

INSTRUMENTALIZING SZEKLERLAND AUTONOMY THROUGH SZEKLER MEMORY SITES AND RITES IN POST-1989 ROMANIA

Petru Szedlacsek

Max Planck Institute for Human Development Berlin, Centre for History of Emotions, Germany

Abstract: In post-communist Romania, Szekler political and intellectual elites have taken advantage of a long discursive tradition on Szekler autonomy, which developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within the *nationalizing states* (Brubaker 1996) of Hungary and Romania. As part of the interwar ideology of *Transylvanianism*, a particular Szekler identity-construction mechanism was developed, buttressed by a rhetoric on geographical remoteness in relation to the centers of power of Budapest and Bucharest. More precisely, the Szekler-ization of geography was enabled by imagining and cultivating sites and rites of memory in the Szeklerland – from pilgrimages to the funerary monuments of Szekler cultural elites and the sanctifying of Hungarian and Szekler flags in public squares. Drawing on this context, my paper explores the post-1989 revival of Szekler commemoration narratives that have attempted to construct a Szekler life-world within Romania by linking memory to territory. Since minority rituals

of memory, parallel to the official state ones, are no longer silenced in Szekler public spaces after the fall of communism, interwar *realms of memory* have been reframed and popularized. On the line suggested by Katherine Verdery in *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (1999), this analysis also looks at how funeral ceremonies shape the relationship between the Szekler community and “its” territory with the Romanian *Other*. In this respect, this study focuses on the attempt to rebury the Szekler pro-Nazi writer József Nyiró on Szekler (yet Romanian) soil. Apart from triggering a huge diplomatic incident between Hungary and Romania in the summer of 2012, it also pinpoints the reformulation of Szekler identity discourse within the Romanian post-communist context. In short, I will address questions regarding the practices of memory production permitted in present, the aims of Szekler elites in popularizing such practices and the way these aims shape the Szekler-Romanian relationship in the public arena.

Keywords: sacred rituals, nationalizing space, realms of memory, identitarian discourse, local autonomy

In *Nationalism Reframed*, Rogers Brubaker (1996) argues that the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a revival of politics and discourses on nationhood similar to those of the post-imperial interwar period. He thus understands the present interstate conflicts in East Central Europe (like in ex-Yugoslavia or Romania) in terms of a post-socialist reframed nationalism, which generates conflicting nationalizing policies involving: (1) *nationalizing states*, (2) *ethnic minorities* and (3) the states self-identified as the latter's *external national homelands*. Each of these three actors have brought forth clashing political projects that aim to connect a single, exclusive people to a territory by utilizing revived rhetorical practices from the interwar period.¹

With respect to the Hungarian-speaking enclave located in the geographical center of Romania known as the Szeklerland – at the same time part of Transylvania – local discourses on Szekler *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1996-98) are again rising in popularity. Meanwhile, these recovered narratives generate weekly stirs in the Romanian public arena and sometimes even serious diplomatic conflicts. This paper argues that in the post-socialist setting, Szekler identitarian rhetoric has developed as a result of a clash between three conflicting nationalisms that intersect in the Szekler minority-building process: (1) that of the Romanian *nationalizing state*, (2) of the Szekler *ethnic minority* (caught between the first and the third) and (3) of the self-claimed external Hungarian *national homeland* (Brubaker 1996). Szekler elites, by reviving

pre-communist narratives of memory, attempt to link Szeklers to the Szekler land and thus advocate regional autonomy.

A great deal of general research has been done on the history of Transylvania and the Szeklerland as well as on past and present Romanian-Hungarian relations, including both minority and state relations (see among others Verdery 1983; Mitu 2013; Brubaker 2006). Nevertheless, literature on post-1989 Szekler imagery is scarce. A topic abundantly studied, however, is the yearly mass-pilgrimage to the monastery and gathering site of Csíksomlyó (Mohay 2008), which is a constitutive aspect of Szeklerlness. But both political and scholarly debates (Kürti 2001) generally do not distinguish Szekler Hungarians from Transylvanian Hungarians. Consequently, literature on Transylvanian history often overlooks the sometimes tense relationship between the two communities' spokesmen, obscuring how keen Szekler elites are in exclusively maintaining and strengthening Szekler regional autonomy. Consequently, in the existing literature it is difficult to tell from these debates the manner in which external nationalizing narratives impact native Szekler ones.

Connecting people to territory in the Szeklerland has taken numerous forms in the last two centuries, ranging from mythologizing nature to funeral cults of important Szekler figures. As part of this latter phenomenon, the recent attempt to rebury the Szekler interwar writer József Nyirő in Szekler soil stands out as an example of the highly politicized nature of ethnicity in East Central Europe (Sturm and Bauch 2010, 191). The failed ceremony meaningfully exemplifies Brubaker's famous triadic nexus presented above (Brubaker 1996). It concentrated all three of its constitutive elements into a single political incident.

