Szeklerland and The Birth of a New Region in Europe: An Inquiry into Symbolic Nationalism

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Abstract

The recent symbolic affirmation of Szeklerland as a new region in Europe marks the deep change in the pattern of relations between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians in Transylvania. With the expansion of ethnic Hungarian cultural minority rights at their very limits during Romania's post-communist transition, the autonomy for Szeklerland is a step forward from cultural to territorial collective rights. Facing the strong opposition of ethnic Romanian parties to the reshaping of the territorial design along ethnic lines, ethnic Hungarian elites adopted a growing symbolic mechanism of identity promotion. The mechanism of ethnic symbolism unraveled by the article ranges from road signs and signboards marking the entry into Szeklerland, the presence of Szekler flag and coat of arms, commemorations and other public gatherings to organizing an unofficial referendum for the autonomy of the region. The symbolic affirmation of the region marks its entry in the list of symbolically disputed territories and the birth of a new region in Europe.

Keywords: identity promotion, regionalism, ethnic autonomy, symbolic nationalism, Transylvania, Romania.

The post-communist debate on regionalization in Romania, although it did not lead yet to a concrete transformation of the regional administration, could be

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considered as an incipient tentative of reshaping the regional design. The process of slow decentralization and the subsequent proposals for further regionalization define the transition from the centralized model of state to the more flexible, decentralized form of state administration. However, the failed political negotiations for creating effective, efficient administrative regions and for widening regional autonomy is to be seen as a long-lasting status-quo in redefining regional administration. The failure of regionalization encompasses numerous political, social and economic factors. One has to notice that the Romanian post-communist central government inherited a long-lasting tradition of territorial equilibration and feared to adopt a stronger regionalization that could trigger an uncontrolled process of economic and social divergence. Such a process could have only added to the free market subsequent effects, which are reflected by the increasing territorial disparities.[1] But another factor seems to weight significantly more than others. This is the ethnic factor, namely the existence of a significant ethnic Hungarian minority living in Transylvania, and more especially in several counties in Eastern Transylvania. The separate identity of a region called 'Szeklerland', inhabited by ethnic Hungarians, as well as its active promotion by ethnic Hungarian political elites turns the issue of this region into a serious obstacle for deepening regional autonomy and for making consistent steps towards functional regionalization.[2]

The case-study selected here emphasizes the mechanism of symbolic nationalism put in place by both ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians when dealing with the affirmation of a new region in Romania. As underlined below, this is not about a new region in terms of historical existence, but in terms of promotion as a regular administrative regional unit in Romania during the ongoing syncopated regionalization process. By its nature, the case-study is limited in scope and cannot support generalization. However, the case of the symbolic affirmation of this region is much telling about both underlying mechanisms of symbolic nationalism and about the shift between practical, functioning politics and symbolic politics. Only when the limits of expanding minority cultural and linguistic rights have been reached, the issue of Szeklerland has emerged. Moreover, in front of the political deadlock on regionalization, normal current politics based on party negotiations turned into symbolic interaction. For fully understanding the case presented here, the promotion of Szeklerland as a distinct region has to be compared with other

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[1]   Dragoș Dragoman, "Regional Inequalities, Decentralization and the Performance of Local Governments in Post-Communist Romania," *Local Government Studies* 37, no. 6 (2011): 647-669.

[2]   Dragoș Dragoman, Sabina-Adina Luca and Bogdan Gheorghiță, "In Defence of Local Identity: Cultural Factors and Actors' Strategy During Regionalization in Romania," *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* XVI, no. 3 (2016): 331-356.

cases of symbolic geography, as it stands for Wales, Northern Ireland, Quebec or Catalonia.[3]

On the one hand, following the collapse of the communist regime, ethnic Hungarian elites have constantly pushed for expanding minority rights. With the willingness of the Romanian state for quick access to various European organizations as the Council of Europe, NATO and the EU, expanding minority rights successfully accompanied the broader process of democratization and Europeanization.[4] Although accepting high standards for minority rights, Romania constantly refused to accept regional autonomy on ethnic grounds. This was in line with the tradition set up by the modernizing and state-building processes which began in the 19th century, when the French model of unitary state was adopted by the Romanian political elites.[5] The current dead-lock regarding regionalization could be seen, in fact, as the ultimate confrontation of two parallel logics embraced by ethnic Hungarian and ethnic Romanian elites. For ethnic Hungarian political elites, the territorial autonomy of the region inhabited in large shares by ethnic Hungarians, which is referred to with the historical denomination of 'Szeklerland', is to be seen as the fulfillment of the largest expectations publically exposed by those elites during the post-communist transition, that is expanding minority rights on its very limits. Territorial autonomy would thus work as the strongest guarantee for minority rights, with no need for constant and uncertain bargaining between ethnic Hungarian and Romanian parties on the minority rights issue.[6]

On the other hand, territorial autonomy on ethnic grounds works against the ideal of the Romanian national unitary state, as it was conceived following

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[3] Rhys Jones and Luke Desforges, "Localities and the reproduction of Welsh nationalism", *Political Geography* 22, no. 3 (2003): 271-292; Carol Schmid, Brigita Zepa and Arta Snipe, "Language Policy and Ethnic Tensions in Quebec and Latvia," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 45, nos. 3-4 (2004): 231-252; Brian Graham, Catherine Nash, "A shared future: territoriality, pluralism and public policy in Northern Ireland," *Political Geography* 25, no. 3 (2006): 253-278; John Nagle, "The right to Belfast City Centre: From ethnocracy to liberal multiculturalism?" *Political Geography* 28, no. 2 (2009): 132-141.

[4] Melanie H. Ram, "Romania: from laggard to leader?" In *Minority Rights in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Bernd Rechel (London: Routledge, 2009), 180-194; Dragoman Dragoman, "Language Planning and the Issue of Minority Languages in Romania: from Exclusion to Reasonable Compromises," *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* XVIII, no. 1 (2018): 121-140.

