

The Case of *fin de siècle* Transylvania: Considerations on a Self-Image

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Abstract: This article attempts to define the specificity of Transylvanian Romanians in the Dualist period. The article presents a list of material and symbolic identifying components and the way in which they are revealed by the sources of the time. Identity appears as a sum of elements, material and symbolic, which define and particularize the constitutive ethnic substance. History, geography, as well as the number and dissemination of the Romanians are factors that offer legitimacy, being used as arguments in the favour of the rights and identity of Transylvanian Romanians. National holidays, heroes, the national anthem and the banner are symbols of the nation. Other elements such as language, culture, religion and also psychology and folklore are elements that complete the list of self-knowledge. The article points out the following: as a type, identity of the Romanians is mainly founded on the organicist model, more precisely the Herderian one, the Romanians assert their identity in a persuasive and argumentative manner and the intellectuals' main goal was to affirm the distinctive and particular features, which could have assured the survival and the safeguarding of the nation.

Keywords: nationalism, identity, symbolic geographies, national symbols, culture and denationalization

This paper aims at defining the specificity and identity of Transylvanian Romanians during the Dualist period. Its main objective is to answer one simple question: what defines and particularizes a Transylvanian Romanian during the Dualist period, and more broadly, what defines and particularizes the Transylvanian Romanian community in this time. It is a fundamental question because now, more prominently than ever, the Transylvanian Romanians were compelled to defining themselves in order to assert and defend their identity.

Transylvania represents a particular case of regional identity in the 19th century, namely a type of marginal identity, which represents self-awareness acquired through relations with *the other*. Transylvania, as a borderland of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, had less autonomy at that time. Under these circumstances, identity was an important issue to deal with. Even though their affinities with the identity of Romania, the mother country, were obvious, the Transylvanian Romanians affirmed their distinctive, specific, and original character, which was the result of the region's evolution through time. Therefore, at the *fin de siècle*, Transylvanian identity was in a full process of construction, which required the assertion of the uniqueness of the Transylvanian Romanians.

Concerning the geographical background of the 19th century, Transylvania was the area where the Transylvanian people lived (geographically, it was separated from Romania by the Carpathian Mountains). As Slavici, a famous writer from that time, said, “[when] speaking of Transylvanians, we understand all Romanians from the Hungarian Royal State” (Slavici 1910: 5).

The process of the assertion of the self-image of the Transylvanian Romanians became more accelerated in a particular historical context. It extended from the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867, which also meant the end of a three-century period of self-ruling for Transylvania, to its disintegration in 1918, which coincided with the end of World War I and the unification of the Romanian nation. In the aforementioned context, extending over half of a century, the self-image of the Transylvanian Romanians underwent certain changes, whereas their identity was permanently affirmed within the framework of foreign domination. One can say that at the *fin de siècle*, the presence of and the contact with *the other* represented a decisive identity-building factor.

In general, the search for the others and for a pattern was perceived as an oscillation between East and West. For a long time, Transylvanian Romanians had defined themselves in a religious way, and thus they oriented themselves towards the Orthodox East. Then after the major event of the Union with the Church of Rome, they started to turn towards the West (Hitchins 2003: 13). However, the importance of religion gradually diminished, and in the 19th century, ethnicity became the important factor in the assertion of the identity.

Transylvania was a region with evident identity elements and had a good position in the history of Europe (it is thought that Transylvania is “the heart of Romania” and “the cradle of national movement of the Romanians”). Frequently, Transylvania was considered the *engine* of the European integration of the Romanians. The reasons supporting the aforementioned theory lie in the regional advantages: a historical and cultural legacy of European inspiration and dimension. Due to its multicultural and multiethnic character, Transylvania plays an essential role in anticipating the European identity. This borderland, because several nationalities cohabitate and several identities are mixed (the regional identity is mixed with the national and even European one) on its territory, prefigures its transformation into a European model.

In the 19th century, the agitation of the Transylvanian Romanians concerning their identity focused on interrogations of an ontological nature, such as “Who are we?”, “How are we?”, “Why are we like that?”, and “What defines us as Transylvanian Romanians?” In this century, the turning towards oneself and the need to explain oneself were directly linked to alterity, to *the other* one, who had a strong presence in one’s own space, in one’s own world. The Transylvanian Romanians were socialized in a political reality, where their identity seemed confiscated and the paradigm of alterity imposed for good. Under these circumstances, this identity reaction was a “survival reflex.”

In their effort to answer these questions, the Transylvanian Romanians thought out a list of identity elements – symbolic and material – that represented the community. This list included representations of the nation’s past, which consolidated the stereotypical images about them, thus giving sense and continuity to the community. The Transylvanian Romanians were identifying themselves as Romanians, even though this context asserted features that defined them as a distinct ethnic group. As it was reflected by the sources of the time, identity appears as a sum of elements, material and symbolic, which define and particularize the constitutive ethnic substance. History, geography, as well as the number and dissemination of the Romanians are factors that offer legitimacy, being used as arguments in the favor of the rights and identity of Transylvanian Romanians. History is reconstructed by emphasizing dramatic moments in which self-preservation manifested itself, and thus it is transformed into a promise to overcome the unsatisfactory present. The common history provided the past facts and functioned as the parable *historia magistra vitae*.¹ The history of Transylvania offered the feeling of destiny, continuous subsistence, and the possibility to go beyond the disadvantageous past and the unfavourable present. History was viewed as a long prelude to the instauration of the triumph of the nation. The nation created its history, and after the reversal of this relationship, history became the creator of the nation. Their constant appeal to history was made in the Romantic spirit of the century. Geography delimitates the area inhabited continuously and permanently by the Transylvanian Romanians, while the highlighting of the people’s relationship with the area they inhabit structures the genuine symbolic geographies. The prestige of ethnicity is expressed at the quantitative level, the number expressing power and resistance. On the one hand, economy is portrayed as a serious weakness of the Transylvanian society; on the other, the economic data attest the modest preventions of the Romanians and their ability to survive under humble living conditions.² The description of all these material elements of identity emphasizes polemic accents, especially a polemic with the alternative vision of the Hungarian élite.

