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*Christopher P. Ball is an Institute Fellow studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe.*

## The Day "God Gave a Brain to the Romanian People" Romanian Elections: November 3, 1996

### Part I: "Setting the Stage" and "In Kolozsvár"

\*BUDAPEST, Hungary

December 1996

By Christopher P. Ball

## DEPARTURE

On 3 November 1996, the Romanian people elected a new government and president. It makes the first real change for the country since 1990. Having missed the elections in 1992, and not wanting to miss the action again, I took a break from my language studies in Budapest and went to Romania for election weekend.

The basic plan for my election visit was to visit Magyar-Romanian Parliament Members as well as the U.S. Information Officer in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, Romania).<sup>1</sup> There I would be able to obtain a broad overview of pre-election issues as well as the attitudes of ethnic Hungarian Romanians. This would also provide me with an official point of view on matters that I could then check against other, less-officially-voiced, opinions. After Kolozsvár I planned to stay in the nearby, and much smaller, town of Nagyenyed (Aiud, Romania). The small-town base was intended to give me a better perspective on issues affecting people at the local level. Also, I hoped to meet with local Romanian political personalities and observe voting on election day. My time in Kolozsvár is largely the subject of this report (Part I) and in Nagyenyed, the next report (Part II).

There were four of us in the car: an American, a Transylvanian (Magyar), a Hungarian and a second American (myself). The first American was Daniel McAdams, editorial page editor of the *Budapest Sun*, a Budapest-based, English-language newspaper. Daniel also runs his own political consulting firm, New World Information Services, and (of particular relevance for this trip) regularly works as an election observer for the British Helsinki Watch. It was in this capacity that he was traveling with us to Romania.

The Transylvanian was András Király, with whom I went to Pécs and Mohács.<sup>2</sup> András works as foreign policy advisor to the Fidesz-Civic Party President, the leading opposition party in the Hungarian Parliament. He and I have known each other since 1994 when I was working with the Hungarian Atlantic Council. In addition to his role as foreign policy advisor, András is from Nagyenyed and studied in Kolozsvár. He volunteered to come with us and act as a guide for Daniel and me. He proved to be an

1. Hereafter, each new city will be mentioned first by its Hungarian name, then by its Romanian name in parenthesis. After a new city has been introduced, I will thereafter refer to it by Hungarian name only.

2. See CPB-4.

\*Publisher's note: The Fellowship area and newsletter dateline, on page 1 of CPB-4, were incorrect and should have read: EUROPE/RUSSIA (area), BUDAPEST, Hungary (dateline). Please accept our apology for the error.



*The whole crew, left to right: Chris Ball, András Király, Szabolcs Nagy, Daniel McAdams*

excellent guide, offering insights into history and politics that would normally not be easily attainable by two Americans.

Last, but not least, was Szabolcs Nagy, the Hungarian-Hungarian. Szabolcs is an impressive young man. When we first met on New Year's Eve 1994, he had already been campaign advisor to Mr. Zsolt Németh (vice-president of the Fidesz-Civic Party) during his bid for a seat in the Hungarian Parliament. He then became special advisor to Németh after he won the seat. Szabolcs held, and still holds, an active position as a Fidesz representative in one of Budapest's district councils, is part owner of Eurosensit Ltd. (a political consulting and research firm), Executive Secretary of the Pro Minoritate Foundation,<sup>3</sup> and a full-time student of Economics. The only thing that changed about Szabolcs between the time we first met, in 1994, and now, in 1996, is that he is two years older. He's age 23. He is truly an amazing young man and one whom I have grown to respect. Szabolcs would not be staying with us for the whole trip. He would stay in Kolozsvár to work, meeting us only on occasion during our time there and then again on the ride back.

## ON THE ROAD TO ROMANIA

The car trip, while unspectacular scenically because we traveled at night, provided adequate time for discussing the current Romanian political-economic scene lead-

ing up to the elections. This we did.

Since the "revolution"<sup>4</sup> of 1989, culminating in the death of Communist Dictator Nicolae Ceasescu and his wife Elena, Romania had been ruled by President Ion Iliescu. With the dictator dead, Iliescu was able to act as President from 1989-1992, at which time he was elected President in 1992 for a complete four-year term.

