. Second, post 1989 Hungarian-Romanian relations are assessed. Third, starting from the success stories of the Franco-German reconciliation, several options for improving Hungarian-Romanian relations are analysed. The arguments and evidence presented in this paper are grounded in existing scholarly research, public data and a series of interviews with academic and political elites.

Two processes are essential for many of these arguments. On the one hand, **convergence** is used to reflect rapprochement at the level of institutions, of foreign policy and diplomacy. It is acquired through

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continuous dialogue and the creation of collaborative frameworks leading to sustainable consensus. On the other hand, **reconciliation** is used when referring to dialogue, communication, and cooperation among people, primarily at grassroots level. Convergence may help reconciliation, just as reconciliation may be an incentive for convergence, although the two may not always pull in the same direction.

1. The Franco German Reconciliation: Stability Through Innovation

The first significant step in the Franco-German reconciliation was the 1963 *Joint Declaration of Franco-German Friendship* accompanied by the *Treaty between the Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany on French-German Cooperation* (i.e. *Elysée Treaty*). Signed less than two decades after the end of WWII, the latter proved to have a long-lasting impact on the two neighbouring countries' bilateral relations. Although embedded in a unique spatial and temporal context, the treaty constructed a vision for reconciliation and rapprochement that transcends this uniqueness. The treaty provided the framework for three major areas of cooperation: (1) foreign affairs, (2) defence, and (3) education and youth. Institutionally, the *Elysée Treaty* provided the basis for the construction of a dense network of bilateral relationships at various levels of decision-making. Their sustainability was guaranteed by continuous and regular bilateral consultations and solid political commitment across party lines. For example, the heads of state and governments pledged to offer all their support and assistance for the implementation of the treaty, as well as to meet as often as possible (usually twice a year). At the level of ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs), high officials responsible for political, economic and cultural relationships held meetings once a month in Paris and Bonn alternatively. Under the coordination of the two MFAs, authorities working in defence, education and youth also met regularly, usually at least once every three months.

In the field of foreign affairs, consultations were to take place before making decisions and common interest was to be thought out especially when related to European issues, East-West relations, and membership in international organizations. The aim of these consultations

was to reach, as much as possible, consensual positions. Both countries also committed to coordinate their policies of international aid, to harmonize their defence strategies and tactics, to implement staff exchange programs for their armed forces, as well as to establish and develop joint programs for armament, joint research and language training. When it comes to societal reconciliation, several measures have been put in place in the fields of education and youth. In matters of education, the two countries pledged to facilitate the processes of teaching each other's language within their public education systems. Efforts were made to ensure the equivalence of degrees and binational research programs were set up. As youth exchanges were considered a priority, a joint body and funding program was also established. These focus particularly on collective exchanges (e.g. pupils, students, young artists and workers).

While the *Elysée Treaty* was just the blueprint for bilateral cooperation, it represented the basis upon which other forms of cooperation were further built. For example, in 1988, the French President Francois Miterrand and the German Chancellor Helmuth Kohl added to the already existing collaborative infrastructure a safety and defence council and a council for economic and fiscal policy (Riegert 2013). More than half a century after French President Charles De Gaulle and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer singed the landmark declaration and opened the path towards increased cooperation, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel met in 2019 in Aachen/Aix-la-Chapelle to expand and deepen the existing framework of collaboration in two directions: (1) the intensification of cooperation in matters related to economy, security and defence, and (2) ensuring Europe's independence as an actor in international relations (Gardner Feldman 2019). Although points of disagreement have always existed (for example Brexit, arms exports or climate policy), compromises have often been reached. This would not have been possible without the practice of continuous dialogue created by the *Élysée Treaty* (Dodman 2019). Productive confrontation leading to consensus became one of the features of Franco-German bilateral relations (Weise & Momtaz 2019).

While Franco-German bilateral relations show significant dynamism especially in a rapidly shifting geopolitical context, it is the philosophy

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of the *Élysée Treaty* that laid the groundwork for substantial convergence and reconciliation. Three initiatives originating in or related to the Élysée Treaty are particularly indicative of the success of this initiative, namely: the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO), the Franco-German history textbook and the ARTE TV channel.

