(RE)CONSTRUCTING THE DIFFERENCE: HUNGARIAN AND ROMANIAN IDENTITY IN TRANSYLVANIA

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Abstract

This article analyses the living together of Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania and how the local population perceives it. In the tense atmosphere of politics, religion, culture, education and everyday life, the (changing) majority-minority relations of Hungarians and Romanians are experienced and interpreted differently by these communities – producing internal differences as well as distinctions over space and time. While focusing on how these majority-minority relations become manifested institutionally, this article also discusses how political, religious, cultural and educational institutions influence the local population’s perceptions of the living together and the (re)construction of their different identities. We identify the key actors and dominant discourses and show examples of best practice of bridging the social and ethnic cleavages in Transylvania.

Introduction

By studying Transylvania one does not break new ground. The multicultural and multilingual region of Transylvania or «the Switzerland of the East» as the Hungarian Prime Minister István Bethlen called it in 1933, has been subject to many publications so far. Especially for historians (see e.g. Mitu 2001 and 2006) and political scientists has Transylvania been an exiting place of research. However, the multicultural character of the region has also encouraged cultural anthropologists (see Feischmidt 2002; Biró and Lőrinz 1999), ethnographers or social scientists to do research in the area – for instance, the Research Centre for Social Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Science (see Bakó 2003).

What encouraged us as social and political geographers to do research in Transylvania and to write this article is, first, the fact that ethnic/national communities/minorities in Transylvania are slowly or quickly disappearing, as members of the different communities emigrate or assimilate. Therefore, Transylvania is losing its multicultural character and Europe is losing a rich cultural heritage. Between 1930 and 2002 the number of Germans decreased from 800 000 to 60 000, the number of Jews from 700 000 to 10 000, and finally the number of Hungarians decreased from approximately 1 600 000 to 1 400 000 only between 1992 and 2002. The only ethnic minority that has increased in numbers is the Roma community. Second, since Romania applied for EU membership, one also has to bear in mind that the European Union – according to the Copenhagen Criteria – requires (or at least discusses) the protection of minorities from the applicant countries. Particularly for these two reasons, we want to analyze the situation on the eve of the EU accession of Romania, especially with regard to the Hungarian-Romanian living together in Transylvania.

For this purpose we do not want to add to the extensive literature on this context by arguing either for Hungarian or Romanian rights, for instance. That is to say, we are not using an essentialist approach, we do not aim to describe reality, the truth, nor do we expect objectivity. Our approach is a social constructivist one and therefore we rather aim to add to publications such as for example Wodak et al. (1998), analysing the discoursive construction of national identity in Austria; or Feischmidt (2002), writing on Ethnicity as a Construction and Experience in the Transylvanian town of Cluj/Kolozsvár/ Klausenburg. However, this article is mainly based on the ethnographic field research of Béla Filep carried out in 2005 and 2006 (see Filep 2005 and 2006), an outcome of 35 focussed interviews with Hungarians and Romanians, including (political and religious) opinion leaders of both communities, and also involving participant observation as a research tool.

By using a social constructivist approach, we want to examine how truth or difference between Hungarians and Romanians as a ‘fact’ or ‘reality’ is constructed. How do Hungarians and Romanians (re)construct their identities and what are the discourses of the main actors in the field? We want to understand the discourses and logics of argumentation of the main actors in order to better understand the standpoints and identity politics in general. Finally, we examine where one could see the possibility for bridging the discourses in the future in order to prepare the field for negotiations and mediation. Furthermore, we see our article as a contribution to the field of social and political geography by setting out the discoursivity of the topic.

The article comprises four parts. First, we examine how difference is (re)constructed in politics both from the part of the Hungarian and Romanian parties and political organizations. Second, we discuss the (re)construction of difference in terms of identity by the Hungarian and Romanian churches, i.e. how difference is (re)constructed institutionally and how it is perceived. Third, we point out the importance of educational and cultural institutions in the process of identity (re)construction. Finally, we provide some examples of difference-(re)construction in the symbolic and the public space.
(Re)Constructing the Difference in Politics

Politicians are agenda-setters that dominate political and social discourses. Therefore, their (re)constructed perspectives of political, social and economic conditions often influence the living together of people and the latter's perceptions of it. In particular, when politicians talk about difference between certain societal or ethnic groups and make one, for instance, responsible for particular negative developments in society. In this section, we examine how politicians in Romania (re)construct difference especially between Hungarians and Romanians. Furthermore, we investigate how these differentiations affect the living together of Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania.

In the political context and in the history of Transylvania and Romania in particular, nationalism has played a seminal role. In order to illustrate that, one could start the examination with Jenő Szász, president of the Hungarian Civic Alliance (MPSZ), who said that «[in Romania] nationalism is in a way an official policy. (...) I don't say that there are only nationalist politicians, but (...) the nationalist way of thinking or behaviour is still noticeable within the Romanian political elite. Very often, we can say of the Romanian political elite: First Romanian, second Romanian, third Romanian and only then (politically) right or left. When we talk about systems of values, then we cannot always create a common language with them, because as soon as one brings up a problem of the Hungarian community then he sees this through completely different glasses. (...) at that very moment even I cannot break with my roots, the school, the community I grew up in.»

