

The Religious Factor in Symbiosis in the Hungary-Slovakia Border Region

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Introduction

This paper discusses the possible symbiosis in the border region of Hungary and Slovakia focusing on the religious factor. In particular, it deals with the role of so-called traditional churches¹ in the relationship between the two countries.

Religion in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe has become more visible in the public sphere. Churches have regained their role in everyday life such as education and welfare services. They broadcast their message using the medium of television and radio as well as publishing their own magazines. Some churches wield influence over national politics through their representatives in parliament. Political scientists even argue that religion has contributed to consolidating democracy and to (re-)establishing civil society in this region.²

1 In this article, I use this ambiguous term roughly to refer to churches that had operated with nationwide church organization before World War I.

2 Debates on the relationships between religion and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe are summarised by David Herbert, 'Christianity, Democratisation and Secularisation in Central and Eastern Europe', *Religion, State & Society* 27, 1999, 277-293. See also Zsolt Enyedi, and Joan O'Mahony, 'Churches and the Consolidation of Democratic Culture: Difference and Convergence in the Czech Republic and Hungary', *Democratization* 11-4, 2004, 171-191.

The revival of religion in this region has been analyzed in national and global contexts.³ However, there has been little discussion about its impact on the border region of neighbouring countries. After the transition of 1989, there were several occasions of mounting tensions between Hungary and Slovakia stemming largely from the historical background and linked with inner political campaigns on both sides. Churches might have the potential to bridge the antagonistic feeling of both nations by their direct channels of appealing to followers. In Hungary and Slovakia, there seems to exist sufficient condition for churches to play a vital role in building a mutual confidence. Some traditional churches have experience of grassroots activity beyond their borders. Both countries have a common historical background in the religious field. Moreover, the church elites of both countries have a lively connection with their politicians. All of these conditions make churches very promising social capital for the relationship of the two nations.

On the other hand, we cannot turn a blind eye to the negative side of the religious factor. It is generally recognised that religion is deeply connected with national identity, and religious conflict could be a cause of national conflict. Or it may even be the case that the common historical heritage of churches is a thorn injurious to future co-operation. We can remember the fact, for example, that compensation for confiscated Hungarian church property in Slovakia is not yet settled.⁴

3 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, 1994; idem, 'Religion, European Secular Identities, and European Integration', in Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds., *Religion in Expanding Europe*, 2006, 65-92; idem, 'Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective', *The Hedgehog Review*, 2006, 7-22.

4 'Mi lesz a szlovákiai református egyház elkobzott vagyonával?' Új szó online 2003. Április 16. (<http://ujsozo.com/cimkek/regio/2003/04/16/mi-lesz-a-szlovakiai-reformatus-egyhazi-elkobzott-vagyonaval>)

The Hungarian government made an agreement with the Vatican on the confiscated real property in 1997 whereby the government would pay a fixed amount to the Catholic Church every year in the future. Other churches made similar agreements with the government one after another, but former property in a foreign country is not dealt with in these agreements. Margit Balogh and Jenő Gergely, *Állam, egyházak, vallásgyakorlás Magyarországon, 1790-2005. II (1944-*

In this article, I will first compare the basic religious conditions in Hungary and Slovakia to point out the potential of churches to influence societies in both countries. Second, the situation of national and religious minorities in Slovakia will be surveyed. The trial of building a mutual confidence will be superficial and vulnerable if the churches of both countries ignore consideration of them. I claim that their situation could be the cornerstone to assessing the possibility and limits of churches as social capital for future cooperation.

I. Why does religion matter?

It is widely recognised that an increasing majority of the European population ceased participating in religious practices on a regular basis. The modernisation of society reduces the significance of churches by disorganising traditional community. Secularisation is not just a diagnosis, but became a cause of the liberal camp, who argue that religion should be withdrawn from public space. The privatisation of religion is a favourable option in modern society, because, as they say, religion is essentially not rational. Moreover, religion in public space comes into conflict with the principle of separation between state and church, or even with the principle of freedom of faith.

Against this secularisation theory, others claim that religion still matters in European society, or is returning to being a major issue in the process of globalisation and EU expansion. José Casanova pointed out that traditional churches revitalised all around the world in the 1980s.⁵ Churches started actively taking part in public space, reaching the stage of political disputes. He named this situation ‘de-privatisation of religion’, and claimed to measure the merits and demerits of this ‘public religion’. He argues that in many places churches have joined together with states, political societies, and civil societies, and appreciates the integrative function of churches especially when they work with civil society. He considers that churches could mobilise people into public discussion,

2005), Budapest, 2005, 1298-1330.