[5] Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation-Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[6] Dan Chiribucă and Tivadar Magyari, "The Impact of Minority Participation in Romanian Government," In *A New Balance: Democracy and Minorities in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Monica Robotin and Levente Salat (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2003), 73-97; Mihaela Mihailescu, "The Politics of Minimal '"Consensus'. Interethnic Opposition Coalitions in Post-Communist Romania (1990-96) and Slovakia (1990-98)," *East European Politics and Societies* 22, no.3 (2008): 553-594.

the Peace Treaties in Paris at the end of World War One. A special status for an autonomous region inhabited in large shares by ethnic Hungarians would contradict the official definition of Romania as national state and would deny the long lasting nation-building efforts made by the Romanian elites.[7] This denial would be at odds with the centennial celebrations that have been in place in 2018, when Romania celebrated one hundred years since the unification of all political territories inhabited by ethnic Romanians. The 1918 union of all ethnic Romanians under the umbrella of an independent and unitary Romanian national state is to be seen as the greatest political, social and military achievement and the outcome of a tremendous effort made by ethnic Romanian elites beginning with the 1848 revolution.

Since post-communist political action in changing the regional design is locked by consistent ethnic tensions, the escape routes for those tensions have recently build up the framework of a growing symbolic conflict between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians in Transylvania. One of the most sensitive issues at stake is the Szeklerland region, whose name and borders remind about the medieval counties (seats) inhabited by Szeklers (known then as *Terra Siculorum* in Latin). Those seats have been in place from the 14th century until 1876, when the Hungarian government decided to re-design regional administration in Hungary and to replace Szeklers seats and other local traditional regional units with modern counties, inspired by the French territorial design model. The historical Szeklerland engulfs entirely the current Harghita and Covasna counties and part of the Mureș county in Eastern Transylvania (see Figure 1). It covers an area of almost 12,500 square kilometers, mainly in the mountainous regions of Eastern Carpathians.[8]

Symbolic Nationalism and Regional Identity

Studying the current affirmation of Szeklerland as a distinct region, it means inquiring about the mechanisms of symbolic nationalism. The symbolic nationalism that is referred to is to be conceived as opposed to overt, violent nationalism marked by open conflict and bloodshed. Although this kind of violent nationalism was largely present in the region, the current situation points toward a softer nationalism. This is a rather banal nationalism,[9] based on

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[7]　Keith Hitchins, *Romania, 1866-1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[8]　Józef Benedek and Hunor Bajtalan, "Recent Regionalization Discourses and Projects in Romania with Special Focus on the Székelyland," *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences* 44 (2015): 23-41.
[9]　Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

symbolic interactions, rather than on violent confrontation.[10] Despite its obvious and sometimes aggressive manifestation, the logic of symbolic nationalism is to promote group identity and, in the same time, accept the presence of the other groups, as a necessary "other". Therefore, the mechanism underlined here is the way ethnic groups define each other by contrast, by ethnic characteristics, in-group interactions and out-group prejudice, namely by drawing virtual boundaries between groups.[11] This is why the article focuses on the way ethnic elites build the imaginary of a region, how they help ethnicity manifest its presence and how they claim the primacy over the territory by using identity markers ranging from commemorations to road signs and flags. The use of ethnic identity markers strengthens the contrast between Szeklerland and the rest of the country, in terms of regional identity, thus emphasizing the symbolic birth of a new region in Europe. Therefore, the article takes into account both Hungarian and Romanian ethnic elites' public standpoints on the matter, trying to unravel the mechanisms of the symbolic conflict over Szeklerland. It analyses the promotion of a peculiar identity and the designing of defining borders, which turn Szeklerland into an imagined community.

Ethno-symbolism and symbolic politics, which is the practical transposition of ethnic categories in repertoires for action, work with symbols in an effort of marking territorial boundaries and dominating the public space. In fact, this is a mechanism of differentiation and power building,[12] which helps both ethnic dominance and strengthening ethnic groups' identity.[13] Ethnic groups finally end by functioning as practical categories, classification schemes and cognitive frameworks, as put by Brubaker, by reflecting each other and helping each other inner strength.[14] In our case-study, by the way of commemorations, anthems, flags and other symbols, symbolic politics is a common feature in affirming ethnic and national identity.[15] As other ethnic identities affirmed, Szeklerland is in the same time an effort of consolidating an imagined community, in the very sense invoked by Anderson.[16]

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[10] Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1994).

[11] Fredrick Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1969).

[12] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

[13] Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1979).

[14] Rogers Brubaker, "Rethinking Nationhood: Nation as Institutionalized Form, Practical Category, Contingent Event," *Contention* 4, no. 1 (1994): 3-14.

[15] John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[16] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

Ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania:
the Fluctuating Regional Borders

During the Middle Ages, Hungarians in East Central Europe have been politically organized in the framework of a solid and powerful kingdom. With the rise of the Ottoman Empire, Hungarian statehood was put on a hold following the crushing defeat from 1526, which led to the dismantling of the Hungarian medieval state. Since then, the Hungarian history is marked by various efforts to regain and consolidate statehood. After 1526, the autonomous principality of Transylvania become the shelter of the Hungarian nation. Although subject to political dependency towards the Ottoman empire, Transylvania was never colonized by the Turks, as it happened to other parts of Hungary. It was there that the Hungarian nobility managed to keep alive the national, political and cultural heritage of the former medieval state.[17]

The medieval institutional architecture and the legitimate authority of the Hungarian nobility in Transylvania was consolidated by the political agreement from 1437 (known as the *Unio Trium Nationum*, the union of the three estates) between the Hungarian landlords and the Catholic clergy, on the one side, and the other Estates of Transylvania (medieval *états*), namely the Saxons (*szászok* in Hungarian and *saşi* in Romanian) and the Szeklers (*székelyek* in Hungarian and *secui* in Romanian), on the other hand. The union of these estates was directed against the peasantry,[18] largely formed of Romanian peasants of Orthodox faith, who rebelled the very year. Both Saxons and Szeklers have benefited since the 12th century from extensive autonomy grated by the Hungarian kings in exchange of solid defense of the kingdom's Eastern borders. Saxons were primarily urban settlers of German origin coming from the Western European regions of Rhine and Mosel and founded numerous towns in South-Eastern Transylvania.[19] The Szeklers, who are a subgroup of the Hungarian people, were at that time mostly free warriors and guards of the kingdom's borders. The medieval autonomy of both Saxons and Szeklers ended with the social and political reforms promoted during the Enlightenment by the Austrian emperor Joseph II, who revoked *Unio Trium Nationum* as the the expression of an obsolete social and political order and promoted inclusive

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[17] Paul Lendvai, *The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[18] Jean W. Sedlar, *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994), 404.

