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REVIEW ESSAY: Competing Narratives in Hungarian-Romanian Interstate Relations

ALFÖLDI LÁSZLÓ. *Kolozsvártól Bukarestig. Egy magyar diplomata visszaemlékezései* [From Cluj-Napoca to Bucharest. Memoirs of a Hungarian Diplomat]. Budapest: Kisebbségért-Pro Minoritate Alapítvány – Méry Ratio Kiadó. 2022. 251 p.

GHEORGHE ALBUȚ. *Un diplomat român la Budapesta (1981-1990 și după aceea...)* [A Romanian Diplomat in Budapest. (1981-1990 and after that...)]. București: Corint Istorie. 2023. 256 p.

There are but a few European states whose national interests have intersected as often as those of Hungary and Romania in the decades before and after the regime change of 1989. Their opposing interests and strategies have led to several occasions of heated interstate debate. However, the evolution

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of interstate relations after 1996 has also shown how the parties manage to overcome their differences, recognizing the benefits of cooperation in the context of European integration. Therefore, the signing of the basic treaty in September 1996 marked a turning point for bilateral relations, which, on the one hand, had done away with the obstacles to NATO accession for both states and, on the other hand, created new frameworks of cooperation, as high-level meetings had become a regular feature, including joint sessions of the governments between 2005 and 2008. Since both states have become members of NATO and the EU, the post-2010 period has been characterized by a lack of common political and economic projects and growing mutual disinterest in bilateral relations and EU-level coordination. Analysts, pundits, diplomats, and political leaders may ask how we ended up here and what dynamics have most influenced the ups and downs of Hungarian–Romanian relations in the last decades.

Both reviewed memoirs attempt to address the development of interstate relations, highlighting the persistent disagreements, turning points, and missed opportunities in bilateral relations, but from differing – of Hungarian and Romanian – diplomatic perspectives. For this reason, the reviewer does not aim to reconcile the opposing viewpoints or to assess the objectivity of historical events presented by the authors. Instead, I will outline the structure and main topics of the books by László Alföldi and Albuț George, who have served in Hungarian and Romanian diplomacy since the 1980s.² The second part of the review will focus on critical observations, highlighting the books' similarities and differences.

In the early 1980s, the Department of Personnel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary came up against a major challenge. Due to the austerity policy in Romania, there were no applicants for the consul position within the Consulate in Cluj. That situation created an opportunity to join the foreign service (13) – László Alföldi, who served from 1983 to 2011,

² László Alföldi was consul at the Consulate General of Hungary to Cluj-Napoca (1983-1988), served as a diplomat responsible for Hungarian affairs and as the Deputy Head of Mission of the Embassy of Hungary in Romania (1990-1996), as General Consul in Cluj (1999-2003), and as Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister in Bucharest (2006-2011). Albuț George was attaché and Assistant to the Ambassador of Romania in Washington (1968-1971), press attaché, counselor, and consul in Budapest (1981-1990), and Head of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Budapest and New York (1993-1997).

almost three decades in the services of Hungarian diplomacy, exclusively on Romanian relations, begins his memoirs. *From Cluj-Napoca to Bucharest. Memoirs of a Hungarian Diplomat* is a compelling book on Hungarian–Romanian interstate relations, diplomatic services, and interpersonal relations, which portrays the key milestones that defined the author’s career and the challenging periods of interstate relations. These were characterized by both diplomatic conflicts and strained relations to cooperative behavior, and the strategic relationship of the parties from the 1980s to the early 2010s.

Alföldi’s memoirs comprise seven chapters set in chronological order, reviewing the main events in foreign service in Cluj and Bucharest as a referent and expert on Romanian issues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary. While the first two chapters treat the growing diplomatic tensions of the 1980s and the events of the Romanian revolution, the following chapters focus on the post-1990s developments, offering a comprehensive view of the evolution of Hungarian–Romanian interstate relations and the nexus between Hungarian diplomacy and Hungarian minority in Romania. The author revealed how supply problems and the activity of the Securitate in the 1980s increased the pressure on Romanian society and how Ceaușescu’s national policy facilitated state homogenization disadvantaging the Hungarian minority community.

Furthermore, bilateral relations deteriorated as Hungary’s responsibility for the situation of the Hungarian minority appeared on the agenda of the Hungarian Party leadership (MSZMP) and critics of the Romanian minority regime became a common feature. The closure of the General Consulate in Cluj in the summer of 1988 shed light on the growing confrontation. According to the author, the regime was looking for any excuse, as Romanian authorities disapproved the travel of Ferenc Szócs, the appointed General Consul to Cluj, to take up his post. The closure came after the mass demonstration in Budapest against the Romanian national policy and systematization project. As a result, the consulate staff were given 48 hours to leave Romania, which led to an unprecedented decision in diplomatic relations (39–40).