⁵ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 3-6. For a theoretical discussion about secularisation, see especially chapters 1 and 2.

without being restricted by the national and state framework.

In Eastern and East-Central Europe, religion has a rather different context. Because the communist regime had taken repressive measures against churches to various degrees, restoring honour and compensation for churches became one of the key social issues after 1989. At the same time, how churches could play a role in the democratic transition was discussed. After the long difficult years of suppression, churches have been struggling to find a new role in the democratic regime.⁶

Another specific historical condition of this region is the gap between the state border and the ethnic border. Because historical churches have grown in the old state framework and some ethnic groups nourished their identity by religious belonging, the change of borders after two world wars resulted in a tangled situation.⁷ In many places, the new state border divided the church hierarchy, and churches had to reorganise themselves according to the new border. The demand for an appropriate church structure for religious minorities is still desultorily raised. When we consider the future role of the churches in this region, we should take into account this regional context, as well as the general European context.

II. Common background to ‘traditional churches’

Church-State relationship

There seems to exist a favourable condition for ‘traditional churches’ in Hungary and Slovakia to promote their social activities. Both the legal framework of church-state relations and people’s loyalty toward the churches allow the churches a considerable scope.

The parliaments of both countries passed a comprehensive amendment of the law on religion in the last decade. In Hungary, the law named ‘On the freedom of conscience and religion as well as the legal status of churches, religious denominations and associations’ passed parliament in

6 Michaela Moravčikova, ‘Slovak-Hungarian relations, Catholicism and Christian democracy’, *Politics and Religion* 2, 2007, 5-26.

7 For the case of Hungary after World War I, see László Sebők, ‘A katolikus egyházszerkezet változásai Trianon óta’ *Regio* 2, 1991, 65-88.

2011 and came into effect on 1st January, 2012.⁸ This law aroused controversy, mainly because it introduced a new system of church registration.

The law prescribes the filling of public roles such as the teaching of religion in public schools, and because they get financial support from the state budget, churches have to be registered. They need to be authorized by parliament, not by the courts as was the rule before. According to the new rule, churches have to collect at least 1,000 signatures of citizens, which is ten times as many as the previous prescription. In addition, the registration requires more than twenty years' activity with formal organisation in Hungary, or 100 years' activity in the world.

It is said in the liberalist camp that this change could be against the freedom of religion, because it endangers the existence of small churches and religious communities. After this amendment, the Hungarian parliament registered twenty-seven churches until the end of 2012.

Slovakian law, which was also amended in 2007, is definitely at the opposite end of the scale.⁹ In Slovakia, churches needed at least 20,000 members to register, which is twenty times more than in Hungary. Based on this prescription, there are eighteen churches registered in Slovakia.

The division between registered and unregistered churches is decisive when we talk about church-state relations, because only registered churches are expected to play a public role in both countries. Hungarian law says that 'churches and religious community are very important social element, which possesses high values and integrates society'. It clearly says that 'churches and religious communities are expected to play a role in various social dimensions, such as education, health care, and protecting family, children, and the young generation. Churches are expected to encourage culture and national consciousness and to protect the environment', etc. It is interesting for our discussion that it also says that 'Hungary values and supports the churches' activities, which play a crucial role in the life of the Hungarian community abroad'.

8 Act Nr. 206/2001.(a lelkiismereti és vallásszabadság jogáról, valamint az egyházak, vallásfelekezetek és vallási közösségek jogállásáról)

9 Act Nr. 201/2007. See Michaela Moravčíková, 'Religion, Law, and Secular Principles in the Slovak Republic', in Javier Martínez Torrón and Cole W Durham, eds., *Religion and the Secular State. National Reports/La religion et l'État laïque: Rapports nationaux*, Washington, 2010, 615-628.

Popular religiosity

According to the national census and other statistical research, peoples of both countries show rather high loyalty toward churches.

Slovakia is well known as one of the most ‘religious countries’ in the EU, and the traditional churches are keeping a strong hold. The result of the national census conducted in 2001 shows that quite a large number of the population declared themselves to belong to a traditional church, such as the Catholic, the Evangelical, or the Reformed Christian Church. Catholic dominance, which amounted to 62%, is especially apparent (see table 1).

