

The “evaporation” of Romanian citizens towards Western Europe, with the secret help of Hungary, between 1985-1989

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Abstract: *The “evaporation” of Romanian citizens towards Western Europe, with the secret help of Hungary, between 1985-1989.* The Document edited and published here it was a secret one. It comes out from the communist archives of Hungary and deal with the problem of the emigrants that enter from East in Hungary in the last years of the communist regime. It is an illustrative piece in which secretly and silently the communist authorities of Hungary understand to lease the persons who wants to travel in west to exit from Hungary without any control. It was not only an expression of the tensions between Romania and Hungary in those years, but also a rehearsal for what was happened with the East German citizens who passed over Hungary to the West in 1989. The authenticity of the act is proved also by the oral and written testimony of one of the travellers which pass over Hungary in Austria in 1985.

Key words: End of Communism, border regime, Romanian-Hungarian tensions, emigration from East to West in late 80s.

Rezumat: *“Evaporarea” cetățenilor români spre Europa de Vest, cu sprijinul secret al Ungariei, între 1985-1989.* Documentul editat și publicat aici este unul relevant pentru felul în care Ungaria a înțeles să trateze problema emigranților din spațiul estic, cu precădere pe cei din România, în ultimii ani ai regimului comunist. Documentul secret emis de structurile de frontieră din Ungaria în 1985 ilustrează schimbarea de

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atitudine a structurilor oficiale maghiare care, tacit, au permis, trecerea înspre vest a multor cetățeni originari din România. A fost nu doar expresia tensiunilor existente între cele două state, ci și o repetiție pentru ceea ce s-a petrecut în 1989 cu est germanii care prin Ungaria au ajuns în vest. Autenticitatea documentului este întărită de mărturia orală și scrisă a unui asemenea *călător din România*, care a traversat granița dintre Ungaria și Austria în 1985.

Cuvinte cheie: Sfârșitul regimului comunist, regimul frontierei, tensiuni româno-maghiare, emigrarea din est în vest la sfârșitul anilor 80.

In December 2019 we celebrated thirty years from the fall of the Romanian communist regime. The break that occurred then was part of an irreversible process, given that through Eastern Europe for months, even years there was a wind of change. Romanian communist authorities were incapable of noticing it or accepting it.

If this was the path taken by Romanian authorities, its neighbours took a different route. The document we are analyzing here, issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with the highest level of secrecy is highly relevant. It was issued in regard to applicable procedures for Romanian citizens of Hungarian descent who transited Hungary on their way to the West. Based on these instructions, around four years before the fall of the Iron Curtain, Romanian citizens crossing into Hungary and presenting themselves at a BCCP (Border Crossing Check-Point), Hungarian border guards secretly, and breaking conventions between the two states, simply let them pass onwards.

As it is a well-known fact, in the 80s, Romanian-Hungarian relations constantly declined, according to Horn Gyula², the former minister of Foreign affairs, ultimately reaching a minimum. The two countries developed in totally different directions and their bosses met very rarely, except for the conferences of the Warsaw Pact. Meanwhile, in Romania, where the standard of living was continuously declining, the regime imposed a series of restrictions, the systematization of villages programs was also put into motion, and Romanian nationalism was consolidated, mainly against the Hungarian minority.

In Hungarian public and political circles, protesting increased regarding the harshening situation of Hungarians living in Romania, something which did not go unnoticed by public opinion and politicians in Hungary.

² Informative note from Horn Gyula for the Political Committee and Central Committee for Romanian-Hungarian relations. Informative reports of the CC of the MSzMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party). Archives from 1980-1989.