[19] Harald Roth, *Kleine Geschichte Siebenbürgens* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003).

citizenship for all inhabitants.[20] Until then, both Saxons and Szeklers enjoyed extensive administrative, judicial and fiscal rights in the framework of distinct political structures which ruled autonomous territories, called *Universitas Saxonum* (Saxon community) and *Székelyföld* (Székelyland or Szeklerland, the label we prefer here). The existence of the medieval autonomous region of *Székelyföld* is still present in the imaginary of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania, influencing how ethnic Hungarian elected officials conceive the relationship with the Romanian unitary state.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Turks by the Habsburgs at the end of the 17th century, Hungary became part of the Austrian Empire. With the awakening of modern national identities, Hungarians fought the Habsburgs in order to establish a Hungarian national state.[21] Although the 1848-1849 civil war ended in defeat for Hungarians, the persistent ethnic and political tensions finally led to the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867. By this, Hungary turned from a province of the empire into a pillar of the dual monarchy and the Hungarian government turned into a strong national government, eager to adopt measures prone to lead to the cultural homogenization of the territory. The struggle to culturally unify the Hungarian territory triggered the defensive response of Romanian ethnic elites in Transylvania. They strongly affirmed the cultural and political rights of ethnic Romanians, who formed the majority of Transylvania's population.[22] Despite all difficulties in promoting their cultural and political rights, the Romanian ethnic elites remained faithful to the Habsburg monarchy. It was only following World War One and the military defeat of Austria-Hungary that Romanian elites turned towards the neighboring Romanian state and proclaimed the secession from Hungary and the subsequent unification of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania on the 1st of December 1918.

In fact, the most important political event of the 20th century for Romania is the 1918 regrouping of all the territories inhabited by ethnic Romanians in a single, unified and unitary state. Modern Romania was born earlier in 1859, by binding together two provinces inhabited by ethnic Romanians, namely Wallachia and Moldova. With the 1877 independence from the Turkish rule, the new state was given recognition by the Peace congress in Berlin under the name of Romania and soon became a political actor in the South East European region. Following World War One, Romania engulfed other provinces, like Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania. Although those provinces were previously part of multinational Tsarist and Habsburg empires, they were largely inhabited by ethnic Romanians. In

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[20] Angelika Schaser, *Josephinische Reformen und sozialer Wandel in Siebenbürgen. Die Bedeutung des Konzivilitätsreskriptes für Hermannstadt* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1989).
[21] István Deák, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1849* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).
[22] Keith Hitchins, *The Rumanian National Movement in Transylvania, 1780-1849* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

the changing European balance of power at the end of the war, Romanian cultural and political elites seized the opportunity and pushed for the unification of their provinces with modern Romania. This political move was the outcome of a long-lasting effort for national unity.[23]

However, the unification of the Romanian territories did not solve ethnic problems in the region. Although Romania was defined as unitary and national state, the new provinces brought in large ethnic and religious minorities, with their more urbanized, active and organized elites.[24] The struggle to culturally homogenize the nation and to unify the national territory led to harsh nationalist policies and finally, to the rise of a violent right-wing, xenophobic and authoritarian movement.[25] Ethnic Hungarians living in Transylvania become one of the most important ethnic minority groups in Romania. Their inclusion within the new Romanian borders as a consequence of the political negotiations at the end of World War One turned their status from the dominant titular nation of the Hungarian state before 1918 to that of an ethnic minority in a neighboring country, in Romania. Transformed into an ethnic diaspora, although living very close to their kin-state borders, ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania constantly feared a slow and painful assimilation.[26]

This fear of assimilation was in contrast to that expressed by ethnic Romanian political elites, who feared the strengthening of a minority group that would eventually lead to insubordination and even secession. This scenario happened when the European and regional context turned unfavorable. At the beginning of the Second World War, the Hungarian state claimed its right to decide the fate of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania and attached half of the province in 1940, by using the second Vienna Award that followed the secret protocol of the Non-Aggression Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This geopolitical move was possible despite the fact that both Hungary and Romania were allies of Nazi Germany.[27] The territorial loss was short-lived, since the lost half of the province was recovered by Romania in 1944 and the border assigned by the 1920 Peace Treaty with Hungary was reconfirmed by the Paris Peace Treaties from 1947. The impact of this secession on ethnic Romanian elites' sensibility was however very important.

The fear of insubordination and secession is still visible later on, in the way the late communist regime tried to keep ethnic minority groups under tight

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[23] Hitchins, *The Rumanian National Movement.*
[24] Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics.*
[25] Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Anti-Semitism: The Case of Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991).
[26] Elemér Illyés, *National Minorities in Romania: Change in Transylvania* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1982).
[27] Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally. Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-1944* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

demographic, administrative and cultural control by forging a combined socialist and Romanian nationalist ideology.[28] Although the very first years of the communist regime represented a period of fraternity between the Hungarian and Romanian workers and peasants, the Ceausescu regime slowly turned internationalist socialism into national communism. Whereas an Autonomous Hungarian Region inhabited by large shares of ethnic Hungarians, engulfing the historical Szeklerland, was put in place in Transylvania in 1952 under Soviet guidance,[29] the region was dismantled in the aftermath of the Hungarian anti-communist uprising from 1956. The communist central authorities in Romania took then the opportunity to reshape regional design and more tightly control ethnic minorities, renewing the more traditional effort of nation-building from the inter-war period. Beginning with 1968, the territory was homogenously divided into 41 counties (*județe*), which are still in place today. The territory once covered by the autonomous Hungarian region in Transylvania was divided into the current Harghita, Covasna and Mureș counties, as shown in the Figure 1.