Table 1: Population by religion, Slovakia 2011

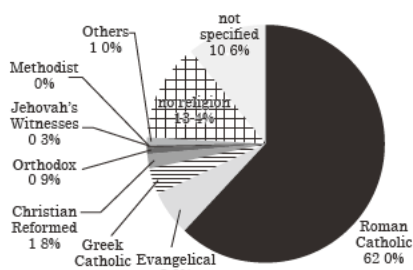
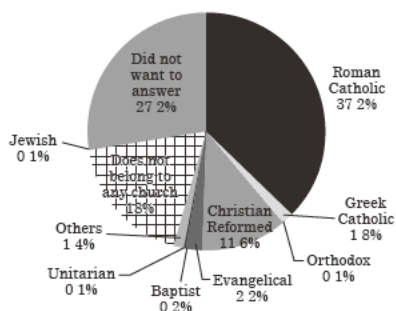


Table 2: Population by religion, Hungary 2011



Source: Statistical office of the Slovak Republic, 2011 Population and Housing Census (<http://portal.statistics.sk/files/table-14.pdf>); Hungarian Central Statistical office, Population Census in 2011 (http://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/tablak_demografia).

We can observe a similar situation in Hungary, where Catholic dominance is threatened by the Christian Reformed Church, but still amounts to 37% of the population (see table 2). Comparing the two countries, it is also noticeable that the Slovakian population is characterised by a relatively large number of Evangelicals. In both countries, less than 20% of the population answered that they did not belong to any church.

This statistic result does not straightforwardly mean that people in these countries are religious. However, certain research results drawn by some sociologist groups seem to support the high ratio of ‘religious per-

sons’ in these countries. According to the survey conducted by the ‘European Values Study’ in 2008, for example, Slovakia proved to be one of the most religious countries in the EU.¹⁰ For the question, ‘Are you a religious person?’, 84% of them gave an affirmative answer. High religious commitment is also indicated in answers to the question, ‘How often do you attend religious services?’. About 40% answered that they go to church at least once a week, and almost 50% attend a religious service once a month.

Table 3: Are you a religious person?

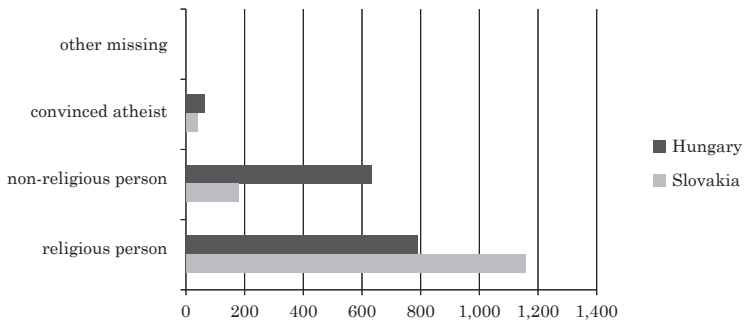
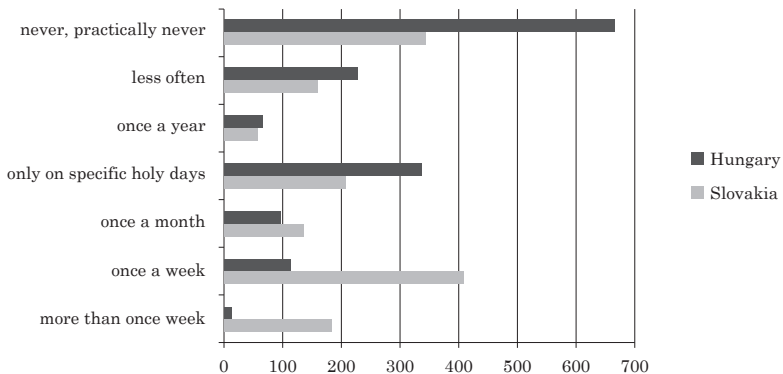


Table 4: How often attend religious services?



10 The result shows that the percentage of ‘religious persons’ in Slovakia is surpassed only by Cyprus, Poland, Greece, and Italy. See <http://zocat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp?object=http://zocat.gesis.org/obj/fCatalog/Catalog5>.