On the other hand, in historiography there were emphasized other evolution that affected the relations between these countries. The progressive deterioration of Hungarian-Romanian relations was noted in documents and interpreted as such by Hungarian authorities:

- "Breaking the respective conventions, Romania is conducting an intensive operative information activity in Hungary. To neutralize it, the competent bodies of the MIA must make an evaluation report on Romanian activities that are contrary to the security of the state, this includes the network of relations of the embassy and information gathering activities in Hungary"³.
- "*The systematization of villages*" impacting mainly villages populated by Hungarian ethnics;
- Between 1986-1987 in cities in Ardeal, the majority of Hungarian street names were replaced with Romanian ones;
- In Romania "*during the first trimester of 1985 in Cluj, Târgu Mures, and Timisoara, regional radio posts in the language of minorities ceased their activities, editorial boards were disbanded, and nearly 600 employees dismissed. The Hungarian language show on Romanian Television had the same fate. Starting with 1986, the exhibits of museums in Ardeal were taken to Bucharest*"⁴.
- In Romania, the circulation of books in Hungarian decreased.
- Hungarian tourists are undergoing more severe customs controls. These were first felt in 1984 when between April and 31 December, 2790 Hungarian citizens were turned from the Romanian border because they had with them certain publications, books, etc., considered forbidden. The percentage remained the same the following year, when in the first five months of 1985 1,500 citizens were stopped⁵.
- In the aforementioned period, the number of expats and those living in Hungary increased constantly⁶.
- "*The MSzMP leadership considered that the situation of the Hungarian minority in Romanian was dire, but it does not believe that intensifying its pressure on the Romanian Party will give results*"⁷.

³ MOL M-KS (National Archives of Hungary HSWP: Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party; 288. f. 5/1035.

⁴ Révész Béla, *From the history-problem of the relationship between Hungary and Romania in the 1980s*.

⁵ Földes György, *Hungary, Romania and the national problem 1956-1989*, (Budapest: Napvilág Publishing, 2007), p. 354.

⁶ *Ibidem*: in 1983: 540 people; 1984: 887 people; 1985: 1,166 people.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 301.

Given that context, it is not surprisingly that there, in the archives was a single copy of this top secret and essential circular. In essence, starting from 15 July 1985, the attitude of the Hungarian authorities was different in the application of special procedures regarding certain Romanian citizens which want to leave Hungary and go to Austria. This document is significant for the quiet change in the attitude of Hungarian authorities. It was probably the first sign of the coming age. One was that at the respective moment focused only on Romanian citizens, but which later, on 11 September 1989, was applied to all other East European citizens. For over four years many Romanian citizens left for the West using this loophole. This was a good rehearsal for tens of thousands of GDR citizens crossing the border towards Austria, under the impassive gaze of Hungarian border guards in the autumn of 1989⁸. The Romanian model worked.

Actually, based on these indications, Romanian citizens legally crossing into Hungary with a valid passport, with the intention of travelling further through the BCCP at Ferihegy, Budapest or in the South-West of the country, after registering of their personal information, were allowed to leave Hungary, despite having only a visa for entering this country. This was known only by the commander of the Border passing point BCCP, his adjuncts, and the chief of the information section. The rest of the members, all other clerks, and guards, knew only that this was requested for their activities. Of course, to all of them a total discretion was imposed and they strictly keep the secret. It was forbidden to stamp the passport, and the exit was to be done discretely, without any trace so as not to attract attention.

Personal information of the Romanian citizens was noted in a separate record book, then secretly sent to the chief of the information section, who then would archive them.

All these were not applied to Romanian citizens trying to illegally cross the border. They were still returned to Romanian authorities.

According to Hungarian estimates, around 3,500 Romanian citizens left East Europe in this way, starting a new life in the West. Although the circular referred to certain Romanian citizens, which according to verbal instructions meant Hungarians from Ardeal, similar to the manner in which Saxons were allowed to leave, but it also included

⁸ Sallai János, *Amprenta unei epoci apuse - Abdruck einer versunkenen Epoche - An impression of a bygone era: Poestea cortinei de fier - Geschichte des Eisernen Vorhangs - The History of the Iron Curtain*, (Budapest: Hanns Seidel Foundation, 2012).

