

Minority languages in Hungary

1. The scene

As far as indigenous (autochthonous) minority languages are concerned, Hungarian legislation acknowledges the languages in the following list, in which, for ease of overview, the names of languages with ‘more’ speakers are bolded, while those with ‘less’ speakers are left in normal type (for approximate numbers, see further below): *Armenian, Boyash, Bulgarian, **Croatian, German, Greek, Polish, Romani, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, Ukrainian, and Hungarian Sign Language (HSL)***. Some of these are supported by obvious historical reasons, to which we will return, some are a result of relatively more recent immigration, and one, HSL, has just been elevated to this status.¹

2. Historical overview

The former Kingdom of Hungary, which existed for almost a millenium, was all through its history a multilingual, multiethnic, and (as the term caught on from the 19th century on) multinational entity occupying the entire region of the Carpathian Basin. At its very inception various territories under its rule had large numbers of non-Hungarian speakers, including Slavs in the East, South and the North, German settlers in Transylvania (South-East), as well as speakers of a Neo-Latin language of Vlach or Wallachian, which was subsequently called Ro(u)manian. Since the idea of national identity as a function of the vernacular was a development that reached Hungary in the late 18th century, there had been no objection to all non-Hungarians assimilated into the Hungarian nobility; the rest of the population didn't matter anyway. In the late Middle Ages ethnic groups of Turkic and Iranian origins, respectively, sought refuge from invaders and had slowly integrated into the indigenous population. The Turkish invasion drove quite a few Serbs, i.e., speakers of a South Slavic language to Hungary, though it left neither speakers of Turkish, nor Moslms after their 150 years of occupation. Then, following the victory over the Ottoman Turkish Empire in the early 18th century, vast areas were left vacant, which had to be populated so that the land be cultivated again. It is due to these (re)settlement policies and practices that there arose a patchwork of ethnic minority communities in Central and Southern Hungary consisting of Slovaks, Ruthenians, Germans, etc. In addition to these events, there was a steady flow of the Roma from Southern Europe, especially the Balkans, and from the 18th century on, Yiddish speaking Jews primarily from Moravia and the German principalities, most of whom gave their nationality as Hungarian after the emancipation legislation at the end of the 19th century, thus tipping the balance of nationalities in the Hungarians' favour. Note finally that until the mid-19th century the official language of the Kingdom was Latin, which made Hungary a peculiar match

¹ I am indebted to Csilla Bartha, who has carried out and/or directed several projects in the topics discussed in this paper, and whose results (as well as those of her collaborators) have been freely made use of here.

only to the Vatican. Admittedly, if anyone wished to have a career in the Hapsburg Monarchy, to which the Kingdom of Hungary belonged, German was obviously a must. When, however, the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy came into being in 1867, a short-sighted minority policy not only began to alienate the nationalities inside the country, but it also turned foreign sympathy arising after the Revolution and War of Independence in 1848/49 to a hostile attitude by the early 1900's.