The body overseeing exchanges of people from the two countries is the Franco-German Youth Office (OFAJ/DFJW, https://www.fgyo.org/). Its declared goal is to strengthen ties between French and German youth and to deepen their understanding about one another. Its aims are to extend and develop the German-French relations, to facilitate key competences for Europe, to awaken curiosity in the partner language, to promote intercultural learning, and to share the experiences of German-French youth exchange and reconciliation with third countries. Its projects support student exchanges at the level of secondary schools and universities, language courses, town twinning and regional partnerships, sports meetings, internships and exchanges on career building and seminars, and research grants. Since 1963, 9 million young French and German people participated in about 376,000 exchange programs through this initiative. In 1976, FGYO's reach extended to countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean area, and 15% of funding went to trilateral programs focusing on democracy, human rights, European history and future, political education and youth participation, as well as professional training. FGYO is an independent international organization and, in 2019, had a budget of 29.5 million Euros.

The project of a Franco-German History Textbook started in 2003 and, although it was a civil society initiative, political and governmental elites in both countries supported it. From the very beginning, the guiding idea was to create a Franco-German textbook of history and not a textbook of Franco-German history. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, majorities in the two countries have long considered the *other* as their strongest ally and have learned to be empathic with the *other*'s histories. Occasional divergences between the teams working on the textbook did not reflect different interpretations of conflictual historical facts, but rather political and ideological features of political culture. For example, Germany condemned the Eastern Bloc's communist regimes

unapologetically, while France insisted on considering socialism (at least in theoretical terms) as an alternative to be discussed (François 2007).

Since 1990, ARTE has been broadcasting initially in both French and German and, through its content, contributed to reconciliation. Considered central to the European construction, the channel hired mixed teams of French and German media people, working together in Strasbourg, with a view to bring former enemies closer by broadcasting jointly developed programs. Between 1990 and 2000, the channel focused on reconciliation per se (as the broadcast *Histoire Parallèle* shows), and then on the future of Europe (Hartemann 2014).

To wrap up, the *Élysée Treaty* had three identifying features that guaranteed its success. First, it conjured political will and commitment for consensual common measures in various policy fields. This will transcended regimes and ideologies. Second, it created an institutional setup that emphasized the importance of interaction between decisions makers at all levels; this interaction was and remains to this day regular, frequent, and substantial. The numerous meetings between various officials guaranteed the sustainability of the initial process. Third, the treaty made important steps towards creating the conditions for reconciliation, as the case studies of FGYO, the common history textbook and the ARTE television channel illustrate.

2. Flickering Lights in Hungarian-Romanian relations

What can explain the vacillating character of Hungarian-Romanian relations during 30 years of post-communist transformations? On the positive side, there are sustained diplomatic efforts to create frameworks for cooperation. Although numerous, bilateral initiatives have not been able to create a common vision regarding convergence or reconciliation. Diplomatic progress has been decidedly made under the auspices of both countries' desire to join international structures of cooperation like NATO and the EU, but convergence is not yet taking place. Perhaps, the lack of intrinsic motivation to achieve reconciliation is one of the culprits for the slow and uneven progress in bilateral relations. Constant political instrumentalization of historical facts on both sides is the other.

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2.1 Hungarian-Romanian Bilateral Relations – three decades of zigzagging

During communism, Hungary and Romania only had good relations in the late 1950s until mid-1960s during the so called "pax sovietica". Afterwards, the period of fruitful bilateral relations took place between 2004 and 2010 when both countries were strongly committed to EU integration, and were in the process of the adopting the *acquis communautaire* (Ghișa 2020).

The early years of post-communism were characterized by alternating optimism and concern. Even then, military relations have been striving, as in 1994 the two countries had already signed a military cooperation treaty (Vădean 2011). Military cooperation between Romania and Hungary has been especially strong under NATO's Partnership for Peace 1994 umbrella (Gallagher 1997). Even when bilateral relations became tense, military cooperation was not affected. For example, in 2018, Hungarian Defence Minister Simicskó considered military bilateral relations "balanced and problem-free". At that time the Hungarian official praised the activity of two very early bilateral constructions, the mixed bi-national battalion created in 1998 and the multi-national Tisza battalion (Hungarian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Slovakian), created in 1999 (AH 2018). However, not all areas of cooperation have been as successful, as this section will show.