Economic and political reform barely staggered along under Iliescu's leadership. After struggling to get underway, Romania's reform stagnated and sputtered with occasional bursts of minor reform, but lacked a sufficient level of change. Privatization started and stopped several times, leaving only 50 percent of the total GNP in the private sector. The private sector remained under heavy-handed state regulation. This is evident not only from personal observation, but also from many surveys among businesspersons, one of which states that "55 percent of foreign investors said corruption was a 'major' or 'significant' problem...[ranking] third after poor infrastructure, with 60 percent, and stifling bureaucracy, 71 percent."<sup>5</sup> According to this survey, it was clear that "stifling bureaucracy" was the number one complaint of foreign investors. That helps explain why foreign investment has amounted only to a pitiful \$2.1 billion since 1990,<sup>6</sup> one of the lowest levels in the region. Other factors might also have been that inflation remained at 45

3. The Pro Minoritate Foundation deals with ethnic minority problems in Central and Eastern Europe.

4. Personally, I feel that "coup" better describes the activities that took place in Romania in 1989, given the role of many political personalities and the secret police. While this is beyond the scope of the immediate report, it is both worth mentioning and hopefully dedicating more pages to in future. Just for the record, though, at this point I believe that it was definitely a coup, which took advantage of a genuinely spontaneous uprising.

5. "Out of chaos," *Business Central Europe*, December 1996/January 1997, pp. 17-18.

6. The total 1990-1995 foreign direct investment total is only \$40 per capita, the lowest in Eastern Europe. Source: "Eurasia Economic Outlook," The WEFA Group, May 1996.

percent and tended to change in erratic jumps<sup>7</sup> rather than consistently, making long-range planning very difficult. In addition, foreign-exchange management was a disaster because the government kept the Romanian currency, the *leu*, artificially high to protect state-owned industries. To add to the problems, exports had fallen 10 percent in the first half of 1996.<sup>8</sup>

In all fairness, however, "unemployment finished 1995 at 8.9 percent, down from 10.9 percent a year earlier, and wages rose 53.9 percent in nominal terms and 16.3 percent in real terms in 1995."<sup>9</sup> By most "guesstimates," the few good figures were simply campaign gimmicks of the ruling government achieved by relaxing the state government budget in an attempt to hold onto its power. If true, then the few good figures are more cruel jokes than positive signs of hope, since someone has to pay for such exhaustive government spending. In sum, reform had started and stopped several times, changes tended to be erratic and unpredictable, and the average person was left as unsure as the economic world in which he/she lived.

The overall political situation *appeared* to be more predictable. In nearly all polls leading up to elections, the Presidential incumbent, Iliescu, was leading his closest rival, Emil Constantinescu, by 5-6 percentage points. It was generally expected inside and outside of Romania that Iliescu would hold on to the Presidency. In the parliamentary race, however, Iliescu's party, the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR), was trailing the same rival, the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), led by Constantinescu. Thus, up to election day, it was largely expected to be a close race for President, with an Iliescu victory offset by a change in Parliament (*i.e.* a CDR win). I too held this opinion.

The last important factor that helped shape Romanian public opinion before the election was the role of the United States in Romanian politics. Here, I merely report three of the most pervasive rumors that were being discussed in Romania at the time of my trip.

The first issue concerned a mixed response to the Romanian-Hungarian basic treaty (see my newsletters CPB-2 and 3). Some believed the treaty was a tactic of the United States and Hungary<sup>10</sup> to support the incumbent Romanian government. Others simply considered the treaty a legitimate step of the Hungarian and

Romanian governments toward joining NATO. Those of the latter opinion seemed to give the matter little further consideration.