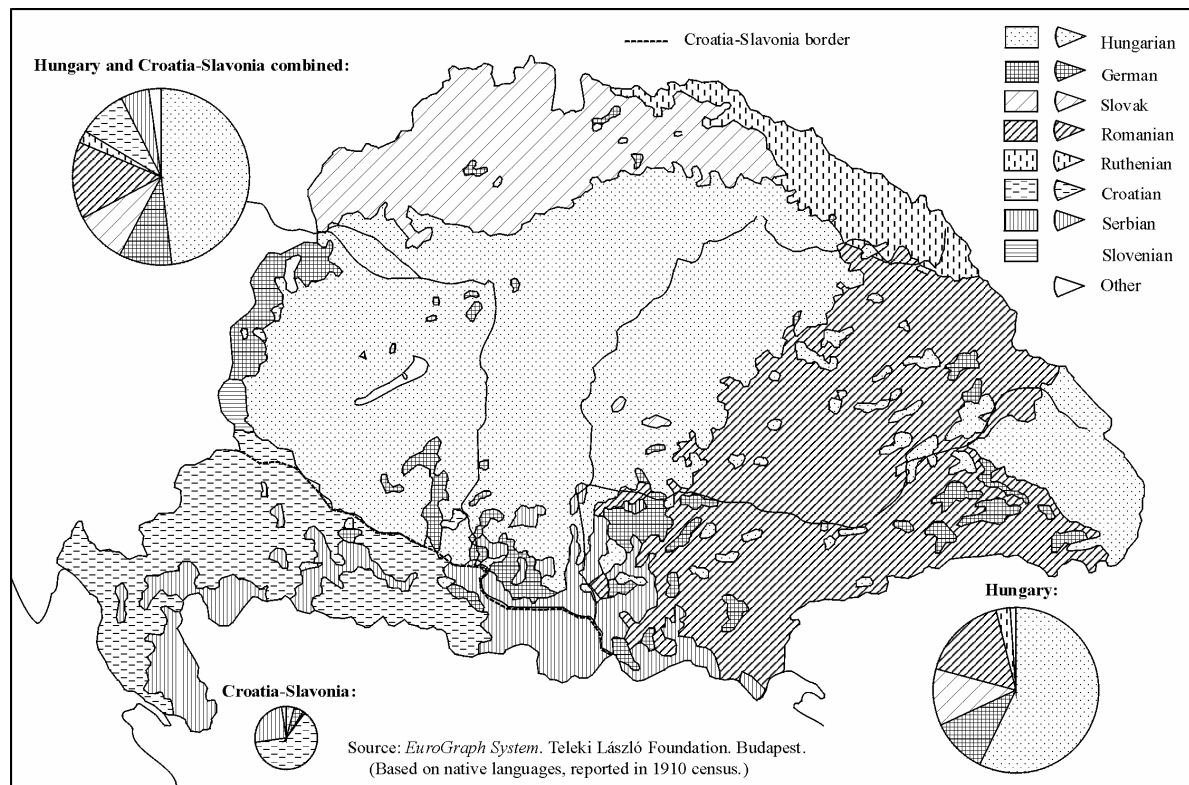


Figure 1: Nationalities in the Kingdom of Hungary in 1886

With the Kingdom of Hungary dissolved at the end of the World War One into a number of countries, which proclaimed themselves to be ‘nation states’, the remaining territory of Hungary was, ironically, perhaps the least varied in terms of the size of national minorities. Even so all of the minorities listed above were among them, though not all of them had equal rights and/or opportunities. First voluntary secularisation, and then the tragic events of the Holocaust, put an end to the Yiddish language in Hungary, which was spoken exclusively by mostly orthodox Jews in provincial Hungary, where almost all were deported to the death camps in 1944 by Hungarian and German Nazis.

The regime that ruled Hungary after World War Two, following an initial silence for 15 years, at most paid lip-service to minority policy and to the demands of minorities, and kept the issue on the surface only to be able to negotiate with the neighbouring countries so as to have them admit the rights of the Hungarian minorities in them, which were not respected everywhere and/or all the time, to say the least. Even so, one tangible result of this adroit policy was the 1985 Education Act, which proclaimed that any language used in Hungary can be the medium of instruction – with or without the parallel use of Hungarian.

3. Minority legislation

After the fall of Communism, new legislation and subsequently new practice had to be introduced vis-à-vis national and ethnic minorities, and in praise of the first free Parliament and government it must be emphasised that the negotiations were started without casting an eye to the then distant chance of joining the EU. As in most cases in contemporary Europe, the legislation conforms to all criteria of modern minority policies. The 1993 Act on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities declares the following:

National and ethnic minorities are all those groups of people who have lived in the territory of the Republic of Hungary for at least one hundred years, represent a numerical minority in the country's population, are citizens of Hungary, and are distinguished from the rest of the population by their own languages, cultures and traditions, and at the same time demonstrate a sense of cohesion aimed at preserving and protecting the interests of their historical communities.

The legislative process made it possible for minorities to identify themselves, and that is how the list at the beginning of this paper arose – with the exception of HSL, whose status was enacted in the autumn of 2009, putting Hungary in the ‘premier league’ of the countries that have recognised the status of sign languages. Note that the passage cited here makes explicit mention of a historical continuity of minimum one hundred years, which excludes exogenous or recent immigrant communities.