The most important date for Hungarian-Romanian post-communist relations was September 16, 1996, when the *Treaty of Understanding, Co-operation and Good Neighbourliness* (i.e. *The Basic Treaty*) was signed. Following the French-German reconciliation model, in January 1997 a *Mixed Intergovernmental Commission for Collaboration and Active Partnership between Romania and Hungary* was also created. It is noteworthy that international pressure and the countries' commitment to enter Euro-Atlantic structures of cooperation have been the impetus for this treaty, rather than substantive desire for reconciliation (Gallagher 1997). There were four reasons for which restraint was adopted in bilateral relations during this period: (1) the desire to integrate in Euro-Atlantic organizations (especially NATO with its collective security promise); (2) the threat of ethnic conflicts unfolding in former Yugoslavia; (3) the existence of other similar ethnic minority issues faced by both countries (Romania in

Moldova and Ukraine, Hungary in Slovakia and Serbia); and (4) the absence of military threat, as neither country was a military power (Ibid.). From this perspective, the treaty could be interpreted as a reaction to geopolitical challenges and a vehicle for gaining access to international organizations, rather than an effort for cooperation motivated by genuine concerns for reconciliation.

The negotiations for drafting and signing *The Basic Treaty* took six years. Initially, the agreement aimed to respond to security anxieties triggered by the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, with provisions on minority rights eventually taking one quarter of the text. The treaty also incorporates three "soft law" documents: the Copenhagen document adopted at the CSCE in 1990 (on human rights and minorities rights), the Declaration of the UN General Assembly concerning the rights of members of national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities of 1992 (Resolution A/RES/47/135) and Recommendation No. 1201 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, i.e. a protocol on the rights of minorities (Nagy 1997). The question whether to incorporate Recommendation No. 1201 into the agreement proposed for adoption divided the parties for several years, until, finally, a footnote was added stating that it does not refer to collective rights and consequently it does not force parties to guarantee the right to territorial autonomy for minority populations (Ibid.).The treaty was followed by a plethora of bilateral and multilateral initiatives aiming to strengthen the dialogue between the two countries (MAE 2022). While joint government meetings have been one of the most important features of successful bilateralism, the last one took place in 2008 in Szeged (Chifu 2012). Follow-up discussions took place in 2011 and 2017 but they did not materialize.

In 2002, Romania and Hungary signed *The Declaration on Romanian-Hungarian Cooperation and Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century Europe*. At its tenth anniversary, then Foreign Minister Titus Corlățean asserted that "[t]he Strategic Partnership between Romania and Hungary has lent substance to our bilateral dialogue, laying its seal on all areas of collaboration. In these 10 years we have managed to build a solid, pragmatic relationship based on dialogue and collaboration". He also praised the mechanism of joint Cabinet meetings, the first of its kind for Romania (MAE 2012).

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In 2015, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Bogdan Aurescu considered Hungary a strategic partner and he praised many of the achievements in bilateral relations, among which commercial/economic aspect ranked high. Commercial relations between Hungary and Romania are striving and there have been numerous multi-annual cross-border projects. The latter have been funded generously by the EU, at the beginning through the PHARE and later through the European Regional Development Fund (INTERREG). The 1996 *Basic Treaty* and the 2002 *Strategic Partnership Declaration*, together with the principles of good neighbourliness were seen as important milestones (Economica 2015). Much less enthusiastic, in 2020, at an online debate of the Center for European Political Analysis (CEPA) and referring to his meeting with his counterpart Peter Szijjártó, Aurescu considered that the two countries could have different/conflictual interpretations of history, but that these do not need to endanger bilateral relations, pinpointing that the outlook should be in relation to the future and not to the past. He also referred to the necessity of formalizing and reconsidering Hungarian governmental economic investments/aid in some regions of Romania, by making them in line with EU legislation (i.e. non-discriminatory) and made available for all Romanian citizens, irrespective of ethnicity or region (Financial Intelligence 2020).

This type of discursive power game can be best observed when referring to the issue of *Szeklerland* autonomy. Throughout decades of post-communist transformation, it has resurfaced constantly. Most recently, in the spring of 2020, the Romanian Chamber of Deputies (i.e. the lower chamber of the Parliament) tacitly passed a bill granting autonomy to *Szeklerland*, a matter which was part of an ongoing politically motivated deal between the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR/RMDSZ). Although swiftly rejected in the Senate (i.e. the upper chamber), the issues created diplomatic tensions and national discontent in Romania. Similarly, in 2018, the three Hungarian parties in Romania – UDMR/RMDSZ, the Hungarian Civic Party (PCM/MPP) and the Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania (PPMT/EMNP) – launched a joint demand for territorial, local and cultural autonomy, initiated and mediated by Katalin Szili (Hungarian Prime-Minister's Commissioner). Although she clarified that

autonomy is not connected with a desire to break away, but rather to achieve self-determination and self-government, based on EU's principle of subsidiarity (G4Media 2019a). The Romanian state constantly refused to entertain any talk about autonomy, perceived to represent a threat to national security and potentially involving a change of the Constitution. Romania is constructed on a principle of ethnocentric constitutionalism, and individual rights come before collective rights, since the nation is imagined to be ethnically homogenous.

