

New Horizons from Prague to Bucharest: Ethnonational Stereotypes and Regionalist Self-Perceptions in Interwar Slovakia and Transylvania

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The paper outlines how the portrayal of “us” and “them” changed during the interwar period in the relational web from Prague to Bucharest. The collapse of the Monarchy had shaken some of the foundations of national self-perceptions and brought to the fore hitherto insignificant groups either as active protagonists of politics of identity or as significant others. Nevertheless, the old representations of each other had changed less markedly. The real novelty of the period was that the appearance of Hungarian minorities and their politics of identity enabled the creation of some temporary group constructs that transcended traditional ethnic boundaries and redefined ethnicity on a more region-centred basis.

KEYWORDS:

Politics of Identity; Interwar Central Europe; Regionalism; Nationalism; Alterity

Delineation of a community is a key element of its existence. This act is not only able to reinforce the feeling of mutual connectedness inside and define who is not entitled to the solidarity of the members, but — at least according to Chantal Mouffe — it is the very essence of politics.¹ According to her definition, the only meaningful action politics can resort to is defining who belongs to the political community. Only the widening of the boundaries of the polity can reduce the effects of the basic distinction between foes/enemies and friends, so convincingly drawn by Carl Schmitt, and not any kind of policy aimed at those who already count as members of the polity.

As a consequence, politics is intrinsically bound with identity, lending gravity to politics of identity, too. Questions of who we are, which also implies who we are not and why are others different, thus become of primary importance. One way of the delimitation of the community is self-thematization,² which — as a social phenomenon — means defining the supposedly common characteristics of the group from the inside, presenting the roots of distinctiveness from within. Nevertheless, it cannot avoid tackling — at least implicitly — the issue of who are beyond the set boundaries of the community, especially as most often than not the characteristics of the other — the alterity — are also telling something about “us”.

1 Chantal MOUFFE, *The Return of the Political*, London 2005, p. 69.

2 Ulrich BIELEFELD, *Nation und Gesellschaft. Selbstthematisierungen in Frankreich und Deutschland*, Hamburg 2003. See also Thomas VON AHN, *Új Szellem Szlovenszón [New Spirit in Slovensko]*, *Pro Minoritate*, 2009, pp. 55–81.



It is therefore hardly surprising that nation-building projects in 19th century Central and Eastern Europe were keen on situating their in-groups among other ethnic groups. At the turn of the 20th century nationalism was an important current in the region, and some of its empires, most prominently Austria-Hungary, offered a fertile ground for such political movements. Actual political institutions had a not negligible influence on the construction of in- and out-groups and often entrenched certain types of boundaries. Just to name one example, the concept of a unitary, naturally given and historically earned national territory of Hungarians in the form of the Carpathian-basin fixed the boundaries of the Hungarian nation, despite the obvious paradox of having almost as many non-Hungarians living in this geographic area as Hungarians. Furthermore, almost every national group falling outside the limits of this national territory was treated as distant and insignificant, only the ones inside constituted the significant others, whose relation to Hungarians and whose characteristics also contributed to the definition of Hungarianness.

Against this background the effects of the Great War were rightly seen as an earthquake which completely transformed the national landscape and the boundaries of nations — and not only in political terms. In this paper I will outline the most important effects of this changes on the boundaries between Czech, Slovak (Czechoslovak), Hungarian and Romanian nations. Although my perspective is deliberately Hungarian, it is not intended to give priority to one perspective. Quite the contrary, its main reason is to offer an angle from which the interconnectedness, the entangled web of relations can be revealed instead of the usual binary analyses of alterities. The study of how in- and out-groups were constructed and delineated in the space between Prague and Bucharest offers an intriguing example of entangled history in its most tangible form since a significant part of the actors involved in politics of identity could often combine the rival discourses of identity in order to make boundaries visible based on unexpected commonalities of certain sub-groups of the national communities. In this way the overlap of nations became a source of alternative constructs of community.

