

## *Chapter IV*

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### **Book Review**

#### **5. Erika Hocz: Barna Bodó – Jelenségek szélzúgásban**



Erika Hocz\*

## BOOK REVIEW: BARNA BODÓ – JELENSÉGEK SZÉLZÚGÁSBAN<sup>1</sup>

“Common sense. Experience. Logic. Reason. That is all (or everything) we have when we need/want to interpret policy developments in the absence of expertise. [...] But politics is the area where common sense often fails. [...] Then a crisis comes into being [...] Then we start looking for the logic, the internal connections of events, the expediency.”<sup>2</sup>

This quote from the book presents its central discipline, political science, which permeates throughout the collection consisting of thirteen chapters. This comes as no surprise, as Barna Bodó is not only an exceptional writer but his research is centred around political science.<sup>3</sup> The most defining subject of the book is Education research, which is indisputably intertwined with the author’s life.

The style of the book attracts even those readers without expertise. As we read, we feel as if we would be discussing vital issues that influence and/or affect our daily lives with a cup of tea or coffee in our hands, constantly expanding our knowledge of both the past and the present. This impression emerges probably because Barna Bodó is a great lecturer and has a way with words. Although some parts of the book collection reflect his approach, Bodó still tries to convey the past events objectively.

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<sup>1</sup> Bodó Barna: *Jelenségek szélzúgásban*. Nagyvárad: Europrint. 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 (“Józan ész. Tapasztalat. Logika. Ráció. Ennyi (minden) áll rendelkezésünkre, amikor a politika történéseit kellene/kívánjuk szaktudás hiányában értelmezni. [...] Csakhogy éppen a politika az a terület, ahol a józan ész gyakran kudarcot vall [...] Ekkor jön létre a válság [...] Ekkor keressük a logikát, a történések belső összefüggéseit, a célszerűséget”). Translation of the author.

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The title itself is mysterious. Anyone who has not yet read the work has little chance of figuring out what the book will analyse and discuss. However, the small wooden cubes that appear on the cover may suggest our inertia and that we are sometimes exposed to a greater outside force. Once we open and read the book and look back at the title, we might understand what it could mean and what Barna Bodó wants to express to the readers: there are many phenomena in the world which may go unnoticed, yet they are out there trying to break out, to capture our attention. An excellent example of this is the Bolyai Initiative Committee,<sup>4</sup> which appears several times in the publication.

Some chapters of the book, which were mainly published as separate studies in different years, date back to the mid-2000s, but the work does not get stuck in time. The chapters do not appear in chronological order. For example, the eleventh chapter was published the latest in the *Magyar Kisebbség* [Hungarian Minority] in 2020.

The first chapter, entitled “Misconceptions in Politics,” is an opening that provides a basis for the reader to inspect the following chapters in a specific manner. Bodó does not write about a single event in this chapter but points out the problems that affect political science: we do not consider political science as a separate science because science presupposes apoliticism, but this might be a methodological fallacy. The issue of political commitment is irrelevant to the political scientist, as one interprets while the other is an agent of the process itself.<sup>5</sup> The other challenge is that the laymen also use the concepts of politics, either correctly or incorrectly. One could call this the political science of “ordinary life”.

The second chapter is about the already mentioned Bolyai Initiative Committee (BIC), further elaborated by the next chapter, which presents the events related to BIC in chronological order. Initially,

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<sup>4</sup> The Bolyai Initiative Committee is an informal association of Hungarian university staff members, intellectuals and students aiming to reopen the Bolyai University of Cluj/Kolozsvár and to advance the achievement of a Hungarian-language higher education network in Transylvania. See more at: [https://www.bolyai.eu/bkb\\_en.php?m=3](https://www.bolyai.eu/bkb_en.php?m=3), accessed: 18. 05. 2022

<sup>5</sup> Bodó 2020 *op. cit.*, 10–11.

the BIC was a loose grouping of about twenty members, initiated by young professors, but the subsequent events transformed it into a more serious political committee.<sup>6</sup> Some minority-related problems of the Babeş-Bolyai University (BBU) are presented, including the fact that the Hungarians in Romania are dissatisfied with the situation of higher education available for the minority, as they do not provide adequate possibilities for education in Hungarian. Then, in the next chapter, the book provides us with a chronology from October 2004 to December 2006.