To sum up, Hungarian-Romanian post-communist relations have been formalized in treaties and bilateral initiatives creating the framework for cooperation. While military and commercial relations, for example, function well, other areas of cooperation are less successful. Among the latter there is the thorny issue of autonomy or minority rights. The mere number of initiatives or the size of economic exchanges do not replace the need for vision and leadership. As such, the three decades of post-communist bilateral initiatives have placed the Hungarian-Romanian bilateral relations on solid grounds in matters of cooperation, yet the two countries do not seem to be willing to address reconciliation in a more substantive manner.

2.2 (Un)common histories

Generally, history is a complicated interpretative process, and, in the case of Hungarian-Romanian relations it often fell prey to political instrumentalization that makes reconciliation a quasi-impossible task. Three examples showcase just how detrimental the manipulation of history to induce essentialist understandings of national identity can be.

(a) The Romanian history textbooks

In 1999, the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj sparked a nation-wide scandal following the publication of a history textbook authored by members of its teaching staff who offered a European relational perspective on matters of common interest for the two countries (Iordachi 2004b).

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Most significantly, the volume argued that emphasizing a European history of Romania is no threat to national identity, since history of ethnicities can be empathically understood by looking at the interaction between them. Relational history emphasizes commonalities; thus, Romanian history cannot be understood without exploring the history of other nationalities living on the Romanian territory. The relational perspective then does not focus on either reestablishing ethno-genesis or the duration of stay of some people in some territories as a warrant for their entitlement to them. The authors of the school textbook wrote a history of Romania and not of Romanians because, they argued, ethnic minorities are part of Romanian history. Moreover, unlike other history textbooks, it did not rely on a teleology of Romanian unification - retroactive reading of historical sequences with the purpose to show that unification of Romanian provinces was, in fact, a centuries old well-crafted plan. The textbook was met with massive opposition and accusations of falsifying history, by many actors on the Romanian political and intellectual stage. Most accusations were framed in terms of treason, lack of patriotism and attachment to the national being.

This example shows that, by and large, the Romanian society has been effectively socialized to read history with the clear purpose of constantly looking for historical/constructed facts that reconfirm its right to inhabit its current territory. History's purpose then becomes purely instrumental – it is meant to convince us and others of our primordial claim over a territory which, in turn, makes us more deserving to live here. If successfully packaged, this type of primordialism can gain traction among strata of population that are prone to promote exclusive understandings of identity, which are detrimental to both bilateral relations and democratic consolidation (by fueling a stream of arguments inevitably resulting in intolerance and rejection of diversity). In Romania, historical anxiety may reflect the constant need to look for historical events that can be used/employed in re-affirming Romanian uninterrupted presence on its current territory, thus legitimizing the current shape of the nation state. In fact, most official discourse in both countries is about chronological pre-eminence as source of legitimacy (Iordachi 2004b).

(b) Hungary – keeping historical trauma alive

Keeping the Trianon trauma alive has been a common theme of Viktor Orbán's career ever since he first became Prime-Minister in 1998 (Toomey 2018). He often talked about cultural and social reunification with ethnic Hungarian communities outside Hungary's borders, and repeatedly referred to Transylvania as "part of Hungary's living space in the Carpathian Basin" (Ibid., 93). While some historians make the case that Trianon was, and still is a real trauma for the Hungarian society, others disagree. In the same vein, it is pointed out the fact that Hungarians finding themselves citizens of other countries after Trianon were not universally accepted by Hungarians living in the newly redrawn Hungary (Ibid., 95).

When Orbán came back to power in 2010, he tried to capitalize politically on the Trianon moment. For him and his political entourage discursively contesting Trianon is a strategy for retroactively constructing trauma. Control of borders, emphasis on self-determination, and opposition to liberal western Europe has been deliberately connected to this trauma. In this logic, Viktor Orbán portrays himself as the saviour and guardian of the Hungarian people against any future Trianon-like potential occurrence. He regularly brings to public attention the necessity of reviewing the Trianon conditions and even made public declarations to recover some territories, although they were only moves to impress voters, and were not expected to have any direct bearing on foreign policy.