Romanians who did not speak Hungarian. However, the majority was made up of Hungarians living in Ardeal.

The document was so secret (consciously contravening on valid conventions between states), that authorities relied on it remaining this way forever, its existence being masked even in regard to its registration number. It is evident that at the beginning of the registration number the authorities added another zero, in case the secrecy of other circulars would ever be revoked, thus its unique existence would not be noticed.

Of course, after some time Romanian authorities noticed something was amiss, and agents of the Securitate left Romania in this manner, even more, they returned home to report this. At a diplomatic and political level, these evolutions did not have any serious consequences, even if Romania increased the security of its border with Hungary, and the relations between the two countries, already bad, continued to worsen.

A few significant examples are: strengthening of Romanian anti-Hungarian propaganda; increasing the rhythm of systematization; specific for this period was the *en-masse* creation of villages forcing the Romanian-Hungarian border exclusively on the Romanian side

On a yearly basis, the number of Romanians and Hungarians crossing the illegal border increased in leaps. While in 1987 it had not yet reached one thousand, in 1988 there were 7,182, while in 1989 it had reached 19,006 people illegally crossing the Romanian-Hungarian border⁹.

- The conflict extended to a military level as well, something mentioned by the minister of National Defence of the Németh government: *"Together with my collaborators we have reached the conclusion that the Ceausescu clan – in order to maintain its grip on the power – might venture, through hazardous initiatives, and not excluding brutal action, against Hungary"*¹⁰.
- *"the Romanian-Hungarian border, tourists are made to get naked, even the newspaper Népszabadság is being confiscated. No such thing is happening at the border of any other neighbouring country"*¹¹.
- Increased border security on the Romanian side.

⁹ Nagy József, *Dezvoltarea locației teritoriale, a activităților, a organizării și a numărului de polițiști de frontieră din 1958 până în 1998*, (Budapest: Doctoral Dissertation, 2000), p. 211.

¹⁰ Kárpáti Ferenc, *Revoluția română și Ungaria, 1989. Memoriile unui fost ministru. Un caz. 2000*, p 4.

¹¹ Révész Béla, *From the history-problem...*

How does such a border crossing occur? The co-author of these lines, Paul Horváth, made it in 1985 from Romania to Austria. This is his short story:

On 1 August 1985, I entered Hungary from Romania in my Trabant. I was with my mother, who was widowed at a young age. Neither of us could stay in Romania, after my father, we were in the eyesight of the Securitate.

At home we heard, about two weeks ago, that two couples, whom we knew, had managed to cross from Hungary into Austria, but no one knew exactly how. We started on our way with the firm intention, if we could, to never return.

For two weeks, in Budapest and nearby, we sought various opportunities, I tried talking with connections living abroad, but I could not get any concrete information about how we could run. The simple visa on our passport would allow for our access into Hungary-Czechoslovakia-GDR-Poland.

Lacking any other information, in the evening of 15 August 1985, after passing through Mosonmagyaróvár, we instinctively veered left towards Austria. At about five-six hundred meters from the Hegyeshalom BCCP, the soldier at the border, seeing that we had a Romanian registration plate, signaled me to pull over and asked: What are we doing there? We got lost, we wanted to go to Bratislava and ended up here by mistake." "You have to turn back here, towards Rajka, there."

"If we are already here, can we just visit Vienna by night?" "Aha, so you want to cross into Austria?" "Yes, if we are already here, we would like to visit Vienna, then we would come back to Bratislava and go on to the GDR."

In the guard house, the phone rang. "Comrade lieutenant, reporting, nothing unusual. Actually, there are two Romanians here, they got lost, they were going to Bratislava, and they are asking if they can cross into Austria... Yes, yes, family, better say mother and son... Yes, speak Hungarian..., Yes, I will tell them..."

After that he came turning back to me: it's all right, lets go to the BCCP. "Who should be asking for there?", "They're waiting for you."