THE MOMENT OF DISRUPTION: 1918

Austria-Hungary's peculiar system of dualism, itself the result of nationalist politics, affected the system of alterities too. The Hungarian half of the Monarchy was organized as a nation state and the Hungarian political elite — with a few exceptions — increasingly used it as the framework and means of nation-building. In this effort the most important significant others were the national minorities living in Hungary. Even if groups of the same nations, like the Romanians, were living outside the country, they were hardly recognized as others, and the Romanians were defined on the basis of the image of Romanians in Hungary and Transylvania. This was even more pronounced with the Czechs, for neglect of this group went so far that some authors later complained that the Czechs were deliberately left out of Hungarian school textbooks in order to make the Slovaks forget about their kin. But ignorance or indifference was often reciprocated and if the Romanian or Czech public could learn

something about the Hungarians it was always in relation to and mainly through the eyes of Romanians and Slovaks living in the country.³

This well-established system of alterities broke down with the collapse of the Monarchy. With the emergence of Czechoslovakia and Greater Romania the national groups beyond the Carpathians suddenly emerged as significant ones for Hungarian self-perception. But not only did new out-groups appear, or older ones merge with hitherto insignificant ones, the existing ones also changed significantly. The Slovaks in Czechoslovakia suddenly played a different role in the Hungarian imagery of ethnic relations, even if just as a group that allegedly nurtured sympathy and nostalgia for historic Hungary due to the excesses of the Czech(oslovak) rule.

National groups became more fragmented, especially with the appearance of Hungarian minorities (these were sometimes successors of regional groups),⁴ which had on their agenda the establishment of politics of identity. Regional elites of the ethnic majority could hold a similar position, further complicating matters. This raised at least three significant questions, all of them redefining ethnic groups and their boundaries. What was “Hungarian” if there was no nation state uniting the group — was the first one. What were the Hungarian minorities at all in this new relationship — was the logical consequence and the second question to face. As a third question the problem and nature of the regional groups of the majority (Slovaks and Transylvanian Romanians) loomed over the scene, too.

Even though seen from Budapest this situation was precarious, those responsible for politics of identity in the Hungarian government were well aware of what it meant for Hungary proper. As Benedek Jancsó, an influential figure in Prime Min-

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- 3 Gábor EGRY, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika. Magyar kisebbségek nacionalizmus és regionalizmus között Csehszlovákiában és Romániában 1918–1944* [Ethnicity, Identity, Politics. Hungarian Minorities between Nationalism and Regionalism in Czechoslovakia and Romania 1918–1944], Budapest 2015; András VÁRI, *Die Palette ethnischer Stereotypen in Ungarn 1790–1848. Überlegungen zu den Thesen John Breuillys*, in: Eva Schmidt-Hartmann (ed.), *Formen des nationalen Bewusstseins im Lichte zeitgenössischer Nationalismustheorien*, München 1994, pp. 173–196; Béla MAKKAI, *A Magyar–román szomszédságkép alakulása Ó-Romániában a 19–20. század fordulóján* [The Formation of the Mutual Image of Romanians and Hungarians in the Old Kingdom at the Turn of the 20th Century], *Magyar Kisebbség* [Hungarian Minorities] 14, 2009, No. 3–4, pp. 214–235; László SZARKA, *Emberarcú nacionalizmus. T. G. Masaryk kisebbségpolitikájának változásai* [Nationalism with a Human Face. Varieties of T. G. Masaryk’s Minority Politics], in: idem, *Duna-táji dilemmák. Nemzeti kisebbségek–kisebbségi politika a 20. századi Kelet- és Közép-Európában* [Dilemmas from the Danube. National Minorities — Minority Politics in East Central Europe in the 20th Century], Budapest 1998, pp. 174–175.
- 4 Gábor EGRY, *Regionalizmus, erdélyiség, szupremácia. Az Erdélyi Szövetség és Erdély jövője, 1913–1918* [Regionalism, Transylvaniam, Supremacy. The Transylvanian Alliance and Transylvania’s Future, 1913–1918], *Századok* [Centuries] 147, 2013, No. 1, pp. 3–32; Nándor BÁRDI, *Az erdélyi magyar (és regionális) érdekek megjelenítése az 1910-es években. Az Erdélyi Szövetség programváltozatai* [Representation of Transylvanian Hungarian (and Regional) Interests in the 1910s. Program Varieties of the Transylvanian Alliance], *Magyar Kisebbség* [Hungarian Minorities] 8, 2003, No. 2–3, pp. 93–105.





ister István Bethlen's entourage formulated it, the success of revision hinged upon the ability of the Hungarian government to preserve the national identity of the minority Hungarian groups in a form that made them compatible with the territorial revision — swift reintegration into Hungary.⁵ It was therefore essential to pursue an active politics of identity among the Hungarian minorities and countering similar efforts of the new nation states.