(c) Citizens across borders

Attending to ethnics outside state's borders can always raise tensions and mistrust in the neighbouring country. While not directly related to instrumentalization of history per se, the two countries' approaches to their citizens living abroad are tributary to essentialist readings of history. In Central and Eastern Europe, there is a broader regional process/trend of "reconstructing the national 'imagined' communities, against the background of radical post-communist socio-political and territorial reorganization." (Iordachi 2004a, 240) Adoption of dual citizenship by

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countries in East Central Europe is different than in North America and Western Europe: in the latter it has to do with the desire to integrate (all) residents, while in the former it is "revival of national and ethnic policies of post-communist states, and addresses the need for more effective minority protection" (Ibid., 242). Since dual citizenship is related to "external and compact kin populations", the policy may pose serious threats to bilateral relations (Idem). Given that both countries aim to bring back into the fold their co-ethnics/former citizens, they are prone to irredentist interpretations. On the one hand, the Hungarian Status Law of 2001 grants Hungarian ethnics living abroad – but only in neighbouring countries – access to Hungarian labour market and access to welfare, based on ethnic belonging. On the other hand, Romania restores citizenship rights to those that previously lost it, and, although it did not include any geographical requirements, most applicants were from Bukovina and Bessarabia. While granting rights to extraterritorial citizens can be seen as genuinely democratic, when it creates suspicion vis-à-vis the true motivation of adopting such acts, the pros and cons should be carefully evaluated.

Political instrumentalizations of history are detrimental to both foreign policy convergence and reconciliation. When Hungarian Foreign Affairs Minister Szijjártó forbade diplomatic corps to attend receptions for Romanian National Day (Touma 2016) (because it glorifies the unification of Greater Romania) or when the Romanian Parliament proposed June 4th -Trianon Day - to become a public holiday in Romania (G4Media 2019b), the message was loud and clear, not only from one MFA to another, but also to the two publics. Institutional bilateral and multilateral frameworks of cooperation are important in ensuring convergence, but they only work when both governments make it a priority, which does not seem to be the case neither in Romania, nor in Hungary. Furthermore, the irresponsible use of nationalist symbols aiming to antagonize the other party can threaten cooperation even further. Developing solid bilateral relations by avoiding history altogether may work for diplomats, but does not work for societies in need of reconciliation.

3. Lessons (un)learned

This section repositions the discussion on more optimistic terms by considering ways of improving Hungarian-Romanian relations derived from the philosophy of the Franco-German reconciliation. First, there is a brief discussion on the applicability of *The Élysée Treaty*. Second, several avenues for improving cooperation are introduced and explored, based on their proven effectiveness in other contexts.

3.1 Franco-Germany reconciliation in and out of context

Although reference to models is useful when aiming for improving bilateral relations, in the end, every situation is unique. A 2004 volume on the applicability of the Franco-German reconciliation model in the Hungarian-Romanian context painted a fairly bleak picture (Salat and Enache 2004). Some contributors saw the success of the Franco-German reconciliation merely as a function of the geopolitical context existing at that moment, which is incomparable to post 1989 Central and Eastern Europe. Others argued that Hungarian-Romanian bilateral relations have a strong institutional framework for cooperation but there is lack of political will. Moreover, a fixation on the past makes matter more difficult to reconcile.

Against these apparent limitations, some transferrable lessons can also be identified. First, bilateral initiatives are important in creating ties and ultimately consolidating cooperation, but they are not sustainable unless political will exists both at the moment of their creation, and afterwards. Setting them up in such a way that partisan or ideological fights cannot affect implementation of bilateral projects is vital for their survival and effectiveness. Political will means not just prioritizing convergence in bilateral relations, but also actively supporting it once it is under way. Second, the emphasis on the role of the youth in solidifying reconciliation is critical in ensuring empathic understanding of the other. Third, constant efforts to depoliticize and de-instrumentalize history are also necessary, if reconciliation is to take place. Fourth, civil society's role in both reconciliation and convergence should not be

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minimized (Balázs 2020). Civil society may be best suited for bringing about reconciliation because it works at grassroots levels.

3.2 Franco-German reconciliation as transferrable know-how

(a) Bilateral institutional frameworks – no form without content

The Franco-German reconciliation model asserts the importance of a dense and sustainable network of bilateral structures, if convergence is to be achieved. While such consultations did exist in the Romanian-Hungarian bilateral relations, they did not survive the test of time. Many bilateral initiatives have been geared towards creating good neighbourliness or increasing economic exchanges or develop infrastructure, but not necessarily convergence. Contrastingly, the Franco-German treaty's main feature is an outlook to a future carefully planned and designed to achieve reconciliation. Therefore, bilateral initiatives should be integrated in a carefully constructed vision that emphasizes and prioritizes convergence and reconciliation.