In his statement, Szász explains that nationalism in Romanian politics is actually preventing cooperation between Hungarians and Romanians and the issues which deal with the relations of the two communities do not seem to be negotiable. According to Szász, matters of the Hungarian community, which he as a political representative of the Hungarians tries to make subject of discussion, very often meet with disapproval. Outspoken nationalists as for example the members of Greater Romania Party (PRM) or Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR) refuse Hungarian requests on principle. These parties in particular emphasize the differences between Hungarians and Romanians and other ethnic communities and societal groups in Romania.

After the fall of communism in 1989, PUNR\(^2\) was amongst the first parties established in Romania. It was founded by and supposed to be the political arm of the nationalist-chauvinist Vatra Româneasca (VR), a 'cultural association' that had great influence in Transylvania and that devoted itself to the struggle against Hungarian revisionism and chauvinism (Kolar 1997). The success of PUNR at the elections in 1992 (they won the third-most votes all-over Romania) was partly a consequence of the clashes between Hungarians and Romanians in Târgu Mures/Marosvásárhely/Neumarkt in March 1990. This made both communities opposing, not only in this specific town, but it also led to mistrust between them all-over Transylvania.

However, this also reflected the political-moral state of post- Ceausescu Romania. PUNR and Vatra Româneasca poked in a very unambiguous way the hatred towards Hungarians and other communities. To give an example on the basis of one of the articles of their programme: «Unfortunately, the sacred Romanian soil is still being defiled by the feet of Asiatic Huns, Gypsies and other scum. Let us unite to expel them from our country. Away with the Huns, those tramps, who should never have obtained a foothold in our country, away with the Gypsies who disgrace our country! We want a pure and great Romania» (Paul 1993:152). To give a further example: The Romanian daily România libera wrote in 1992 that Gheorghe Funar, the presidential candidate of PUNR, has an obsession: the Hungarians. «The economic platform of Gheorghe Funar is simple: it is the Hungarian’s fault. The political platform: everything bad derives from the Hungarians. The social, moral, cultural programme: let’s solve the Hungarian problem and we’ll see what comes after that...» (Kolar 1997:397; the authors' translation). Gheorghe Funar was not only the leader of PUNR but also the mayor of Cluj/Kolozsvar/Klausenburg, where he kept the chair for twelve years with nationalist, xenophobic slogans and actions (see e.g. Baláz and Schwartz 1997) – the latter will be presented in the chapter (Re)Constructing the Difference in the Symbolic and Public Space.

Although in the meantime Funar left a weakened PUNR and joined PRM, although he did not change his attitude towards Hungarians. 14 years after the clashes of Târgu Mures/Marosvásárhely/Neumarkt, in March 2004, the Daily Telegraph quoted Funar with the following words: «The Hungarians have been hostile towards us Romanians for 1,100 years. Today all they want is to create a Greater Hungary. Their secret services are more active here than ever. They are training young men as paramilitaries. They have brought in large quantities of guns and explosives. We can expect a Yugoslav-style civil war at any time.» This statement is harmony with the Greater Romania Party (PRM), since this party represents a very similar political line as PUNR does. PRM, too, stirs up against Hungarians, Roma and Jews. According to Woker (2004) PRM’s president Corneliu Vadim Tudor’s inventive against all enemies of the upright Romanians are on record. To these primarily belong those, who had always served

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\(^2\) Initially Partidul de Unione Națională a Românilor din Transilvania/Party of Romanian Unity from Transylvania (PUNRT).
as the scapegoat in Romania’s history: the Jews, the Roma and the Hungarians as the biggest ethnic minority in the country.

PRM’s member’s strategy is the defamation of the other, by particularly blaming Hungarians and Roma for Romania’s economic malaise and by considering them to be in the way of a homogenous nation state as well as a Greater Romania. In its periodical România Mare PRM has got a special column named Unguri (Hungarians), with the aim to spread the assumption of Hungarians’ conspiracies. The October 2006 issue includes, for instance, Spionii maghiari vor sa rupă Transilvania de România! (Hungarian spies want to tear off Transylvania of Romania). The concern one may have in the context of Hungarian-Romanian relations in Transylvania and what is relevant for the Hungarian-Romanian living together is that PRM is still not a negligible force in Romanian politics, although its number of seats in the Romanian parliament decreased from 121 (in 2000) to 69 of 469 (in 2004). To conclude, there are nationalist elements in Romanian politics and society, nationalistic in their attitude and argumentation that aim to strengthen Romanian identity by also (re)constructing and emphasizing the difference between Romanians and other communities in Romania. The crux of the matter is that this kind of Romanian identity-building is at the expense of the non-Romanian communities in Romania.

In light of the EU accession process, PRM did not seem to be a suitable coalition partner for the governing parties. Consequently, the current ruling parties, the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Democratic Party (PD) refused to go in coalition with the nationalists. PNL and PD decided to take the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ), the Hungarian representative in the Romanian parliament, in the ruling coalition. Does this mean that both Hungarians (RMDSZ) and Romanians (PNL and PD) managed to bridge the historically, socially and discursively constructed differences between them? Can we talk about a sustainable cooperation between Hungarians and Romanians in politics? One has to be sceptical, since both side’s decision to go in coalition was a strategic one. For PNL and PD on the one hand, RMDSZ was a more suitable partner in the light of EU accession – due to the lack of votes they needed a third coalition partner. The RMDSZ on the other hand, considered the strategy of cooperation (with compromises) being the best to gain influence for the Hungarians, to defend Hungarian interests and to reach the Hungarian’s goals which we are going to point out in the course of the article.

