

Background

The available references on the Chango issue would make up an imposing library. Finnish, German, Hungarian and Romanian scholars have been dealing with the history, language, and ethnography of this extraordinary ethnic group living in the Moldavian part of Romania. Since the Chango issue has become a political problem, a steadily growing number of papers have been published with the aim to justify the Romanisation, the artificially accelerated assimilation of the Changos.

Irrelevant for the Council of Europe

Jean Nouzille's paper entitled "The Changos of Moldavia" is a fine example of those political pamphlets. Namely **from the point of view of minority protection and human rights the origin of a given ethnic group is fully irrelevant, if we are dealing with the civil, political, economic and cultural rights of the community concerned.** Nonetheless it certainly deserves a few comments (to keep silence would mean to agree).

The paper is discussing extensively the Romanian origin of the Hungarians of Moldavia. In this respect it has to be pointed out that dozens of historical, linguistical, ethnographic and religion-historical sources prove the Hungarian origin of the Changos.

At any rate, we think that the Council of Europe is not concerned with the issue of their origin, which is of subordinate importance for the present situation, but rather with the unsettled real problems of the Changos, and the tensions resulting from the very fact that those problems are still unsettled.

The Chango issue is a timely problem of human rights versus assimilation

This is proved by an attached example of the latest requests, in which 10 Moldavian Chango parents from Cleja village request their 14 children to be given lessons of their mother tongue (i.e. Hungarian), referring to two very recently issued Decrees of the Ministry of Education (nr. 3113/31.01.2000 and 3533/31.03.2000). (**Annex**)

Para 1 of Article of the Recommendation 12201/1993 adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 1 February 1993 formulates the right to education in the mother tongue as follows.

"Any individual belonging to a national minority has the right to learn his/ her mother tongue and to education in his/ her mother tongue in an appropriate number of schools and state institutions of education and instruction, distributed according to the geographic distribution of the minority".

The nationalist Romanian politics of our days is insisting very aggressively and most consequently on the assimilation of the several tens of thousand strong Hungarian community living isolated in Moldavia, lacking civil and clerical intelligentsia.

Nouzille's paper intends to create a "scientific" background for this assimilation which is utterly incompatible with the spirit and the aims of the Council of Europe. However, in crucial issues it is based on unprofessional theories and unscientific statements. Its argumentation is not scientific but ideological. For these reasons it is **unsuitable to serve as a basis for the objective discussion of the protection of the Chango minority culture.**

The changing and elusive number of the Changos in Moldavia

The Hungarians of Moldavia (Changos) are living in two major blocks: in the North in the surroundings of the towns Suceava and Roman, in the South in the surroundings of Bacau, and on the banks of the rivers Tatros and Siret. (1).

It is very difficult to determine their number, due to the lack of reliable sources. According to the descriptions given by medieval travellers, the great majority of the Roman Catholics in Moldavia had Hungarian names and spoke Hungarian (2). According to the first official census made in the Moldavian Principality (1859) 90 percent of the Roman Catholics were of Hungarian nationality (3). In a lexicon published in Bucharest at the end of the 19th century (4) it is stated that "there are entire villages with Chango families, where not a word of Romanian is spoken, e.g. Forrófalva and Cleja."

Considering the data on the nationality contained by the different census executed in the 20th century one has to keep in mind that in the time of developing nationalism the politics of the east European countries was directed on the creation of a nation-state, displaying virtually no tolerance towards the coexisting minorities. For this reason the census statistics in many cases are not reliable, manipulated, and contradictory. This is in particular true for the case of the peripherally situated Changos.

The Romanian census of 1930 registered 23 thousand Hungarians in Moldavia (5). This figure is obviously in contradiction with calculations deduced from earlier statistics and with the on-the-spot experience (6). In each of the two villages mentioned above, only one single Hungarian was registered. It is hardly believable that the two fully Hungarian villages should have become fully Romanian in 30 years.

After World War II, the Changos officially became almost disappeared. Although the **Hungarian Popular Association registered about 60,000 Hungarians in the 50s (7)**, the **official census indicated 17.105 in 1956, 8.332 in 1966 and 4.258 in 1977.**

After all, what may be the actual number of those Changos who are Hungarian-speaking and declare themselves to be Hungarians? According to the local experience and research performed by Hungarian scholars it is still somewhere between **50 and 70 thousand, but is steadily decreasing due to the intensive assimilation process.**

Some words on their controversial past

It has been proved by ethnographic data and written sources that the Changos have come to Moldavia from the West, from the Carpathian basin (8). The first Chango settlements in Moldavia were ordered to be set up by Hungarian kings. The task of the frontier-guard settlements established in the 13th century was to throw back the Tartar incursions. Their population was steadily increasing by voluntary emigration from Hungary (mainly from Transylvania) in subsequent waves, until the 18th century (9).