The second issue was that the US Ambassador, Alfred Moses, had recently pushed the U.S.-supported International Republican Institute (IRI) out of Romania. The IRI had held several training seminars for opposition parties in the Spring 1996. These seminars helped opposition parties win local elections in the summer. So great was their influence that the leading opposition party, the CDR, formed a pre-election "Contract with Romania," openly modeled after the Republican "Contract with America." The role of the IRI in Romania, the importance of its training seminars, support for opposition parties, its influence on the "Contract with Romania" and the fact that it suddenly left Romania in mid-1996, are all verifiable facts. What is less sure or, better put, what I never bothered to confirm, is why the IRI left and what role Ambassador Moses had in its leaving. Rephrasing a bit, did Ambassador Moses push the IRI out of Romania in order to hurt the opposition parties and help Iliescu? I don't know.

Finally, due to then-recent press coverage of the issue, there was much ado about an American public relations firm that was said to have worked for Iliescu to promote his image inside and out of Romania. The same firm was also said to have run Yeltsin's successful reelection campaign (1996). While much of the street-talk/gossip surrounded what was considered to be the general trend of US support for former Communists (in this case, Iliescu), the thrust of the real scandal as portrayed in the press actually dealt with the accusation that Iliescu used tax money to pay the PR firm.

## KOLOZSVÁR AND NATHAN BLUHM

We were in Kolozsvár on November 2nd, the day designated for rest between the official end of the campaign and voting day. The city was exhausted from weeks of campaigning, which had ended the day we arrived. Rather than rest, politicians and their supporters were preparing for the coming day. Those who have worked in American political campaigns know what the day before election day is like. In this sense, Romania closely resembled the United States: volunteers were running to and fro, phones were ringing off the hook, etc. At the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ)<sup>11</sup>

7. Economically, these erratic changes can be taken as good indications of a poorly planned, or at least very inconsistent, monetary policy in Romania, most notably up to 1994 and then again in 1996.

8. "Romania and Bulgaria: Those south-eastern laggards," *The Economist*, 19 October 1996, pp. 32-34.

9. "Eurasia Economic Outlook," The WEFA Group, May 1996, p.11.7.

10. The United States is widely believed to be supporting the old communists throughout the entire region, perhaps in an effort to maintain stability. The Hungarian role in this case was seen as Hungary's reformed communists helping out Romania's reformed communists.

11. The RMDSZ is the Magyar party in the Romanian Parliament. I use the abbreviation RMDSZ because that is the abbreviation for the name in Hungarian, *Romániai Magyar Demokratikus Szövetség*. For further reference, the most common abbreviations in English appear to be: RMDSZ, UDHR, and DAHR. These are the abbreviations for the name in Hungarian, Romanian and English respectively.



*Szabolcs Nagy (left), a young Magyar-Romanian student and Jenő Mátis (right)*

office they were assigning poll watchers and finishing up other last-minute details.

In this quiet before the election storm, I managed to hunt down the United States Information Office (USIO) Director, Nathan Bluhm, for a short talk. For weeks he had ignored my requests for a meeting despite the fact that I had faxed, e-mailed, and even had the US Embassy in Budapest send messages to him through official channels. Being stubborn, I decided to visit him anyway. As it turned out, he didn't have much time and his secretary told me that the whole office was busy "preparing for the elections." I didn't ask what the USIO did to prepare for Romanian elections, but after learning about the rumors of American tinkering in Romanian politics I was embarrassed by his statement. András responded to the secretary's comment by giving me a queer look which I tried to avoid.

At any rate, I got my brief meeting, a few photocopied maps showing the ethnic composition of the region (dating 1992) and almost no information at all. I never figured out why he refused to return my faxes. At our meeting he was noticeably deferential, but avoided answering any of my questions. The only interesting thing he had to tell me was that in the month or so since the Romanian-Hungarian Basic Treaty was signed, "the Hungarians [in Romania had] already telling [him] that things are *already improving a lot and they are treated better.*"<sup>12</sup> We left soon after, but I promised him that I would visit the next time I was in town.

## JENŐ MAKES SOME PREDICTIONS

Fortunately, Mátis Jenő had time for a drink and discussion with us that evening. Jenő is a thirty-something-

year-old RMDSZ representative whose square face reminds me of a boxer. He serves on the Budgetary Committee in the Romanian Parliament and has always been able to tell me what will happen with the Romanian economy several months in advance. Budgetary committee members tend to know such things.