Recently condemned by the Romanian government as an anti-Romanian fascist sympathizer, Nyirő is nevertheless particularly popular among Szeklers. Ironically, many public schools and streets in the region bear his name. Due to these conflicting views, the deceased novelist's re-inhumation led to a diplomatic scandal involving Romania, Hungary and, due to Nyirő's anti-Semitism, Israel. Furthermore, the incident was widely popularized in dozens of press articles, particularly in Romania and Hungary (but not only), where some of the most important newspapers, such as *Adevărul*, *Gândul* or *Cotidianul* and *Népszabadság*, *Index* or *Heti Világgazdaság*, respectively covered the development of the tensions. Numerous debates on the event emerged both in Romania and internationally. For example, when asked for his opinion, the head of the largest Hungarian political party in Romania, the UDMR/RMDSZ, and Szekler social-democrat Kelemen Húnor stated that the ceremony was a mere "electoral event" organized by Szász Jenő's Hungarian Civic Party, *Adevărul* reported (Kelemen: UDMR nu participă la reînhumarea lui Nyiro, fiind un eveniment electoral al lui Szasz 2012).

But looking beyond the plethora of explanations for the tensions, from Nyirő's personal political views to the political crisis then taking place in Romania, the frictions determined by the reburial attempt disclose underlying narratives on Szekler identity. They revealed parts of the on-going process of imagining the Szeklerland as an exclusively Szekler territory, in this case by linking the memory of a Szekler ancestor to his homeland. Had it taken place, the burial would have enforced the Szekler sense of belonging to a place imagined as "theirs." According to Katherine Verdery, Nyirő's ashes, like other deceased ancestors' remains, concentrated mythical and sacred dimensions that

symbolically facilitated the connection between the Szekler community and "its" territory (Verdery 1999, 36, 49, 50). Thus, it refuted Romanian claims over "their" land, the perceivably threatening state lacking such sacred instruments of legitimation.

At the same time, the diplomatic battle between Hungary and Romania revealed the contentious character of the clash between Hungarian transborder nationalism and the Romanian *nationalizing state* with respect to the Szekler area, a clash characterized by contested identities. It is an instance for the rivalry between two nation-states – one claiming to represent the Hungarian transnational nation and the other a single, exclusively Romanian nation – struggling to appropriate a territory seen by each as their own. Interestingly, a local nationalist discourse emanated from the Szekler territory rejecting both the appropriation attempt from Budapest as well as that from Bucharest, while at the same time manipulating the former against the latter. Since 1918, Szekler elites have regarded Hungary more as a tool for instrumentalizing local autonomy within Romania rather than their *external national homeland*. Nevertheless, this is what Hungary has been aspiring to represent in the eyes of Hungarian minorities all-over East Central Europe since the end of WWI.

The ancient autonomous status of the Szeklerland traditionally rested in the historical Middle Age privileges of the region's border guards and those of their successors. Intellectuals reframed this status with the rise of nineteenth-century nationalism. They increasingly viewed the region from the national center of Budapest as a distinct borderland within Hungary, now defined in ethno-linguistic terms. By the turn of the century, Hungarian anthropologists, ethnologists, artists and writers imagined this mountainous, remote

border region of Transylvania in the spirit of the epoch's fashionable primitivist ideology: a pure, mythical and isolated land (Kürti 2001, 43, 65, 80, 97, 102, 113-116).² In other words, they imagined a "poetic space" – what Anthony Smith calls a site of cultural resistance (Smith 1991, 66, 69) – where the original, pure Hungarian spirit could allegedly be found untainted by modernity. As the first settlers in Transylvania before the Magyar conquest, the Szeklers have held a special place in Magyar mythology. It was thus in the primitive life of the Szekler peasant that the specificity of Magyar identity seemed to lie.

Soon, emerging Transylvanian and Szekler intellectuals assumed this Orientalist rhetoric. Szekler elites then developed a narrative on rural authenticity as characteristic for Szekler identity. They used this discourse against the centralizing policies of Budapest and, after WWI, against Bucharest, in order to maintain and strengthen the region's historical institutional autonomy, remarkably preserved under various forms up until 1918.³

The first Szekler author who consciously constructed a distinct Szekler narrative in his *Description of the Szeklerland*, pinpointing elements of Szekler characterology, was Orbán Balázs (Kürti 2001, 128). Similarly, the Transylvanian novelist Szabó Dezső, in his notably titled novel *The Eroded Village*, focused on the negative influence of modernity and cosmopolitanism on the purity of the Szekler peasant (Neubauer 2008, 170). Tamási Áron, in his novel trilogy *Ábel*, created veritable Szekler *realms of memory* by mythologizing what he regarded as natural phenomena and monuments specifically bound to the Szeklerland, such as the Hargita Mountains and the St Anna Lake. Local castles and ruins described as vestiges of past

glory were to remind Szeklers of their better-off Hungarian past (Kürti 2001, 115). The traditional collective memory in the region, these works, the modern imagery they constructed as well as the authors themselves, along with the *political lives of* these prominent figures' own *dead bodies* – all ended up becoming salient Szekler *realms of memory* in post-socialist Romania.