The process of cooperation had started in 1996 when RMDSZ was in the ruling coalition (1996-2000), too. According to Csaba Takács, that was the first time when Romanian parties, namely the Democratic Convention accepted the Hungarians as potential partners; before 1996, election campaigns were coined by the hostility to Hungarians. By 1996 the RMDSZ had serious legislative influence and means, both on local and national level. We used these means to create a way for this country, in which we can realize our rights, too», says Takács. By acting politically engaged also in the solution of political, economic and social problems of Romania as a whole, one could say that RMDSZ tried to gain support also amongst Romanians. When Béla Markó, president of RMDSZ ran for the presidency of Romania, he used the slogan «Az erdélyi elnök» (the Transylvanian president) for the Hungarian. «Un prededinte ardelean pentru o Românie europeana!» (a Transylvanian president for a European Romania!) for the Romanian electorate. However, the percentage of votes the RMDSZ usually got at the national elections more or less corresponds to the official percentage of Hungarians in Romania. That is to say, elections in Romania have an ‘ethnic’ character, particularly local elections in Transylvania do, and that is when the difference manifests itself in politics. In this context the example of Târgu Mures/Marosvásárhely/ Neumarkt is quite interesting: «In Marosvásárhely we have ethnic elections and unfortunately one has to say that not programmes but persons are elected and this on an ethnic basis», says an RMDSZ member in town. While Hungarians were in majority in the 1990s according to the national census and the mayor was Hungarian as well, in the year 2000 Dorin Florea, a former prefect of the county, was elected as the first Romanian mayor, when at the national census of 2002 the Romanians were already in majority. At the same time, both deputies are Hungarian and in the city council there are 12 Hungarians and 11 Romanians, of which five represent the nationalist parties (4 PRM and 1 PUNR).

However, there is the example of Satu Mare/Szatmárnémeti, where majority of the population is Romanian but the mayor is Hungarian – Juli Ilyés representing the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ). Or there is the interesting case of Sibiu/Hermannstadt/Nagyszeben, where Saxons were in majority for centuries. Due to the (partly) forced emigration of Saxons during the communist era and the emigration in the early 1990s the town became Romanian. However, in 2000 the majoritarian Romanian population elected a German, Klaus Johannis, as mayor, who attracted lots of (foreign) investors and made the town flourish; and the majoritarian Romanian population re-elected Johannis in 2004. However, although some prominent examples prove the opposite, we have to record that ethnicity still plays an important role in local elections in Transylvania. This is not because of ‘open conflicts’ between Hungarians and Romanians but mainly because of the perception or assumption that the ‘other’ would not really or resolutely represent their own ethnic group.

Returning to national politics, however, the RMDSZ as the representative body of the Hungarians has got a hard time with and has – in the opinion of former members – politicized far too little firmly for the Hungarian interests. For that purpose in 2003 the Hungarian Civic Alliance (MPSZ), Hungarian
National Council of Romania (EMNT) and Szekely National Council (SZNT) were founded, three political organizations that do not pursue a policy hostile towards Romanians, but that emphasize the Hungarian interests and claim equal rights and the right to self-determination for Hungarians in Romania. The mentioned organisations set the autonomy for the Hungarians (personal and territorial autonomy) as their political goal and to restore with that – particularly in the case of the territorial autonomy – the structure of self-governance in the Szeklerland, which had been autonomous for centuries (see next section).

Due to the fact that Romanian parties stick to the centralistic and minority-hostile nation state for different reasons, MPSZ (EMNT and SZNT act on a non-party basis) cannot imagine cooperation with Romanian parties for the moment – although they do not oppose cooperation on principle. Jenő Szász, for instance, refers to the articles 1,1; 2,1 and 4,1\(^2\) of the Romanian constitution when he says «Romania is called a nation state, consequently the Hungarians are not a state-forming nation and under these circumstances (...) one has to say about this constitution that it classifies us and all the minorities as second-rate citizens.» That is to say, the Romanian constitution constructs a difference between Hungarians and Romanians. But there are other fields in which Hungarians feel discriminated against, for instance, in education and in administration. And that is one of the reasons why Hungarian politicians claim, amongst others, for personal autonomy. Also, personal autonomy entrusts a community with decision-making power in community-related issues and it ensures supply of money for the community by the state (Brems 1995). According to representatives of MPSZ (and RMDSZ) in the framework of personal autonomy, a special 'minority body' – institutionalized under public law – would govern particular Hungarian issues – but not Romanian issues.

A minority in the majority: The (re)construction of a regional identity in the Szeklerland

The claim for territorial autonomy for the Szeklerland is a different case. It does not make a difference between Hungarians and Romanians, although the claims are based on the ethnic structure of the Szeklerland. This region is mainly inhabited by Hungarians, in the counties of Harghita/Hargita and Covasna/Kovászna even over 80 per cent of the population is Hungarian, so paradoxically the Hungarian minority represents a majority in this region of Romania.