On this day Jenő was exhausted, but still positive in his outlook. He had been campaigning nonstop around the clock in Kolozsvár and the neighboring area for the previous several weeks, and it showed. He was near that point of exhaustion where the body and mind are left numb, moving forward by inertia only.

Jenő is an excitable fellow, though, and to provoke him a bit I asked him his opinion of what Mr. Bluhm had said about the situation improving now that the treaty had been signed. Without a second thought, Jenő replied: "I have two words for you: *Ló Fasz* [Bull Shit]." We all laughed and Jenő changed the subject without further elaboration. He was more awake now and indirectly told me what I wanted to know: unofficially, the RMDSZ was still not pleased with the basic treaty, despite its public acquiescence.

Following Jenő's poetic remark, he went on to tell us of the campaign. Being relatively young for a representative, he spends much of his time working with students and other young supporters of the RMDSZ. He said he was surprised to find that student participation and enthusiasm for these elections was unusually high; much higher, that is, than before the local elections last Summer or the national elections of 1992. According to Jenő, there was probably twice the amount of normal support among students. Based on this and his other grassroots work during the campaign, Jenő was much more opti-

12. Emphasis added by author.

mistic than many others. "I think people are ready for change and we'll have a greater victory than the polls are predicting," he said.

The following day, the electorate met Jenő's expectation by giving a sweeping victory to the opposition parties, including a greater-than-predicted number of votes for the RMDSZ. The RMDSZ received 6.7 percent of the total votes and its presidential candidate got around six percent. Considering that Magyar-Romanians officially constitute seven percent of the Romanian population, this would constitute a 96 percent Magyar turnout for the election, high by any standard.<sup>13</sup> Jenő had been on the mark.

Unfortunately, Jenő was right about one other thing as well. When the conversation eventually turned to economics, Jenő, becoming a bit more solemn, warned us that no matter who won the elections, the government budget and inflation figures would explode immediately following the elections. The government had apparently been lying for some time about economic figures.

One of the first announcements from the new government, bent on political and economic reform, was that the government budget and the general economic situation were in worse shape than reported by the Iliescu government. So far, Jenő has never been wrong with his predictions.

## THE OTHER MINORITY

It was somehow poetically ironic to me that the day before the election, November 2nd, was also All Saint's Day, a day to remember the dead. It seemed to symbolize, or foreshadow, something about Romania that I hadn't been able to quite put my finger on.

After a long day meeting with politicians, journalists and the uncooperative Nathan Bluhm, András took us with him to the graveyard. By the time we arrived, crowds had already been gathering, milling about for hours. Daniel and I followed along like schoolboys as András explained to us the role of All Saint's Day in Transylvania.

"You see, All Saint's Day had special meaning for us during Ceasescu. Under his attempts to rewrite Romanian history and kill off Hungarian history, the number of candles on the graves, especially the graves of important figures, came to be a sign of rebellion, a gauge of popular support and memory. Everyone turned out to

put candles on the graves of Hungarian historical figures.

"It was especially important, though, to maintain your family's and community's ethnic graves. If it was noticed that some Hungarian's grave wasn't maintained and didn't have candles on it for a while, then [the authorities] would tear it down or just replace it with a Romanian one."

The sun was setting by now, but Hungarians and Romanians continued to pour into the cemetery. Some graves were lighted with few candles whereas others shone brightly with the glow of a thousand little flames. Interesting to me was the fact that many of the heroes, both Hungarian and Romanian, were honored by both ethnic nations. These tended to be cultural leaders, dissidents and those who died in the 1989 "revolution." It suggested to me that there were still strong common feelings that ignored ethnic divisions.

András placed a candle among the many already burning before the grave of Károly Kós, a famous Transylvanian folk-architect who combined Saxon, Romanian and Hungarian forms<sup>14</sup> in his unique style. He continued his explanation: "It was actually forbidden for us to make maps of the cemetery. I guess they hoped we wouldn't remember where the graves were." He stood a moment in silence and we moved on together.