NEW HORIZONS

As I mentioned above, the most important change after 1918 was the appearance of new out-groups surrounding the Hungarians, though the same was true for the perspective from Prague and Bucharest. The Czechs urgently needed to be included among the significant others for the Hungarians, and not only because of the political developments — at any rate, it was Edvard Beneš, the embodiment of all the Czech vices, who became the main culprit for Hungary's "unjust" fate, but also because of the developing contacts between the Czechs and the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. Similarly, it was difficult to continue to neglect the Romanians of the Old Kingdom, the regions that constituted the Kingdom of Romania before 1914, after Bucharest started a unification procedure that led to a centralized state, dismissing regional differences.⁶ The result was the merger of regional groups of Romanians (from Transylvania and the Old Kingdom), and also two social groups into a single unified out-group. Until then the Transylvanian Romanian peasants were often seen as benevolent and well-inclined towards the Hungarians, whose national passions were only fired by a group of middle-class instigators aiming to gain political influence and material advantages for themselves. Henceforth the myth of friendly Romanian peasants was replaced by the picture of a homogeneous and anti-Hungarian Romanian nation, even if the notion of some differences along the social and regional lines was preserved and sometimes, when politically advantageous, even used.

In both aforementioned cases it was political agency that made a redefinition of the relations inevitable. The main factor behind the changing role of Slovaks in the Hungarian perception of alterities was politics, the fact that almost immediately after the proclamation of Czechoslovakia a current of Slovak politics, tied to the Catholic clergy and represented by Andrej Hlinka, initiated a political programme of Slovak autonomy.⁷ It was not just a challenge to Czech influence and presence in the former Upper Hungary, but also such a politics of identity that strove to delineate the Slovaks from the Hungarians, something to reckon with in Budapest.

5 Benedek JANCSÓ, *A magyar társadalom és az idegen uralom alá került magyar kisebbség sorsa* [The Hungarian Society and the Fate of The Hungarians under Foreign Rule], *Magyar Szemle* [Hungarian Review] 1, 1927, No. 1, pp. 50–57.

6 Irina LIVEZEANU, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania. Regionalism, Nation-Building and Ethnic Struggle 1918–1930*, London, 1995.

7 James M. WARD, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia*, London 2013.

The situation was further complicated by the new role of the Hungarian minorities in the politics of identity. Their elites, however loyal to Hungary,⁸ were in a position to formulate their own goals in terms of politics of identity; furthermore, to a certain extent, they were simply compelled to do so. Their role was not just a mere transmission of what was devised in the Prime Minister's Office in Budapest, where the experts on minority issues acted, very soon a dynamic relationship was forged which enabled minority Hungarian elites to assert their superiority over Hungary in terms of national identity,⁹ adding another twist to the web of alterities.

But the post-1918 situation was similarly complicated if seen from Prague or Bucharest. Not only did Hungary shrink significantly what made the traditional perception of the Hungarians as Asiatic oppressors of minorities somewhat problematic, both the existence of the Hungarian minorities and regional elites of the majority (sometimes aspiring to the status of a separate nation) made the politics of identity more challenging. For Prague the Slovaks became a problematic group, whose existence directly challenged the main tenets of the ideological foundations of Czechoslovakia, but whose separate history and a certain difference from Czechs were not to be easily denied. As for the Hungarians, they suddenly became a more important out-group, just as it was the case with the Czechs and the Hungarians. Furthermore, large groups of Hungarians now became minorities in Czechoslovakia whose relationship with Hungary was unclear — at least from the Czech perspective. Were they to be treated simply as being part of a unitary Hungarian nation and as such agents of territorial revisionism, irreconcilable enemies, or were they to be made part of a more civic Czechoslovakia?

