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## Kossuth and Transylvania

Lajos Kossuth elaborated the theory of his Transylvania policies during the Reform Era and its practical implementation came about during the 1948–49 revolution and war of independence. In the second part of the 19th century, it was modified somewhat on the basis of the experiences gathered in the meanwhile. Kossuth had various personal positions in all of these three periods; history cast rather different roles to him from age to age: prior to 1848, he was an outstanding personality of the reformist opposition in Hungary, as well as minister of finance and military organiser during the revolution. Starting from September 1848, he was a leader of the war of independence. Later on, in exile, he was a consequent representative of the issue of Hungary's independence in various non-official associations in the simple role of a political refugee. He would not have been a true politician if he had not modified his position – but, naturally, without giving up his principles – according to the changing circumstances of the various historic eras.

In the following, I briefly examine the relationship of Kossuth and Transylvania in the times of the revolution and the war of independence; I will only touch upon the antecedents and the years in exile.

The Transylvania policy of Kossuth that took shape in the Reform Era was inspired by European examples. He realised early that the historical current of the continent pointed toward the birth of civic nations and national unity, the formation of independent states. “The current of national unity had an immense influence on [me]”, he writes in one of his early writings. The essence of his Transylvania policy can be expressed in a few words: union and through it, the civic transformation of Transylvania.

He first set forth his views on the Union in the paper *Pesti Hirlap*, no. 30, 1841, as follows:

The Hungarians, wedged between two big nations – i.e. the Slav and German nations –, are threatened. Therefore, Hungary and Transylvania need to unite their forces. This is in the interest of both brother nations. Union would also be important for Transylvania so that its development of civic character could gain momentum. Its constitutional system is outdated, Kossuth argued. Although it has its national assembly, the king can send so many delegates in it that is enough to outvote the opposition forces. Kossuth also held the constitution based on the principle of three nations and four accepted religions out-of-date because it did not provided for the adequate representation of the Romanians – since the great majority of them were peasant tenants. Naturally, it is well known that Hungarian peasant tenants were also overlooked as far as feudal rights were concerned. Vienna, where Transylvanian affairs were administered, oppressed the weak Transylvania more than the stronger Hungary, Kossuth

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believed. Viennese policies made the local government wither. The essence of the argumentation of Kossuth was that feudal world had to be substituted with a civic system. After all, Kossuth – similar to his great Transylvanian contemporary, Miklós Wesselényi, from whom the principles of his Transylvania policies originated – expected from the unification of the two countries primarily the strengthening of the Hungarians in Transylvanian.

Kossuth knew it so well as Wesselényi that a common will would have to be expressed in Hungarian and Transylvanian politics with respect to the union issue, while the consent of Vienna would be essential as well. He finished his above-mentioned article in *Pesti Hírlap* by noting that everything would have to be examined carefully, openly and honestly from the question of independence to the whole system of feudal tenants, as “nothing could be lost with unification but we could only win in everything.”

Indeed, the union issue was increasingly on the mind of the representatives of the Hungarians in Transylvania and it was thoroughly discussed at the fora of political public life, with the pro-union group gradually growing. Zsigmond Kemény, similar to Wesselényi, expected from the union changes in the field of the so-much awaited development and Dénes Kemény, one of the leaders of the reformist opposition, adopted politics promoting the union.

However, Vienna did not want to make concessions from its position formed back in 1790, according to which the separation of Transylvania and Hungary had to be preserved. The attitude of the Saxons supported this, while the Romanians were waiting.

1848 brought a new situation regarding the questions of the union and civic development: after more like a theoretical way of politicising, the European revolution also offered the possibility of a union. Kossuth did not hesitate to make use of the political atmosphere the revolution in Paris in February stirred up and he compiled a program from the demands of the opposition national movement. Naturally, the union of Transylvania was included. Among the legislation proclaimed in Pozsony (Bratislava) in April 11, 1848, the union figured in Act VII. By then, the “twelve points” of the “Youth of March”, the company of Petőfi, had been known all over Transylvania: this too included the demand of the union, which was welcomed by the Hungarians in Transylvania.

News about the events in Budapest reached Kolozsvár (Cluj) on March 20 and the members of the reformist opposition staying there started consultations on what to do at once. They reported on this to Miklós Wesselényi, who was staying at his property in the Partium, and asked him to leave for Pest and Pozsony so that he could represent the interests of Transylvania.