Alföldi argues that the normalization of bilateral relations began only after the signing of the basic treaty in September 1996. Up until then, bilateral relations had been marked by mutual mistrust and a low level of commitment, as state-secretary-level meetings in the early 1990s

and the basic treaty negotiations showed. However, signing the basic treaty closed a much heated debate on territorial, border, and minority issues and resulted in a détente of Hungarian–Romanian relations, as “the tone of high-level meetings changed, and the issues that had been considered taboo were now raised on the agenda of bilateral relation” (105).³ Prior to Alföldi’s taking up his post as a General Consul to Cluj in 1999, bilateral relations had entered a new phase; however, local-level interethnic relations and the function of the General Consulate were hampered by the city mayor. The author provides details on how the consulate’s activity and the Hungarian national symbols and holidays came under siege in the Funar era (129–136).

Alföldi was known for maintaining a reasonable distance from the post-1990s government despite the challenges posed by the ever-changing foreign and national policy priorities of Hungarian governments. However, he never denied his right-wing political orientation and close friendships with party members of Fidesz. Therefore, he was never appointed to a leadership position within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but in a later stage of his diplomatic career, he became Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of Hungary in Bucharest receiving the rank of Extraordinary Envoy and Minister Plenipotentiary. Also, Alföldi was one of the few diplomats – without any Transylvanian ancestry – who were extremely committed advocates of minority issues, regardless of his position. As a diplomat, he witnessed not only the most important Romanian political, economic, and social developments of the past decades but also the improvement of bilateral relations, and Hungary’s increased kin-state engagement.

A Romanian Diplomat in Budapest presents the memoirs of George Albuț, a career diplomat who intermittently served three and a half decades at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), since 1965. The book provides a detailed insight into the wide range of duties of a diplomat, which were constantly challenged by the instructions from the MFAs, by conditions in the host state, and, more importantly, by the dynamics of interstate relations.

³ The translation of all originally non-English quotations belongs to the reviewer throughout the paper.

In comparison to Alföldi's memoir, Albuț's work is more systematically structured, with twenty-two chapters and containing several documents related to his career. The book begins with a description of the general hostility toward the Romanian Embassy in Budapest and Romanian citizens in general. The author terms this hostility as "anti-Romanian sentiment" because political and diplomatic relations were unable to resolve the major disputes of interstate relations in the late 1980s (16). Furthermore, as of the latter half of 1988, protests at the embassy against the systematization project and the situation of Hungarians in Romania became a permanent feature. Despite the ambassador's repeated protests registered with the Hungarian authorities, the lynch-mob atmosphere – as perceived by the author – subsided only in the wake of the events of December 1989. This *in medias res* opening was followed by a brief professional biography of the diplomat, completed with a concise presentation of the most important stages of his life and diplomatic career (34-42).

As the title and the structure of the book suggest, the most important period of the author's career was his time in the foreign service in Budapest during the 1980s, detailed throughout ten chapters. According to Albuț, the Romanian Embassy in Budapest was staffed by the local elite of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), rather than career diplomats. This exposed serious problems in the Romanian diplomatic apparatus (pp. 46-48). The embassy's staff was a heterogeneous team facing a difficult situation, as the Hungarian Party leadership expressed quite a strong criticism against human rights abuses and the treatment of the Hungarian minority in Romania, which all contributed to the deterioration of interstate relations. To support his argument, the author recalls the 1985 European Cultural Forum held in Budapest and provides a comprehensive explanation of how the Hungarian delegation tried to put the situation of human and minority rights in Romania on the agenda.

The diplomat provides valuable insight into the various functions and roles within the embassy: the main tasks of a press attaché and the importance of being well-informed (52). Having served as interim consul for a while, he outlines the tasks involved and also reveals the background of the establishment and the closing of the consulates in Debrecen (1984) and Cluj-Napoca (1988). These events contributed to the growing tensions in bilateral relations.

Similar to Alföldi, Albuț emphasizes personal matters and introduces the diplomats – the appointed ambassadors to Hungary (Chapter 21) and the military attaché (Chapter 9) – who have individually contributed to Romania's representation and the protection of its interests abroad. His approach highlights the impact of individuals in shaping interstate relations. In this regard, the author points out the case of Károly Györffy, a Hungarian economic attaché, who was accused by the Romanian authorities of disseminating hostile manifestos, ultimately leading to his expulsion (Chapter 7). An odd situation arose in December 1989 when bilateral relations reached a low level and Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn summoned Ambassador Traian Pop to deliver a letter of protest against the eviction of Protestant pastor László Tóké. According to Albuț, the ambassador claimed that Hungary's protest had interfered with the Socialist Republic of Romania's domestic affairs, and, consequently, the ambassador did not accept the letter of protest (22-23, 200).

Although it is commonly believed that diplomatic service is limited to certain forms of foreign service, Albuț goes into detail about how after a long diplomatic service in Budapest, a referent at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can contribute to bilateral relations. As a member of the Romanian delegation, he participated in several state-secretary- and ministerial-level meetings. Despite being recognized for his competence, even by Hungarian diplomats, he began to feel increasingly marginalized after working in the field of cultural diplomacy. Although he was considered a potential candidate for the positions of General Consul or Ambassador to Hungary, he was never appointed, which led to the end of his diplomatic career.