While the legislation is impeccable, its practical application is fraught with problems. But before we embark on those issues, let us see the numbers that are given in the censuses and, concurrently by expert estimates.²

Minorities	Census 1990 (Nationality)	Census 2001 (Nationality)	Census 1990 (Mother Tongue)	Census 2001 (Mother Tongue)	Estimated Number
Gypsy/Roma	142 683	189 984	48 072	48 685	400 000-600 000
German	30 824	62 233	37 511	33 792	200 000-220 000
Croatian	13 570	15 620	17 577	14 345	80 000-90 000
Slovak	10 459	17 693	12 745	11 817	100 000-110 000
Romanian	10 740	7 995	8 730	8 482	25 000
Serbian	2 905	3 816	2 953	3 388	5 000-10 000
Armenian	–	620	37	294	3 500-10 000
Polish	–	2 962	3 788	2 580	10 000
Slovenian	1 930	3 040	2 627	3 187	5 000
Ruthenian	–	1 098	674	1 113	6 000
Greek	–	2 509	1 640	1 921	4 000-4 500
Bulgarian	–	1 358	1 370	1 299	3 000-3 500
Ukrainian	–	5 070	–	4 885	2 000
Total	213 111	314 060	137 724	135 788 (-1,41%)	835 000-1 083 955

Table 1: Minorities according to censuses and estimates

(Source: Central Statistical Office 1990 and 2001 Censuses, Nationality Affiliation)

² Boyash was not treated as a separate language but classified under Gypsy/Roma, a grave error, since Boyash is a totally different language spoken by a few tens of thousands of speakers of Roma ethnicity. It is a version of Old Romanian as itinerant Roma groups underwent a language change, cf. Kálmán and Orsós (2009).

The 1993 Act affords extensive entitlements to minorities in the fields of both individual and community rights. Minority self-governments of 5 to 9 members can be elected by secret ballot during local elections in all municipalities. National minority bodies of 15 to 35 members are entitled to comment on, consent to, or veto relevant legislation, primarily concerning media, education, etc. Parliament elects (by a majority of two-thirds) a national minority ombudsman. The current ombudsman is from the Roma community and is a vocal representative a minority rights. Municipal governments can also elect local minority ombudsmen.

The use of minority languages is legitimate from the level of local governments to Parliament. Documents, names of institutions, offices, streets and geographical names are also given in minority languages wherever local minority governments require. There is a preference for employment of officials who speak the minority language in the municipalities where there are speakers of minority languages.

The law guarantees “minority school” status wherever at least 25% of pupils of the educational institution (from and including kindergartens) are members of a minority. Local and/or national minority self-governments are involved in assigning minority school status or the introduction of education in minority languages.

4. Current problems and tendencies: Attitudes to minority languages

As was noted above, the legislation concerning minority rights and language use is, as in many other European countries, up to the standards of current international requirements, such as the Council of Europe or the OSCE prescribes. But, as is also customary in many European states, the daily practice may differ from what one would think is the case considering the empowerment that legislative actions indicate. A telling sign of the gap between principles and practice is the numbers in Table 1. But rather than speculating on the cause of the discrepancies between reported and estimated numbers of members or minorities or speakers of their languages, we will discuss what current fate and future challenges the languages spoken by these minorities will face in this country.

In the official census of 2001, members of national minorities could choose their identities according to four criteria (with possible overlaps): nationality, culture, mother tongue, and actual language use. The diagram in figure 2 shows their ratios.

It is not surprising to see that the members of minorities who identified themselves by the cues of nationality or culture were about twice as many as those who did so by means of native language or language use. The reasons become clearer if we look at the proportion of minority language use in the various communities, as transpires from the research carried out by a project in cooperation between ELTE University, Budapest, and the Research Institute for Linguistics (see figure 3).³

³ Research carried out by Csilla Bartha and Anna Borbély, National Research & Development Programme Contract number: 5/126/2001. For details, see Bartha (2003), Bartha/Borbély (2006), Bartha (2008)