\(^2\) Article 1,1: «Romania is a sovereign, independent, unitary and indivisible National State». Article 2,1: «the national sovereignty shall reside within the Romanian people». Article 4,1: «The State foundation is laid on the unity of the Romanian people».

And that is what makes the Szeklerland different from other regions in Romania – when one asks Hungarians there, they say that it is actually a Hungarian region. But this claim has nothing to do with Hungarian separatism and the politicians do not exclude the Romanians who live there when they talk about territorial autonomy.

«The territorial autonomy means that regardless of whether one is Hungarian or Romanian (...) he has the same rights and possibilities (...). Subsidiarity means that not in Bucharest, but in Székelyudvarhely, in the Szeklerland decision are taken, regardless of whether one is Romanian or Hungarian, so regardless of the national affiliation, the religious differences.» (Jenő Szász, president MPSZ)

Furthermore, one has to bear in mind that this claim is based on history: the Szeklerland was autonomous in the principality of Transylvania and the Hungarian Kingdom for centuries. And it is also due to this historical fact that the Hungarians who live in the Szeklerland consider themselves to be Szekler, and not only Hungarian. Although the majority of the population considers itself to be Hungarian, this regional identity in the Szeklerland is much stronger than in other parts of Transylvania where Hungarians live. The consequences on the living together between Hungarians and Romanians in the Szeklerland are described by Mungiu-Pippidi (1999, cited in Andersen 2005) as follows: «Due to their homogenous presence in their areas, Szekely are in fact less interested in cohabitation [with the Romanians] than other Hungarians. [...] Cohabitation in the Szekely area is viewed differently in the rest of Transylvania, especially in towns, since at the countryside there are almost no Romanians except one policeman per village.» Szeklers or Hungarians in the Szeklerland as well as Hungarians all-over Transylvania consider Hungary to be their motherland, but they emphasize that in a certain sense they are different, especially from Hungarians in Hungary.

The difference between a Hungarian in Hungary and one in the Szeklerland is (re)constructed and defined by the differing circumstances and surrounding society. Hungarians in the Szeklerland or all-over Transylvania experience their Hungarianness most likely day-by-day because of coming into contact with the 'other', the Romanians. Since they in addition perceive their Hungarianness threatened by the 'other', they emphasize it much more in order to keep it than Hungarians in Hungary do or would have to do, where Hungarianness seems to be the most natural thing and is not threatened. Or, as Paasi puts it (1996:12) «identity construction or nation building always occurs against the background of an external other», while O'Tuathail (1996:14f) speaks in this context of an idealised me /we and a demonised other.
Transylvanism and the Transylvanian identity: the (re)construction of cultural uniqueness

(Re)Constructing the difference in Transylvania is not only about contrasting the Hungarian and Romanian identities but also about the construction of a Transylvanian identity. Since Hungarians, Romanians, Saxons and Roma have lived together in the region for centuries, political organizations such as the Pro Europa League or the Liga Transilvania Banat emphasize the multicultural character of Transylvania and they construct a Transylvanian identity. The latter is part of the concept of transylvanism, which emphasizes the uniqueness of the cultural (and political) traditions of Transylvania. In the words of Sabin Gherman, president of the Liga Transilvania Banat,

«transylvanism is a well founded reoccupation of a forgotten history, the history (...) of a great cultural power Transylvania was. [A history] that has to be thought over and has to be accepted in the current political situation, the European integration. We Romanians, Hungarians, Roma and Germans, all of us, we are obliged to be informed about our living together.»

The concept of transylvanism originates in the 19th century and was in the beginning a cultural movement. «The movement used the cultural ‘ideology’ to protest against the centralizing efforts of the Hungarian government by means of statements demanding greater economic, cultural, and administrative autonomy for Transylvania» (Balogh 1999:243). Transylvanism subsided in the Transylvania of the 1920s, but was taken up in the 1970s by the Erdélyi Helikon literati group as a self-identification programme, as Balogh writes. The political component of the concept was the belief in an independent, regional, linguistic-cultural development. They tried hard to achieve a compromise between an identity of integration and acceptance (of the current political situation, the European integration, We Romanians, Hungarians, Roma and Germans, all of us, we are obliged to be informed about our living together.»

(Re)Constructing the Difference in Religion: Manifesting National Identity

In Transylvania (and in Romania as a whole) the church is a key actor in identity (re)construction, for Hungarians as well as for Romanians. Usually Hungarians and Romanians do not go to the same church – Hungarians are mostly Catholic or Protestant, Romanians mostly Orthodox and some Greco-Catholic. «In my opinion it is normal that we separate, since the majority of Romanians is Orthodox, Hungarians are Catholic or Protestant», argues a Romanian in Miercurea-Ciuc/Csíkszereda. In the communist era the church was a place for communal events and – particularly for the Hungarians – a ‘place of refuge’. A Hungarian musician in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg remembers: «As a child I did not realise the importance of the church. However, if the church had not been there, the Hungarians would not in the least live in such a strong solidarity.»

