*Information about interviewee:*

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*R= Respondent - Ferenc Kalmár*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: What are the priorities for the Hungarian state with regards to the Hungarians living abroad?

R: So, I started to tell you already, that after the First World War Hungary was divided so that 1/3rd of the Hungarian population of the Carpathian Basin, the so-called historical Hungary remained outside the borders. It means now that after Yugoslavian wars when new states were formed and the abolition of the Soviet Union, now we can say that the members of Hungarian nation lives in 7 states around Hungary, the so-called Kin States. The biggest community is in Romania, counting still 1.3 million persons, then Slovakia with a little bit more than 400,000 in Serbia now around 200,000. Then Ukraine in Transcarpathia around 150,000. 10,000 in Slovenia and Croatia. In Austria we have the autonomous Hungarians are also around 10,000. In Austria there a lot of Hungarians going to Austria to work, some of them have apartments there and live between here and there. So, what is our relationship with these communities? Well, historically, after 1990 we signed agreements with our neighbouring states. So, we have agreements that also concern the national minorities. We have agreements with Slovakia, Serbia, Ukraine, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia, the only one with which we do not have an agreement with is Austria. I don’t know why, but this is how it is. Austria is a Western state already, so it is different. This agreement says we should form the so called joint, mixed committees for handling the problem or dealing with the problem of national minorities. With have these committees. I was nominated to be appointed the co-president of all these 6 committees, this is why I am here. I have been here two years already and we have succeeded to sign the basis agreement, which says that these committees should have a meeting every year, at least once. Unfortunately, this was not respected, because of different political situations. For instance, with Slovakia, there were meetings, but no protocols signed. Last year we had a meeting here in Budapest with the Slovakian counterpart and we succeeded to reach an agreement in many respects, there are still problems which we put in the forward preamble of the protocol, where we could not reach an agreement. About 6/7 issues, for instance, double citizenship, use of mother tongue, is also the interpretation of the Slovak delegation is different from our interpretation. There was a referendum in Beret, a village, its Slovakian name is Beret and in Hungarian it is also Beret, it is inhabited mostly by Hungarians. There was a referendum to give back the Hungarian name of the village because the Slovakian authorities gave a totally Slovak name to the village and the referendum said that okay, people want to have back their name but the Slovak authorities said that okay, you had the referendum but it was only an indicator and we don’t need to take it into account, so they didn’t take it into account. Then the question of television programmes in mother tongue, the Slovakian law says that it should be done proportionally with the national minority, relative to the whole population, but there was an argument because it is much less than the proportion of Hungarians in Slovakia. It is much less than it should be according to the law. They said we should not understand this law in this way but in other ways, so it is not clear. But anyhow we signed the protocol. With the Ukraine it was very difficult. In 2011 we had a meeting, I was not here at that time, I was a member of parliament at that time. We had a meeting where they could not sign the protocol, the counter parts could not sign the protocol. After that time there was no dialogue between the two parts. I tried to initiate a dialogue, but it was very difficult, because when I was nominated in 2015, I started immediately in all relations. In 2016 somebody was nominated from the Ukrainian counterpart, Deputy minister of culture, we established a date of when I should go to Kiev to talk to him, but unfortunately, he was sacked one or two weeks before I had to go. We started to wait again, to wait for the new appointment, there is a new appointment and about one or two weeks ago we met with this lady. Ms. Vlamenko, Deputy Minister of Culture. It was very interesting to see the Ukraine and their behaviour in this position, because as I saw the most important question is Donbas, the Russians and Eastern Ukraine. This question of the 150,000 Hungarians in Ukraine is something of a 5th order or 10th order. This is not a question on the table. But there are also problems regarding double citizenship, and you know that Mr. Orbán and Pereshenko they had an agreement in Malta. Mr Pereshenko said that this would be solved with bi-lateral agreements, but now they retreat, it was something of a promise, but it is not so easy. It seems that they do not want to do that. There are planned amendments, the use of mother tongue, which would restrict its use, and education, to restrict education because they tried to force the use of the Ukrainian language. The whole of Ukraine, there is a big problem, not everybody speaks the Ukrainian language, not only the Russians, in this Western part. You know that there is a part, Galicia, that is part of Poland before the war, and there are also problems to use the Ukrainian language. They tried to force, but this is not the way to do it in the 21st Century. They should use other methods to use the Ukrainian language. With Romania we do not have a signed protocol. It was signed in 2009, we even didn’t have a meeting of the committee. They would like to do that; we would like to do that. But there are so many problems, but when we talk to the co-president, they do not want to speak about our problems in Romania. For instance, the medical University, there is no Hungarian section of the University. Although in spite of the of fact that Romanian central law says that 3 universities are multi-cultural Universities. The medical university is not operated well, the other two – fine, but they say that the university has its autonomy. Okay fine, but that doesn’t mean that you are independent of the national laws. So, it doesn’t work. The other thing is very important is restitution, mostly to the churches, and there are also some very interesting cases, of resituated property. It was resituated to the church and they started the school, and after two or three years the authorities said it was not right to give it back and give it back to the state. There are other cases. There are also 1000-year-old chronicles, that are insured for millions of dollars. These were accepted when Chearascho took loans against different banks as collateral. The archbishop of Transylvania has applied to get them back. There was a governmental decree to give it back to the Roman Catholic church. In 1993. Then the archbishop went to the European Court. But in spite of this, they did not want to give it back. The use of the Secular symbols. The problem is that they cannot use their own flag. Romanian culture has European root, in Transylvania, there is the Eastern root in Moldavia which is very close to the Russian culture and the Balkan root. And you can see the difference in thinking between these three parts. I told Romanian counterparts that it is a tragedy the capital is in the South, if it was in Transylvania the thinking would be something completely different. So, these are problems they do not want to discuss.