In the fourth chapter, the author continues to address the same topic by briefly presenting the Tismăneanu report (hereinafter: the *Report*). The *Report* was presented to the Romanian Parliament on 18 December 2006 by a committee analysing the communist dictatorship in Romania while also addressing the issue of Hungarian higher education and the Bolyai University in particular. If we take a closer look at the numbers, there are only 18 pages that analyse the situation of the minority, a negligible amount compared to the more than six hundred- and fifty-pages long *Report*. The content of the *Report* is explained briefly in this chapter. The *Report* acknowledges the existence of the minority issue only to the extent of one reference. Still, it makes no mention of the discrimination against the minority itself, which would have been required by such a document, which would otherwise serve as a reference work at the international level. The history of Bolyai University is completely missing from the *Report*. It is only mentioned in two paragraphs when its creation and merging is presented. Bodó explains the “legal trick” they had used to achieve the university merger and questions the stance of the dominant Hungarian party of the country, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR), as their representatives refrained from speaking during the parliamentary presentation of the *Report*.<sup>7</sup>

The next chapter of the book explains more extensively the events of the new millennium. The first part of the chapter presents the principle

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–51.

of multiculturalism and the practice in Romania / Cluj-Napoca, which appears as a fault line between the Romanian and Hungarian sides. This is followed by discussing the different epochs of the process, then the analysis of the actions of the BIC, followed by a concluding chapter gauging new possibilities for representing the unresolved issues of the university.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the sixth chapter, we can read a historical overview of the regime change in Romania. In Romania, the former communist leaders retained their power based on nationalism, and they did not strive to build a democracy. This chapter turns its attention to the three factors of the common objectives of the Hungarians in Romania. Firstly, and most importantly, the need to restore the university as a Hungarian education institution. Secondly, the respect for minority traditions, and finally, the issue of the university as a critical element of cultural autonomy, became one of the objectives of the Hungarian community in Romania.<sup>9</sup>

A political analysis can also be found in this chapter, as the author explains that the case of the university rested primarily on the shoulders of the political representation. In many instances, they did not do everything in their power to reach an agreement, despite the milder Romanian political situation. However, they could have been more successful on several occasions.<sup>10</sup> Neither the later Bolyai Society, a non-governmental organisation, was able to bring about change. The law of National Education of 1994, which the Hungarians rejected in Transylvania, also appears in the chapter. Following the 1996 parliamentary election, the DAHR became a governing coalition member. An amendment to the law of National Education, considered unacceptable by the Hungarians, was on the agenda so that a state-subsidised Hungarian language university could be established. Nearly half a million signatures were collected to support DAHR's initiative in this regard. Still, the draft met with opposition from the Romanian

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–83.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

intellectuals, as shown by the fact that 48 universities rejected the plan for the Hungarian university in an open letter. Under these circumstances, the ominous section 123 of the 1997/36 government decree amending the law of National Education was issued, which only allowed the establishment of Hungarian departments, not an independent university. In response, the DAHR threatened to leave the governing coalition, which ultimately did not materialise.

Following the parliamentary elections of 2000, the DAHR supported the governance of the Social Democrats from the outside based on protocols, i.e., agreements to support the governing party, which had to be renewed annually. Nevertheless, the issue of independent Hungarian faculties in the framework of the BBU did not become the subject of a political decision. In contrast, the Hungarian media in Romania could not properly thematise this issue, which according to the author, can be partly attributed to internal shortcomings of this media segment (Bodó argued that media actions to monitor the public life continuously have been insufficient).<sup>11</sup>

The topic of the seventh chapter is the choice of school, which shows not only the situation in Romania but also several regions inhabited by Hungarian minorities, including Vojvodina and predominantly Hungarian-speaking southern Slovakia. Compared to the style of presentation used in the previous chapters, the author presents the discussed topic much differently. It seems much more like a textbook-style presentation, the understanding of which is enhanced by the figures included in it.