It is not by chance that Wesselényi himself hurried to notify Kossuth about the happenings in Transylvania: the news filled him with pleasure. On March 23, he wrote a letter to Kossuth to whom he had expressed his appreciation for the petition of March 3 scarcely ten days before. Now, he went even further: “may you and all those be blessed” who could take advantage of the favourable turn

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(that is, the revolution in Vienna). What has happened since, he continued, “is heartlifting and fills the chests with fresh air”. He, Wesselényi, “has been living amongst the storms of enthusiasm and happiness”. However, he also had been tormented by troubles because the three evil pillars that absolutism had besides the mercenaries: hierarchy, oligarchy and bureaucracy, which had been offended by the events and could mount a counter force at all costs.

In spite of his fears, the news from Kolozsvár thrilled Wesselényi and he did not hesitate to write to Kossuth about them. The former opposition and the conservatives proclaimed together their demand for a general and complete union and the readiness for its implementation in Kolozsvár already on March 20. “Several from the opposition called upon me as well – writes Wesselényi – to go to Pozsony to promote this case”. As “I imagined to hear the call of my nation in this request, I regretted that I could not depart that very hour, that is, yesterday.” Thus, he accepted the “challenge” and confirmed this in his letter addressed to János Bethlen, Sr. and his companions: in this call, “I believe I hear the word of my nation. I take it as a command, I shall go.” And his signature: “Your true fellow citizen.”

He left for Pozsony cherishing great hopes. On his way, he addressed the assembly in Pest and was received with exuberant celebration.

At what stage the issue of the union was in Pozsony when Wesselényi got there and what role he could have in the formulation of Act VII on the union?

It is a fact – and it was not accidental that Wesselényi mentioned this in his letter written to Károly Kis, his legal administrator – that “The Transylvanians have elaborated a bill with respect to the union prior to my arrival but I did not like it. We drafted another that was passed by both “tábla” (sections of the Hungarian Diet).”

Let us see what bill Wesselényi and his colleagues rejected and what bill they came up with.

Dénes Kemény refers to a union proposal in his letter addressed to Kossuth on March 22, 1948, “the formulated version you hold”. Kossuth submitted this proposal on April 2 under the title “On the legislative unification of Hungary and Transylvania”. However, it was Kossuth himself to stop the debate at the district meeting of the orders scheduled for April 5, saying that the delegates arriving from the Partium can “give us more information” on this question. Aladár Urbán has a good reason to point out that Miklós Wesselényi and Ödön Beöthy, upon their arrival to Pozsony objected to the above-mentioned bill created in a spirit prior to the changes of March 15, because it would have stipulated the unification of the two parliaments only.

Wesselényi and his colleagues thus rejected this plan on a partial union and elaborated a bill on a complete union. Wesselényi reports on the events in his letter of April 10, addressed to the former leader of the Hungarian national movement in Transylvania, János Bethlen, Sr. (Wesselényi always uses the plural when writing about the elaboration of the bill even though we know that in the Upper House it was him to carry through the version that did not contain the

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clause on the previous consent of Transylvania to the appearance of its representatives at the assembly of popular representation in Hungary.) In the above-mentioned letter addressed to János Bethlen, he also refers to the fact that the “most significant part [of the bill] broke” because the condition was included that the “participation in the [next] assembly in Hungary” would depend on the approval of the Transylvanian parliament. According to Wesselényi, this modification implied that the opposition “Will now use tooth and nail to make the next parliament in Transylvania oppose the union.” He, therefore, also marked the necessary tasks: the case of the union will have to be made an “issue of fashion and the public opinion”. What is more, he believed, it would be preferable to have several local authorities decide that no matter what the decision of the parliament will be, they would send delegates to Pest, to the national assembly. He also suggested that a petition campaign should be launched toward the Hungarian government and a request should be sent to His Majesty. In his opinion, the “union has become a vital question for both Transylvania and the Hungarian homeland.”

The mission of Wesselényi, however, did not end with what we described above. After Kossuth had listened to Ödön Beöthy and Wesselényi, he submitted a motion on the implementation of Act 1836:21, that is, the re-annexation of the Partium. Wesselényi was appointed the royal commissioner for the implementation (Ödön Beöthy received the same assignment in Zaránd [Zărănd]).

From the point of view of the Hungarians in Transylvania, Kossuth found the union of vital importance because they had already fallen into a minority position in the counties and their number was in decrease. Another point of which he had the same opinion as Wesselényi was that the union could be lasting only if the peoples of Transylvania would also accept it. Kossuth and the leaders of the Hungarian national movement believed that the nationality issue could be settled through the extension of general basic freedoms. They thought that the Romanian people could be won with this to support the unification with Hungary, where peasant tenants had been free since March. This was why Kossuth and the others hurried to link the union to the extension of the emancipation of the peasant tenants in Transylvania.