One solution in creating more convergence can be international pressure, since that seems to have worked at different moments in time before. In other words, the EU's reconsideration of post-accession conditionality instruments (of which, the recent debate on conditioning EU funds on the respect for the rule of law, is a timid example) may facilitate convergence. At the moment, Romania has a clear Western looking foreign policy, while Hungary less so; if Romania supports deepening Euro-Atlantic integration, Hungary is keen on cultivating bilateral relationships with some of the countries that are at odds with the EU and NATO, such as Russia, Turkey (although a NATO member) and China (Kiss 2020). Moreover, according to the last 2020 V-Dem Democracy report, Hungary is the first non-democratic EU member state. If in 2008 Hungary was a liberal democracy, by 2010 it has already been downgraded to an electoral democracy, and the 2020 report considers it an electoral autocracy. Control of media and academic freedom, removal of important checks and balances and politicization of key democratic institutions (for example the national election commission), curtailing freedoms and rule of law attacks have all led to

the consolidation of an autocratic Hungarian political system. For these reasons, convergence through international pressure may be difficult to achieve in the current context.

(b) Youth political culture – reconciliation by design

FGYO was essential in the Franco-German relations in ensuring reconciliation and empathic socialization. A similar program does not yet exist in the Hungarian-Romanian context. In fact, in 2005, during the first joint meetings of Romanian and Hungarian governments held in Bucharest, the agenda included a proposal to create an institution very similar to FGYO. The proposal was made by the Ethnic Diversity Resources Center (CRDE) and the Pro-Europe League. Through the support of UDMR/RMDSZ, it made it on the meeting's agenda. Levente Salat (CRDE) and Smaranda Enache (Pro-Europe League) considered that FGYO was one of the most transferrable features of the Franco German reconciliation, and aimed for the creation of a local, EU funded version of it. Although both governments agreed to the proposal, nothing ever came out of it, to the proponents' dismay (Salat 2020). Rekindling interest in bilateral investment in such a youth program would be beneficial for reconciliation. Besides the obvious benefits in the realm of empathic understanding of the other, FGYO also had the added value of becoming a tool for gaining international influence. Just as FGYO developed trilateral programs in countries at EU's borders characterized by conflict and potential tensions, a similar Hungarian-Romanian program could be useful in raising the two countries' reputation in the region. Coordinating both countries development aid programs may also contribute to increased international visibility.

Focusing on the youth is also extremely important from the point of view of democratic citizenship. Young people of Hungary and Romania have been socialized in new democratic systems and they are genuine EU citizens. Data shows that in many countries of the world young people display less support for democracy than their parents except for the younger people in post-communist countries where the opposite is true (Foa et al. 2020). It follows then that it is even more

important to socialize young people in the spirit of tolerance in post-communist Europe, since they have a higher degree of acceptance of diversity. Young people may be the ones to achieve what older generations could not, since reconciliation works best when democratic values are held in high esteem.

(c) The quest for common histories

When history readings are as contentious as they are in Hungary and Romania, constructions of ethnic identity often involve processes of opposition to the other. It is worth mentioning that historiography in Romania has mostly been geared towards strengthening national identity and infusing patriotism among the population (Iordachi 2004b). Nevertheless, instead of constantly fighting over differences, identity could also be constructed by identifying commonalities. Civic nationalism is the key word: identity is formed by attachments to a set of social and political values and norms that define the nation, in addition to or even instead of relying exclusively on ethnicity. In this respect, Romanians and Hungarians are truly not that different: both people have been traumatized by communism, both wanted "a return to Europe", both are attached to democracy. Nevertheless, commonalities are harder to "sell" to the public when political will supporting reconciliation is absent or minimal.

A mandatory first step in reconciliation is to accept the existence of states in their current borders (Balázs 2020). The misuse of irredentist symbols (like maps of Greater Hungary used even by Viktor Orbán) should be avoided. They also have effects on societal views. A 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that 67% of Hungarians consider that parts of neighbouring countries belong to them (40% completely agree) (Fagan & Poushter 2020). History itself is neither linear nor teleological, and the abundance of interpretations makes it a favourite victim of instrumentalization. Going beyond patriotising histories does not equal being unpatriotic. Patriotism does not mean rejection of modernity and relegating the idea of patriotism to older idealized times is not a solution (Pantazi 2020). Relational historical perspectives are

needed and the Franco-German history textbook is illustrative. Therefore, countries should engage in negotiating a common reading of history. Such endeavour is easier said than done, but social history textbooks are key: each minority should be presented in its own context since they are not all the same; their histories are different, and so is the positioning of mainstream society towards them. This is evident in the positive appreciation of Germans, the tolerance of Hungarians in Romania, and the rejection of Roma in both countries (Kiss 2020).