The support of and trust in the church is particularly high in the Szeklerland, the Orthodox Church, which superseded the at that time forbidden Catholic church on the other hand, under the cloak of religion, acted as the extended arm of the nationalist policy of Ceausescu and it is in the opinion of Hungarians even today an aggressive and expansionist instrument of romanisation. «The Orthodox have built approximately 1500 churches and 40 monasteries in Transylvania within 15 years, mainly in Hungarian regions»,
confessional bounds. Two Hungarian high-school students in Miercurea-Ciuc emphasize that, saying that basically there are no problems amongst Hungarians and Romanians at school because of denomination. They have, for instance, Orthodox classmates with whom they really get on well with.

So, religion is not an obstacle in connection with making friends, but it is still a very important part of national identity, as a reformed priest in a Szekler village says:

«Where they live mixed, in the villages, Hungarians and Romanians, the church stands at the same time for Hungarianness. That means, the religious identity stands also for the Hungarian consciousness.»

The importance of the church for Hungarians— in order to keep their Hungarianness— has been explained earlier. But church and religion have also been identity-building for Romanians. Especially for the Romanians in the Szeklerland the church has been one of the few institutions they could actually hold on to. Most of the Romanians living in the Szeklerland, coming from outside Transylvania, were settled there in the communist era by the national regime and since they did not have any historical roots in the region, the church was a community and identity-building institution.

The rather rare religious exchange between Hungarians and Romanians is, on the one hand, due to history and the role of the churches in the historical context; on the other hand, this is also due to the language barrier. The mass is mostly held either in Hungarian or Romanian and this is, in fact, an obstacle, since a lot of people are not perfectly bilingual and many do not even speak the language of the other. «When I go to church, it is important to me to understand the language, to feel it, to have the special feeling one has when he goes to church», says a Romanian in Miercurea-Ciuc/Csíkszereda. This town located in the Szeklerland is a special case in this context, since the very close Csíksomlyó is an important place of pilgrimage especially for the Hungarian Catholics. Every year at Whitsun hundreds of thousands of Hungarian faithful, mainly from the Szeklerland and the close Csángó-region in Moldova make a pilgrimage to honour the Virgin Mary of Csíksomlyó. The pilgrimage of Hungarians to Csíksomlyó can be understood as a strongly identity-manifesting and difference-(re)constructing event. It is a Hungarian event to which most Romanians do not have access in identical terms.

However, there is some cooperation between the Hungarian and Romanian churches on a local level. It is in January during the so-called ecumenical week when they bridge the (re)constructed difference. Sighisoara/Segesvár/Schäßburg, for instance, is an example for a seemingly well-going cooperation of all religions. In this former Transylvanian-Saxon town, now mainly inhabited by Romanians, they attach great importance to the ecumenical week. During this week Hungarians, Romanians and Germans go to mass together, visit the mass of the respective other and listen to masses which are said in several languages. «The ecumenical week is an event that encourages the spiritual life in Sighisoara. It is a very important event that encourages the whole municipality of Sighisoara», says the Greco-Catholic priest in town. According to the Saxon priest in Sighisoara/Segesvár/Schäßburg, the good cooperation is also thanks to the fact that a quite young generation of priests is working in town. Elsewhere the success of this ecumenical week is limited.
(Re)Constructing the Difference in Education and Culture

What holds true of the churches applies also to education and cultural work – they have an identity-building role in Transylvania, for Hungarians as well as for Romanians. First, there are artists, i.e. musicians, actors, painters, dancers taking part in this process. They very often reproduce collective, 'national' values and traditions: actors perform plays in the respective language, musicians for example play 'old' Hungarian or Romanian songs. If a sculptor creates a statue, he creates also a symbol for a community, mostly his own and gives it a corresponding meaning. At the same time, the 'other' community would give the statue a (probably different) meaning – which can lead to conflicts between Hungarians and Romanians. So, are then artists those who (re)construct the difference between Hungarians and Romanians? Or are they just the creators of parallel, actually diversity-enriching cultures? The particular case of sculptors and their work will be discussed in the chapter (Re)Constructing the Difference in the Symbolic and Public Space. One could write about the Hungarian and Romanian theaters that are mostly separated in the larger towns of Transylvania, or the modern music festivals, at which both Hungarian and Romanian bands give concerts that are attended by members of both communities.

However, here we would like to point out the example of a Hungarian dance group in the Szeklerland, which is successful all-over Romania as well as abroad. The director of this dance group says that the goal of the group is not only to perform and collect folk dances, but also to learn them on a high level in order to present them on a high artistic level and on an international terrain. Nonetheless, «of course there is the aspect of tradition-keeping and tradition-cultivating», as the director says. He goes on to say that his dance group mainly performs Hungarian dances, but occasionally performs Romanian dances, too. So, the dance group can be understood as kind of an institution preserving and (re)constructing the Hungarianness but also as a formation that actually could serve as a 'bridge-builder' between Hungarians and Romanians and could contribute to mutual understanding.