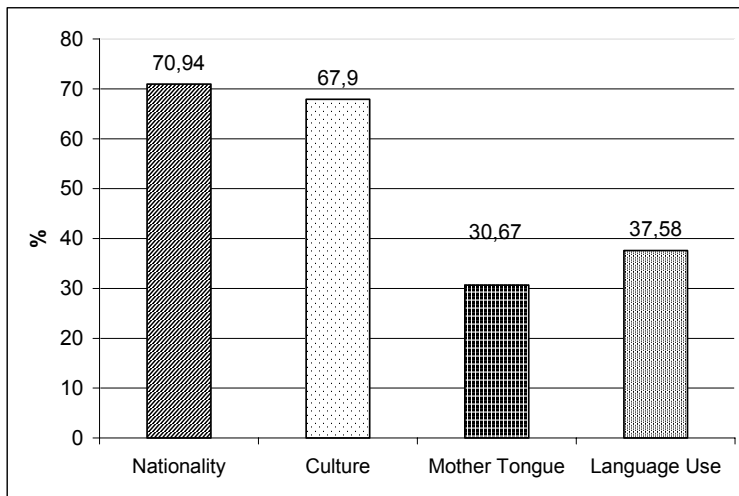


Figure 2: Minority Affiliation (Four Identity Categories; Census of 2001), N = 442 739

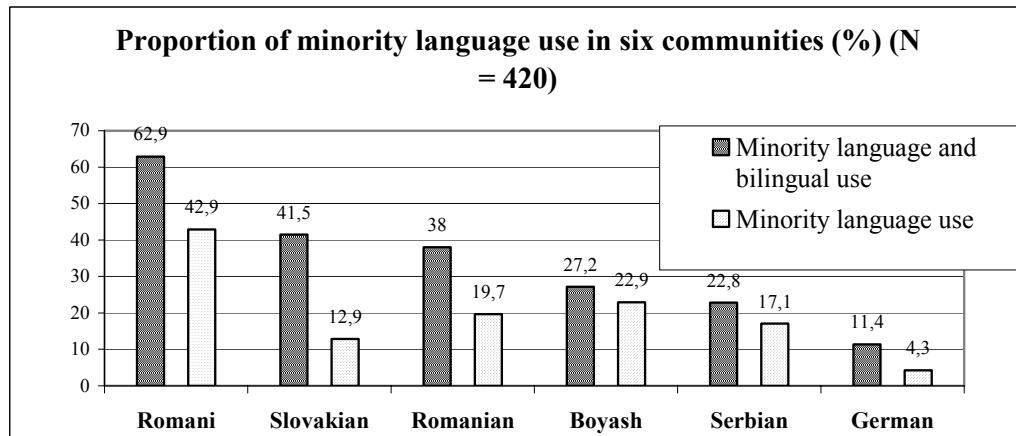


Figure 3: Minority language use

While one would think that (the use of) German was more widespread, cf. Table 1, in fact it ended up at the bottom of the scale, probably because German has the greatest prestige in Hungary along both the national and cultural axes, so more people who have already assimilated identify themselves as of German origin than (former) members of other minorities.

On the “usefulness scale”, predictably German has ‘pole position’ from both the general and the international aspect, though interestingly the two languages spoken by the Roma population, viz., Boyash and Romani, have higher scores than all the other languages which have states ‘behind them’, thus having institutionalised status. The picture only changes when their international usefulness is inquired about, but strangely Romanian is even then scores remarkably low.

The findings shown in Figures 3 to 5 harmonise with the complex summary results fleshed out in Figure 6, which shows speakers' attitudes to maintaining their respective native minority languages as against abandoning them for the majority language, that is, Hungarian. Romanian again figures at the low end of the scale, and surprisingly both German and Slovak are in less favourable positions than the two languages spoken by the Roma. Here the status of Serbian can be surprising to those who believe

that a language spoken by a numerically relatively small community has less chance for maintenance, but they do not take into account that the community is held together by their adherence to the Serbian Orthodox religion (Bartha/Borbély 2006).