To sum up, the decisions behind the school choice have several causes, but they also show similarities from a minority's perspective. Accordingly, we can distinguish between symbolic (transfer of language and culture) and rational motivations (the school's endowments). Reasons for choosing a school can be at the macro, meso and micro levels. The macro-level refers to the grounds for selecting a school concerning the education system as a whole. The most acute problem with this appears in relation to the legal framework: do laws in force

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-97.

offer freedom of choice at all? The settlements' ethnic ratio directly affects the language of instruction in the schools, so frequently, a school selection infers a language choice for many parents. Meso-level factors are more closely related to the external and internal life of the school. These include, for example, geographical proximity (which is relevant to transport) and accessibility, the condition of the school building, and the "quality" of the school. Then last but not least, micro-level factors are individual, family-level decisions. Parents with higher socio-economic affluence choose the future school for their children themselves, whereas, in the case of middle-class parents, this selection is a part of a kind of family strategy.<sup>12</sup>

The following two chapters (eighth and ninth) describe trends in school choice for children of minorities in Arad County. As Bodó finds it worth mentioning, by a more thorough analysis of a large region, we can make several deductions for some diasporas of Transylvania. Still, the conditional mode of conclusions is strongly advised in light of the data.<sup>13</sup> This analytical research is completed mainly for Arad County, but comparable data referring to other diaspora communities also appear in the research.

As can be concluded based on the book, the situation of Hungarian public education in Romania has played a central role in politics and public life during the last two decades, enabling Bodó to carry out an in-depth analysis of a large number of sources for his study.<sup>14</sup>

The eighth chapter was published as a consolidated dissertation in 2012 with a study by János Márton, which mainly presents the data of the 2000s, and the ninth chapter mostly analyses the data of 2011. These two chapters, which contain informative interviews, substantiate

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-133.

<sup>13</sup> Bodó also examines how democracy affects the minority. This highly personal question is formulated subjectively when examining data series referring to the Hungarian public education in Romania: „*can democracy as a social system in itself be a solution for public education in the minority's mother tongue?*” However, there is no single, unified answer to this. Where the minority lives in a higher density, the answer is yes, but the data series for lower densities are strongly decreasing, showing negative trends. Source: *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.



the argument that family background has a crucial role in choosing minority- or majority language schools. The author also concludes that the Hungarian minority increasingly substitutes Hungarian with the Romanian language resulting in the Hungarian language playing a gradually less important role in public education.<sup>15</sup>

In the ninth chapter, we may read interviews with four students from Elena Ghiba Birta High School, an elite school, and Aurel Vlaicu Primary School, as a public education institution. Although most of the interviewees are of Hungarian origin, they cannot and do not want to learn to read or write in Hungarian. But not only does this section include a conversation with the students, but we can also gain some insight into interviews with two parents and three teachers. The conclusion can be deduced from the interviews that the two schools represent different models. On the one hand, there was no intention in the elite-private school to help Hungarians learn the Hungarian language. On the other hand, the district's public school tries to involve the pedagogical community and parents in proactive school life, so Hungarians did not feel that their language and culture, which was different from the majority, was something to hide.<sup>16</sup>

The tenth chapter examines the situation of colleges located in the diaspora. Bodó sets out four tasks for the betterment of the Hungarian minority's situation: educational strategy, strategy for the diaspora, college strategy for the diaspora, and a strategy covering the support policy. The author then goes on to analyse these tasks. There was no educational strategy (as of 2013, since this chapter was published at that time), or at least the author is uncertain whether the part referring to education in the DAHR's election programme at that time could still be considered politically valid.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the situation was a bit brighter in the case of the strategy covering the diaspora, as several of these were published, some of which were preceded by public debate.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 202–203.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