Following the fall of the communist regime, the desire expressed by ethnic Hungarians to obtain autonomy on various levels was taken as a serious threat by ethnic Romanians. Ethnic clashes in Târgu-Mureș, a medium-size town from Transylvania, could have led to open ethnic conflict in March 1990, putting Romania on the European map of the post-communist violent ethnic conflicts well before former Yugoslavia or the former Soviet Union. Although open ethnic conflict was avoided by the decisive involvement of political elites regrouped in ethnic parties, who transferred ethnic disputes from streets on to Parliament, Romania faced a more difficult post-communist transition. As other countries from the Eastern Europe, Romania had to face a triple transition. Besides rapid economic change and a new democratic institutional design, Romania had to put in place a constitutional framework able to accommodate minorities. Other countries from the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia had even a more difficult task, since they had to balance national integration and secessionist threats, the legal recognition of the inherited borders and the definition of nationhood.[30]

Ethnic Tensions and the Expansion of Minority Rights

Once transferred to the Parliament in early 1990, ethnic tensions in Romania have been channeled by the disputes regarding the issue of expanding

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[28] Catherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

[29] Stefano Bottoni, *Stalin's Legacy in Romania: The Hungarian Autonomous Region, 1952-1960* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

[30] Taras Kuzio, "Transition in Post-Communist States: Triple or Quadruple," *Politics* 21, no. 3 (2001): 168-177.

minority rights. Despite the nationalist discourse of the Romanian parties in government which aimed at consolidating in power,[31] the inclusion of the newly formed Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată a Maghiarilor din România – UDMR) in the political arena and especially its access to the Romanian Parliament largely helped to keep open an essential communication channel between the two ethnic communities in Transylvania. Through their parliamentary representation, ethnic Hungarian political elites had the opportunity to defend ethnic minority rights and to take part to the overall reshaping of the institutional design put in place by the new Romanian Constitution from 1991. The specific institutional design left the room opened for the future expansion of minority rights through political and parliamentary strategies,[32] so that there would be no need to resort to overt ethnic struggle, as it was the case in former Yugoslavia.[33]

The initial provisions of important laws on education and public administration were rather restrictive with regard to minority rights. The Local Administration Act of 1991 stated the supremacy of the Romanian language, even in counties and localities where ethnic minorities constituted the majority of inhabitants. The law demanded to elected officials to use Romanian, the national language, in open debates in local councils, for example, even where there was no ethnic Romanian elected official. The same goes with education. Following a tense debate in Parliament,[34] the Act of Education was adopted in 1995. Although it acknowledged the use of Hungarian and other minority languages in primary, secondary and university education, it stated the obligation for disciplines as history or geography to be taught only in Romanian. This was a clear symbolic constraint, since it was well known that ethnic minorities use peculiar, different geographic denominations and that they use different perspectives when dealing with various historical events.

Despite the initial nationalistic perspective on nation-building and sovereignty, the willingness of the Romanian political elites to work for Romania's integration into the Council of Europe, NATO and the EU proved to be decisive in expanding minority rights. The accession to those regional

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[31]   Tom Gallagher, "Nationalism and political culture in the 1990s," in *Post-Communist Romania: Coming to Terms with Transition*, ed. Duncan Light and David Phinnemore (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 104-124.

[32]   Mihaela Mihailescu, "The Politics of Minimal 'Consensus': Interethnic Opposition Coalitions in Post-Communist Romania (1990-96) and Slovakia (1990-96)," *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures* (2008): 553-594.

[33]   Sabrina P. Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milosevic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).

[34]   Catherine Kettley, "Ethnicity, Language and Transition Politics in Romania. The Hungarian Minority in Context," in *Ethnicity and Language Politics in Transition Countries*, ed. Farimah Daftary and François Grin (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2003), 243-266.

organizations represented a serious conditionality, pushing for the consolidation of democracy and the consistent expansion of minority rights.[35] Not only were the initial restrictive legal provisions in teaching history and geography lifted, but the use of minority languages was accepted at all educational levels, from primary school to the university level, with the obligation of teaching and learning Romanian as official language. In public administration domain, public debates in minority languages in the local councils were accepted with proper translation in Romanian and with the final decision and disposition to be written in Romanian. The new Public Administration Law from 2001 states that in all localities where minorities trespass a 20% threshold, public institutions and local authorities can use minority languages when in relation with citizens from minority groups. Moreover, public inscriptions are provided in the minority language, wherever the minority group trespasses 20% of the population. Romania ratified in 2008 the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and, in parallel, the law for patrimonial restitution from illegal dispossession during communism was strictly enforced in Romania. The Hungarian community in Transylvania recovered many of the proper conditions for the preservation of its native language and of its cultural identity. Through the restitution act, both Catholic and Protestant churches of ethnic Hungarians recovered large parts of the patrimony they have been dispossessed of by the former Communist regime back in 1948. Many of the restituted buildings have been put by the Hungarian churches at the disposal of local authorities and currently host Hungarian language schools.

Consistent minority rights area turned Romania from laggard to regional leader.[36] However, expanding minority rights at the very limit of language rights also meant passing to a new level of ethnic relations. The fulfilment of large cultural rights was considered by the Romanian parties as the ultimate definition of what would be a reasonable compromise with the Hungarian party's demands. Since ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania now benefit from a large cultural autonomy, based on autonomous and solid institutions, such as schools, libraries, churches and numerous publications, voluntary associations and foundations, engaging into political negotiations for redefining regional design triggered the refuse of ethnic Romanian parties, which led to a long-lasting status-quo.

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[35] Lynn M. Tesser, "The Geopolitics of Tolerance: Minority Rights Under EU Expansion in East-Central Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 17, no. 3 (2003): 483-532; Grigore Pop-Eleches, "Between Historical Legacies and the Promise of Western Integration: Democratic Conditionality after Communism," *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 142-161; Frank Schimmelfennig, "European Regional Organizations, Political Conditionality, and Democratic Transformation in Eastern Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 126-141.