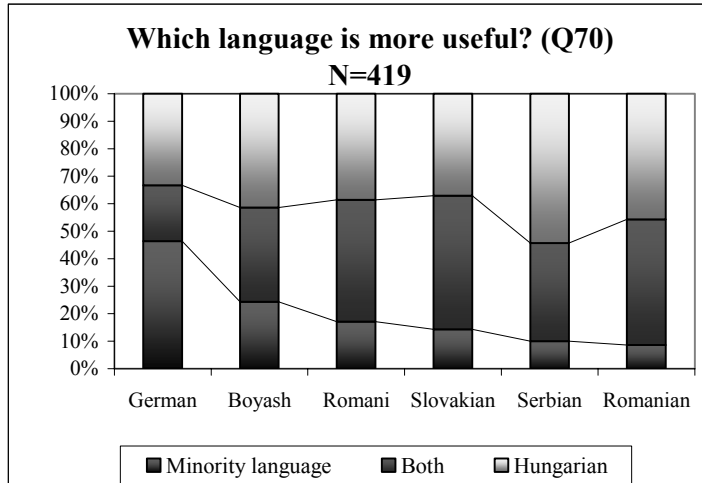


Figure 4: Attitudes to minority languages – general usefulness

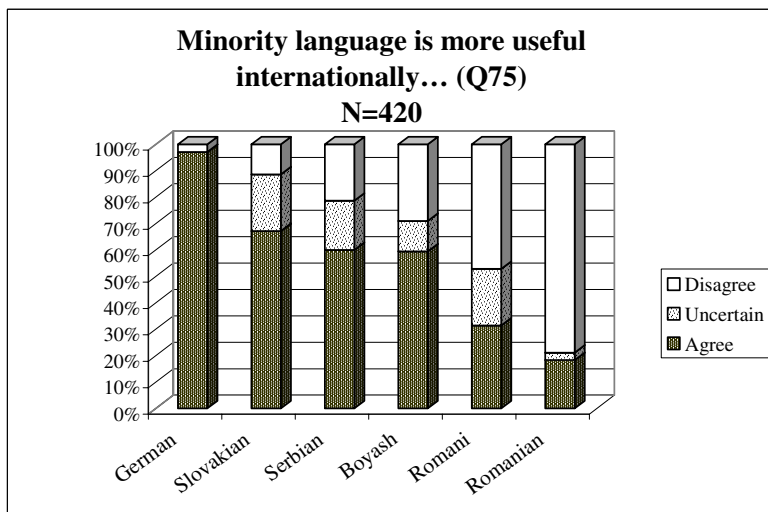


Figure 5: Attitudes to minority languages – international usefulness

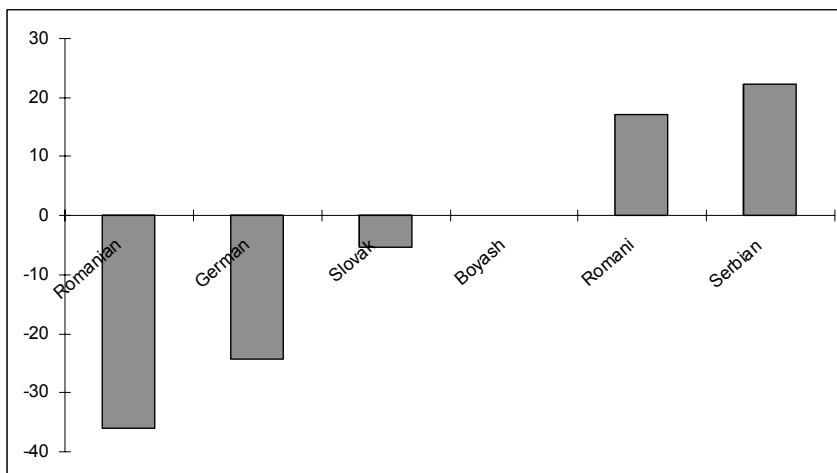


Figure 6: Attitudes to language shift and maintenance

5. Current problems and tendencies: Minority language in education

The crucial factor in maintaining a minority language is its being passed on to the next generation. If it is confined to the family, church, pub, etc., its fate is doomed, even though it is an indigenous language. Without a role or status assigned to it in the national (public) educational system it cannot survive. Therefore, the new type of *Kulturkampf* for authority over schools has been fought ever since the issue of national and/or ethnic minorities was raised in the 19th century. While the official minority policies in Hungary would like the indigenous Hungarian minorities across its borders in the neighbouring states to have every possible option to study in their native language, it often is the case that inside Hungary these same policies are stifled, mostly with reference to dwindling numbers or financial difficulties.