The changing political contexts – from Greater Hungary to Greater, communist and post-communist Romania – kept such narratives alive (though hidden), despite the silence imposed on those public memories counter to the official ones during the communist regime (Bucur 2009, 167). Nevertheless, as Maria Bucur points out, in employing "semi-private and semi-public" markers and practices, Szekler elites eluded this central drive towards suppressing local minority remembrance (Bucur 2009, 183). Minorities set up monuments and memorials inside churches as well as plaques in villages, where the central power had limited access and official propaganda was less intrusive (Bucur 2009, 184-187). After 1989, the practice of cultivating memory sites and rites in particular became more overtly public. In fact, László Kürti argues that "state socialist ideology [...] attempted to homogenize the nation-state of Romania and, in turn, assisted in the rise of fundamentalist Hungarianism, regionalism and transnational identity" (Kürti 2001, ix). Thus, post-1989 Romania experienced a burst of Hungarian claims for more minority rights, including Szekler autonomy.

Presently still struggling against discourses of contested belonging, both against Bucharest and Budapest, Szekler nationalists are publicly reviving and reframing pre-communist nationalizing discourses. Adapted to evolving political frameworks, they today

enrich Szekler imagery with new elements. On the one hand, in the context of EU integration, this imagery appropriates contemporary ideas of regionalism, decentralization, local autonomy, human rights, multiculturalism and environmentalism, which aim at eluding the centralizing and nationalizing policies of Bucharest. On the other hand, the support of what Benedict Anderson terms the “long distance nationalism” of Budapest is being taken advantage of in advocating Szekler autonomy.

Indeed, whenever ceremonies take place on Szekler soil with the goal of stressing Szekler identity, public figures from Hungary proper are there to support the event, like the Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament attending the failed inhumation of Nyirő. Ever since the anti-minority measures of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s national-communist regime, especially stark in the 1980s, Budapest has publicly spoken out for its kin minority. Though formerly couched in terms of human rights, such actions became overtly nationalist after 1989. Since 1990, prime-minister József Antall opened The Office of Transborder Hungarians aimed at enhancing the connection between state and Hungarian minorities. Additionally, he declared himself the prime minister of, not 10, but 15 million Hungarians, thus including diaspora communities like the Szeklers. At the same time, the Duna TV Channel was opened to be viewed by Hungarians all-over East Central Europe. Finally, in 2001, drawing on the interwar literary association called The Association of Folk Literature (Török 2001, 60), the Hungarian Parliament approved the so-called “Status Laws” that provided for a limited time period various governmental advantages to Hungarian minority members, especially funding in areas such as culture and economy (Bottoni 2002).

In a manner similar to that of the interwar period, the Hungarian nation has, after 1990, become a wide ethnocultural community, no longer exclusively identified with the core national state. Nevertheless, consistent with its interwar national policy, Budapest feels the responsibility to protect what it regards as its diaspora community all costs.⁴ Hence its self-proclaimed status as the *external national homeland* of Hungarian minorities.

This transnational approach to national politics has created serious tensions with neighboring states home to many Hungarians. Like in the post-WWI period, it presently frustrates the nationalizing policies of nation-states like Romania. The last serious diplomatic crisis happened barely one year ago, when the president of the Hungarian right-wing extremist party, *Jobbik*, participated in the opening of one of the Hungarian summer camps in the Szekler region. Drawing on Hungarian interwar revisionist rhetoric, Vona Gábor stated that his party would support Szekler autonomy and the cancellation of the Trianon Treaty, even with the price of a Romanian-Hungarian conflict, *Gândul* reported (Vona Gabor: Dacă apărarea drepturilor maghiarilor înseamnă conflict cu România, *Jobbik* își asumă asta 2013). In response, the Romanian President, amalgamating *Jobbik* with the Hungarian state and nation, declared that “Hungary has become a source of instability in the region,” that it will restrict Hungarian manifestations in the area and that “Romania will assume the leading role in dealing with Hungary” (Traian Basescu, declaratii dure la adresa politicianilor maghiari: Romania isi va asuma leadershipul punerii la punct a Ungariei, care a devenit focar de instabilitate in regiune / Liderii unguri au fost indecenti, foarte probabil ca anul viitor nu va mai 2013). Furthermore, *Jobbik* also attracted criticisms

on the part of the RMDSZ, which nevertheless also advocates Szekler autonomy. Its president affirmed that these extremists make such radical statements and then leave Romania while “we are those who remain here dealing with the [real] problems”, as *Radio France Internationale* reported on its website on August 12, 2013.