Most of the national symbols are related to the 1848 Revolution. Certain national benchmarks, such as national holidays, heroes, the national anthem, and the red, yellow, and blue banner are meant to create solidarity and cohesion, and induce continuous sacrifices for the nation. The national pantheon included both national heroes, such as Avram Iancu (Goga

¹ Bănuțiu, Simion (1990) *Discursul de la Blaj și alte scrieri de la 1848*. (Ioan Chindriș și I. Rațiu ed.). Cluj Napoca : Uniunea Mondială a Românilor Liberi.

² *Tribuna*, anul II, nr. 122, 1885, 31 mai-12 iunie, p.485.

1998: 287), and cultural personalities, such as Andrei Şaguna, an active politically minded Orthodox bishop (Slavici 1984: 14-20), and Alexandru Mocioni³, a political and cultural personality. These role models symbolized national virtues.

The instrumental elements of identity – language, culture and religion – was under constant attack throughout this period, but remained to express the specificity of a community that had cultivated and defended them unceasingly. The restrictions concerning the use of the language, the efforts that the Romanians had to make at the cultural level and the challenges to their traditional religion, prompted them to defend and argue the significance of these identity elements. The Romanian language was a permanent source for the preservation of the national identity in this period, since its use was restricted in the administration and state institutions⁴. The language, as an expression of ethnic roots, mobilized intellectuals, who militated for its preservation. The language was the strongest link between all Romanians and it was spoken by all of them. All intellectuals emphasized the importance of the language for the culture, and the language-culture link was a major theme in their works and speeches.

The denationalization attempts of the political establishment only strengthened the Romanians' drive in asserting their national identity.

Psychology, folklore, traditions, gastronomy, and leisure activities are elements that complete the list of self-knowledge, offering a general picture of the daily life of the Transylvanian Romanians. The general psychological portrait offers the image of a Transylvanian Romanian with predominant qualities and minimal flaws that can largely be explained by the unfavourable political context and are accompanied by annotations and corrections. The Romanians show courage, hospitality and good-heartedness. These traditions and folklore, as benchmarks of specificity, uncover a province with a rich vernacular culture, which is illustrated by the fascinating customs of the Transylvanian Romanians during holidays and events such as funeral and wedding ceremonies. Their gastronomy reveals simplicity and unsophisticated tastes, while leisure elements illustrate a society that begins to adopt specific elements of a complex daily life.

Other identity elements are Romanian folk songs (*doina*) and folk dances (*bătuta, învârtita*) [Slavici (1984: 728-734)]. All these representations, clichés, and stereotypes contributed to the creation of the national identity and of a specific self-image, promoted by all the Romanians from Transylvania.

Generally, the shaping of the self-image and identity was achieved by pursuing specificity in the diversity of human nature, perceived fragmentarily. A particular aspect is that in modern times, the nation became a fundamental reference point. While in the 18th century identity was defined in a religious way, in the 19th century, ethnicity and the nation became the identifying elements. Through its political, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and even ethical aspects, the nation became an identity. Introspection and the feelings of belongingness by means of individual relationships within a family, a group, and in an ethnic context, help shape not only self-awareness, but also the awareness of identity. This is mostly supported by collective memory as well as historical memory, which outline self-awareness and national identity.

At the *fin de siècle*, the Transylvanian Romanians were exploring their self in their attempt to find their sense of being. They asserted the uniqueness of their nation by creating a list of original elements of identification, such as the common language, national heroes, national holidays, places of glory, official representations, myths and symbols. There is a self-identification pattern recognizable in this list of common elements, which was drawn up in a particular context. The nation and the ethnic belonging are the basis of their identity.

³ *Familia*, anul IV, nr. 28, 1870, 12-22 iulie, 325-326.

⁴ *Tribuna*, anul II, nr. 26, 1885, 2-14 februarie, p.101.

Conclusions

I emphasized the basic guidelines in the construction of the identity of the Transylvanian Romanians at the *fin de siècle*, a moment when the question of identity became stringent. Having nation and ethnicity as fundamental elements, the Transylvanian Romanians, through the voice of the leading intellectuals of the time, drew up a “list” of elements that articulated their continuity and revealed their specificity as Transylvanians. As a type, identity is based upon the organicist model, more exactly the Herderian model of the ethno-cultural nation. The discourse of the nation uses mainly the national consciousness that gives a genuine desire for self-knowledge and identity assertion. The intellectuals outlined the identity by elaborating a list of material and symbolic identifying elements of the nation. All these are presented in an argumentative and persuasive manner. Identity is outlined as an answer determined by the impetuosity of its contestation. The extrinsic impulse for self-definition is the fundamental determinant for outlining the identity, the need for self-knowledge being secondary. Generally, the discourse on identity, as it is revealed in the sources, is argumentative and persuasive and expresses the resistance of the Transylvanian Romanians.

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