In this respect, the mixed history commission set up by Hungary and Romania (at the level of national academies) creates the framework for such common historical projects, but its activities are influenced by political constraints: the commission is more active when the bilateral climate is favourable, and less so, or not at all, when bilateral relations are tense (Balázs 2020). Granting political and financial independence to a mixed history commission would ensure its success. Moreover, recent history is just as complicated as more distant events. For example, there has not yet been an agreement about the violent events in March of 1990 that took place in Targu Mures. Some argue that they were fuelled by irredentism, while other believe that it was a carefully planned event whose main purpose was to reconstitute/reinvent former Securitate (Gascón Barberá 2020). In the Romanian context, lustration has neither been fully accepted nor embraced. Coming to terms with the distant past is more difficult when even recent times are shrouded in mystery.

(d) Civil society and the quality of democracy

Hungarian-Romanian reconciliation started in the early 1990s with the involvement of the American Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) and the Carter Center (1991-2012). Civil society was thus involved in reconciliation (as mediator) from the very beginning. Friends of PER organized a meeting in 2014, in which significant progress in reconciliation has been noted by participants of both Hungarian and Romanian sides: the debate is less heated now than after the collapse of communism, there are no taboos in dialogue and political elites are involved in dialogue at different levels (Watts 2018). Moreover, the fact that UDMR/RMDSZ

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maintained a quasi-permanent presence in successive Romanian governments consecrated a culture of ethnic minority political participation at the highest level.

The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR/RMDSZ) has branded itself as an ethnic party that makes or breaks almost all governing coalitions in Romania. As such, they often find themselves in a pivotal role, which, throughout time, allowed them to work effectively towards securing minority rights. From the very beginning, UDMR/RMDSZ insisted that minority status in Romania should be modelled by the South Tyrol case, the basis of Austrian-Italian reconciliation, which focuses on significant autonomy (Gallagher 1997). However, *The Basic Treaty* of 1996 did not reflect their preference. While UDMR/RMDSZ is critical in representing the interests of the Hungarian minority, their ability to negotiate with almost any political party holding the power at a particular moment (Verseck 2018) and their subservience to FIDESZ, made it loose popularity among some categories of Hungarian ethnics (Keller-Alant 2020).

The dynamics of ethnic nationalism is different in the two countries. In Hungary, FIDESZ and Jobbik are both constantly bringing ethnic minorities issues to the fore. Jobbik has been a long-standing advocate for *Szeklerland* autonomy and has repeatedly criticized FIDESZ for not truly engaging in securing it. Jobbik asserts that FIDESZ considers the Hungarian minority in Transylvania as an electoral pool, while neither listening to their needs nor trying to meet their demands. Then again, in Romania, a cursory analysis of main political parties' programs in the context of the general parliamentary elections in December 2020, reveals that no mention is made about ethnic minorities, minority rights or autonomy. This does not mean, of course, that ethnic issues are not present in the public space, but rather that Romanian political parties and elites react to particular incidents, rather than make interethnic relations a priority. In general, Romanian political actors consider interethnic relations as properly managed, while unanimously rejecting any debate on autonomy.

At the same time, political parties are not the only societal actors that can influence reconciliation. Religious institutions, cultural actors, mass-media and nongovernmental organizations are also important.

Although churches can facilitate reconciliation, in the Hungarian-Romanian case this is probably not the case (Romocea 2004). On the one hand, the Romanian Orthodox Church and Orthodoxy *per se* are historically associated with Romanian ethnic identity. On the other hand, Hungarians in Romania are more religious than Hungarians in Hungary and Hungarian communities are structured along religious/church lines; religion is important for ethnic identity (Kiss 2020). The parallel cleavage of ethnicity and religion makes reconciliation improbable. Moreover, the situation is further complicated by the fact that the Hungarian state finances churches in Transylvania abundantly (Ibid.).

Cultural rapprochement is also very important. Cultural and literary dialogue in Transylvania has been declining lately, because most Romanian writers do not master the Hungarian language; therefore, knowledge of the other through cultural means has diminished constantly recently. It is mostly Hungarians that speak Romanian that can engage in such processes and not the other way around (Trifescu 2017). Theatres could also socialize the two societies into the rich artistic legacy of the other. For example, in the context in which artistic life is politically controlled in Hungary, Romanian cultural institutions could invite Hungarian artists to express themselves freely at theatres across Romania. There would be a risk of diplomatic tensions, but the effect on constructing common identity would potentially be larger.