The struggle to construct a Szekler life-world within the *nationalizing state* of Romania coupled with refuting claims of belonging to the Hungarian homeland is arguably part of the more encompassing *Transylvanianist* ideology.⁵ Since the late nineteenth century, *Transylvanianists* have aimed at forging a specifically Transylvanian *groupness* based on Transylvanian ethnocultural diversity. According to this ideology, different ethnic groups could peacefully coexist, within their own, distinct everyday life.⁶

Transylvanianism became particularly salient after WWI, when the contested dimension of Transylvania's belonging – to locals, to Hungary, to Romania – took on new, increasingly tense valences. According to Zsuzsanna Török, following Brubaker, “the demand for ethnic solidarity emerged most intensively when Transylvanian Hungarians were ‘caught’ [...] between the antagonistic nationalisms of two nation-states” (Török 2001, 58). Answering to Makkai Sándor's pessimistic “It's not possible” article, which argued that the fate of the minority is not only a political impossibility, “but an ontological one”, the Transylvanian writer Reményik Sándor wrote from Cluj/Kolozsvár on February 26, 1937: “our whole Transylvanianism [...] bluntly relied [...] on the fact that state and nation are not necessarily the same, on the contrary, the nation's stateless form is deeper, cleaner, more communitarian, more Christian, more ethnic than [...] its political form” (as cited in Liktor 2008). Like *Transylvani-*

anism, Szeklerism today stresses local identity against nationalizing attempts coming from both Budapest and Bucharest while acquiescing to its minority status. Nevertheless, it exploits the former's national policies in order to instrumentalize regional autonomy against the latter and nationalize the claimed space.

The Nyiró case as well as the cultivation of other Szekler *realms of memory* reveals the mechanism of ethnicizing a territory by constructing and utilizing a people's culture and memory. It is part of the struggle to Szeklerize public space in the region, providing a tangible, material dimension to local culture. In fact, since WWI, when imagining the Hungarian minority as a coherent community, Hungarian intellectuals and politicians under the influence of the leading Transylvanian journal *Hitel* [*Credit, Trust*] have regarded culture as crucial in buttressing Transylvanian local specificity. Their ideology included Szekler characterology. Cultural nationalism thus turned into politics of minority-building, as Török suggests (Török 2001, 61).

In the Szekler area, cultural nationalism traditionally intertwined with territorial nationalism. Due to the historical rootedness and concentration of the Szekler people, ethnicity is strongly territorialized (Sturm and Bauch 2010, 193). This trend continues up until today and gained fresh impetus after 1989 in the Szekler region. Geographical and historical sites and symbols as well as local traditional celebrations are seen today as integral parts of Szekler cultural identity. Memory, in turn, is regarded as central in perpetuating these regional manifestations of *groupness* to coming generations.

Since remembering parallel to the official, Romanian “rememberings” is no longer silenced in Szekler public spaces like it was during communism (though still contested), constructing, reviving, and populariz-

ing sites and rites of memory bolster Szekler ethnocultural identity. A strong identity, in turn, is a putatively crucial step in advocating regional autonomy. Places and monuments connected to the 1848/1849 War for Independence, such as the Nyerges Tető; the Szekler nature, including the symbol of the pine or the forest; religious ceremonies, most importantly the famous mass pilgrimage to Csíksomlyó; graves of famous Szeklers, such as Órbán and Tamási; the Szekler flag or simply songs, like the *Székely himnusz* (forbidden during Communism) – all constitute *lieux de mémoire* and are parts of the mechanism of linking Szekler memory to Szekler territory.⁷ Habitually, in the capital of the Szekler Hargita County, Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda, where both the mayor and the president of the county's council are fervent advocates of Szekler autonomy, March 15 celebrations feature rituals informed by interwar nationalism. While the official ceremony in front of the building of the county's council, just by the main square, attracts smaller, mostly elderly audiences, it is nevertheless characterized by the appropriate awe of any other official celebration. Following the intonation of the Hungarian anthem, a group of Hussars hoist the Szekler flag, after which official speeches precede a religious mass during which both the Protestant and the Catholic bishops sanctify the Szekler flag.

Religious nationalism proves crucial to securing the mythical dimension of the tie between territory and people in the Szekler region. In line with Verdery's *Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, commemorating Szekler dead is particularly important in sacralizing local political claims regarding the Szeklerland, as the failed reburial of Nyirő reveals (Verdery 1999). Similarly, "[t]he monuments of Órbán and Tamási are equally charged with nationalist as well as anti-Romanian sentiments. Both are true nationalist pilgrimage sites

with their sacrosanct air" (Kürti 2001, 116). In fact, Órbán was reburied four times in the past 100 years, suggesting the importance of this kind of memory entrepreneurship in the area in properly connecting ancestors to their land (*Idem* 2001, 116).