Second, identity is built by educational institutions, on which we will focus in this section of the article. In general, one can say that it is in every community's request to socialize its members in a sphere that reproduces the community's values and traditions. An important place of socialization is school; there not only language but, for instance, also history – and with that values and knowledge of a community – are being imparted. Due to this, education is one of the most controversial issues in Transylvania (actually in Romania) when it comes to the question of Hungarian-Romanian living together. Parents decide on their children's (professional) future when they send them either to a Hungarian or a Romanian school. It is a fact that students who have studied at Romanian schools most likely have an easier life, especially those participating in higher educations. That is why also Hungarian parents and most mixed couples send their children to Romanian schools. These students have better opportunities in the professional sphere thanks to their language skills and due to the fact that there are simply much more jobs offered in Romanian, since this is the (only!) official language and actually the most used language all-over the country. The fact that students studying at Romanian schools have a better knowledge of the Romanian language holds also true of the Hungarians studying at Romanian schools. There the latter simply practice the language more often than Hungarians and they are in a Romanian speaking sphere for a pioneering time of their life. However, it is possible that also Hungarians studying at Hungarian schools achieve very good language skills in Romanian. But due to the fact that their language books are the same as those out of which Romanians learn their mother tongue, problems are pre-programmed. For example, there is no specific teaching aid for Hungarians who learn Romanian as a foreign language.

However, there is also fundamental resistance towards the Romanian language amongst Hungarians, since the Romanian state forces the Hungarians to learn Romanian, although the same state does not force the Romanians in Transylvania to learn Hungarian. With that the state (re)constructs inequality between Hungarians and Romanians, it expects more efforts from the one than from the other. The Szeklerland is an interesting case in this context, since Romanians from time to time complain about not finding jobs there. A Romanian teacher in Târgu Mures/Marosvásárhely/Neumarkt, for instance, says:

«I heard from my friends (...) that in institutions [in the Szeklerland] Hungarian language is obligatory (...) and the Romanians are not allowed to fulfill certain functions in administration system without knowing the Hungarian language. Also we have a lot of Hungarian writing there, Romanian writing is taken out of several shops, the shop assistant is asking you or is serving you first in Hungarian, then in Romanian. There are things and elements which rose the fear of discrimination.»

According to Smaranda Enache, co-president of the Pro Europa Liga, it is true that it is not easy to find jobs for Romanians in the Szeklerland. «But this is not because there would have been set up a discrimination process from the part of the Szekler, but because these Romanians who live there do not speak Hungarian.» Indeed, Romanians in general do not speak Hungarian, even in the Szeklerland where Hungarians make up the vast majority.

Turning back to the issue of (re)constructing the difference in education, we have to bear in mind some aspects not yet mentioned. By imposing the current
Romanian school system on the Hungarians — also on those learning at Hungarian schools — the latter not only have to learn the Romanian language in an unfavourable way, as we have mentioned earlier, but they also have to learn Romanian history and geography in Romanian. In these classes, not only language is a problem for Hungarians, but also the contents given. The perceptions of — particularly Hungarian and Romanian — history, Hungarians and Romanians have in general, are considerable different from each other (see Filep 2006). And since education is an issue of the central state, the version of history students are taught at school contrasts very much with the Hungarian version probably mediated at home by family members, the cultural association or the church. A Hungarian student in Cluj/Kolozsvar/Klausenburg remembers:

«During my whole childhood I read a lot of historical novels and I have always been interested in the topic [of history]; that is why I am quite clear in my mind with the history that is taught in Hungary or the West about this region, the whole Carpathian Basin. And this [history] totally differs from what they teach the Romanian students and what they also try to drum into us in history classes.»

So, one of the conflicts Hungarians and Romanians have in education is concerned with the mediation of the ‘right’ or the ‘wrong’ history, not only at Romanian schools but also at Hungarian schools. Some Hungarian teachers seem to arrange with that by giving extra classes on history, as high-school students in Miercurea-Ciuc/Csfikszereda tell: «Some teachers gave extra classes, so that we nonetheless know where we come from and who we are». However, this might not be the best solution: first, it is not sustainable, since it is not institutionalized and second, it is most likely not a critical teaching of history either. Attempts to write common history books would be one solution, as is has been done in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the war, for instance. Another would be a more critical examination of their respective histories, as for instance the Romanian historian Lucian Boia does (see Boia 2001). This should lead to what Smaranda Enache calls the «historical reconciliation» of Hungarians and Romanians. «We Romanians still learn that the Hungarians were our biggest enemies in Transylvania. But we never learn, we learn nothing (...) that Zsuzsanna Lorántffy established a school for Romanians. We don’t know anything about these good things», says Enache. And this is also true for the Hungarian side.

The solution Hungarian politicians in Transylvania offer is the creation of an autonomous public school system for Hungarians. Furthermore, they strive for an independent public Hungarian university in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg. At the moment there is only an independent private Hungarian university, the Sapientia University. At the public Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj/ Kolozsvár/Klausenburg there are at least tracks in Hungarian, but no faculties — except the faculties of theology. The Hungarians’ claim for an independent public university is due to the historical fact that there was once a Hungarian university in town, but it is also in order to preserve a Hungarian elite in Transylvania whose members have excellent skills in Hungarian and who ensure a Hungarian future in the region. This illustrates that the Hungarians can imagine education as an identity and elite building sphere only if education from the kindergarten to the university level functions autonomously for the Hungarians, financed by the Romanian state, whose tax payers Hungarians are, too. Hungarian intellectuals oppose mixed-national classes created by the central state, in which Romanians take the main decisions, because they fear a back formation of Hungarian consciousness in Transylvania and so a much more increasing assimilation with that. A solution to this problem would in our opinion only be a promotion of mixed-national schools and classes in both languages or the creation of new common spaces for a ‘common’ living together, which would supplement an independent socialization at school and that would help to bridge the differences perpetuated and (re)constructed by education.