It was a decisive momentum in the question that the parliament in Transylvania codified the union in its first act in Kolozsvár on May 30, 1848. The king signed it on June 10, 1848 and, with this, the union was established in a legal sense.

The act on the union, together with unification, also proclaimed with due emphasis the basic principle of the civic nation: “As the equality before the law of all inhabitants in the brotherly Hungarian homeland has been proclaimed and has entered into force, the same and in the same way is acknowledged here as a permanent and inalterable principle valid for every inhabitant of our homeland without prejudice to nationality, language and religion and, through it, every previous law contrary to this is to be abrogated.”

That is: every inhabitant of Transylvania was equal before the law in a civic sense, which meant the legal abolishment of the feudal nations. The feudal

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system that lasted for centuries in Transylvania vanished into historic memory once and for all in Kolozsvár on May 30, 1848.

Besides others, the noted publicist, the would-be outstanding historiographer, Elek Jakab took the news on the historic event in Kolozsvár to the Hungarian government in Pest. He also gave account of the welcome: the members of the government and István Széchenyi also hurried to declare that they rejoiced at these events.

Kossuth received Elek Jakab with warm sympathy, since he saw his union plans were coming true. "After three centuries of partition, our home has become one again [...]. The unification with Transylvania is an increase in force for Hungary but forever for the Hungarians of the [Transylvanian] county it is a vital question because of the Wallachians who are in twice as many."

It is more than interesting that Kossuth used the same expression as Wesselényi: "vital question", namely, to the Hungarians in Transylvania. We also have to consider the following a common political thought that Wesselényi expressed like this: "There is nothing we should be shouting louder," wrote Wesselényi, "than that the union is needed so that Wallachian and Hungarian peasants could have all th(os)e right(s) that had been granted to noblemen previously; and that these latter would carry the burdens of the country together with those who had been peasant tenants; moreover, that persons from one religion and one nation would have rights equal to those possessed by a person from another nation."

It was Wesselényi to submit the bill on the emancipation of peasant tenants to the Diet. "A holy cause it is in support of which I speak" he started one of the most beautiful speeches of his life. He spoke of those, as he put it, who had carried the burdens alone so far. Whom this issue did not fill with sympathy, it was not reality that person uttered but the "glorious slogans of the age: liberty, equality and fraternity were merely sounding, empty words of his [...]. Let the former peasant tenants and serfs not be peasants, miserable plebs any more, but free citizens." It had to be also carried out in Transylvania that had been realised in Hungary months ago: the peasant tenants would have to be liberated. Indeed, one of the advanced acts on the emancipation of peasant tenants was drafted in the parliament of Transylvania on June 6, 1848: former peasant tenants became free citizens and landowners.

Entire Transylvania won with the emancipation of peasant tenants: it was liberated from the shackles of the feudal world that had hindered its development. The act on peasants in Transylvania liberated men and lands more than one and a half decades earlier than in Romania or Russia. Moreover, this process was realised under much advantageous conditions in our case: in Hungary and Transylvania, the state undertook the compensation of the landowners in exchange of the lost peasant services. As opposed to this, according to the 1864 Romanian act on land, the peasants had to redeem themselves.

The Transylvanian laws were soon passed on to the Hungarian parliament of national representation, where Kossuth pronounced his position with respect to

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the basic freedoms on several occasions during the discussions of the Transylvanian issues.

We have to mention the fact that several problems occurred during the civic development of Székely Land that the last feudal assembly, meeting in Kolozsvár, could not resolve. These were the emancipation of peasant tenants in Székely Land and the problem of the Székely border guard system organised under Maria Theresa. The first problem was caused by the fact that a part of the “urbarial serfs” settled on the property called the “Székely heritage” were in the service of smallholder Székely border guards or free Székely farmers and these could not receive a land upon their emancipation. Kossuth, at the suggestion of others, wanted to move these poor Székely to the plains of the Hungarian treasury and had a bill prepared on this.

The other problem was more complicated: the free Székely of Háromszék (Trei Scaune) and Csík (Ciuc), whom the Habsburg empire forcedly transformed into a military order in 1764, wanted to get rid of the military burdens and the border guard system of foreign mentality right after the beginning of the revolution. However, this could not be realised – on the one hand because the imperial commander-in-chief of Transylvania opposed it and on the other because Transylvanian politicians – even Wesselényi – wanted three Székely border regiments in arms because they feared the movements of the Romanians in Transylvania, since the memory of the Horea revolution was still alive in their memories.