Similar questions plagued the leaders of Greater Romania. Their new ally, Czechoslovakia that suddenly appeared to be closer, and seemed to offer a potential out-group finally was only of secondary importance. It was more important that these politicians and intellectuals, most of whom were from the Old Kingdom, now had to face a more direct entanglement and interactions with the Hungarians, whom they could easily neglect and see through the eyes of their Transylvanian kin before 1914. It soon became evident too that the unification would not be a triumphal march and the resistance of the Transylvanian Romanian elites to homogenizing would be the hardest to crush.¹⁰ This obviously had a bearing on how to construct the identity of the Romanians in their new homeland. Whatever they thought about the ideal situation, Transylvanian and Old Kingdom Romanians became out-groups for each other insofar as their en-

8 Nándor BÁRDI, *Otthon és haza. Tanulmányok a romániai magyar kisebbség történetéből* [Home and Homeland. Studies on the History of the Hungarians in Romania], Csíkszereda 2013.

9 Gábor EGRY, *National Interactions: Hungarians as Minorities and Changes in the Definition of Who Is Hungarian in the 1930s*, in: Zoltán Ripp (ed.), *Influences, Pressures Pro and Con, and Opportunities. Studies on Political Interactions in and Involving Hungary in the Twentieth Century*, Budapest 2014, pp. 75–98.

10 Lucian LEUȘTEAN, *România, Ungaria și Tratatul de Trianon* [Romania, Hungary and the Treaty of Trianon], Iași 2002; I. LIVEZEANU, *Cultural Politics*; Florian KÜHRER-WIELACH, *Zentralstaatliche Integration und politischer Regionalismus nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, München 2014.



counters were instrumentalized by politicians, and integrated into rival politics of identities. Everything that had come about before now seemed to become irrelevant between Prague and Bucharest while the new horizons remained obscure.

US AND THEM

In order to make sense of these multitudes of relationships politics of identity usually use pairs of alterity, defining in-groups (“us”, who we are) and out-groups (“them”, who they are/who we are not).¹¹ But public discourse is often infused with basic stereotypes about each other, instead of an elaborated portrayal of the respective groups. These stereotypes represent the basic concepts of what makes a nation, what are its inherent characteristics and how they are related to the world. As a form of unquestioned common knowledge they convey not only meaning but also a sense of security. In the intricate web of post-WWI relationships these basic stereotypes came in handy. Most of them were inherited from the dualist era, showing the resilience of the popular imagery, a phenomenon not independent of the lack of effective individual contacts between nations.

Starting with Prague and the Czechs, the dominant discourse of identity relied on the idea of an inherently democratic and progressivist nation. It was a historic phenomenon, going as far back as the Middle Ages, to Jan Hus and the Hussite wars. It affirmed that the nation was fighting for freedom and national liberty for centuries. Anti-clericalism, doubts regarding Catholicism and religion were also born out of this historical struggle. But it was also the origin of their civic organization. Without a nationally minded aristocratic elite, eliminated after 1620, the Czechs were reliant on their aspiring bourgeoisie and on craftsmen and workers who organised national life through a number of associations, as the argument ran. The ethnic cleavage and pillarization — a real historical process in the Bohemian Lands — was to lead to the regeneration of the nation state — but in a democratic form, as an island of democracy in an authoritarian Eastern Europe.¹²

The Czechoslovak idea inevitably would have conferred some of these qualities to the Slovaks. However, the sense of difference, the separate history and the idea of ruthless oppression of the Slovaks by the Hungarians for hundreds of years,¹³ made it all but impossible to simply look at the Slovaks as Czechs. Thus, they became a simple, somewhat uncivilized but good-natured tribe of the nation, a reservoir of ethnic purity, a group which should be civilized by their Czech brothers in order to finally

11 Dietmar MÜLLER, *Staatsbürger auf Widerruf. Juden und Muslime als Alteritätspartner im rumänischen und serbischen Nationscode. Ethnonationale Staatsbürgerschaftskonzepte 1878–1941*, Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 3–21.