The section on colleges in the diaspora and the support policy strategy are detailed in separate parts. Bodó classifies the previously mentioned colleges in the diaspora into three categories: classical residential (operating next to a school, founded by the state / municipal); dormitory and diaspora centre (a complex institution, usually set up through a church initiative, to promote minority education better); finally, the dormitory network of the St. Francis Foundation was enlisted in a separate category, their primary purpose being the assistance of orphans and the indigent.<sup>18</sup>

The fundamental problem is that the demand for Hungarian education is declining in the diaspora; non-classical residential accommodation could be a solution to provide better conditions for students. In this context, Bodó concluded from conversations with the teachers that the parents are afraid of their child living in a student dormitory, while motivation to stick to the mother tongue is also lacking.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to the fourth task, educational (small) regions are further described as areas for cooperation between the local community. In his work entitled *Diaspora Strategy*, Bodó explains that the diaspora needs a local leader/elite – or even more – who can handle the challenges of life in a diaspora, perform complex tasks, and furthermore take on moral responsibility for the community. This has to be supported both professionally and personally. Indeed, this might be more difficult to put into practice than just outlining in theory.<sup>20</sup>

Then, at the end of the chapter, the fourth task is detailed: under the heading “grants and politics”. Here the author reveals the problem that the distribution of subsidies from Hungary is politicised and monopolised, often aimed to strengthen clientelism rather than expediency and professional reasons. Regarding the control of the spending of these funds, it is also problematic that the distribution of public funds is delegated to private foundations. Among the questions

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

of principle are, among other things, how and on what basis are the grants awarded, while a particular problem is obtaining the necessary certificates in order to apply, as it is both time and money consuming.<sup>21</sup>

In the eleventh chapter, among other things, the Catholic High School in Târgu Mureş appears as a central theme, in light of law and politics, to build upon the topic of public education. This chapter was also published in the *Kisebbségvédelem – Minority Protection* journal,<sup>22</sup> where a more detailed and up-to-date version can be read.

Bodó illustrates the essence of the problem, lying in the fact that although Romania is a state governed by the rule of law, the establishment of a Hungarian school in the country is not easy, as it does not pose a legal, social or economic question, but rather a political dilemma. This is at the root of the problem: politics is gradually taking over education rights.<sup>23</sup>

More can be read about the case of II. Ferenc Rákóczi Roman Catholic Theological High School in the *Kisebbségvédelem* journal. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of Minorities is also mentioned here. Romania's country report on its implementation makes no mention of the High School, despite the concerns expressed by the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention on the matter. The government's reply to the Report of the Advisory Committee was that the school had been established unlawfully, which was a conclusion taken by the Mureş County Court, annulling the founding decision.<sup>24</sup>

Bodó also presents the rules for founding a school and has ordered all the measures related to the founding procedure chronologically. The chronology begins with the date of 2003 and ends on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2019 (while in the journal we can follow the events until the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2020). The remainder of the chapter examines the responsibilities of all the participants in the re-establishment

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 219–221.

<sup>22</sup> Bodó Barna: Jog és politika Romániában: a marosvásárhelyi katolikus líceum esete. In: *Kisebbségvédelem*, No. IV (2021), 129–175.

<sup>23</sup> Bodó 2020, 223–225.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 136–137.

process: the town hall clerk; the mayor; the local council; the county inspectorate; the prefect's office; Unirea High School, and the parent community of Unirea High School; the Status Foundation; Dan Tanasă as a notorious claimant who brings Hungarian minority-related issues to domestic Courts, and other representatives of Romanian parties; and finally the responsible people of the central institutions.<sup>25</sup> The aim of the statements inciting to hate against foreigners (and Hungarians) permeating the whole process was to divert attention and create an anti-Hungarian mood.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Bodó recalls that Romania has also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>27</sup> This reaffirms, *inter alia*, the obligation of States Parties to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and respect the language and cultural values of parents through the child's education. The Convention further stipulates that one of the aims shall be "*the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin*".<sup>28</sup> The information presented in the book and the anti-Hungarian sentiment, which in many cases involves exclusion, reflect an image contrary to the Convention.<sup>29</sup>

In the twelfth chapter, the author also targets the diaspora,<sup>30</sup> including Hungarian kindergartens, in the light of the reason that Hungarians living in the minority often enrol their children in Hungarian-language kindergartens. Yet, the parents usually prefer choosing a school where the language of instruction is Romanian.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 244–249.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>27</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Done at New York, 20th of November 1989.