Another example for Szeklerizing geography through rituals of the dead is the monument of the battle of Madéfalva, where on the 7th of January 1764 all Szekler villagers were massacred by Austrian troops. Besides the idea of cultivating the memory of dead Szeklers, this also makes part of territorial nationalism. Thus, similar to sanctifying Szekler and Hungarian flags, it adds a sacred as well as ethnic dimension to the claimed territory. Moreover, the popularity of these places together with their astounding, yet local dimension enables popular identification with these symbols exclusively among Szeklers. Szekler folk motifs were employed in the carving of Órbán's and Tamási's funeral monuments, overtly telling about their connection to the locality. All these sites and rites of memory now constitute firm territorial markers of Szeklerness.

Having the aim of enforcing divisions, as Brubaker suggests, nationalizing public space has been a particularly important phenomenon in East Central Europe, where populations have been mixed over centuries (Sturm and Bauch 2010, 186-187, 191-192). Thus, Szeklarization attempts today regarding the Szekler Hargita and Csík areas are especially directed against the allegedly threatening *nationalizing state* of Romania with the aim of reifying difference. Being a territory characterized by contested belongings, tensions resulting from attempts of appropriation either by the spokesmen of the minority or of the majority are part of two discordant nationalizing narratives about the same territory. These tensions have become part of

the everyday post-socialist political landscape in Romania, constituting one of the Romanian media's favorite topics, apparently stirring up the sentiments of their ordinary readers.

The phenomenon is convincingly exemplified by the on-going Szekler flag scandal. Ever since the beginning of 2013, the prefectures of Mureş/Marós, Harghita and Covasna/Kovászna counties – which today roughly constitute the claimed Szeklerland – are constantly summoning and suing local councilors and mayors for hoisting the Szekler flag on official buildings. Media headlines on the issue sow an increasing fear that Romanian public space is literally losing ground in the Szeklerland: Romanian Minister for Administration and Regional Development “Liviu Dragnea Was Greeted with Szekler Flags and pro-Autonomy Messages” (RTV.NET 2013), “A Two-Meter Wide Szekler Flag Hoisted in the Center of Sfântu Gheorghe Municipality” (Realitatea.NET 2013) or “The Szekler Flag Approved as the Flag of Harghita County” (Antena3.ro 2009). High-ranking Romanian politicians are involved too, making unquestionably negative statements. This suggests the manner in which they assess their voters' views with respect to understandings of state and nation: i.e. Romania of/for Romanians.⁸ Asked if the Government would legislate normative acts approving the hoisting of the Szekler flag, prime minister Victor Ponta reportedly declared: “The Romanian Government, not. Maybe the Hungarian Government” (Ce spune premierul despre arborarea steagului secuiesc pe instituții 2013).

Again, Hungarian transborder nationalism was there to support the Szeklers and radicalize the conflict. As if to express solidarity with the Szekler initiative, the Hungarian Parliament too hoisted the Szekler

flag. This prompted the Romanian Foreign Minister to summon the Hungarian Ambassador for explanations.

In fact, monopoly over memory representation has an essential stake in these frictions. With respect to the Szekler flag, one of the most popular mainstream Romanian newspapers, *Libertatea*, informed:

“The Szekler Flag Was Invented by [the Vallachian prince] Michael the Brave: The ethnic Hungarians who want to sever themselves from Romania by proclaiming the Szeklerland's autonomy “have thrown” a flag over 400 years old in their battle for independence. Ironically, the standard was invented by Michael the Brave and was used in the battle of Şelimbăr, which preceded... the first union of all Romanians!” (Steagul secuiesc a fost inventat de Mihai Viteazul 2013)

In the same vein, the article also refutes Szekler paternity over the Runic script – another element of the Szekler Self:

“In a 2010 article with the title “The Szeklers Stole a Dacian Writing,” *Libertatea* proved that that strange alphabet's letters are not an invention of the Szeklers, but are part of an ancient native [i.e. Romanian] writing, [...], which the Szeklers “borrowed” from the Romanians who were living around the year 1000 in the Carpathians' curve”. (Idem)

The contested identity of the Szekler territory, of its symbols and even of its inhabitants is deeply embedded in past and current debates on national identity in Hungarian and Romanian political as well as cultural spheres in general and in Transylvanian as well as Szekler ones in particular. Obviously, usable pasts are a key element in linking people and territory, in nationalizing landscapes, in the ownership of geography. Hence the stakes involved in these never-ending debates.⁹