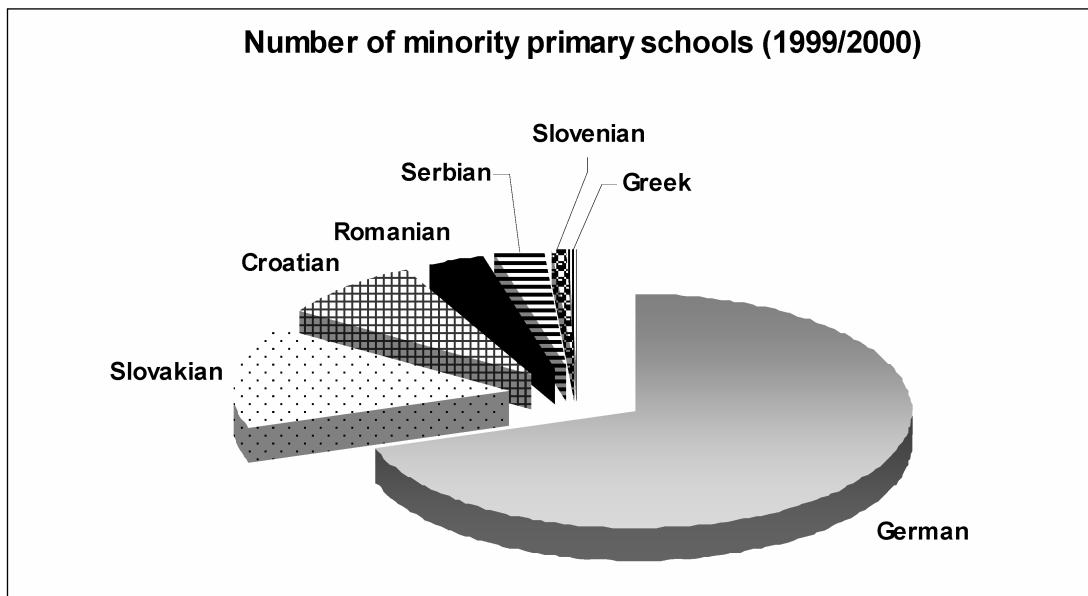


Figure 7: Minority primary schools according to language (1999/2000)

This figure shows a favourable picture, but again the truth has more shades to it. The number of ‘all minority language’ schools is very low, and only the least efficient third group of ‘language teaching’ schools have an adequate number – but only the numbers, not the kind, since they mostly teach the ‘high’ or standard dialect, rather than the local vernacular, which often has less prestige, and in consequence the school is popular, where applicable, as in the case of German, among non-minority parents, who send their children there to pick up a useful foreign language early enough. And, as one study indicates, in bilingual minority schools efficient bilingual methods are neglected also because the parents are already all bilingual and the pupils show an ever decreasing level of knowledge of the minority language (Borbély 2009). Numerically very small minorities (Poles, Greeks, Ruthenians) have created ‘Sunday schools’ outside the framework of public education (H. Kontra/Bartha forthcoming). It also strikes the eye that there are no Romani or Boyash schools in this statistics.

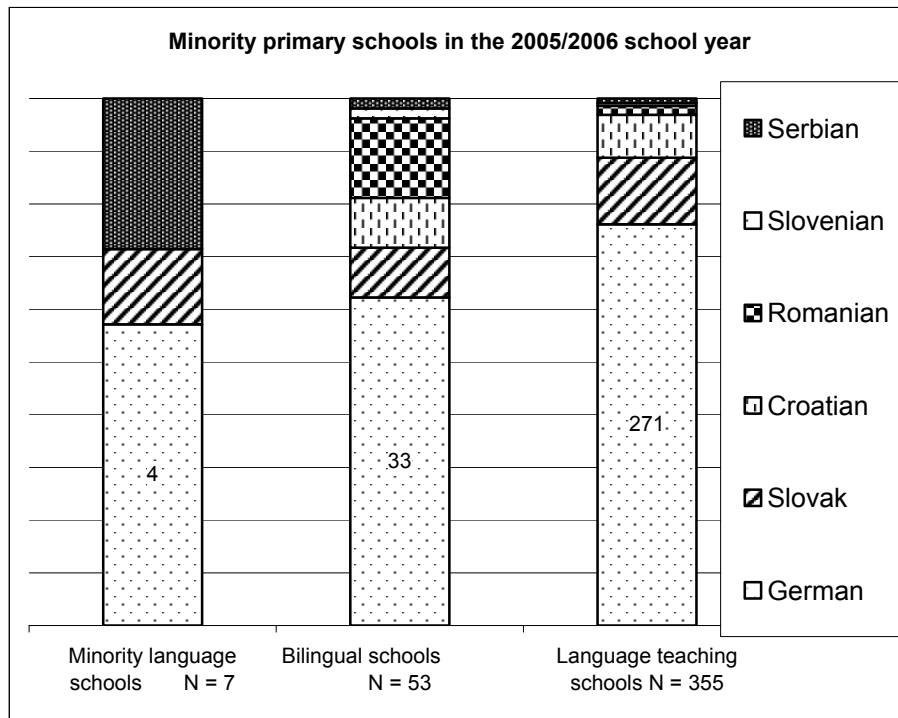


Figure 8: Minority language schools (2005/2006)