The Hungarian figure is much more moderate. ‘Religious persons’ amount to 53.5%, which is just a little larger than ‘non-religious persons’ (42.7%). Only 8.4% of people answered that they go to church at least once a week. This reaches 14.6% even when we include people who attend once a month. But this number is still high compared to western neighbouring countries, such as the Czech Republic, Austria, and Germany, where non-religious persons account for a large majority.

In both countries, there are good conditions for churches to have an impact on society, and the ‘traditional churches’ especially seem to have potential to be useful social capital for cross-border civil activity. Nevertheless, there still exists in the religious field a factor of instability in nourishing mutual confidence and activating co-operation at the local level.

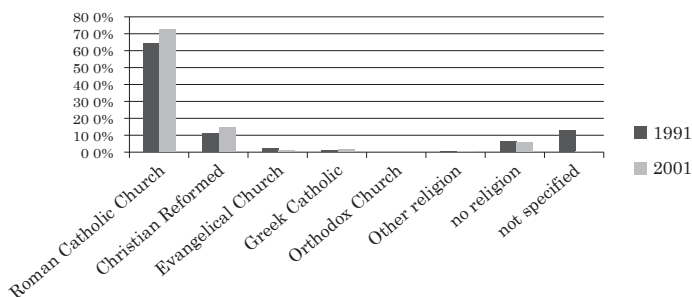
III. Religion among the Hungarian minority: Flashpoint or mediator?

The Hungarian minority in Slovakia is one of the key elements in stimulating cross-border regional co-operation considering their large proportion, geographical position, and political influence. We could expect from the fact seen above that the churches could play a role in this activity.

The Slovakian national census shows that the majority of the population declared themselves to belong to one of the ‘traditional churches’. This tendency is also true for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia with a little deviation (see Table 5).¹¹ Looking into the details, Catholicism is also dominant among the Hungarian minority (72.8%); however, the proportion of Reformed Church followers is considerably high (11.4%). Evangelicals and Greek Catholics follow them but their number is smaller by far (1.5%-1.6%).

¹¹ László Gyurgyík, *Magyar mérleg. A szlovákiai magyarság a népszámlalási és a népmozgalmi adatok tükrében*, Bratislava, 1994, 121-122; idem, *Népszámlálás 2001. A szlovákiai magyarság demográfiai, valamint település- és társadalomszerkezetének változásai az 1990-es években*, Bratislava, 2006, 72-78, 144-146.

Table 5: Religious belonging of Hungarian minority



		RomanCatholic		Evangelical		GreekCatholic		ChristianReformed		Orthodox	
		Hungarian	Slovakian	Hungarian	Slovakian	Hungarian	Slovakian	Hungarian	Slovakian	Hungarian	Slovakian
1991	Total	3,187,383		326,397		178,733		82,545		34,376	
	breakdown	368,416	2,745,502	12,310	310,749	6,764	156,886	64,533	17,522	135	22,365
	%	11,6	86,1	3,8	95,2	3,8	87,8	78,2	21,3	0,4	65,1
2001	Total	3,708,120		372,858		219,831		109,735		50,363	
	breakdown	378,700	3,224,093	7,963	360,716	8,086	188,522	80,582	27,970	86	31,607
	%	10,2	86,9	2,1	96,7	3,7	85,8	73,4	25,5	0,2	62,8
2011	Total	3,347,277		316,250		206,871		98,797		49,133	

Source : Gyurgyik, 2001; 2006; Statistical office of the Slovak Republic, 2011 census.

The divergence in the breakdown of the Hungarian minority from the national census causes an interesting reverse phenomenon. In the Slovakian Reformed Church, Slovakian followers make a small minority (25.5%). People who declared themselves as Hungarian and also Lutheran are fewer than 5%, which puts them in a totally minority position.

Another research project conducted by the National Youth Research Institute in Hungary gives supporting results.¹² It investigates the identity of Hungarian youth (aged fifteen to twenty-nine) beyond the border in 2001, and among other things, reveals their sense of belonging toward the churches. The result shows that the majority of Hungarians living in

12 Zsuzsanna Mészárosné Lampl, Károly Tóth, *Mozaik 2001 gyorsjelentés. Felvidék*, Budapest, 2001, 45-90; Zsuzsanna Lampl, 'A dél-szlovákiai magyar és szlovák fiatalok vallásossága', *Fórum. Társadalomtudományi Szemle* 7-2, 2005, 85-99.