We were shown to the diplomatic lane and two controllers appeared, one left with our papers, the other stood by our side: where to?" "Well, you see, we wanted to go to Bratislava, and we got lost, so we thought, since we're already here, we could visit Vienna and then go to Bratislava..." "Young man, tell me the final destination?" "Bratislava, and then the GDR, and afterwards we thought we could return home through Poland..." "Young man, look into my eyes: the final destination of your trip?"

I did not dare open my mouth.

"As it happens, wouldn't it happen to be Germany? FRG?" "Look, sir, you know very well that if you let us leave now, of course that is where we will go to West Germany" "Very well, that is what I will be saying, a few minutes and you can leave."

I do not think there is any need to talk about the emotions and our state of mind...

Meanwhile, he was looking at my newly tuned Trabant, which I had greatly improved: "What is this button for? And this flap?" He also owned a Trabant.

"Sir, can we really cross?" "Yes, stay calm today, we already allowed another Hungarian family from Ardeal to cross. Everything will be fine." "Sir, give me your name and address, so I can send you my Trabant as a gift."

His answer shocked me: "No, young man, look at my face, forget you ever saw me, forget even that you passed through here, anyway there will not trace in your passport, and you will need the trabant, especially at first."

All of this took about ten minutes, a time in which several border guards passed us, they saw the Romanian registration plate and knew exactly what was happening. They would smile to us and encourage us: "Where to abroad, abroad?" "Best of luck in your new life!" We got back our passports, there was no stamp, not a single sign as if we had crossed through there. The barrier was lifted and we left Hungary for Austria.

For us everything was so unbelievable and we were shocked. Darkness, heavy traffic, small Trabant, trembling knees, that is, how we got into a car crash forty kilometers after crossing on Austrian territory. Due to our injuries, no

way of travelling further, so this is how we ended up in Austria, which to think about I am thankful for.

In the next four and a half years, until the fall of the regime in 1989, I helped with the similar “evaporation” of tens of people. Most of them were Hungarians from Ardeal, but some were also Saxons who could speak Hungarian and Romanians who could not. Hungarians leaving Ardeal already in Hungary, I would instruct on the telephone, on what day and at which BCCP they should go and what to say, how to behave, and what to expect. Very often I would wait for them there and tell them what steps to take next. There were cases when my Austrian connections with travelling rights went to bring them to their cars. Those that I helped, all made it across, I don’t know of any failed attempts.

Now, after thirty years, as an amateur historian and researcher, lucidly and leaving aside sentiments, I have to say the following:

The “evaporation” of Romanian citizens was a top-secret operation and exceptionally organized at a central level, known by all those involved, each knowing exactly as much as they were required. Border guards, soldiers, they all knew what was happening, conscious of the importance of the operation and respecting the conspiracy. Over the extent of my research, I talked to many border guards, **but none had ever seen any written order, they only followed verbal orders.** The importance and the conspiratorial character of the procedures got engrained in their conscience, even today almost none want to talk about this subject.

An adjunct commander of a BCCP at the Austro-Hungarian border, who himself had never seen any written order, got an explanation, which he then communicated to his subalterns, that the passport of Romanian citizens is valid for all countries, as that of tourists from any other country. On all pages it was written “this passport is valid for all of the world’s countries”. This admission is a convention between states according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There was, however, in the Romanian passport a small loophole (simple visa) where the countries the citizen was allowed to visit were written. The ministers of internal affairs of member countries of the Warsaw Pact convened that this loophole should reciprocally be taken into consideration at the border. However, this internal affair was not a of external affairs, and the

Ministry of Internal Affairs of Hungary did not agree to abide by it when it came to Romanian citizens.

Later, the mass exodus of Romanian citizens with the help of Hungary took large proportions. In 1989, Hungary joined the Geneva Convention, officially becoming a country that could receive refugees. Increasingly Romanian citizens (mostly ethnic Hungarians) requested the right to stay or help to cross into Western countries.