[36] Melanie H. Ram, "Romania: from laggard to leader?."

Symbolic Politics and the Affirmation of a New Region

With the expansion of minority rights and with Romania's accession to the EU, ethnic tensions entered a symbolic phase. Because the expansion of minority rights has attained the very limits of what ethnic Romanian parties conceived at the beginning of the post-communist transition as reasonable compromises, the deadlock on seriously engaging in negotiating regional autonomy for the Hungarian ethnic minority left no room but for the development of symbolic politics. Since our aim is to unravel the very mechanism laying at the heart of the symbolic affirmation of a new region, we extensively focus on the public statements made by various actors in the region. By media covering and secondary data analysis, we rely on the positioning of relevant public actors as parties and party leaders, local elected officials, churches and other cultural associations, in order to set up the framework for interaction and the recent developments in the affirmation of this region.

In 2007, Covasna county council decided to set up eight tourist road signs at the county borders, as to mark the entry into Szeklerland. Similar road signs with the text *Székelyföld* (Szeklerland) were put in place immediately after by authorities from the neighboring Harghita county. The two county councils are dominated by UDMR elected councilors, since both counties are inhabited in large shares by ethnic Hungarians (73.79% in Covasna and 84.61% in Harghita). When the Romanian State Road Company removed the tourist road signs, the dispute entered a judicial phase, finally won by the two county councils. The legal and permanent installation of the signboards with the text *Székelyföld* marks the beginning of a symbolic competing geography over the new region. As in other geographical contexts, the dispute regarding road signs is a mixture of hot and banal nationalism, which can be better understood by the functioning of everyday nationalism.[37] It means that expanding minority rights can initially trigger acute nationalist reactions from the other ethnic side, but finally the two communities get accommodated and start using symbolic national symbols in everyday contexts.

The argument of the Romanian State Road Company was that Romania is a unitary state and that there is no official territorial unit called *Székelyföld*. The symbolic affirmation of the presence of ethnic minorities has also been contested when other road or street signs have been put in place before. Beginning with 1996 and the access of UDMR to several central governing coalitions, the expansion of minority rights through tough political negotiations

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[37] Rhys Jones and Peter Merriman, "Hot, Banal and Everyday Nationalism: Bilingual Road Signs in Wales," *Political Geography* 28, no. 3 (2009): 164-173.

took the shape of redefining public space.[38] Sharing public space also meant accepting extensive public inscriptions in Hungarian (road signs, schools, libraries, police stations) in areas inhabited in significant shares by ethnic Hungarians. The amended law of public administration has set up in 2001 a 20% threshold for defining what a significant share of ethnic minorities means, but those provisions regarding public inscriptions were unevenly put in place. The responsiveness of local elites mainly depended on their political affiliation, with UDMR elected officials showing more willingness to implement those provisions,[39] but also on the effectiveness of the local cooperation between ethnic Romanian and ethnic Hungarian elites, or on local elites' willingness to accept the influence of central political leadership.[40] Although many of the initial road inscriptions in Hungarian and some of those in Romanian were destroyed during night-time, in the end, public inscriptions in minority languages have been largely accepted and can be now find all over across Transylvania.

Street names, flags and commemorations are important symbolic issues that help defining identity and belonging. Items as street names stand as identity markers and affirm the willingness of ethnic groups to appropriate public space. Alongside statues of national heroes, poets and musicians, street names evoke past events or personalities and express the ideological dominance of political rulership.[41] They commemorate past events and national heroes, helping to strengthen collective identity by various processes of constructing and reconstructing history and tradition.[42] Moreover, the symbolic domination of the urban space, as a strategy used by ethnic groups, fits into practical categories, classificatory schemes and cognitive frames, as emphasized by Brubaker.[43] Alongside the politics of street names in Transylvanian cities,[44] the use of the Szekler flag is an important identity marker. It is visible throughout the region, raised on private or public buildings. The current flag, figuring one blue and

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[38] Dragoș Dragoman, "Ethnic groups in symbolic conflict: the 'ethnicisation' of public space in Romania," *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* XI, no. 1 (2011): 105-121.

[39] Chiribucă and Magyari, "The Impact of Minority Participation," 84.

[40] Kettley, "Ethnicity, Language and Transition," 259.

[41] Maoz Azaryahu, "The Power of Commemorative Street Names," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14, no. 3 (1996): 311-330; Maoz Azaryahu, "German Reunification and the Politics of Street Names: The Case of East Berlin," *Political Geography* 16, no. 6 (1997): 479-493.

[42] Gillis, ed., *Commemorations*.

[43] Rogers Brubaker, "Rethinking Nationhood: Nation as an Institutionalized Form, Practical Category, Contingent Event," *Contention* 4, no. 1 (1994): 3-14.

[44] Agnes Eröss, "Politics of street names and the reinvention of local heritage in the contested urban space of Oradea," *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 66, no. 4 (2017): 353-367.

two horizontal yellow stripes, with a sun and a crescent in its upper left corner, was inherited by the region from the medieval coat of arms of free Szeklers.

The widespread presence of the Szekler flag triggered a dispute regarding the right of ethnic Hungarians to hoist this flag. Finally, a law (Law 141/2015) was adopted by the Romanian Parliament, granting each territorial unit the right to adopt and use a specific flag, but limiting its presence to public institutions' buildings or to special events, as commemorations and other festive events. It was the way the Harghita county council adopted in 2015 the historical Szekler flag as its own county-specific flag. In fact, the presence of flags was symbolically used at the beginning of the post-communist transition in another tense context, in Cluj-Napoca city center.[45] The city was the capital of Transylvania during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and was shared for centuries by ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians. Although inhabited by a large ethnic Hungarian majority before 1918, the city slowly became an ethnic Romanian city, and is today inhabited by a Hungarian minority that counts less than 20% from the overall city population. The nationalist mayor Gheorghe Funar, elected three times on a row beginning with 1992 by a large ethnic Romanian majority in town, did everything he could to secure the votes of ethnic Romanians and to assert the Romanian character of the city center. The city center is dominated, since the end of the 19th century, by the equestrian statue of Mathias Corvinus, a famous Hungarian king from the Renaissance period. In order to neutralize the Hungarian past of the city, the mayor erected towering flagpoles flying Romanian flags on each side of the statues and even replaced the white-painted benches in the square surrounding the equestrian statues with new ones in Romanian national colors.[46]