Diplomatic memoirs often rely on the authors' recollections and records and may not reference the literature. This is the case with both of the books reviewed here. Alföldi summarizes the events and developments of bilateral relations in which he was actively involved, without referencing archival sources. To support his arguments, the author frequently refers to Hungarian newspaper articles to supply additional information for his analysis.⁴ The result is an easy-to-follow and readable book that not only details the main responsibilities of a diplomat, but also emphasizes

⁴ Frigyes Udvardy, "Press Chronology of Hungarians in Romania, 1990-2017," accessed on May 22, 2025, <https://udvardy.adatbank.ro>.

the importance of unofficial and individual relations in diplomatic service. Similarly, Albuț's book is also based on his memoirs. Since his attempts to access archival sources proved unsuccessful, he includes brief biographies of the mentioned decision makers and diplomats in the footnotes. He also provides minutes from high-level bilateral meetings, interviews, and official correspondence to support his arguments.

Methodologically, both the individual and the interstate levels of analysis are fundamental to the approach of Alföldi and Albuț. While the individual level of analysis focuses on the behavior, characteristics, and perception of diplomats and decision makers, the interstate level aims to analyze the interaction between Hungary and Romania. Moreover, both authors incorporate a minority perspective into the interstate approach: while Albuț analyzes the situation of the Romanian minority in a single chapter, the nexus of the Hungarian government and the Hungarian minority is central to Alföldi's work. The diplomat provides a detailed account of the consulate's day-to-day tasks and cultural diplomacy activities, highlighting the personal relationships he developed with members of the minority elite.

The reviewer had no previous expectations that both authors would make critical arguments that go beyond the well-known national positions and narratives. Consequently, the memoirs outline a parallel history of the Hungarian–Romanian relations with only a few common interpretations. Furthermore, the memoirs reveal the emergence of competing narratives, indicating insurmountable problems in addressing the legacy of post-1989 interstate relations. While Albuț repeatedly emphasizes proposals with the potential to improve interstate relations in alignment with Romanian interests, he fails to acknowledge Hungary's legitimate interests in minority protection. He also views one of the post-1990 goals of Hungarian foreign policy, which aims to support Hungarian minority communities living beyond the borders, with a critical eye.

Furthermore, Albuț considers the Hungarian Government's commitment to supporting Hungarians in Romania, as detailed by Alföldi, to be interference in domestic politics. The Romanian diplomat emphasizes the position most frequently expressed by Romanian diplomats, claiming that minority rights are guaranteed in Romania according to European

standards (134).⁵ Furthermore, Albuț criticizes Hungarian diplomacy for not withdrawing its ambassador when the Romanian ambassador was being withdrawn due to an institutional decision as a sign for the renewal of Romanian foreign affairs in 1990. As Alföldi explains, the Antall government recalled most of its ambassadors after May 1990; consequently, a new Hungarian ambassador to Romania was appointed in September the same year.

Although neither author mentions the other by name, it becomes clear from the memoirs that the careers of the two diplomats, both of whom focused on vindicating Hungarian and Romanian interests, intersected several times. For example, Alföldi drafted the letter of protest regarding the eviction of Tőkés, which was presented by Albuț. Albuț also recalled the events of December 21, when Ambassador Traian Pop wanted to protest against the demonstration at the Romanian embassy. As the ambassador was already en route to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his colleagues could not get into touch with him. It was Alföldi who accompanied the ambassador to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and informed the ambassador about the Romanian developments.⁶ Furthermore, both diplomats had a very similar path, dedicated to serving national interests over several decades. Their careers are also similar, as neither succeeded in ascending to the uppermost echelons of diplomatic service, having been appointed to ambassadors – although Alföldi served as General Consul in Cluj and Deputy Head of Mission in Bucharest. Consequently, both submitted a request to be placed on retirement, citing personal reasons; the underlying truth was that they failed to be appointed to the desired position.

Memoirs of diplomats are important sources for diplomatic history and foreign policy. Although both authors interpreted bilateral relations within the framework of well-known arguments of Hungarian and Romanian diplomacy, with only a few critical remarks, they always maintained a diplomatic tone when discussing personal and institutional problems. Therefore, the works of Alföldi and Albuț are valuable contributions to understanding how two neighboring countries with fraught relationships

⁵ Albuț, *Un diplomat român*, 134.

⁶ Alföldi, *Kolozsvártól Bukarestig*, 51.

and conflicting national interests navigated through history over the last few decades. Moreover, both authors provided some valuable insight into bilateral relations, the actors involved in negotiating and representing national interests, and the diplomatic mechanisms for settling interstate disputes. While the reviewed books are only available in Hungarian and Romanian languages, they are useful readings not only for those interested in Hungarian-Romanian interstate relations but also for decision makers actively shaping this sensitive strategic relationship.