Since Robert Rösler's immigrationist theory developed in his *Romänische Studien* of 1871, which claimed that there was a Romanian immigration to Transylvania *after* the coming of the Magyars, there has been an on-going Romanian-Hungarian intellectual battle over history and geography too. Each side aimed to nationalize in discourse the claimed Transylvanian territory. This dispute was only briefly silenced during the first half of the international socialist period. The Szekler history schoolbook scandal that emerged in 2012 is a conclusive post-1989 example about the conflicting approaches to Szekler history in particular.¹⁰ While the Romanian *Academia* accused the textbook's authors of deliberately distorting historical facts simply for the purpose of disseminating Szekler autonomy claims among Szekler schoolchildren, the Szekler historians naturally defended the validity of their view. A lecturer in Romanian Medieval History at Bucharest University, Marius Diaconescu, ranted:

"The Szekler history schoolbook intended for 6th and 7th grade pupils is evidently an attempt to manipulate 12-14 year-old teenagers. One cultivates the obsession of autonomy understood as self-determination and independence. Moreover, there are too often fragments from where anti-Romanian sentiments emerge, both in statements intentionally pejorative about Romanians' serf status compared to the aristocratic status of the Szeklers and especially in the legends forged and promoted about the abuses of the Romanians against the Szeklers in the twentieth-century. (Marius Diaconescu, „Mit și manipulare în conștiința secuilor prin manualul de istorie a secuilor” [“Myth and Manipulation in Szekler Consciousness through the Szekler History Textbook”], *Historia*, March 14, 2013)

Interestingly, this debate took place in some of the most popular Romanian journals, such as *Historia* and *Adevărul*, revealing the wide potential audiences interested in the subject.

Similar contentions over symbols and territory-possession with regards to the Szekler region keep popping up and are by no means obscure. In fact, with the prospective regionalization and decentralization plans and with the redrawing of the Romanian Constitution, such tensions are increasing, and with them, so do their participants and audiences. While fearing yet another regional reorganization affecting the Szeklerland's integrity, Hungarian minority spokesmen integrate contemporary EU vocabulary on human rights, regional autonomy, decentralization, environmentalism, and local identity into older discursive frameworks.

On the other side of the conflict, Romanian anxieties of a Hungarian takeover in the area exacerbate local tensions, transforming them into national issues. When in 2013 a Romanian pupil came to the majority Szekler high school, Sándor *Kőrösi Csoma*, during the Hungarian March 15 celebration with a Romanian tricolour ribbon in her hair, the conflict it stirred went viral in the social- and mass-media. Likewise, the Szekler March the same year, in contrast to previous years, was thoroughly covered by the Romanian mainstream media, with detailed descriptions and images of the procession's length and organization as well as with interviews of Szekler participants, political representatives and religious leaders.

The post-socialist creation of a Szekler space of cultural resistance results from the conflicting relationship between what Zoltan Kántor (2001) terms as the *nationalizing minority* of the Szeklers, the *nationalizing state* of Romania and the auto-proclaimed *external national homeland* of Hungary. Diverse artifacts of

memory interiorized as being Szekler, spanning from books and songs to geography and monuments, have been employed by Szekler elites in framing Szekler cultural identity which, in turn, supports regional autonomy claims. As the adoption of popular EU discursive clichés reveals, memory entrepreneurship in the region adapted itself to radically changing political contexts, such as wars and revolutions. Thus, the traditional myth-producing role of intellectual and political elites is still crucial in post-communist Romania in the process of minority-building (Hutchinson 1987, 495; *Idem* 1999, 397; *Idem* 1992, 103, 104).

