

Romania threatens expulsion of Hungarian ambassador as conflict over Székelyföld escalates dramatically

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Romanian Foreign Minister Titus Corlatean has accused Hungarian Ambassador Oszkar Fuzes of contravening diplomatic norms. He may be expelled from Romania unless he "stays within the scope of his authority," he said.

Speaking on Romanian television on Wednesday night, Corlatean condemned the ambassador for voicing support for autonomy for Szekler Land.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Romanian government sharply rejected remarks by Hungarian State Secretary Zsolt Nemeth, who had called on Romania to drop a ban on the use of Szekler symbols and put an end to "symbolic aggression".

The Romanian Foreign Ministry summoned Fuzes, who had made his remarks in a television interview. A subsequent statement called Nemeth's "intervention" unacceptable.

In response, the Hungarian Foreign Ministry said "it is up to Romania" to resolve the issue. Romanian PM: No "lessons";

Earlier on Wednesday, Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta said his country will not tolerate "lessons" from anyone on how to apply its laws. Ponta was speaking in reaction to Zsolt Nemeth, state secretary at the Hungarian foreign ministry, calling on Romania to stop a ban on the use of Szekler flags on office buildings.

Ponta said Romania was applying the highest European standards in the representation of minorities and in local autonomy.

The Romanian Foreign Ministry said in a statement sent to MTI that Nemeth's statement was unacceptable and was in contrast with the strategic partnership that existed between Hungary and Romania, as well as with the spirit of good neighbourly relations.

Bogdan Aurescu, the foreign affairs state secretary, said in the statement that Romania would not accept such "regrettable interventions" that violate Romania's constitutional and legal framework.

Nemeth on Tuesday called on Hungarian local councils to show support to Romania's Hungarian-populated Szekler Land over the flag issue and said he firmly expected Romania to stop this "symbolic aggression".

Government commissioners in Covasna (Kovaszna) and Harghita (Hargita) counties in central Romania have banned the hoisting of the Szekler flag on office buildings.

The Hungarian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday afternoon that the solution concerning the issue of the ban on minority symbols was "in the hands" of Romania. The ethnic community has the right to use its symbols and Hungary therefore supports the use of the Szekler flag, the ministry said in a statement.

The Hungarian position was presented by Hungary's ambassador to Romania in Bucharest's Foreign Ministry where Oszkar Fuzes stressed that it was in line with previous practices as well as with Romanian and EU laws.

Speaking on Wednesday evening Nemeth suggested the Romanian prime minister could have "misunderstood something" before he said that Romania would not tolerate "lessons" from anyone in connection with the issue of the Szekler flag's use.

"What laws do not ban is permitted in Europe. There is no law banning the Szekler flag's use in Romania. In this context European norms, and the norms of a state governed by laws, must be ensured, irrespective of what the premier of Romania may or may not tolerate," Nemeth said in Gyula in south-eastern Hungary.

He said the Szekler people in Romania had the right to use their own flag and expressed hope that the Romanian government would understand, and allow, that. He repeatedly voiced Hungary's support for the Szekler people and its position that the issue had to be resolved by Romania. Hungarian FM backs up ambassador

Foreign Minister Janos Martonyi said on Thursday that nothing the Hungarian ambassador to Romania had said

concerning the issue of autonomy for Szekler Land "deviates from the position of the Hungarian government."

Responding to a question at an unrelated conference on the economy, Martonyi said that Hungary had maintained a clear stance concerning endeavours to ensure autonomy for Szekler Land for the last 22 years. If a community claims some form of autonomy in a democratic way, majority society must consider that claim, he said.

Concerning Romania's banning the Szekler flag from public buildings, Martonyi said that Hungary would act as a partner in resolving the situation.

"No doubt, Romania is in a position to take steps; legal proceedings initiated in connection with displaying the flag in Romania should be dropped," he said.

Martonyi also said he would have talks by phone with his Romanian counterpart Titus Corlatean in the afternoon.

He said the situation must be handled calmly rather than amid the atmosphere in which the Romanian media was dealing with the matter.

The minister said it was very important that, "we did not start the flag-fighting." In the past few months it has been indicated to Romania that the good relations which have been developing well, and the strategic partnership between the two countries, could be endangered, he said. Whereas a reply had often been given that there was nothing to worry about, the Romanian measures taken over the issue of the Szekler flag, "belong in the category of negative gestures.". He said a community's right to display a symbol was today a "European minimum.". MTI (Magyar Tvirati Iroda) is the Hungarian news agency./Politics.hu