Serbia. In Serbia things are going better. They made big steps for reconciliation with Hungary. You know in the Second World War, and I would say there are periods in our common history, were Hungarians killed Serbs and then Serbs killed Hungarians. I had the occasion in Strasbourg, I was member of parliament and also member of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe. I met Mr. Nikovic, we spoke about the Hungarian Serbian reconciliation and he told me that, but you don’t know how many problems I had with my Serbs. The Serbs said You could your reconciliation with the Hungarians because they killed us, and I told them that we killed them. So, we have to draw the line, it is not possible to continue like this into the future. This is true. They did something very very positive. There were 3 Hungarian villages in Serbia, and they were declared of collective guilt after the Second World War. So, everyone who was from that village was declared guilty of some massacre. So now the Serb parliament has cancelled this law. So, the only collective guilt country in Europe is Slovakia. They have the banished decrees, just after the war, they said that the Hungarians and the Germans. All are guilty. Presidential decrees. Now I would say the relations are starting to get better and better. We proposed to them to make an action plan for the protection of national minorities. This action plan was adopted, and we helped formulate all the items. It was accepted and adopted in Brussels. Now Serbia wants to join the European Union and they opened a 23rd chapter which regards the Human rights and minority rights. So, it started to do something, there was a monitor in Serbia not long ago, who said “unfortunately, they adopted this plan okay, but noting was implemented in the last year. So now there is a pressure on Serbia to use these laws and action plans. But it is positive anyhow. Now a little bit general about Serbia. They have election every year in Serbia. Even Serb members of parliament say that we vote every year and we cannot work. From campaign to campaign. We should stop with this voting. But development is difficult without stability. Croatia and Slovenia. We have only 10,000 Hungarians, so not too many. Some recognise these communities in their constitutions. They have the right to delegate in the parliament, one member of parliament. They have a fixed place. Italians and Hungarians in Slovenia. Hungarians have a fixed place in the parliament in Croatia.

What is still important? These 3 Slav countries in the south, they recognised so called collective rights. Because here are the big differences between countries, because at European level, there is a document adopted by the Council of Europe in 1995, it was signed in 1995. The framework convention for the protection of national minorities. In every document dealing with this question, they make reference to this document, but my big problem with this is that it goes towards individual rights, but you need to stop or to put a brake to the assimilation process, you need collective rights also. In these 3 Slavic countries, there are collective rights, there are national councils for national minorities. In Vojvodina there are 19. The Hungarian council is the biggest and quite well organised. But in Romania and Slovakia there are no collective rights and they do not want to recognise this. When you see such a formulation the right of persons belonging to national minorities. They don’t say the right of the national community is to have schools, to have so and so. Now I have to speak a little bit about myself. In 2014, I made a report for the Council of Europe, it was the situation and rights for the national minorities in Europe. There I stated that we needed the collective rights, and we pushed for collective rights and it was adopted. When I prepared this report during my so-called fact-finding visits it was interesting to see international lawyers, when I say everybody has the right to use their mother tongue, this is not a collective right, this is strange because I cannot speak alone or to myself. Or when I go to school, I have the right to learn in mother tongue, but when I go to school this is also a collective right. Even if I have a teacher it is already a collective thing as two people is already collectively. They said, no this is so called individual right with collective dimension. When you use the term collective, it implies more than individual, politically.