This is not to say that the phenomenon of national indifference, recently documented by Tara Zara, is not present, that all Szeklers regard their daily life in ethnicized terms. In fact, the denominational variety which characterizes the region as well as the urban/rural divide suggests a much more differentiated cluster of beliefs and self-understandings that apply to ordinary Szeklers. But clearly the public sphere in post-1989 Romania, as reflected in local identitarian manifestations and in the mass-media, is dominated by (often tense, but nevertheless popular) debates regarding the future of the Szeklerland. As Brubaker pointed out, the contested region of Transylvania, including the Szekler area, is framed today by “a setting in which ethnicity is highly politicised on local, state-wide, and interstate levels” (Sturm and Bauch 2010, 191). While Szekler elites cultivate fears characteristic of a besieged community, Romanian elites fuel anxieties over state-disintegration as a result of Szekler discursive practices. Tensions continue to grow on each side of this battle for symbolic ownership of Szekler space.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper would not have come into being without the valuable help of Zsuzsanna Magdó (University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign) and Chris Davis who kindly advised me in how to approach Szekler discourses on local identity. Additionally, they pointed out to me extremely relevant material to my topic. Likewise, I am grateful to Adam Bresnahan (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin) for his proofreading and stylistic improvement of my text.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Rogers Brubaker developed his argument that after the collapse of the USSR, the successor states in East Central Europe are (re)developing nationalist understandings similar to the interwar ones (Brubaker 1996, particularly the “Introduction” and “Chapter 6. Aftermaths of empire and the unmixing of people”).
- [2] For general works on the primitivist current see: Rhodes 1994; Kuper 1988; Rush 1995.
- [3] The Transylvanian Lord-Lieutenants, for example, continued to be locally rooted despite the 1867 Compromise and Budapest’s centralization attempts since then (see Pál 2008).
- [4] For the situation of post-Trianon Hungarian minority-politics see Brubaker 1996, especially “Chapter 6. Aftermaths of empire and the unmixing of people.”
- [5] For the Transylvanianist ideology see Sata 2001.
- [6] I borrow the term *groupness* from Brubaker (1996; 2004).
- [7] I am grateful to Zsuzsanna Magdó (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) for mentioning these examples to me as territorial markers of Szeklerness in the region.
- [8] The idea that the post-socialist nation-states are conceived of in ethnocultural terms as being for and of only the dominant nation, and thus as not being congruent with citizenship, which also encompasses national minorities, is developed in Brubaker 1996, 5, 83, 103.
- [9] In fact, the entirety of interwar East Central Europe was dominated by national states’ struggles for national homogeni-

zation with the aim of reifying the nationalization of their territories (preceded in the pre-1914 period by ethnological and historical narratives of homogenization, which afterwards intertwined with concrete actions in this direction): the massive population exchanges in the Balkans especially affecting Muslim populations or the Nazi Holocaust are only the most extreme examples. Even the Soviet Union, struggling to create Soviet (national) republics, was employed in categorizing and moving peoples around its territory with the same end – national homogenization and the linking a certain nationally identified people to its designated territory – as Brubaker (1996, 23-54) argues more generally and as Kate Brown (2003, 8-9, 32-33, 39-44, 127-128, 138, 148-149) suggests regarding the “*kresy*” borderland in particular. With respect to the Szekler region, similar nationalizing projects of interwar Hungary and Romania resulted in both nationalizing narratives and population transfers. Numerous top Romanian racial scientists – Chelcea, Făcăoaru, Popovici – argued that Transylvania (including the Szeklerland) represented the “cradle of Romanianness” while at the same time trying to prove that Szeklers were in fact Hungarianized Romanians (Turda 2008, 101, 111, 114-115). Thus, in order to reify the proclaimed homogeneity in both Romania and Hungary, 17.000 Bukovinian Szeklers were transferred in 1941 to southern Hungary, where the Swabian Germans used to live – themselves transferred to their own external “homeland” through similar population policies – in order to nationalize the emptied territory with a pure kin (Kürti 2001, 109).

- [10] For usable pasts and the extent of memory-enterprise in post-socialist East Central Europe, regarding the commemoration of the contested 1848 event in Romania, Hungary and Slovakia see the comparative study Feischmidt and Brubaker 2002.

REFERENCES

- [1] *Adevărul*. "Kelemen: UDMR nu participă la reînnumarea lui Nyiro, fiind un eveniment electoral al lui Szasz." May 25, 2012.
- [2] Anderson, Benedict. "The New World Disorder." *New Left Review*, 1992: 3-13.
- [3] Bottoni, Stefano, "The Debate Over Hungarian National Unity from Trianon to the 'Status Law' (1920-2001)." *The Contours of Legitimacy in Central Europe: New Approaches in Graduate Studies*. Oxford: European Studies Centre, St Anthony's College, 2002.
- [4] Brown, Kate. *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- [5] Brubaker, Rogers. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- [6] —. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [7] —. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- [8] Bucur, Maria, *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth-Century Romania*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009.
- [9] Diaconescu, Marius. "Mit și manipulare în conștiința secuilor." *Historia*, March 14, 2013.
- [10] "Drapel secuiesc de doi metri, arborat în centrul municipiului Sfântu Gheorghe." *Realitatea.Net*. June 2013, 2013. http://www.realitatea.net/drapel-secuiesc-de-doi-metri-arborat-in-centrul-municipiului-sfantu-gheorghe_1197074.html (accessed November 1, 2013).
- [11] "Drapelul secuiesc a fost aprobat ca steag al județului Harghita." *Antena3.ro*. November 27, 2009. <http://www.antena3.ro/romania/drapelul-secuiesc-a-fost-aprobat-ca-steag-al-judetului-harghita-86058.html> (accessed November 1, 2013).
- [12] Feischmidt, Margit, and Rogers Brubaker. "1848 in 1998: The Politics of Commemoration in Hungary, Romania and Slovakia." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2002: 700-744.
- [13] *Gândul*. "Vona Gabor: Dacă apărarea drepturilor maghiarilor înseamnă conflict cu România, Jobbic își asumă asta." August 10, 2013.
- [14] *HotNews*. "Traian Basescu, declaratii dure la adresa politicianilor maghiari: Romania isi va asuma leadershipul punerii la punct a Ungariei, care a devenit focar de instabilitate in regiune / Liderii unguri au fost indecenti, foarte probabil ca anul viitor nu va mai." August 12, 2013.
- [15] Hutchinson, John. "Cultural Nationalism, Elite Mobility and Nation-Building: Communitarian Politics in Modern Ireland." *The British Journal of Sociology*, 1987: 482-501.