Slovakia have a sense of belonging toward one of the traditional churches, and the rate is higher than for Slovaks in the same region (74.6% to 68.6%). The proportion of those belonging to the Catholic Church is somewhat smaller (56.3%) and those belonging to the Reformed Church is larger (15.7%) than the result of the national census, but Catholic dominance is obvious in the young generation, too.

This research also hints at the attitude of young Hungarians toward the churches. For the question, 'Are you religious?', more than 80% of both Catholic and Reformed Church followers answered, 'Yes', but for the further question, 'How are you religious?', more than 60% of them answered, 'Religious in my own way'. Only 25% of the Catholic Church and 16% of the Reformed Church followers answered that they 'follow the teachings of the church'. As Lampl Zsuzsanna, the Slovakian researcher of this project, pointed out, it suggests that although Hungarians in this region have a relatively strong feeling of religious belonging, it does not directly mean that they are very obedient to the Church authority.

Catholic and Reformed minorities

This disproportionate ethnic composition of each denomination creates some difficulties in churches. It is well known that religious services in the people's own language have been one of the most important requirements after the Reformation; therefore, most of the problems of minorities are related to this point.

The current situation and requirements of the Catholic Hungarian minority are summarised in a document made by a Catholic civic group.¹³ On 6th May, 2001 when the Slovakian archbishop of Trnava visited Komárno for Slovakian-Hungarian joint worship, the Jópásztor Társulat (Good Shepherd Association) read a 'memorandum'. It listed the difficulties they are facing as follows;

13 'Memorandum a szlovákiai magyar katolikus közösség helyzetéről, problémáiról és ezek megoldási lehetőségeiről', *Egyházforum* 2001/6, 33-34. (<http://www.hunsor.se/dosszie/aszlovmagykatolikuskozosseghelyzeterol.pdf>). See also József Menyhárt, 'Katolikus nyelvpolitika Szlovákiában', in Gizella Szabómihály and István Lanstyák, eds., *Magyarok Szlovákiában* vol. 7 (Nyelv), Šamorín, 2011, 27-37.

1. Lack of prelacy and clerics: The Hungarian Catholic minority live in 250 parishes, but one-third of them do not have a priest, and another third have a pensioner or a priest whose mother tongue is not Hungarian. The shortage of priests can be improved only when Hungarian-speaking bishops consider, sincerely and effectively, this problem.
2. Drain of young clerics: Most young Hungarian-speaking priest trainees study in Hungary, but they do not come back to Slovakia.
3. Institutional and organisational problems: There is no postgraduate course for priests. Although religious education at school is allowed, teachers learned in Hungarian theological training course are not qualified for teaching. The number of catholic Hungarian school is very little. All these problems are linked together and make their unclear future.

In conclusion, the following six requests are enumerated:

1. There should be a member in the Slovakian Episcopacy whose mother tongue is Hungarian, who has the confidence of the Hungarian Catholic followers in Slovakia and the competence to solve their problems or to co-ordinate the Slovakian Episcopacy with Hungarian priests in Slovakia.
2. There should be a Hungarian vicarious bishop, who takes responsibility for caring for the Hungarian Catholics living in the Catholic Archdiocese of Košice and the Diocese of Rožňava.
3. When a new diocese is established, the Holy See should not split the Hungarian minority living in concentration.
4. The Slovakian Episcopacy should set up a Hungarian section as an independent committee for the effective administration.
5. In the course of pastoral training, there should be the possibility for Hungarian students to learn theology in their mother tongue through an appropriate system.
6. Church and state might solve the problem of teacher training of Hungarian theology and properly appreciate its status.

To ensure an appropriate number of priests who speak the mother tongue is the main purpose, and for this sake, reform of the pastoral training

system and hierarchical construction is required.

Their anxiety increased when the Slovakian Bishops' Conference released a plan for restructuring the diocese's districts. Hungarian Catholics living in a cluster in southwest Slovakian Bratislava-Trnava Archdiocese are split into four dioceses (Bratislava, Trnava, Nitra, and Banská Bystrica), and none of the top of the newly established dioceses appointed a bishop from the Hungarian minority. The Catholic Hungarian Civil Association (Pázmaneum Polgári Társulás, a Mécés László Társulás and a Jópásztor Alapítvány) released in an open letter opposition to this decision in vain, and this reform was implemented on 14th February, 2008.¹⁴



Roman Catholic dioceses before 14th Feb., 2008.