The most disheartening numbers come from the number of students in minority education, and especially in secondary education (grades 9 to 12). The numbers are so small that they are truly insignificant.

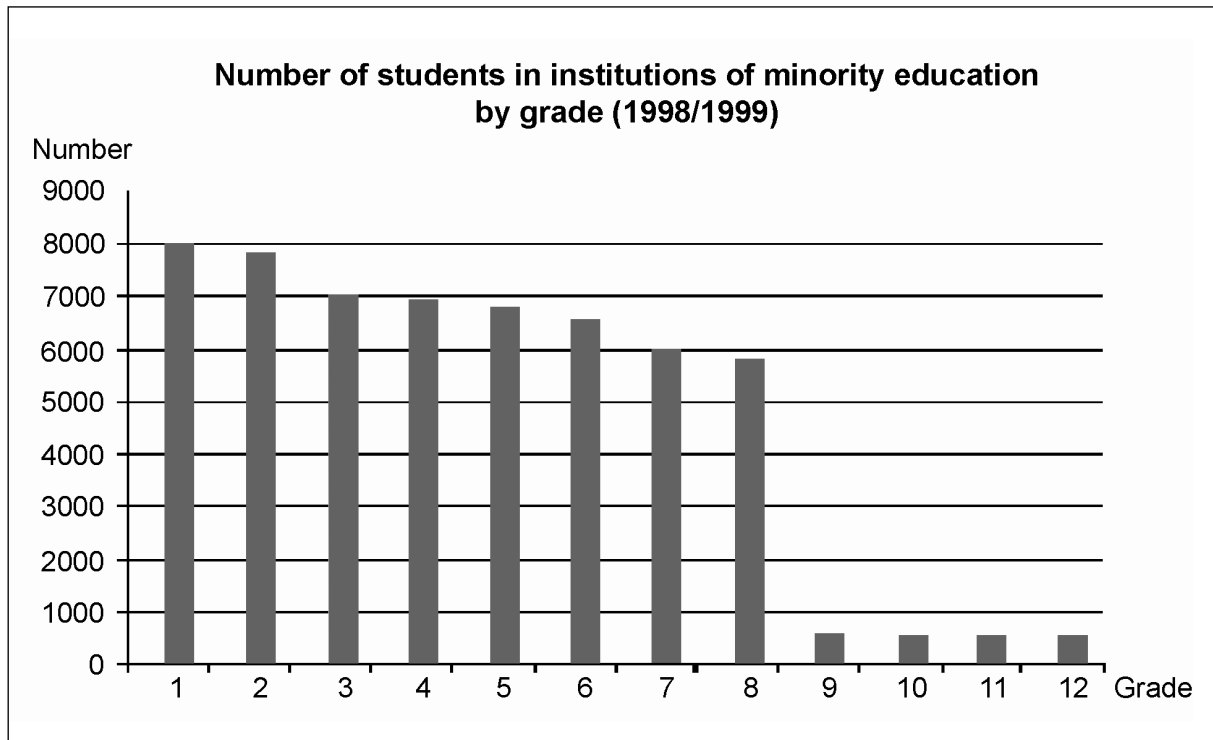


Figure 9: The number of students in minority education (1998/1999)

Of course, the sorry state of the educational situation can always be blamed on the parents: it is mostly due to their decision which type of school their children will attend. And, as has been shown by Kontra (2009), the case is parallel in Hungary and in Romania, Slovakia, etc., where the Hungarian parents do not send their children to Hungarian-language educational institutions.

However, that does not absolve the state from promoting the educational rights of members of minorities, but as the case is, in many countries of Europe, and especially to the East of the former Iron Curtain (and not excluding Hungary), governments choose to fall back on inaction if they are benevolent, or exercise their authority against education in minority languages if they are not.