12 Andrea ORZOFF, *The Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948*, Oxford 2009, pp. 11–14, 108–125.

13 Miroslav MICHELA, *A nemzeti elnyomás tézisének instrumentalizálása Szlovákiában 1918 és 1945 között* [The Instrumentalization of the Idea of National Oppression in Slovakia between 1918 and 1945], *Limes* 21, 2008, No. 2, pp. 273–284.



merge with them in a unified, modern nation. Even though some Czechoslovak politicians and intellectuals were less eager to prophesize the disappearance of the Slovaks, they usually accepted the thesis of the Czech civilizational mission remedying the injustice caused by the Hungarians and elevating the Slovaks to a cultural level that will enable them to live a proper national life.¹⁴

On the surface, the issue of who the Hungarians were was much less controversial. Despite the political changes, the old stereotypes about Asiatic, oligarchic, feudal “Magyars” were perpetuated, not the least because of the dubious realities of the authoritarian interwar Hungary sliding towards even more radical nationalist politics. It was easy to point out the sad realities beyond the border and to recite everything about it coming from the Asiatic blood of the Hungarians to oppress peasants. It was even alleged, by Masaryk himself, that the Hungarians were more Prussian than the Prussian Junkers, more ruthless in their denationalizing efforts in school and in everyday life.¹⁵

Now while the political leaders of the Hungarian minority, due to their social background and past, could still fit this stereotype of Hungarian noblemen and gentry, a large part of the Hungarian minority was not so easy to depict as enemies of their Slovak and Czech neighbours. In their case the Czechoslovak politics of identity — with the help of Hungarian personalities and organizations that represented at the height of their popularity around one third of the minority Hungarian population¹⁶ — promoted a new, republican identity. It was not simple civic loyalty, as it aimed at de-legitimising the mainstream Hungarian culture and replacing it with a progressive one. Its discourse employed the main tropes of the Czechoslovak self-perception, accepted the oligarchic and feudal nature of Hungary and the Hungarian elite and promised to bring about a complete, democratic renewal of Hungarians — ultimately in Hungary proper, replacing the old elite that was driven in its politics by a desire for revenge on the unworthy Czech and Romanian “peasants”.¹⁷

Making sense in the new world was not less complicated in Budapest, especially as the outcome of the war seemed to have shaken the fundamentals of the Hungarian self-perception (or auto-stereotypes) such as the unique ability to build and run a state, something the Hungarians had never granted to their neighbours, apart from the Poles. The collapse of Hungary, hard as it was to accept, was one issue, but to see people unworthy and unable to run a state becoming rulers over the Hungarians added insult to injury. Nevertheless, the foundations of the Hungarian discourse of identity remained unchanged. State-building capacity, equalled with military power, political sense, culture and education was attributed to the Hungarians, and they were

14 Peter HASLINGER, *Nation und Territorium im tschechischen politischen Diskurs*, München 2012, pp. 325–327; L. SZARKA, *Emberarcú nacionalizmus*, pp. 173–175.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

16 Attila SIMON, *Az elfeledett aktivisták. Kormánypárti magyar politika az első Csehszlovák Köztársaságban* [Forgotten Activists. Hungarian Pro-Government Politics in the First Czechoslovak Republic], Somorja 2013.

17 G. EGRY, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika*, pp. 183–185.



undertaking a civilizing mission, the result of the Hungarian cultural superiority over the other nationalities inside the Carpathians.¹⁸ But the ups and downs of Hungarian history made it impossible not to exhibit some negative traits in the national character. Disunity, politicking, internal divisions, these were usually highlighted as such — in conformity with the traditional self-perception. But the dismemberment of Hungary added one more, a lack of proper social organization — something the Czechs attributed to themselves. According to this line of reasoning, the state was too powerful before 1918 and the national society was disorganized, which made it easier for the rival nation states to establish sovereignty over vast territories and their Hungarian populations after the state had collapsed.¹⁹