Roman Catholic dioceses today.

(Source: <http://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/cirkevne-provincie.>)

14 József Menyhárt, 'Katolikus nyelvpolitika Szlovákiában', 34-35.

The Reformed Church, on the other hand, is equipped with a sufficient recruiting system of ministers for the Hungarian minority. They have their own academy for recruiting priests and a higher theological training system in Komárno at the Reformed Theological Faculty of Selye János University. To become a minister in Slovakia, applicants have to take an oral and written exam held in Hungary every year, which is closely connected with the University's education system.¹⁵

In the case of the Reformed Church, the problem is maintaining the rights of the Slovakian 'minority'. This does not seem as crucial for Hungarian Catholics, because they have a dean and deputy bishop whose mother tongue is Slovakian, and Hungarian-speaking ministers usually speak Slovakian as well. But the latent element of dispute became prominent when the Reformed Church in Hungary took the initiative of establishing an organisation embracing the region of the former Kingdom of Hungary.

When the general convent of Hungarian Reformed Church invited church delegates from neighbouring countries for discussing the draft of common 'Church Constitution' at 23rd May, 2009, all but the Slovakian delegates signed the agreement and joined the initiative. The Slovakian Reformed Church faced the delicate problem of balancing between its Hungarian and Slovakian followers, and even among the Slovaks, the community was divided.¹⁶ The Slovakian Reformed Church finally joined the Hungarian Reformed Church on 21st July, 2011, but on the condition that two Slovakian-speaking church districts keep the same rights and privileges as they had had in the past.

Conclusion

Traditional churches in both countries maintain their influence in society and are expected to play a social role. They even have the potential to buffer political tensions independent of the changing political situation.

¹⁵ The date of examination for qualifying as minister is set the day after announcement of the final exam result by the Theological Faculty of Selye János University. *Hatályos egyházi jogszabályok hivatalos gyűjteménye (Hatály 2012. Jan.1.)*, 142-143.

¹⁶ *Reformátusok Lapja*, Február 12, 2012, 7p.

Although nationalised in modern times, churches have a tendency to solidarity beyond the national border. It seems that churches are a promising infrastructure for facilitating dialogue and communication.

The Catholic Church, for example, makes efforts step by step. It seems that church leadership is taking a good initiative. In June 2006, a historical liturgy took place at Esztergom Basilica, which both the members of the Hungarian and the Slovakian Bishops' Conference attended. On this occasion, bishops of the two countries exchanged letters expressing the will to settle conflicts and boost mutual understanding.¹⁷ In one letter, a Hungarian bishop asked the Slovakian Catholic community and Slovakian nation for forgiveness for historical acts.

With great regret, we remember that Hungarians hurt Slovaks or Slovakian communities. ... Our nation also suffered personal and societal wounds, but before God's face, we renew feelings of respect and reconciliation, feelings of forgiving love. We forgive, and ask for forgiveness.

Similar initiatives were taken between Germany and France, and Poland and Germany after World War II, and recently, between the Czech Republic and Austria in 2000. Although this event itself did not have a big impact in either country, it opened a series of dialogues. Based on the statement signed then, a regular meeting called the 'Hungarian-Slovakian Cultural Event' has been held at the Catholic University in Košice. Two years later, members of the Catholic Church in both countries took a common pilgrimage on the initiative of the Franciscans. This event has been held regularly once a year since then, and it also creates an opportunity for dialogue.

The Catholic leadership also opened an opportunity for dialogue by publishing periodicals. In Esztergom, where the Hungarian Catholic Archdiocese is situated and which is also close to the Danube River border with Slovakia, the journal named *Magyar Sion* started publication in 2007. In the foreword of the first edition, Hungarian archbishop, Erdő

¹⁷ János Székely, Ján Orosch, 'A 2006-os Magyar-szlovák történelmi kiengesztelődés folytatódik. Nehézségek és a remény jelei', *Magyar Sion, új folyam* 3-1, 2009, 3-15.

Péter, wrote that this magazine is for all readers of the Carpathian Basin. Two Slovaks have taken part in the editorial board, and the content of the journal has been translated into both languages. This kind of permanent opportunity to converse by the heads of churches could help to solve the difficulties of religious minorities in churches. In regions where national and religious identity is interwoven beyond the state border, circumspect consideration for minority rights is required.