The symbolic affirmation of the new region was strengthened by the inclusion of Szeklerland among the Hungarian regions represented in Brussels by the Association of Hungarian regions. The Association is a Hungarian lobby institution designed to to keep the Hungarian Regional Development Agencies in touch with the European institutions. Although the lobby could eventually improve the economic situation of the regions represented by the Association of Hungarian regions, the official representation of Szeklerland is much telling about the willingness of ethnic Hungarian elected officials in Szeklerland, as well as of several politicians from Hungary, to strongly affirm the existence of the region as distinct from other Romanian regions. This symbolic representation is necessary since an administrative region designed in the historical limits of Szeklerland does not exist in Romania.

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[45] Sheryl Stroschein, *Ethnic Struggle, Coexistence, and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[46] Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, John Fox and Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

The long-lasting status-quo over the territorial design and the advances in regionalization triggered a growing internal competition within the ethnic Hungarian minority. Since UDMR used the strategy of small steps beginning with early 1990s and thus managed to seriously expand minority rights, its inability to operate the unlocking of the status-quo on regional design only fueled discontent and frustration. In fact, growing symbolic political action and the affirmation of Szeklerland could be related to the channeling of this ethnic discontent. And this is also visible in the reshaping of the internal competition for political representation within the ranks of the ethnic Hungarian minority.

During the successful process of expanding minority rights, UDMR remained the unchallenged representative political party for all Hungarians in Romania. With the slowing expansion of minority rights, as they were approaching the very limits taken for acceptable by ethnic Romanian parties, UDMR slowly began to lose ground when it came to politically represent ethnic Hungarians. Therefore, new Hungarian parties emerged, as the Hungarian Civic Party (Partidul Civic Maghiar – PCM) and the Hungarian Popular Party in Transylvania (Partidul Popular Maghiar din Transylvania – PPMT), alongside a National Szekler Council (Consiliul Național Secuiesc – CNS), a civic organization aimed at politically representing Szeklers from Transylvania. With a stronger appeal towards a territorial reorganization based upon bottom-up initiatives and regional identities,[47] PCM and PPMT managed to won several important mandates in local elections. In 2016, for example, both parties won 6 mandates each in county council elections held in Covasna and Harghita counties.[48] The twelve mandates were subtracted from the total number of mandates previously won by UDMR in those counties. This loss is important when one notices that the total number of seats in both Covasna and Harghita county councils is 31.

In fact, the increasing electoral preferences for both PCM and PPMT could be related to the symbolic affirmation of the Szeklerland. Noticing the reluctance of UDMR to engage into more substantial and tough symbolic politics due to governing coalition constraints, PCM and PPMT seized the opportunity and proposed in 2009 and 2012, by the voice of ethnic Hungarian elected deputies in Parliament, several draft bills regarding the autonomy of Szeklerland. Although those drafts have been rejected by all Romanian parliamentary parties regrouped in an *ad-hoc* coalition, smaller ethnic Hungarian parties managed to put the issue of regional autonomy on the parliamentary agenda. Moreover, PCM and PPMT also put pressure on UDMR as parliamentary party, which proposed a new draft bill on the same matter in

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[47] Benedek and Bajtalan, "Recent Regionalization Discourses and Projects."
[48] Dragoș Dragoman and Andreea Zamfira, "2016 Romanian regional elections report," *Regional and Federal Studies* 28, no. 3 (2018): 395-408.

February 2018, rejected by the Parliament in May 2018. This represents a different approach for UDMR, noticing that previously the Hungarian party was pleading for a special status for ethnic Hungarians, namely personal autonomy and a special status for the Hungarian language, therefore rather focusing on cultural, individual and collective rights then on explicit territorial autonomy. The 2004 draft bill proposed by UDMR was postponed several times and finally rejected in 2012 by the Romanian Parliament.

Because smaller Hungarian parties are not parliamentary parties, they adopted a different strategy than UDMR. For instance, CNS used the legal provisions for citizen initiative and prosed in January 2017 a new draft bill regarding the autonomy of Szeklerland. But the most important initiative undertaken by CNS is the referendum organized in 2008 in numerous communes and towns within Szeklerland. The referendum, organized by civic associations and not taken for legal by the Romanian government, was put in place in order to offer support to the citizen initiative and the new draft bill concerning the regional autonomy. The referendum was backed by numerous ethnic Hungarian elected mayors, as well as by many town and commune councilors. The result of the referendum was subsequently invoked in January 2017 by the authors of the citizen initiative. Those initiatives are highly symbolic, aiming at underlining region's distinctiveness and turning autonomy from a taboo into an partially acceptable, although controversial issue. By invoking similar autonomy arrangements from other European Union member countries, as South Tyrol in Italy, as well as the principle of regional democracy, ethnic Hungarian parties managed during the recent period of time to put forward several draft bills and to force ethnic Romanian parties to discuss, although briefly and sporadically, about asymmetric autonomy and collective minority rights. With the ongoing tensions in other autonomous regions from Europe and especially in Catalonia, the pressure on Romanian parties will increase, most probably forcing them to look for a negotiated, solid and long-lasting solution.

Territorial Design and Regional Autonomy for Szeklerland

As mentioned earlier, Szeklerland is neither an invention, nor a novelty. Although Szeklerland has a strong historical tradition, the current symbolic affirmation of the region makes it to appear as a new region, mainly because it is in deep contrast with the official Romanian regional design. In its effort to join the European Union, Romania adopted in 1998 the necessary territorial regulations in order to cope with the statistical requirements of the European Commission, namely a series of NUTS 2 territorial units.[49] The eight new larger

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[49]   Dragoş Dragoman and Bogdan Gheorghiţă, "Regional Design, Local Autonomy, and Ethnic Struggle: Romania's Syncopated Regionalisation," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 2 (2016): 270-290.

units, presented in Figure 2, have been designed as development regions, coordinated by regional development agencies and placed under the supervision of a central government regional development ministry. The move was rather limited to the creation of statistically functional regions, as the central government refrained from devolving consistent competences to those new development regions.[50] Regions are not legal persons in Romania and cannot work as political and administrative actors. They cannot directly access EU funding, but only can do this through the Ministry of Regional Development financial schemes. Although the new development agencies managed to inoculate to local authorities the logic of regional development, the overall results of the regional policy in Romania are rather weak.