As for the traditional out-groups, there was not much to be changed concerning the Slovaks and the Romanians, whereas the Czechs posed a real challenge. The Slovaks, who were for a long time treated as unreliable, but whose image had become much more positive during WWI,²⁰ were continuously seen as good-hearted peasants, only stirred by pan-Slavic agitators, people who would eventually return to Hungary voluntarily if the Czechs would allow them to express their real sentiments. This also meant that they were seen as somewhat backward, in need of being civilized — by the Hungarians and not by the Czechs, obviously — and also too fearful and distrustful of each other to be able to go into politics.²¹

Romania and the Romanians were seen as a country of the Balkans and the Orient, led by dishonest people, who were more at home in Byzantine intrigues than in honest European politics, and whose prime goal was to exploit the population. The country was chaotic and ineffective — unless it was about the oppression of the Hungarian minority, whose grievances, often echoed in the public discourse, suggested that Romania was surprisingly successful in this respect. However, Transylvanian Romanians were sometimes treated differently, closer to Hungary and the West, in some cases even used as a good example of the national social organization that was so painfully lacking among the Hungarians in 1918. Even the emergence of a Transylvanian Romanian middle-class was understood as something to learn from with the aim of transforming Hungarian society.²²

18 This was the main line of argument deployed by the Hungarian delegation at the peace conference already, invoked in Albert Apponyi's speech in front of the representatives of the Allied Powers.

19 Ibid., pp. 114–120, 134–137.

20 László VÖRÖS, *Premeny obrazu Slovákov v maďarskej hornouherskej regionálnej tlači v období rokov 1914–1918* [The Representation of Slovaks in the Hungarian Regional Press of Upper Hungary between 1914–1918], *Historický časopis* [Historical Review] 54, 2006, No. 3, pp. 419–453.

21 The last view was expressed by János Esterházy, who spoke of Karol Sidor as a typical Slovak, fearful and untrustworthy. Dušan SEGEŠ — Maroš HERTEL — Valerián BYSTRICKÝ (edd.), *Slovensko a slovenská otázka v poľských a maďarských diplomatických dokumentoch v rokoch 1938–1939* [The Slovak Question in Polish and Hungarian Diplomatic Documents], Bratislava 2012, documents No. 13 and 92.

22 G. EGRY, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika*, pp. 135–137.



The Czechs fared clearly the worst among the larger out-groups, not the least because it was hard to assert any kind of Hungarian superiority in this relationship with a modern, developed and educated nation. They became the target of the most vicious attacks and their portrayal told a story of deceit, cheating and vileness. Almost everything in the Czech discourse held as a positive self-image was turned against them, interpreted as a sign of the utmost dishonesty or unreliability. Czech successes in the economy, as well as the influx of Czech administrative personnel, were understood as imperialism, directed at the Slovaks and the Hungarians. Czech social organization — especially its petty bourgeois tenets — were regarded as signs of an uncivilized, unrefined culture, and Czech atheism and anti-clericalism as a lack of morality. Czech democracy was disguise for imperialism and capitalist exploitation. Czech desertions during WWI — amplified by the Czech propaganda afterwards²³ — were seen as a sign of a villainous character and a lack of soldierly virtues. On top of this, Beneš was seen as the embodiment of every Czech vice, the great villain responsible for Hungary's dismemberment, which he had achieved through shameless lies and deception.²⁴

The position of the Hungarian minorities was even more problematic. The main goal of the politics of identity was to preserve their Hungarianness for the moment of territorial revision, having meanwhile to act and counter the nationalizing efforts of the successor states, which was a task impossible without their elites shaping their own politics of identity. Furthermore, a new generation socialized in the successor states appeared on the scene, whose personal experiences with Hungary and Hungarians living in the kin-state enhanced their sense of difference.²⁵ The result was a thought-provoking process of redefining Hungarianness and the way these minority groups were included into the broader nation. Somewhat surprisingly, the result was very similar in Czechoslovakia and Romania even though in the latter the Hungarian minority elites loyal to Budapest had no republican competitors.