"Anyway, our school teachers used to make us memorize the entire cemetery, and the places of all the famous graves. We would memorize it and then go visit the grave sites every All Saint's Day. We never needed maps." He laughed a little to himself, perhaps proud of the defiance. Indeed, from memory András knew the exact location of every important grave and the layout of the entire cemetery. "When a family couldn't afford to maintain their grave, either because they couldn't afford the maintenance fee or had no living family to regularly maintain it, the community would assign other people to maintain the grave so it wasn't lost. This way we maintained the graves of those whose family members had been gone for years. Every Hungarian grave was assigned a person to maintain it. It isn't as important anymore and already you can see several graves that haven't been kept up for years."

András showed us all the important Hungarian and Romanian graves. He never commented on Romanian customs, but it was clear that the Hungarians were not the only ones maintaining their graves. I guessed, though,

13. I am assuming, of course, that no non-Magyar Romanians voted for the RMDSZ, which is probably a safe assumption. Interestingly, the total votes for the RMDSZ party was 6.7 percent, but votes for the RMDSZ presidential candidate totaled only six percent. This strongly suggests that some Magyar-Romanians (approx. 10% of the Magyars who voted) voted for another candidate, reflecting a growing disappointment with the RMDSZ, which I noticed during my last pre-fellowship visit to Romania in Spring 1996. Then, many complained that the RMDSZ didn't work on any of the economic problems, which were increasingly more important to them than additional ethnic rights. Some openly admitted that they planned to vote for Constantinescu instead of the RMDSZ presidential candidate, György Frunda.

14. The three historically dominant nations in Transylvania.



*Meet the Gábor  
Lajos family.*



that it was probably more important to the Hungarians, as a minority, than it was for the Romanians as the majority.

The group often left unmentioned by both Hungarians and Romanians, however, is the other minority: the Gypsies, or to be politically correct, Roma. It was almost forgotten by us as well, but on the walk out, we happened to pass a grave that caught the attention of both Daniel and me.

A large crowd had gathered around one grave. All other crowds had been gathered around the graves of famous persons who András usually told us about, but

this time, he just walked by without notice. Daniel and I, however, not noticing that they were all Roma, stopped to look. Immediately, as is typical Roma custom, we were surrounded and drawn into the middle of the large Gábor Lajos family. Luckily, they were Hungarian-Roma and we could talk with them in Hungarian.

They were there all day, and probably into the night, eating and drinking in memory of their deceased family member. I didn't notice or ask whose grave it was. The men and younger relatives were dancing, the women sitting and talking, and of course bottles of liquor and baskets of food were strewn about. They offered us some slugs from their whiskey bottle, but we politely declined.



*The entire Gábor  
Lajors family, after  
gathering stray family  
members for pictures*

As soon as they noticed our cameras, they dropped their line of pursuit to get us to drink and instead sent out messengers to gather straying family members for pictures. Quickly the crowd doubled in size as brothers, sisters, fathers and grandparents pushed together so that all could be in the pictures. Daniel and I gladly shot away and promised to mail them copies after our return to Budapest. They invited us again for drinks, but we declined, wished them well and stressed that we were in a hurry.

As we walked out of the cemetery I couldn't help think that no matter who won the next-day elections, the Gábor Lajos family and others like it would still be left largely on their own. They would still be avoided by the rest,

being left out of almost any society in which they find themselves, be it Romanian, Hungarian, German, or other. Nevertheless, they would continue to forge their own path and celebrate holidays like All Saint's Day in their own way. Family and friends would gather to drink and dance as they always have. Children would be born and the old would die as they do the world over. There was something more human and basic about them and their customs, something more real than the "democratic" institutions and new politicians sprouting up in the region. No matter who was elected, the Roma would still be the other minority, the trouble makers, black sheep shunned by the rest of society.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. □



# Institute of Current World Affairs

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## ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

### Institute Fellows and their Activities

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Christopher P. Ball.** An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**William F. Foote.** Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

**John Harris.** A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John

reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Pramila Jayapal.** Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators and manager of a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

**Randi Movich.** The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

**John B. Robinson.** A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

**Teresa C. Yates.** A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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Executive Director Peter Bird Martin  
Program Administrator Gary L. Hansen  
Publications Manager Ellen Kozak

Phone: (603) 643-5548  
Fax: (603) 643-9599  
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net

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