Moreover, development regions did not replace the existing smaller territorial units, the 41 existing NUTS 3 territorial units, called *judeţe* (counties). Counties are the largest territorial units to be recognized by the Romanian constitution from 1991, and their presence firmly states Romania's character of national and unitary state. The difficulty in abandoning the county as the largest territorial unit and the reluctance of the central government to empower regions could only partially be explained by central government's fears of boosting existing development disparities,[51] accelerated recently by the free market logic of private competitiveness and investment. The most difficult obstacle for effective regionalization is the ethnic symbolic conflict in Transylvania and the affirmation of Szeklerland.

The obstacle was present from the very beginning, when it came to draw the boundaries of the development regions, but in a rather attenuated manner. Taking into account technical elements, the first law on regional development (Law 151/1998) regrouped existing NUTS 3 units (*judeţe*) into larger NUTS 2 units, namely into eight development regions. The criteria which drove the regrouping of the existing counties into larger statistical units were the potential cooperation between counties, the human capital diversity and socio-economic heterogeneity.[52] By doing this, the central government endowed each region with highly developed and under developed areas, expecting that more developed, leading areas work for the development of those areas that lagged behind. Moreover, the rather technical discussions regarding regional design were exempt of the subsequent ethnically symbolic dimension. With less room for identity issues, the 1998 political negotiations were almost ethnically neutral. The regionalization was top-bottom oriented and it was the result of consulting a very limited number of actors.[53]

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[50] Ana Maria Dobre, "Designing and Justifying Regional Reforms: Lessons from Romania," *Policy and Politics* 36, no. 4 (2008): 587-600.
[51] Dragoman, "Regional Inequalities, Decentralization and the Performance."
[52] Dumitru Sandu, "Social Disparities in the Regional Development and Policies of Romania," *International Review of Social Research* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1-30.
[53] Benedek and Bajtalan, "Recent Regionalization Discourses and Projects."

The obstacle related to the identity and territorial shape of Szeklerland became more and more evident with each subsequent push towards deeper regionalization. With a frustrating long-lasting status-quo regarding regional design, the cooperation potential of governing multi-ethnic party coalitions in central government got seriously eroded. It is worth to mention that expanding minority rights was the main basis of the coalitions formed earlier by UDMR and several Romanian parties in power or in opposition.[54] With minority rights expanded at the limit of negotiated solutions, the dead-lock in expanding regional autonomy for ethnic Hungarians alongside ethnic lines channeled the tension towards the increasing symbolic affirmation of Szeklerland.

The tension was quite visible in 2011, with the willingness of the central government to reshape regional administration in a quick and profound manner, by turning the existing development regions created in 1998 for mainly statistical reasons into functional regional units. Seizing the opportunity to redraw the regional map by imposing a more salient ethnic vision, UDMR proposed to split the existing development regions in two, raising their number from 8 to 16, and to regroup them into five macro-regions, as shown in Figure 3. By this, UDMR would have gained more ethnically homogenous development regions than it is the case today. The new regional design would have detached Covasna, Haghita and Mureș counties, inhabited in large shares by ethnic Hungarians, from other counties, largely inhabited by ethnic Romanians (Alba, Brașov and Sibiu).

The coalition partners, the Democrat Liberal Party (Partidul Democrat Liberal – PDL) offered instead a special status for Harghita and Covasna counties as forming a distinct region for the future, alongside the current eight development regions. Extracting Harghita and Covasna counties from the current Development Region 7 (Center), although appealing, would have left behind the Mureș county into a region dominated by ethnic Romanians. With growing internal party tensions and serious criticism from smaller ethnic Hungarian parties, UDMR rejected the offer. The failed attempt to redraw the regional map finally kept in place the long-lasting status-quo on the regional design issue, fuelling the frustration of the two ethnic camps.

Conclusion

The symbolic affirmation of Szeklerland as a new region in Europe is in line with developments in Spain and the United Kingdom, where referendums for autonomy and independence have been recently organized. However, the situation is different for Szeklerland. The region has not yet attained the level of recognition enjoyed by autonomous regions or by regions in quest for wider autonomy. Therefore, the article emphasizes the mechanisms for symbolic differentiation and

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[54]   Mihailescu, "The Politics of Minimal 'Consensus'."

affirmation put in place by ethnic Hungarian elites on external and internal settings, alongside symbolic responses from ethnic Romanians.

On a theoretical ground, organizing the empirical material and deriving implications from the observation on the ground, the article points toward a different understanding of the use of symbolic politics. It is here the escape route taken by normal politics, based on party negotiations, when the deadlock on sensitive ethnic issues is impossible to overpass. Therefore, symbolic politics channel elite behavior in a context marked by both ethnic tensions and a rather consolidated democratic setting. With overt violent confrontation removed from the range of possible actions, banal, every-day nationalism based on highly relevant symbols is to be noticed. By other means, symbolic nationalism fulfills the same duty, namely marking the territorial boundaries of ethnic groups and assessing their dominance. In the same time, the symbolic conflict works for the internal cohesion of ethnic groups and legitimate the predominance of political elites.

Hosting Szekleland in Brussels alongside other Hungarian regions, under the common umbrella of the House of Hungarian Regions, which is a Hungarian lobby institution, is a step taken by ethnic Hungarian elites for increasing the awareness about the region. This symbolic external act completes the effort for differentiation on internal grounds. The symbolic affirmation ranges from road signs and signboards marking the entry into Szeklerland, to the widespread presence of Szekler flag and coat of arms, commemorations and other public gatherings. Moreover, ethnic Hungarian parties from Transylvania affirmed the existence of the region by expressing the inhabitants' willingness to live in a distinct regional unit through a local referendum and several draft bills in the Romanian Parliament regarding the autonomy of the region.