<sup>28</sup> Article 29 (d) of the Convention.

<sup>29</sup> See also Katalin Szamel: The right to education. In: Lamn Vanda (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*. Budapest: HVG-ORAC Lap-és Könykiadó. 2018, 578–579.

<sup>30</sup> The situation of kindergartens in three towns and a village in Timiș County was examined. Bodó 2020 *im* 253.

This problem can also be linked to the constantly growing effect of assimilation.<sup>31</sup>

There are smaller settlements that Hungarians predominantly inhabit; nonetheless, it is necessary to establish bilingual kindergarten groups as a compromise, as Romanian families would like to have their children also learn Romanian in the kindergarten. However, the obstacle of imbalance in the use of languages can be found in these bilingual groups, an issue that deserves correction.<sup>32</sup>

The last chapter is entitled Identity Variations of Young People, part of the Hungarian Minority, which analyses the answers given to the questions related to identity in the survey called “Mozaik 2011”, on the attitudes to the public life of Hungarian young people living outside of Hungary. Bodó defines national identity as follows: “*National identity in the ordinary sense means a sense of belonging to the nation [...], a knowledge of it.*”<sup>33</sup> Bodó examined the image formed upon their identity by the Hungarian minority living in different countries on the basis of certain words and statements, including the homeland, what it means to be Hungarian and questions related to the mother tongue and language use.<sup>34</sup> The answers are mixed, while in Bodó’s opinion, misinterpretations can also be found, such as the view on citizenship: as stated by a Hungarian minority respondent living in Austria, only a Hungarian citizen can call himself Hungarian.<sup>35</sup> In this chapter, the problem of choosing a school was featured once again, yet here the main topic is the relation between the mother tongue and education, as the author presents the differences between living in a diaspora or compactly.<sup>36</sup>

A separate subtitle was accorded to couple choices and mixed marriages. Judging by the answers, although many people’s views are

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-258.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

positive, those living in a cluster see little chance for mixed marriages,<sup>37</sup> given the fear of assimilation.

The relationship between the Hungarians and the local community has also become the subject of research. The workplace community has emerged as an example, where it is rare to find a positive, accepting environment. Many people think that if they open up to their Hungarian identity, they might face exclusion. One of the critical conditions for the improvement of these relations is reciprocity.<sup>38</sup>

Sports, the support associated with it, leisure time and entertainment also arise. Sport is not a national value in the case of young people. They rather tend to support the better team as opposed to the team linked with their ethnic group identity. In terms of leisure time, diaspora members are disadvantaged, as there are few venues for entertainment designed for Hungarian groups.<sup>39</sup>

The vision of the future and assimilation have also been expanded in a separate subsection and referenced during the topics discussed earlier. Many people would go abroad for work, considering that there are fewer and fewer job opportunities, especially in disadvantaged micro-regions, but Hungary is not the leading destination country.<sup>40</sup>

All in all, the thirteen chapters of the book illustrate the difficulties and offer an overview of the situation of the Hungarian minority, a reality ignored by many people. In terms of the subject matter, the book is really well-structured, leading the reader through the political situation and the issue of the university towards the case of Hungarian kindergartens, and shows how the choice between educational institutions can worsen the condition of the Hungarian language. To sum up, the last chapter provides a comprehensive picture of the identity variants of young Hungarian people living outside of Hungary, offering us a deeper understanding of the analyses we have read before.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 303–304.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 312–313.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

Bodó put a significant amount of work into the book. Considering the still unresolved problems of the Hungarian minority, this collection of studies will serve as valuable source material for future research and further analyses.