They understood the aftermath of WWI as a period of enormous social transformations that drove them away from Hungary. The most important was the loss of the middle-class, the backbone of the nation, which was seen as having deserted in Czechoslovakia (taking refuge in Hungary) or losing its social status and its capability to fulfil its national duty in Romania. Somewhat paradoxically, these Hungarian groups were seen as gradually getting closer to the majority, or at least to its regional groupings. On the one hand, it was the result of their common fate, being colonized by the foreign centres of Prague and Bucharest. In Transylvania Hungarian-Romanian communities exhibited social practices (especially leisure, quite often used in everyday settings to exclude Old Kingdom Romanians) and a common legacy of municipal politics, rule of law and effective administration. In Slovakia this manifested

²³ A. ORZOFF, *The Battle for the Castle*, pp. 95–136.

²⁴ G. EGRY, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika*, p. 68; Balázs ABLONCZY, *Trianon legendák* [Legends about Trianon], Budapest 2010.

²⁵ N. BÁRDI, *Otthon és haza*, pp. 504–506; Franz Sz. HORVÁTH, *Zwischen Ablehnung and Anpassung. Die politische Strategien der ungarischen Minderheitselite in Rumänien 1931–1940*, München 2007; G. EGRY, *National Interactions*.



itself in a common history (fighting the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburgs), a common religiosity as opposed to Czech atheism, and a patriarchal and not imperialistic Hungarian civilizational role.²⁶

It was even more interesting to see the extent to which the future was seen as holding commonalities for the Hungarians, Slovaks or Transylvanian Romanians on the basis of analogous (and profound) social transformations. All three groups were seen as pioneers of an organic, anti-individual and anti-liberal national unity, a harmonious community in which everyone is aware of their duty and responsibility for the nation, ready to subordinate individual goals to the nation's good. Recognition of their common fate enables people to transcend and gradually erase social distinctions, leading to a "democratic" national unity. In this respect the minority Hungarians were pioneers and models for their own larger nation and the majorities set the example here. But also, the history of the Czechs and the Romanians offered object lessons on organizing a national minority effectively and the final conclusion was that if all nations would align themselves along the same organic lines, their parallel existence would be unproblematic.²⁷

In a sense Bucharest was the farthest from all the other actors in this web of relationships, not the least because the Romanian self-perception included a certain amount of self-stigmatization and cultural bovarism,²⁸ the sense of belonging to a more developed civilization but always questioning it because of the realities of the country. Despite the tacit acceptance of the Balkan and Oriental traits of the Romanians the nation proper was seen as still being superior to the Asiatic and feudal Hungarians, whose abiding passion was oppressing the minorities. Nevertheless, the Romanians also differed the good Hungarian workers and peasants (the latter they thought to have escaped from the oppression of their feudal landlords following the agrarian reforms after WWI) and the elite, whom they thought longed for their feudal privileges.

Among the Transylvanian Romanians self-stigmatization was less perceptible, their self-perception being based on their democratic nature, historic liberty (sometimes paradoxically in the form of the Hungarian nobility of their leaders), on the unity of peasants and intellectuals as opposed to the Byzantine, despotic Old Kingdom elite and the Asiatic, feudal Hungarians. The Old Kingdom elites were often perceived as a different ethnicity, to the extent that even the stigmata attached to the Transylvanian Romanians by the Hungarians were transferred to them.²⁹ Taken together with the frequent use of the Hungarian language during common social

26 IDEM, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika*, pp. 92, 100–101.

27 Ibid., pp. 148–155.

28 Sorin ANTOHI, *Romania and the Balkans. From Geocultural Bovarism to Ethnic Ontology*, Transit Online 21, 2002, <http://www.iwm.at/transit/transit-online/romania-and-the-balkans/> [retrieved 27. 8. 2016].

29 Gábor EGRY, *An Obscure Object of Desire. The Myth of Alba Iulia and its Social Functions 1918–1940*, in: Claudia-Florentina Dobre — Cristian Emilian Ghiță (edd.), *In Search of Better Times. Myth and Memory in Eastern and Central Europe*, Budapest — New York 2016, pp. 11–28.

practices in order to expose the foreignness of the Old Kingdom Romanians, it was expedient to use the presence of Hungarians as a resource. But, the very same Transylvanian Romanians reinforced the self-portrayal of the Czechs when they depicted the country as a land of progress, hailed the quality of its schools, and suggested that even Romanians from Yugoslavia should attend its universities.³⁰

The Slovaks were hardly visible from this Romanian perspective, even though their self-perception, at least as presented by the autonomists, bore significant similarities. They were a peasant nation, living in unity, whose national identity relied very much on the Christian faith, which was largely Catholicism. The Hungarians were their oppressors, but their presence could still be a resource, although a rather symbolic one, especially in the form of some common historical references, like the supposedly religious struggle against the Ottoman Empire.