(Re)Constructing the Difference in the Symbolic and Public Space

Public space in Transylvania serves Hungarians and Romanians now and then to (re)present their — often differing — histories, views and intentions. Statues, commemorative plaques, churches, schools and other (public) buildings, flags and other symbols in the national colours represent the prevailing community in public space. A king’s statue is far more than only the representation of a person, also specific events are associated with it, events that can be kept in one (or more) community’s collective memory. If there live — as in Transylvania — several ‘national’ or cultural communities in a particular space, which, however, refer (at least in many cases) to a separate history, which have their own ‘heroes’, one has to ask whether such statues or commemorative plaques should be erected at all; and if yes, where.

The personality cult of the Ceausescu era had consequences on the appearance of public squares in towns and municipalities in Romania — particularly the number of ‘heroes’ of the Romanian ‘nation’ reached their peak in the public space. The erection of statues of Nicolae Balcescu, Mihai Viteazul or Stefan cel Mare boomed. They were raised also in ‘Hungarian’ municipalities, i.e. in municipalities where the vast majority of population were Hungarians. A sculptor in the Szeklerland tells that in the Ceausescu era although Hungarian statues were accepted, it was a long and arduous way to get there — and if yes, they were placed next to a Romanian statue. Consequently, next to a Petőfi Sándor
statue there had to be a Balcescu statue, both heroes of the 1848/49 revolution – Petőfi for the Hungarians, Balcescu for the Romanians. According to the same sculptor, with the year of 1989 the situation changed; in 'Hungarian' municipalities it is not a problem any more to erect a Hungarian's statue, also without raising a Romanian next to it. However, it is not that problem-free in towns or municipalities where the proportion of Hungarians and Romanians is close to 50:50, as for example it is the case in Târgu Mureș/Marosvásárhely/Neumarkt. Even in Miercurea-Ciuc/Csíkszereda, where the proportion is approximately 80% Hungarians to 20% Romanians, there have been quarrels in connection with the erection of statues. Smaranda Enache, co-president of the Pro Europa League says that «there is a conflict in the symbolic field, since we [Hungarians and Romanians] do not yet share the symbolic space». It can happen from time to time that there are demonstrations opposing the attachment of a commemorative plaque or the erection of a statue.

In connection with the erection of statues, the statue-park of Arad obtained particular significance and attention. A Hungarian memorial in honour of the martyrs of Arad, executed on 6th of October 1849, was raised in 1890, but was removed in 1925, after the annexation of Transylvania to Romania. In spite of Hungarians’ claims, the Romanian side insisted on not to re-erect the statue, but agreed with it later, on condition that there is going to be a memorial in honour of the Romanian heroes of 1848/49, too. This wish was accepted by the authorities, on 25th of April 2004, and the memorial was re-dedicated as part of the so-called Hungarian-Romanian Reconciliation Park. However, the latter seems to be rather a failed attempt of reconciliation due to the contrasting meanings and interpretations of history concerning the revolution of 1848/49. This argument is underpinned by the fact that the authorities ordered to line up the Hungarian memorial so that the Hungária on the top of the memorial looked straight in the direction of the Romanian triumph arch. With that the (Romanian) authorities did not reconcile but rather produce new antagonism, since Hungarians regarded it as a provocation – offending their national (historical) feelings.

One has to raise the question whether a symbiosis in the field of symbols can be achieved by erecting Hungarian and Romanian statues and memorials next to each other, although Hungarians and Romanians seem to share only little on the historical-symbolic level of the collective memory. An action such as for instance the statue park in Arad, can also evoke animosities or at least (new) aversions, when the personalities chiseled into stone or memorials are controversial to the 'other'.

One can also question whether there should exist 'Hungarian' and 'Romanian' squares as for example in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg that stand for a symbolically strict separation in public space. The main square (Fő tér in Hungarian, Piața Unirii in Romanian, former Piața Libertății) of this town, in which nowa-days approximately 20% of the population are Hungarian and 80% Romanian, is in symbolic terms a 'Hungarian' one. The gothic church, which was built in the 15th century and in which the (Hungarian) Transylvanian princes Gábor Bethlen and Gábor Bátory were crowned, dominates the square. In front of the church there is the impressive and very famous statue of Mathias Corvinus, who was the king of Hungary from 1458–1490. Just a few hundred meters away on the Piata Victoriei the Romanians built an impressive Orthodox church between 1923 and 1933 – and quite similar to the appearance of the 'Hungarian' square, in front of the church Avram Iancu, regarded as one of the Romanian heroes during the revolution of 1848/49, is looking down from a pillar. Vis-à-vis on the Piata Stefan cel Mare one can find the former Hungarian national theater built in 1906, which became in 1920 the Romanian national theater of Cluj-Kolozsvár/Klausenburg.