- [16] Hutchinson, John. "Moral Innovators and the Politics of Regeneration: The Distinctive Role of Cultural Nationalists in Nation-Building." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 1992: 101-117.
- [17] Hutchinson, John. "Re-Interpreting Cultural Nationalism." *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 1999: 392-407.
- [18] Kántor, Zoltán. "Nationalizing Minorities and Homeland Politics: The Case of the Hungarians in Romania." In *Nation-Building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies*, 249-274. Budapest: Regio, 2001.
- [19] "Kelemen Hunor despre declarațiile liderului Jobbik: Chiar și prostiile circulă liber; respingem astfel de afirmații!" *RFI România*. August 12, 2013. <https://www.rfi.ro/articol-stiri-politica-43372-kelemen-hunor-declaratiile-liderului-jobbik-chiar-prostiile-circula> (accessed November 1, 2013).
- [20] Kuper, Adam. *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformation of an Illusion*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- [21] Kürti, László. *The Remote Borderland: Transylvania in the Hungarian Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.
- [22] *Libertatea*. "Steagul secuiesc a fost inventat de Mihai Viteazul." March 17, 2013.
- [23] Liktor, Katalin. "Reményik Sándor transzilvanizmus." Edited by István Dobos and Bene Sándor. *A magyarságtudományok önértelmezései: A doktoriskolák II. nemzetközi konferenciája*. Budapest: Nemzetközi Magyarságtudományi Társaság, 2008. 100-103.
- [24] "Liviu Dragnea, întâmpinat la Covasna cu steaguri secuiești și mesaje pro-autonomie." *RTV.NET*. July 12, 2013. http://www.romaniatv.net/liviu-dragnea-intampinat-la-covasna-cu-steaguri-secuiesti-si-mesaje-pro-autonomie_88867.html (accessed November 1, 2013).
- [25] Mitu, Sorin. *Building Identities in Transylvania: A Comparative Approach*. Quebec: Symphologic Publishing & Argonaut, 2013.
- [26] Mohay, Tamás. *Töredékek az ünnepről*. Budapest: Nap, 2008.
- [27] Neubauer, Jown. "Conflicts and Cooperation between the Romanian, Hungarian and Saxon Literary Elites in Transylvania, 1850-1945." In *Cultural Dimensions of Elite Formation in Transylvania (1770-1950)*, by Viktor Karady and Zsuzsanna Török, 159-185. Cluj: EDRC Foundation, 2008.
- [28] Nora, Pierre. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. III vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98.
- [29] Pál, Judit. "The Transylvanian Lord Liutenants after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise." In *Cultural Dimensions of Elite Formation in Transylvania (1770-1950)*, by Viktor Karady and Zsuzsanna Török, 138-158. Cluj: EDRD Foundation, 2008.
- [30] Rhodes, Colin. *Primitivism and Modern Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1994.
- [31] *România Liberă*. "Ce spune premierul despre arborarea steagului secuiesc pe instituții." October 12, 2013.
- [32] Rush, Ronald. *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- [33] Sata, Kinga. "The Idea of the "Nation" in Transylvanianism." In *Nation-Building and Cotnested Identities: Romania and Hungarian Case Studies*, by Balázs et al. Trencsényi, 42-60. Budapest: Regio Books, 2001.
- [34] Smith, Anthony. *National Identity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.
- [35] "Steagul secuiesc a fost inventat de Mihai Viteazul." *Libertatea*. March 17, 2013. <http://www.libertatea.ro/detalii/articol/steagul-secuiesc-istorie-mihai-viteazul-moise-secuiul-selimbar-439419.html> (accessed November 1, 2013).
- [36] Sturm, Tristan, and Nicholas Bauch. "Geopolitics Conversation Nationalism and Geography: An Interview with Rogers Brubaker." *Geopolitics*, 2010: 185-196.
- [37] Török, Zsuzsanna. "Planning the National Minority: Strategies of the Journal Hittel in Romania, 1935-44." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 2001: 57-74.
- [38] Turda, Marius. *Eugenism și antropologie rasială în România: 1874-1944*. București: Cuvântul, 2008.
- [39] Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- [40] Verdery, Katherine. *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