Economy. How does the Hungarian state support these people economically? Well in 2011 we voted in the new constitution, not called constitution, but called basic law or fundamental law. In this fundamental law, it is written that the Hungarian state bears responsibility for the Hungarian communities abroad. This is the fundamental thing. In the last years, the Hungarian economy has strengthened. Our macro-economic indicators are quite good. The strength of economy is high. So, first of all we started with Serbia, because the relations are good. Our prime minister stated that we give loans for Vojvodina. After 50billion Forints. Not all at once. It is a process which started already and will last for several years. This is the aim. This is in accordance with the Serbs, to make people say there. They have taken the Hungarian citizenship but go west to work. Not too many years ago they were double. Not because they came to Hungary but to the West to work. This is a very big problem. When I left Romania in 85, there were 2 million and now there are 1.3. A lot going out, coming here, going west.

I: It was not the intention of the Hungarian state to encourage Hungarians to migrate to Hungary?

R: It was not. It is the intention that people should stay on the territory where you were born, and you should have the possibilities there to live a normal life. So, this is what we started in Serbia. This money is given through application. There is a tender competition. Tenders are issued with different titles. Not all together immediately, but one following the other. Then we started towards Slovenia, only ½ billion Forint, in the region of Mora. We gave tenders, also for economic reasons and development. In Ukraine, we start economic and healthcare structure there, but we don’t know what the cost will be. Interesting the Bandera we came by car from Lvov, we saw many Bandera flags. IMF and EU finance Ukraine and they do not ask to get rid of this type of politics? They were a fascist group and killed 100,000 Polish people. In Slovakia there is a beginning of economic development fund, but it is only the beginning, it is not set up for the time being. It is under preparation. In Romania there are tenders, but I wouldn’t say there is an amount of money dedicated to Romanian investors. These tenders are not grouped only for Romania. In Ukraine, living standards and how offices are furnished and so on, it is the level of Romania in the 1980s.

I: How is the money distributed?

R: The money is dedicated by the government and the distributor, in Serbia, is a foundation, the Prosperitati Foundation and they distribute the money. I think that not only the Serb part, but someone from Hungary is in the board of trusts and they judge the tenders.

I: Does the Hungarian state support the political parties representing the Hungarians in neighbouring territories?

R: The strongest relationship is with Mr Pasztor for the VMS because, as I have told you, as the Serb state recognises collective rights, there is, time to time, every 4 or 5 years there are elections for the national councils. There can be different parties, whoever wins, they delegate the national councils, not electors but members. But usually, the VMS reaches 80-85% and so they delegate. What they say is fundamental to the Hungarian national council, as they have the most numerous numbers of delegates there. In this sense, we deal with them. In Romania, there is a party of the Hungarians which is in the parliament. Now it is in collation with a Hungarian civic party of Romania, but there is a 3rd party of the Hungarian national civic party. Mr. Turkish. He was a reformed priest, who started the revolution in 1989. He has a party which is quite small. The MNDS which is the biggest in coalition with this small one. When all 3-party started in elections the MNDS gets also over 80%.

I: Does the Hungarian state offer financial support to these parties?

R: Well. Not directly to the parties but for some programmes. We have a state secretariat for national politics, but they have some money for these tenders. The so-called Gábor Bethlen fund. Gábor Bethlen was a priest in Transylvanian in the middle-ages. Here different churches, schools, for example for renovation of a church it is possible to apply. Through this fund there are tenders. But directly, the state does not support the parties?

I: Politically?