There were some interesting cases. Possibly the most absurd was that on 29 July 1988, when a man from Miercurea Ciuc requested to be allowed to stay in Hungary at the Moscow embassy. In this special case, for his travel and settlement in Hungary, the Soviet authorities had to give their consent, which did not happen. Moscow did not want to get involved in the Romanian-Hungarian conflict, but also, they did not report the case to Romanian authorities¹².

The most complicated situation was at the Hungarian embassy in Sofia, where on 24 September 1988, three families (seven adults and five children) requested the right to stay in Hungary. The case is relevant because the Western press covered it even more, they insisted on Bulgarian authorities to respect the international conventions between states. They requested that tourists be allowed to go back to Romania and officially request the right to live in Hungary, as the Romanian government was willing to quickly negotiate the case. Of course, the refugees refused to return home and in October 1988 requested that Hungary, through the International and Hungarian Red Cross, solve the issue. The case was the subject of diplomatic and high political discussion. The extent of the subject is very well illustrated in the Hungarian press, and prime minister Németh Miklós did not want to discuss about the date of the Hungarian-Bulgarian summit until the matter was solved. Due to political pressure, Bulgaria eventually agreed to let the refugees travel to a neutral country. Thus, on 17 February 1989, under the shadow of well-planned secrecy, they left Bulgaria on a plane for Vienna¹³.

A Hungarian border guard – then working on trains – recounts in his memoirs an event on the Budapest-Vienna train, when he allowed a lady from Ardeal pass through, after refusing a hefty bribe from her. He instructed her to stay in the compartment and later told his Austrian colleagues: *Diese ist gut!* (This one is good). Of course, the Austrian

¹² Révész Béla, *From the history-problem...*

¹³ Révész Béla, *From the history-problem...*

border guards also knew what was happening, Romanian citizens were not legally allowed at the moment to receive an Austrian visa.

We posted questions on this subject on a Facebook group created by former border guards. We were mainly interested in the social angle and the emotional side of the cases, what the border guards felt, as they were the one influencing the destinies. Here is a selection of their replies:

I only know that in 1989 those coming from Romania were not sent back! A young man, half Romanian, half Hungarian, we caught two times! We never harmed anyone!

It all started sometime in 1985, one could cross to Sopron as well, I was at Ferihegy, it also worked there, but I will not publicly write about this.

Look, we got the orders for the day, but we never turned this into a political seminar. We were not given any other information. We did our job, and sometimes even 24 hours a day, and in the best case we would beat our heads about the whys, but silently.

Hegyeshalom train, between 23 December 1989 and the midnight of 26 December we had to let all Hungarian ethnics cross. We could not put stamps on the passports, each one of them received a note, and it would be stamped. Thus, in case they returned, home, Romanian authorities would never see they had been in the West. The procedure was the same for the visa on a separate sheet.

88-89 Mosonmagyaróvár. I also let Romanian citizens in buses cross. They mixed with GDR citizens.

On 21 August 2019, at a conference in Hegyeshalom, where was a celebration of 30 years since the fall of the communist regime, I was also invited as speaker. We were given the chance to relive the sentiments we had back, then to see and hear the people who took these decisions and then applied them. The theme of the conference was of course the exodus via Hungary of GDR citizens, the context, and its main moments. However, it was regrettable that there was nothing said of the Romanians “evaporated” over the span of four and a half years. Even if the border guards were present at the conference, they were the main focus of this process and it would have been good if they knew that Hungarians from Ardeal *were and still are very thankful*.

The Iron Curtain has ceased its existence thirty years ago and our world has changed. We know this is an irreversible transformation,

sooner or later it still would have occurred. However, Hungary can be proud of its role as a catalyst, as it accelerated the process, playing a decisive role in the rapid change and – except for Romania – a peaceful one. Without doubt the most evoked and promoted moments of the regime's fall are tied to the exodus of GDR citizens. However, we are happy that after so many years, finally, this process has been brought to light. It was 1985, moment when, according to this secret order, the behaviour of Hungary changed. It was five years before the 1989 change, making it its oldest and most important harbinger.