The increasingly symbolic affirmation of the region signals the escape route for long term ethnic tensions and frustrations on both ethnic sides. For ethnic Hungarians, asymmetrical regional autonomy would be the best guarantee of minority rights, by removing ethnic rights from the threat of uncertain and frustrating political negotiations inside successive governing coalitions. For ethnic Romanians, a possible asymmetrical territorial autonomy should be disconnected from the process of expanding minority cultural rights. All ethnic Romanian parties rejected the draft bills regarding the autonomy of the region put forward by ethnic Hungarian deputies. Regional autonomy along ethnic lines is in deep contrast with the organization of the Romanian unitary state. Such an autonomy would surpass full cultural rights and turn into collective territorial rights. However, it is the expansion of cultural minority rights at their limits, combined with the permanent deadlock on reshaping regional design, which seems to fuel the current symbolic affirmation of Szeklerland as a new region in Europe. Although limited to a single case-study, the article could be the basis for a future broader comparative analysis of symbolic nationalism and political elite behavior in other disputed territories in both East-Central and Western Europe.

Annexes

Figure 1. Counties in Romania.
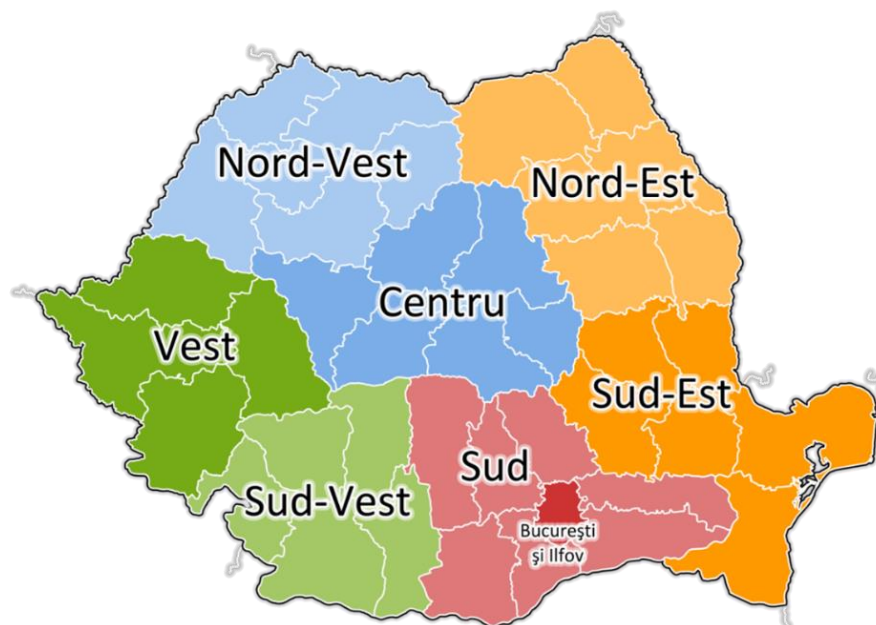*Source:* Created by the authors.

Figure 2. Development regions in Romania.
Source: "Eurostat: Romania remains with five regions among the poorest 21 in the EU," *actmedia*, February 29, 2016, accessed May 13, 2020, https://actmedia.eu/daily/eurostat-romania-remains-with-five-regions-among-the-poorest-21-in-the-eu/62520.
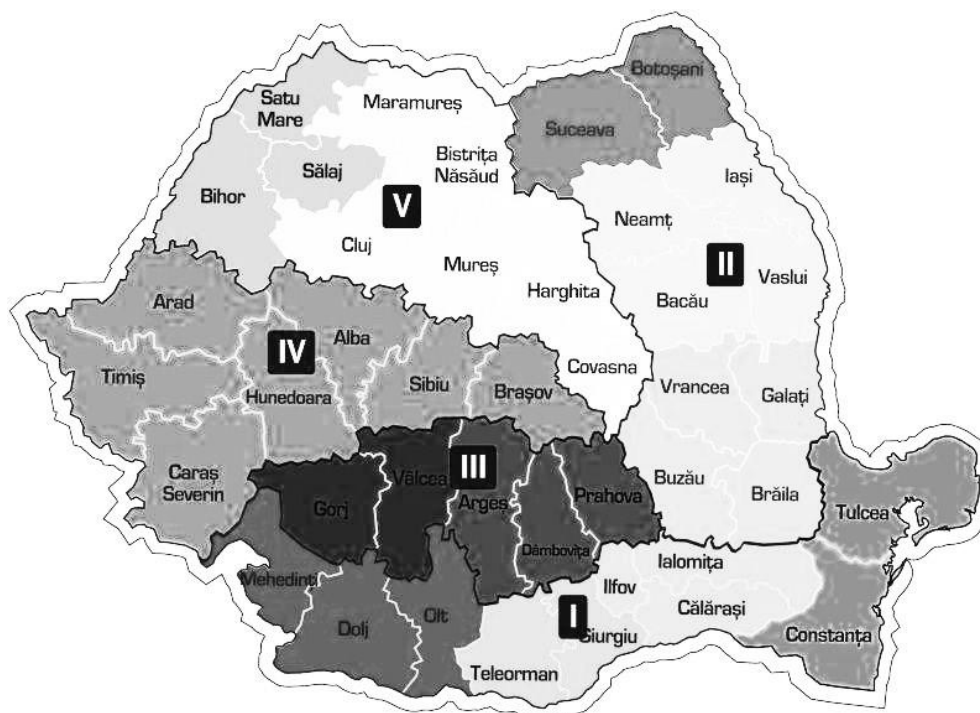
Figure 3. The reshaping of the regional design proposed by UDMR.
Source: "Acad. Dinu C. Giurescu," *Formula AS*, No. 966, 2011, accessed May 13, 2020, http://arhiva.
formula-as.ro/2011/966/spectator-38/acad-dinu-c-giurescu-13646.