Kossuth himself was uncertain as well. Therefore, he proposed that a separate Transylvanian army of light horsemen be set up composed mainly of Székely. In the meanwhile, the debate was going on in the assembly of popular representation in Pest with proposals emerging one after another for the solution of the Székely issue.

Kossuth himself held the floor several times after having talked to the delegates of the Székely and requested the adoption of a uniform act valid to all citizens: the time of privileges was over. He made these declarations because the Székely had formulated demands concerning the restoration of those rights, of which the Habsburg power had previously deprived them: tax exemption and the free use of salt. Kossuth knew it for certain that the Székely would be glad to see a law curing their grievances. However, he could not think in terms of the restoration of former feudal rights but only in the expansion of rights ensuring civic freedom, which was in harmony with his principles. His address mobilising both “heart and mind” went like this at the session of the parliament on August 24, 1848: “I have many times declared that no one in the unified homeland can prove more true fraternal love and sympathy than I do; I count it among my dearest duties to arrange for its situation not on the basis of privileges but based on common law and burdens connected to common law and liberty [...]. Let us not heal the wrongs but lay the foundations of rights.”

He put it clearly: based on civic equality before the law, basic freedoms – valid for everyone – had to be established. With this, properly speaking, he also took a

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stand on the endeavours of Romanian national movements that wanted the Romanian to be the fourth “feudal” nation of Transylvania. Hungarian and Transylvanian laws, together with the feudal privileges, annulled feudal nations as a category of public law. This was no doubt a decision in harmony with European liberalism. Yet, could this approach calm the Romanians and Saxons of Transylvania?

We know that neither the Romanian nor the Saxon leaders adopted the ideas of Kossuth. What is more, in the autumn of 1848, they joined the anti-Hungarian alliance proposed by Vienna against Hungary.

Kossuth was disappointed with his ideas and turned to the Romanians with an appeal: he acknowledged that the people carried heavy burdens. However, the time of liberty has come and the people have become free: “the sorage has been abolished with respect to Hungarians and Wallachians [...] Hungarians and Wallachians have equal right to arrange the affairs of the country, they are not excluded from any public office, and all honest ways of earning a living are open to them similar to the Hungarians.” He called upon the Romanians, who participated in revolts to return to peaceful life. At this point, we have to note that those who try to judge the policies of Kossuth toward nationalities on the basis of a few, sometimes really threateningly worded sentences they pick out, usually proceed with a prejudice and are mistaken. However, when facts are compared with the incriminate sentences of the speeches, they can easily understand that Kossuth used the strong words because he tried to avoid that the problems would actually come about.

The leadership of the revolution, among them Lajos Kossuth, were often accused of starting to deal with the question of the nationalities too late and negotiating with the politicians of the national minorities in Hungary from a position of power.

Today’s Hungarian historical research accepts in connection to this that this leadership was not willing to make concessions regarding neither territorial division nor the unified Hungarian political nation. Beyond that, however, it sought to make clear the relationship of Hungary and the nationalities living in it with a wide-ranging extension of rights. Kossuth expected the union commission elected in Kolozsvár and operating in the Hungarian parliament and the Romanian members of the Hungarian Diet to elaborate the appropriate laws in Transylvania, among them the bill on national minorities. And he did not have to wait for long. The first bill of Wesselényi was ready already in August 1848. It sought to guarantee the right to use the mother tongue. On September 19, 1848, the union commission accepted a bill from the Romanian members of the Hungarian parliament. This declare that the Romanians could use their Romanian language undisturbed in their churches, ecclesiastic matters, and in the primary and higher level schools; they had the rights to make speeches in their mother tongue at consultations in the county and the seats; Romanians would be employed in public administration “in a fair proportion”. Paragraph 16 stated that “all those rights that other nations of this country possessed or would be granted through legislations, the Romanians should also be endowed with.”

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It can be seen that the Hungarian parliament started to deal with the question of national minorities starting from the summer of 1848. That the proposals became an act only much later (July 1849), it can be attributed not to the ignorance of Kossuth and his colleagues but primarily (though not exclusively) to the deterioration of the internal situation. After that Croatian Ban Jellačić, encouraged by Vienna, had launched an armed attack against Hungary on September 11, 1848, an internal crisis ensued, the Batthyány cabinet resigned and the National Defence Committee (Országos Honvédelmi Bizottmány) headed by Kossuth, which acted as the government, believed that its most important and pressing task was the defence of the country. Every other question was relegated into the background and was put off for a long time. The rethinking of the questions related to this issue makes imperative the revision of false assessments that either Hungarian or Romanian historiography turned into a dogma. Historic sources make this possible in our days.