However, this is not the only eye-catching object in symbolic terms. Since Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, the cultural and intellectual centre of Hungarians in Transylvania, had a (Romanian) nationalist mayor for 12 years in the person of Gheorghe Funar, the population experienced a lot of nationalist actions not only in the political and social but also in the symbolic field. One could hardly count the number of Romanian flags in town, and benches, posts and litter bins were painted in the colours of the Romanian flag (blue-yellow-red). That is what Feischmidt (2002) would call the instrumentalization of national symbols. Funar did that for 12 years to a very high extent and angered especially the Hungarians not only in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg but also all-over Transylvania and even abroad. Things were ready to change in 2004, when he was not re-elected and Emil Boc (Partidul Democrat) became the new mayor in town. Boc ordered to change the colour of benches and litter bins in 2005.

Turning back to the Funar era: Funar initiated excavations on the main square in front of the Mathias Corvinus statue – in order to prove the Daco-Romanian continuity, since one should have expected ruins of the old Roman town of Napoca. Roman and Hofbauer (1996:192) write that what was not of important value for archaeologists, since the Forum Romanum of the old Roman town they were looking for was supposed to be somewhere else, served the authorities as a national relic, as a further tessera in the giving of evidence that the Romanians as the legitimate descendant of the Romans had been on the spot already 1000 years before the Hungarians. Things changed here, too: Emil Boc, the new mayor ordered to fill in one of the 'building sites' in April 2005.
Also the statue\(^2\) of Mathias Corvinus is very controversial and of high symbolic significance: After the First World War, the Hungarian coat of arms was removed from the statue and replaced by the inscription MATHIAS REX. In addition, they placed a quotation from a Romanian historian there in 1932, which says that the king did not manage to defeat his own blood, the Romanians in Moldova. It is to say that the ‘ethnic’ background of Mathias Corvinus is controversial. It is possible that the king of Hungary had ‘Romanian’ ancestors and that is why Romanians consider him to be Romanian. However, the Romanian historian Lucian Boia (2001:15) writes about Mathias Corvinus the following and refers to Pop (1998): «The name of Iancu de Hunedoara has not remained in the Romanian public consciousness of the Middle Ages as that of Mathias even less so; indeed not could they, as their ideals were different and the ethnic aspect was of secondary importance at the time.» The Hungarian-Romanian dispute that re-emerged in 1992 around the statue of Mathias Corvinus lead to an atmosphere in which town and history were made subject of discussion again, and national communities and borders were reconstructed or rather tightened up (Feischmidt 2002). Feischmidt gives a very illustrative example for that: When Funar ordered to attach a new plaque on the socle of the statue, Hungarians as well as Romanians were outraged in the beginning and organized a spontaneous demonstration against this action on the spot. However, with the first symbolic form of protest, the singing in Hungarian and right after that in Romanian, a division of the assembly was introduced. A symbolic border was created by which people were classified as belonging either to one or the other side of the square, divided by this border. The until then heterogeneous crowd began to split up ethnically. This exemplifies how difference between people considering themselves to belong to a certain community – in our case Hungarian and Romanian – can immediately be (re)produced.

We would like to conclude with a Hungarian example in the Szeklerland, strictly speaking in the Gyergyő basin. According to locals in this small part of the Szeklerland, Hungarians – or Szekler – make up over 90 percent of the population. However, there is one village with a Romanian majority: Voslobeni/ Vaslău, founded in the 17th century by the the counts of Lăzău who settled down Romanians from Moldova here (Sepești Nagy 2002). Despite this fact, Romanians seem to be alien in the basin. It is here, in Gyergyóalfalu/Joseni, where one can find a plaque erected in 1942 with the inscription: «Émler véld szívédbe, hogy ez a föld mindig székely volt és az is marad!» («Man carve in your heart that this land was always Szekler and it remains Szekler»). That is to say, it will not become Romanian, although it is on the territory of the Romanian state and although Ceausescu settled down Romanians here from the 1970s onwards in order to change the ethnic composition of the population. Although shop and traffic signs have to be bilingual, although (Romanian) firms from Bucharest own great expanses of forest in the region, it remains Szekler. And this is because the Szekler stay, as one can read on a wooden post on the main square of Gyergyőszentmiklós/Gheorgheni: «Maradunk» («We» – the Hungarians – «stay»). This might serve as a symbol for those who have stayed so far, for those who did not leave – in contrast to the Romanians that left the region after the fall of communism, when the factories were closed down. Many Romanians turned back where they came from, but also Hungarians left the region due to unemployment. However, the land remained Szekler – the question one might ask, though, is for how long.

Conclusions

On the eve of the Romanian accession to the European Union, the smouldering conflict between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania is of great importance as any problems regarding minorities in a member state can become also an issue at the European level. The European Union has great interest that human rights and minority rights are guaranteed by the accession countries. Therefore the question remains who is interested in not solving the conflict, who is working for a solution and which are the key discourses and players in the context.

In our paper we argue on the basis of an extensive fieldwork in Transylvania and especially the Szeklerland that there are mainly two opposite groups and parties, who want to keep an essential difference between Hungarians and Romanians and who are mostly arguing for more respectively fewer rights for the minority. On the other hand, we have shown some institutions and people trying to overcome the social and ethnic cleavages and trying to bridge the differences. From an external view, one could find key political actors who are explicitly searching for the neighbours and taking the initiative for better understanding and emphasising minority rights in order to sustain the traditional multicultural character of the region and the rich cultural heritage. Those actors could be partners for European institutions and efforts to overcome the partly quite problematic current situation.

References