FRONTIERS OF CIVILIZATION

These numerous, often intricate relationships produced a larger-scale map of the nations entwined with each other. Its most important general characteristic was the unevenness of civilization, accepted implicitly or explicitly by every discourse of identity. Seen from Prague, it was a smooth civilizational slope towards the Slovaks, the Hungarians and finally towards the Romanians, who were at the bottom. Seen from Budapest, this slope was extended with a plateau, the Hungarians and the Czechs being at the top of the civilizational ladder (although the Hungarians were still being more authentic) and the Slovaks as a nation in need of civilization, the Romanians being oriental aliens. From Bucharest, the landscape was very different. There was no way to situate Romanians at the top, but it was still possible to put the Asiatic Hungarians into a civilization pit right in the middle of the region.

Against the background of this general landscape the individual discourses were able to seek to reposition their own groups and out-groups, to draw new boundaries if necessary. One way to do it was to transform civilizing into colonizing. The Slovaks, the Transylvanian Romanians and the minority Hungarians equally complained about their regions being invaded by strangers who exploited them and who repressed the locals. This was often reinforced by implicit or explicit claims of ethnic differences between the Slovaks and the Czechs and the Romanians from the opposite sides of the Carpathians, also raising the issue of authentic or inauthentic national identity and organization. For the Hungarian minorities the latter was the main method for establishing a boundary with Hungary. During the thirties and after the territorial revisions of 1938 and 1940 the Hungarian regional elites (or at least part of them in Slovakia) tried to define their respective groups as forerunners of an inevitable national renewal. This way they did not deny national unity but differentiated — and

³⁰ Florian KÜHRER-WIELACH, *Zwischen "mongolischem Zorn" und der "tschechoslovakischen Sonne der Freundschaft". Eine siebenbürgische Perspektive auf die Rumänen jenseits der Grenze*, in: Harald Gröller — Harald Heppner (edd.), *Die Pariser Vororte-Verträge im Spiegel der Öffentlichkeit*, Wien — Berlin 2013, pp. 1-17.



legitimately — Hungarians from Hungarians. Real national unity was postponed and projected into the future when Hungary proper also will have undergone the necessary renewal. It was also the most important method of expressing regional differences, which often led to surprising shifts of national boundaries. The Minority Hungarians were grouped together with the regional majority vis-à-vis the Czechs or the Romanians, while after 1938 and 1940 these regional minority groups were on the one hand reunited with their motherland in their struggle against the Romanians and the Slovaks, on the other hand they remained separated as missionaries of the nation's social revolution without revolution.³¹

RÉSUMÉ:

Delineation of a community, drawing its boundaries is essential for its existence. One of its methods is the definition of the members and of what differentiates them from the world outside. This is customarily done in the form of in-groups and out-groups. This paper outlines how the portrayal of “us” and “them” in the relational web from Prague to Bucharest changed during the interwar period. The collapse of the Monarchy had shaken some of the foundations of national self-perceptions and brought to the fore hitherto insignificant groups either as active protagonists of the politics of identity or as significant others. The Slovaks, the Romanians from the Old Kingdom, the Hungarian minorities, even the Czechs gained more significance for each other than before, restructuring the landscape of the national imageries. Nevertheless, the old representations of each other changed less significantly, the national groups were situated on a civilizational slope with the Romanians at the bottom, the Hungarians either at the top or in a “pit” as Asiatic oppressors. The real novelty of the period was that the appearance of the Hungarian minorities and their politics of identity enabled the creation of some temporary group constructs that transcended the traditional ethnic boundaries and redefined ethnicity on a more region-centred basis, held against the “colonizers” of the new national centres even by their supposed ethnic kin.

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31 G. EGRY, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika*, pp. 196–203.