6. Conclusion

It is no use to draw a conclusion at this point. All I can do here is point out that the Research Institute for Linguistics, together with its sister institute within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Research Institute of National and Ethnic Minorities, has conducted several projects in minority languages in Hungary and the East European region, some of whose results have been made use of in this paper. It has also been a principled position of this Institute to hire staff from minority communities, who could do research in(to) their native languages and regions. Thus RIL HAS has research personnel from the the following communities and/or speaking the following minority languages: Boyash, German, Romani, Romanian, Slovak, Ukrainian, and Hungarian Sign Language, with only Serbian and Croatian missing from the list of major minority languages. We do not like to be seen as giving an example for others to follow either as regards our research and hiring policy or our critical attitude to current practices in our own country, but we do tend to believe that such small steps forward would help alleviate the current situation.

7. Sources, acknowledgements

- Bartha, C. (2003): Die Möglichkeiten der Bewahrung der Minderheitensprachen in Ungarn. Über eine soziolinguistische Zweisprachigkeitsuntersuchung im Landesmaßstab. In: Glatz, F. (ed.): *Sprache und die kleinen Nationen Ostmitteleuropas. Studien von Cs. Bartha, A. Borbély, M. Erb, F. Glatz, A. Gyivicsán, O. Nádor, Zs. Ritoók, L. Szarka, Gy. Szépe, B. Vizi.* (= Begegnungen 21). Budapest: Europa Institut, 225-236.
- Bartha, C. (ed.) (2007a): *Cigány nyelvek és közösségek a Kárpát-medencében.* Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó.
- Bartha, C. (2007b): Nyelvcseré két magyarországi oláh cigány közösségben. In: Bartha, C. (ed.): *Cigány nyelvek és közösségek a Kárpát-medencében.* Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 244–253.
- Bartha, C. (2007c): Summary. In: Bartha, C. (ed.): *Cigány nyelvek és közösségek a Kárpát-medencében.* Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 334–342.
- Bartha, C. (2008): Myth and reality of linguistic others. The situation of linguistic minorities in Hungary. In: *Cahiers d'etudes hongroises* 14 (2007/2008), 101-122.

- Bartha, C./Borbély, A. (2006): Dimensions of linguistic otherness: prospects of minority language maintenance in Hungary. In: *Language Policy* 5.3, 337–365.
- Bartha, C./Borbély, A. (2008): *Linguistic minorities in Hungary – A practical overview*. Budapest: Research Centre for Multilingualism. Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
- Borbély, A. (2009): Megtanulható-e a kisebbségi nyelv az iskolában? – Egy magyarországi nemzetiségi kétnyelvű iskolában végzett vizsgálat tapasztalatai. In: Kolláth, A. (szerk): *A muravidéki kétnyelvű oktatás fél évszázada*. Bielsko-Biala/Budapest/Kansas/Maribor/Praha: Zora 68, 179-193.
- Borbély, A. (forthcoming): Social and linguistic practices of minority communities in Hungary at the beginning of the 21st Century. In: Bartha, C. (ed.): *Multilingualism, citizenship and the future of minority languages — Ideologies and practices of linguistic difference in Europe. Selected papers of the 11th International Conference on Minority Languages (ICML 11), Pécs, 5-6 July, 2007*. Budapest: Research Centre for Multilingualism. Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
- H. Kontra, E./Bartha, C. (forthcoming): Foreign language education in Hungary: Concerns and controversies. In: *Sociolinguistica*.
- Kálmán, L./Pálmáné Orsós, A. (2009): *Beás nyelvtan*. Budapest: Tinta Kiadó.
- Kontra, M. (2009): Nyelvi genocídium az oktatásban a Kárpát-medencében. In: *Magyar Tudomány* 2009/11. <http://www.matud.iif.hu/2009/09nov/Kontra.htm>.
- Pálmáné Orsós, A. (2007): A beás nyelv megőrzésének lehetőségei. In: Bartha, C. (ed.): *Cigány nyelvek és közösségek a Kárpát-medencében*. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 266-293.
- Szalai, A. (2007): Egységesség? Változatosság? A cigány kisebbség és a nyelvi sokféleség. In: Bartha, C. (ed.): *Cigány nyelvek és közösségek a Kárpát-medencében*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 20-51.