Regarding the relationship of Kossuth and Bem, such a dogma is that the Transylvania policies of the Polish general were contrary to Kossuth's policies concerning national minorities. In my book published in 1999 on the happenings in Transylvania in 1848–49, I believe, I succeeded in demonstrating that it was originally Kossuth who determined the amnesty politics of Bem. The draft peace of Bem of December 6, 1848 underlines: what he promises is a “resolved intention of the [Hungarian] government”, according to which “every inhabitant has equal rights and duties alike, without prejudice to nationality, religion and rank.”

It is a fact, however, that subsequent to the assault on Nagyenyed (Aiud) (January 9–10, 1849) that had been burnt to ashes and masses of its Hungarian population had been massacred, the politics of Kossuth became much harder and he called for the legal proceedings against those found guilty. However, he had never ordered the killing of masses or a genocide. What is more, he did not agree with the plan of Bem on positioning Székely border guards among the Romanians in the surroundings of Beszterce (Bistrita) because this would have caused further grievances and tensions. It is also a part of reality that he condemned the openly hostile attitude of the Saxon leaders. Following their not negligible role in the first Russian intervention, his policies made the complete military occupation of the Saxons possible so that the forces of the tsar could not be called in again.

After Transylvania had been recaptured, Kossuth ordered Chief Government Commissioner Csány to promote its civic development. It is to be emphasised, however, that changes occurred in the Transylvania policy of Kossuth between the beginning of 1849 and the summer. Although this question requires further thorough research, the data we have at our disposal reveal that in January 1849, he recommended Csány to spare the Transylvanian characteristics as much as possible, while in April 1849, he emphasised the importance of the reorganisation of the administration. “Transylvania needs to be reorganised. The union can become a reality only afterwards. Its institutions need to be harmonised with Hungary, otherwise there will be no continuity. This has to end and the termination

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has to be guaranteed through a new territorial division.” It is to note that it was from this definitely centralising position that Kossuth arrived as far as the Hungarian–Romanian peace bill signed with Bălcescu and Cezar Bolliac, then the act on national minorities adopted on July 14, 1849, and then, in exile, the plan of the Danubean confederation under which Transylvania could have decided about its fate alone.

The reorganisation had hardly begun when unexpected events occurred and no effective change occurred in the administration based on counties and Székely and Saxon seats.

Social changes, however, were fundamental. The peasant tenants acquired the status of the free peasants and a part of them (a thin stratum) also acquired suffrage. The privileges of the nobility ended and they became citizens obliged to pay the taxes. Many obstacles arose on the way toward a civic society, since Transylvania was a theatre of war starting from October 1848. The civil war took great tolls among Hungarian nobility and officials and even among the civic inhabitants – especially on the territories of the counties and devastated the settlements in large areas. However, Kossuth still did not opt for a politics of revenge: he was for reconciliation.

The historic characteristics of the Székely society also made the civic development of Székely Land difficult. The peasant tenant issue could only be resolved in part and the opposition to the principle of sharing the burden of taxes lasted longer among the Székely than in other counties. However, the enforcement of civic laws gained momentum after Transylvania had been recaptured. And yet, again, weapons took the place of peaceful days with the intervention of the tsar. Following the capitulation at Világos (Siria) and Zsibó (Jibou), retorsion and the military structure of the Habsburg power produced a genuine counter-revolutionary situation.

Back in those times, Kossuth believed that the war of independence could be re-started through making use of the conflicts for power but the military capitulation of Austria in front of France and then Italy sealed off the possibility of diplomatic solutions.

In exile, he had a chance to re-think everything that had happened and, indeed, he looked back to 1848–49 in his documents written. Pondering over the past from the distance of several decades, he saw the results of the 1848 revolution as follows: “The origins of our reforms themselves prove that they could not create a ground for the power to resort to aggression against us who remained within the limits of the historical laws of progressive development. In fact, the improvements we implemented can be traced back to two principles. One is: justice to the people. The other: safeguarding the constitution. The second was our right, the first was our duty.”

Kossuth was always in the lead when it came to the fulfilment of one’s duties. And he also led when it came to uniting the best forces of the Hungarian nation for the sake of the great common goal, the future of the homeland. This Kossuth does not separate but unites. This can be the message to present and future generations.