R: Politically there is a so-called, ever year meeting, the Hungarian Standing Conference and there is also another forum, the forum of the Hungarian members of parliament from the Carpathian Basin. These forums have committees dealing with diaspora and so on. In this way, we have the relations with members of parliament in the surrounding parties. In Ukraine we have one member of parliament and mayors who are Hungarian. In Slovakia the situation is more difficult. There are two parties and they divided the Hungarian community, unfortunately. There is the Hungarian community party which is not in the parliament. This is the only ethnic Hungarian party and the HID-MOST party, which is a mixed party. In this way, this bridge party is not invited to this forum. Our experience is that if something started to mix the end is that there will be some Hungarians in the Slovak party. In Serbia it happened that there were some Hungarians in Serbian parties and they voted against their own community. For instance, about 6/7 years ago, when the Serbs voted about restitution, but there were some exclusions and mostly the Hungarians were excluded, and the Hungarians in Serb political parties voted against their own communities. We think that this is not the healthy way. You cannot defend the interests of your community if you are mixed. In this party they are half half, usually the ethnic majority part erases the minority part.

I: What is the ideal situation?

R: Demographic question first of all. What we experienced is that these communities are smaller and smaller. The question is where is that million missing? What I see in my big family in Transylvania is that there are only a few Hungarians left. Assimilation is very strong. We need to preserve the cultural and language somehow. This is a basic objective. The other objective is to make people stay there. Hungarians also went to Spain and Italy to work. We would like them to stay at home. My big question is why somehow who works in England, gets ten times the salary for the same work here in Hungary. Maybe even more. The situation is disastrous. Why does someone in metro Vienna or Ger, 100km away or at LIDL at two cities either side of the border gets ten times more. Now with free movement, everybody moves to where they get more money. In 1990 we thought that Western Europe would help us, they did not, they came here to make profit. They made profit, they closed factories. They privatised, sold everything and went away. From what money should I sustain the welfare, education, healthcare because the economy went down?

There are now almost 1 million Hungarians who have taken the Hungarian situation. More than 900,000. The majority in Romania. There is one problem here, the double citizenship with Slovakia. There are very few who have taken citizenship in Slovakia, few have dared. If Slovakia approved to have double citizens, then another 200,000 would come immediately. It was outlawed in response to our double citizenship laws. All these ethnic tensions could be solved if the whole of Europe was organised like Switzerland. Everybody should be very clear about their identity. If they are not clear, it is very difficult to produce values. You are not linked to some roots. The term nation-sate means we have one language, one king, one army, and if anyone speaks another language, we chase them out and we kill them. This is an archaic term. Now we should say, unity through diversity. Diversity is a richness. In Romania for instance, they say Romania is ethnically homogenous. This is not true. If you speak with our neighbours they say, okay this is a good law you have in Hungary, but why do they not have a vote in the parliament. They say that “who can speak”, they can even speak in their own language, it happened last year that this Slovenian lady spoke in her own language, but we have a committee of nationalities, 13 nationalities, they have the right to elaborate law drafts and formulate opinion on the draft laws that are on the table of the parliament. They do not have the vote. I always told to my counterparts, that we have a very bad experience with giving votes to representative of the nationalities, because when you have a vote, you enter onto the political market and what happened in Croatia with the Hungarians. They are divided the political parties, one on the right one on the left. They do not speak with each other; they cannot stand each other. The other one is in the parliament representing the some of the Hungarians. When you enter the political market, you either vote for somebody or with somebody and this means you will be channelized on the right or left, or whatever happens and from that time, you do not represent the whole community, you only represent only the left or the right. In this way, the speaker of the nationality has to represent his nationality, and through this way, they can express their opinion and make modifications to these laws. I think this is good, because one votes out of 200 cannot change anything. In spite of the fact they don’t have a vote, they get full salary. Some counterparts do not accept this, they say democracy means vote. I would say this is better. When I was in parliament, I also voted for this law, and I was contented with it. I would say this is better than having a vote. You enter the political market, and this is another situation.

This part of Europe is different to Western Europe. You have 40 years of advance. When I wrote this report, I always say you divide Europe into three parts: Western Europe, where the situation is normally good regarding minorities, in these former communist parts, we can speak about everything because we have democracy but in fact nothing happened in the last 25 years. Nothing happened to advance a little bit. In the former countries of the Soviet Union, if you talk about questions of national monitories or these things, then they get the rifles. They say, you want my country. Another important element is how to teach history. Other countries want us to celebrate the Peace of Trianon, for us we lost a lot, we cannot celebrate that. That is why I say that the teachers of history should say to people, both sides. Why this was good for us, bad for them etc.