And this is a very important point: sometimes, diplomatic convergent relationships and societal reconciliation may not work hand in hand. Since Viktor Orbán initiated a politically motivated "takeover" of the Budapest University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE), protests and occupation of buildings have been taking place. The National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest (UNATC) and the Faculty of Theatre and Film at Babes-Bolyai University (UBB) solidarized with SZFE, but Hungarian theatres in Romania kept a low profile throughout the process and did not engage in any symbolic support activity. Heavy funding by the Hungarian state of media and churches in Transylvania, and also support for Hungarian cultural institutions results in diminishing independence of those spheres. Increased support from the Romanian state in these directions would help avoid situations like the one above.

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Also, nongovernmental organizations (especially those focusing on the youth or implementing projects on tolerance and accepting of diversity) are important in ensuring convergence and availability of funding of such projects is critical. Nongovernmental organizations are a staple of democratic politics, although their entrance in post-communist countries has often been met with mistrust and plagued by suspicions of conspiracies. Funding for nongovernmental organizations working on reconciliation at all levels is absolutely necessary, as is ensuring their freedom to implement projects. The recent situation in Hungary where NGOs have been increasingly controlled and restricted by the government, makes civil society actors less capable of engaging in reconciliation projects.

The illiberal turn in Hungarian politics influences the Hungarian minority in Romania too since Viktor Orbán's entourage and Hungary itself actively pursued a policy of buying out independent Transylvanian Hungarian speaking mass media (Kiss 2020). An independent and equidistant media is then critical to constructing peaceful relations between countries, especially in situations characterized by the presence of minorities.

In conclusion, collective fears are efficiently exploited in both Hungary and Romania (Salat 2020). Hungarians leave in the fear of not being able to have a safe future in Romania; although the legislation allows them a certain high degree of integration, they are constantly mobilized to fight a potentially assimilationist system. In Romania, fear is kept alive by repeated attempts to construct the Hungarian minority and its quest for autonomy as a national security threat. The way out of this deadlock can only be realized if civil society on both sides of the border engaged in a concerted effort to overcome historical insecurities, and reset the relationship on less conflictual ground.

Conclusion

Three decades after the fall of communism, Hungarian-Romanian relationships are, at best, underwhelming. While the international context – democratization, integration in European and Euro-Atlantic

structures – presented endless opportunities, at the end of the day, the two countries managed successfully to achieve two things: avoid conflict and construct a bilateral institutional set-up allowing for cooperation to take place. The list of their non-achievements is much longer: genuine reconciliation, true convergence in foreign policy, significant cultural and social rapprochement, and the list is open.

Revisiting the Franco-German reconciliation is a useful tool for identifying ways to improve bilateral relations converge and for bringing about reconciliation. Dense networks of bilateral initiatives are important avenues for cooperation, but they need to be constant, long lasting, insulated from regime changes and, most importantly, sustainable. Moreover, such networks should all revolve around a vision prioritizing societal reconciliation, besides their declared economic, political or technical benefits. Ultimately, the society should see the fruits of improved bilateral cooperation. There should be investments in young people's empathic education and socialization, especially since, in both Hungary and Romania they are genuine carriers of a European identity characterized by tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Instrumentalization of historical facts should be avoided at all costs, especially since the global phenomenon of fake news facilitates the circulation of even the hardest to believe conspiracies.

Resetting the historical record is a major task for historians, but the political elite should also have a vested interest in solving historical symbolic feuds; without it, academic research may not have any significant outreach (especially since it is underfunded). An independent institute of historical research benefitting from multi-partisan support in Hungary and Romania is a necessary initiative. Divergences among researchers are natural, but working for a common goal – such as the reconstruction of a common history – is very important not just for scientific reasons, but also for informing political debate. Seeking out commonalities that would reset the historical record could be the job of the historian, but the effects of such an effort would definitely benefit political decision makers as well. Finally, one should not diminish the role of civil society in bringing about reconciliation. Just as elites can socialize the public, grassroots initiatives can put pressure on elites to act in the direction of convergence.

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Democracy, European and NATO integration, and military and economic cooperation are all important factors in creating bilateral convergence. However, avoiding or misinterpreting history and not having an intrinsic motivation for reconciliation may harm even the most successful cooperation initiatives.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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