The Hungarian (and in part Saxon) origin of the Roman Catholics of Moldavia was admitted by Romanian historians, too. (10, 11)

It was as late as in the 1980s that a previously marginal theory became widely propagated (by D. Marinos), assuming that the Changos are Romanians turned Hungarians, and should be called "Romanian Catholics" instead of "Roman Catholics".

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This pseudoscientific theory promptly obtained enthusiastic political support and eventually has become the officially adopted, only admissible theory. It has provided the so badly needed "scientific" basis for the forced Romanization of the Changos.

Varieties of assimilation

1. The assimilation process started, in fact, much earlier than the nationalistic 19th century. But in early times it was of religious rather than national nature. Namely the Roman Catholic Changos were living among Orthodox Romanians, and up to the present day have never obtained from the Vatican to have Hungarian-speaking priests. They had even to pray in a foreign language.

2. In the time of the 19th century's "national revival" all possible measures were taken to accelerate the process of assimilation. There were no Hungarian-language schools, and the use of Hungarian in the offices was prohibited (12).

3. A much more **promising intermezzo** occurred after World War II. At that time the Changos were considered in Romania as part of the Hungarian national minority. Hungarian-language classes were started in the schools, and even a Hungarian-language Teachers' College was established in the town of Bacau. Priests of Chango origin accepted confessions in Hungarian, and Hungarian-language psalms were sung in the churches. The Hungarian Popular Association was allowed to open offices in the Chango villages in order to organize the protection of their interests.

4. This episode of "sunshine" did not last long. From the mid-fifties on **unconceivably aggressive measures of assimilation followed**. The Hungarian kindergartens and schools were closed, it was forbidden to use the "devil's language" in church (13). Those Changos who stuck to their Hungarian nationality were persecuted and intimidated. It was forbidden to have contact with Hungary, and even with the Hungarians living in Transylvania. People coming from Hungary were stopped by the police and sent back. Even Transylvanian Hungarians were allowed to enter the Chango villages under severe control only (14).

Missing completely Hungarian-language schools, books, and newspapers, and due to the adverse attitude of the ecclesiastic authorities, the Chango ethnic group has lost its intelligentsia. As a result, the 80s witnessed the tragic spectacle of an extremely helpless and intimidated group of people.

"Catch 22" of the present

The political changes that occurred in Romania in 1989 brought about new hopes and new chances.

Para (3) of Article 32 of the new **Romanian Constitution** states: *"The right of persons belonging to national minorities to learn their mother tongue and the right of being educated in that language is guaranteed; the modalities of the implementation of these rights is defined by law."*

The **Education Law** nr.84/1995 was amended in 1997 (urgent Governmental decree nr. 36/1997) as follows: (Article I, para 4, art.8.: (1) *Education at all levels is done in the Romanian language. It is also done, according to the provisions of this Law, in the languages of national minorities, and in internationally used languages.* (2) *In each settlement are organized and function units, classes or formations of study with Romanian as the language of instruction, and, in cases, with national minority languages as the language of instruction, or mother tongue scholarship is assured in the most appropriate locality where it is possible."*

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The Changos promptly took advantage of the possibilities: they founded associations to protect their interests, launched a Hungarian-language newspaper, submitted applications to the Church and to the State requesting permission of Hungarian-language church services and education.

However, the experience of the past years (1997-2000) have proven that even the permission obtained from the Ministry of Education in Bucharest (by Minister Andrei Marga himself on 4 March 1998) does not help: they are simply ignored and not implemented by the organs of the local administration (in particular by Mrs P. Florescu, head of the School Inspectorate of Bacau County). The parents who signed the petition are submitted to serious psychological pressure in order to withdraw their request. In most - but not all - cases with success.

We think that this is certainly not the right and justifiable solution of the problem.

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SUMMARY

The Chango issue is a problem of the culture of Europe. The forced assimilation of the Changos would do harm to the ethnic and cultural diversity of Europe. The Hungarians of Moldavia, due to their long-time isolation, have preserved a rather archaic dialect and folklore. Their existence is one of the treasures of European ethnography; their disappearance by assimilation would mean an irremediable loss.

The Chango issue is a timely problem of human rights. The right to maintain one's national identity, to have education and religious services in one's mother tongue, is one of the basic rights of any member of humankind living anywhere in the world. This must be true also for the Changos of Moldavia in Romania, disregarding their origin.