Ministry of Internal Affairs "Top Secret!"

"Extremely Important!"

National Commandment of the Border Guards

copy no. 1

Budapest

Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Commander of the Border Guards,
Circular no.0001/1985, referring to procedures regarding Romanian citizens, Budapest, 9 July 1985

In the future, in the case of certain Romanian citizens, procedures to be followed:

I

1./ Romanian citizens entering on the territory of the People's Republic of Hungary with valid identification papers, and those with a passport, with the intent of travelling further abroad, presenting themselves at the BCCP (Border Check-Point) in Budapest, respectively the Yugoslav and Austrian BCCPs must be allowed to cross Hungary, even if the indications on the passport do not extend to other territories and periods.

The agent checking the passport must record - in the special registry created for this purpose - the personal data and the number of the Romanian citizen's passport leaving Hungary, to stamp for exit and then transmit the information to the on-duty officer. On-duty officers must give these data to the commander or to the deputy of the BCCP, which must then send them in a closed envelope, during working days until 15:00 hours, to the chief of the Information Section of the district or to his deputy with the specification that the envelope be opened by them alone.

The commander of the BCCP in Budapest or his deputy, the chief of the Information Section of the districts or his deputy, must gather all records and continuously transmit them to the chief of the Information Section of Border Guards or his deputy with the specification that the envelope be opened by them alone.

At the Information Section of the Border Guards a special envelope must be open for the archiving of these records.

The above category will not include Romanian citizens trying to illegally cross the border; they must be retained and put under according procedures of current practices.

2./ Information regarding Romanian citizens detained on Hungarian territory, for the illegal crossing of the common border will be given only at the explicit request of Romanian authorities and slowly. The repatriation of these defecting citizens – if the committed other crimes – will be done directly, according to current practice, with the approval of the chief of the Information Section of the Border Guards.

Romanian citizens who have crossed the border accidentally or against their will be surrendered directly to the Romanian border guards, with the approval of the commander of the Orosháza and Nyirbátor District or of his deputy.

3./ At the crossing points of the Romanian border, for trained personnel – without drawing attention – there will be increased monitoring and information gathering activities.

At these crossing points, reports regarding other measures on the established conventions, aggressive or harassing manifestations against travellers, will be done urgently through the on-duty guard, by telegram.

II.

1./ Tasks established in the circular must be strictly executed according to the rules of conspiracy and secrecy. Our actions must go unnoticed by the Romanian authorities and the in cause citizens.

2./ Of those mentioned in this circular and the way of their carrying out those informed must be:

The national commandment: the national commander, his deputies, the first secretary of the border guards' Committee of the MSzMP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party), the deputy chief of the border police of the MI, the chief of the border traffic Department and his deputies, the chief of the Information Section and his deputies, the chief of Counter-Information and his deputies.

- at district level: the commander of the district, the chief of the district, the chief of the Information Section and his deputies, the general reporter of the BCcP;
- at BCP level: the commander of the BCcP and his deputy, the on-duty officers and the passport controllers, only to the extent of their duties, as mentioned at point I/1.

3./ The content of this circular, except for those involved in the execution of these order, cannot be made know even to officials.

Each commander is bound to keep this circular in a closed envelope, in his safe, the making of copies is forbidden. Subalterns will be given orders only verbally, in a clear and explicit manner. During instruction, with the exception of the BCcP commander, nobody has permission to take notes of what is discussed.

Activities mentioned in this circular come into action on 15th July 1985, 00:00 hours, and will be valid until its retraction.

In case it is retracted, this will be sent to the chief of the border guards at the MI, in a closed envelope with the specification that the envelope be opened by him alone.