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**Representation of Interethnic Relations  
within the Structure of Historical  
Commemorative Ceremonies in the Region  
of Háromszék (Trei Scaune) (1918–2014)**

*PhD dissertation – Theses*

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## Abstract

Although I witnessed the changes of 1989 ('revolution' and related events) in Romania as a child, I was able to follow and analyse consciously and systematically the consequent changes in the field of *interethnic relations which play an important role in the redistribution of symbolic borders and spaces* in Szeklerland. Due to its geographic situation and historic evolution, the city of Sfântu Gheorghe and its surroundings provide a very special geographical site for this research in respect of ethnicity and minority–majority relations: as the geographic centre of Romania, it is inhabited 74,5% by the Hungarians (minority), whereas the Romanian population (majority component of the state) represents only 25,5%, hence being locally in minority. As a consequence, this research focusses on a territory which represents a frontier zone in respect of both ethnic and confessional point of view.

In my research I emphasised the most important forms of expression of *ethnic representation* and *articulation of identity*, especially on various *commemorative feasts*, organised by both Hungarians and Romanians. Already during the literature review and collection of materials I realised that Hungarian research groups had previously worked a lot on ethnic representation, on the forms of ethnic identity manifestation and coexistence of ethnicities in Transylvania, on local festive customs. However, their results could not be used as concrete starting points for my work, as they dealt with these questions from a very different point of view. Namely they did not investigate and document the representation of local Romanians' commemorative ceremonies. These feasts could have provided an immense source to present the local Romanian community's desire of self-representation and its ever growing and mediatised articulation at national level

My most important research objective was to analyse the changes within the structure and meaning of four main Romanian feasts, and the resulting interethnic relations, by analysing the local Hungarian media and by conducting detailed structured interviews. The research follows Foucault's theory of discourse analysis, and is based on the results of Assmann, Barth, and Eriksen, when proceeding the 502 press articles and 16 structured interviews. The media analysis of press representation starts in time with the Proclamation of Alba Iulia (1918) and ends in the present days, more precisely on 1 December 2014. The four main Romanian feasts analysed are 24 January (union of Moldavia and Wallachia), 9–10 May (the feast of royalty, later the end of WWII), 23 August (the royal coup d'état and antifascist revolt), and 1 December (union of Transylvania with Romania). Among these events I have

elaborated the most on documenting the most important contemporary commemorative feast: *1 December*. The results of the research of press representations were completed and revised by 16 structured interviews. In my research I dealt only with the festive period of coexistence and identity representation. Before concluding, I have placed the feast of 1 December in an international context, by comparing it with two similar European commemorative feasts.

Similarly to the structure split in three grand chapters, as presented above, I have also predefined three main hypotheses which will be examined through my paper one by one:

1. *As a first step* I presumed that the structure, function and meaning of Romanian commemorations had been experiencing multiple changes between 1918 and 2014. The changes of these four feasts follow closely the historical and political context of the successive periods, thus exceeding their simple festive character. As such, these feasts become structural elements of each era to legitimate it. This endeavour can be observed and demonstrated by the press articles and structured interviews.
2. I presumed that a certain part of the actual political and power elite, who recognises the desire of the community to represent its ethnicity, *would use the majestic atmosphere of the feast to model the thinking of the community, to consolidate its identity and the solidarity of its members*. Since my research focusses on a frontier zone, I presumed that this process takes place in the mirror of the local Hungarians and is built on the dichotomy of “us” and “them”. This elite does not refrain from using methods and forms which may well result in interethnic tensions and mutual provocation.
3. The seriousness of the potential conflicts of the contemporary events in Sfântu Gheorghe has been demonstrated by using a comparative analysis of two similar conflict-zone cases, one from Northern Ireland and another one from Hungary. I have analysed the common aspects of the contemporary marches of radical organisations from Sfântu Gheorghe and those of the unionist protestant Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, respectively of the Hungarian Guard Association from Hungary.

*In a first phase of the research* I have carried out a *content analysis* based on the Hungarian press material that I found at the Museum of History of Guilds from Târgu Secuiesc, at the Szekler National Museum and Bod Péter Library from Sfântu Gheorghe as well as on Internet portals. I have performed a *quantitative and qualitative analysis* of the changes within the structure of four Romanian feasts and the resulting Hungarian–Romanian relations, for *four predefined time periods* (1918–1944, 1945–1964, 1965–1989, 1990–2014). In my analysis I dealt with the Romanian commemorative feasts taking place until 31 December 2014, based

on articles and reports from the local Hungarian press, therefore in fact *I have presented, analysed and interpreted the perception by a minority of these official national feasts, organised by the majority*. I did not intend to analyse the Romanian press material as the scope of my research was not a comparison, but an analysis of the Hungarian press representations of those Romanian commemorative events. During the analysis of the four feasts *my hypotheses were validated*: these feasts have undergone several functional and structural changes, according to the successive political contexts:

The most important feast of the first period (1918–1944) was **10 May** because the royalty organised festive events all over the country, including in Szeklerland, in order to consolidate its institution and to legitimate its dictatorial actions. The press reports and news in the regional papers have built up the whole event around the King, his actions and the success record of the royal family. Several interviewed persons told about the festive marches organised in the centre of Sfântu Gheorghe that, although it was majestic, participation was not mandatory, contrarily to the practice of the following regimes. In the next two periods (1945–1964, 1965–1989) this feast had lost its importance: following the technique of parallel feast construction<sup>1</sup>, this royalist feast was replaced by 8 May (founding of the Romanian Communist Party), 9 May (victory against the Ottomans and end of WWII) and 1 May (international Labour Day). In the fourth period (1990–2014) it can be clearly seen how heavily the content and meaning of this feast was distorted, that even in nowadays the original content still competes with the statements of the communist propaganda. And even if in 2015 a law re-instated 10 May as a national feast, it is unsure which aspect of the feast won the Romanian spirit. Instead, it seems that competing contents and ideologies, and the long lasting historical tensions have had a negative effect on the event itself, and degraded its initial significance.

In the second period (1945–1964) none of the previous feasts was predominant. 10 May was neutralised by the importance of antifascist 9 May, whereas **24 January** had often appeared in an international context, but had shown no significant change in its content. However, this memorial day of the formation of the modern Romanian nation and national state has been the most constant feast among all, being able to resist anything except the ideological pressure of the communist regime. This is how 24 January has become the alpha and the omega of the unification of the Romanian nation, and also the celebration of the birthday of the secretary-general of the Romanian Communist Party, leader of the Socialist

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<sup>1</sup> Bucur 2001. 305. and Ádám 2016. 119

Republic of Romania. Following the system change, 24 January slowly regained its initial meaning as the feast of the unification of the Romanian principalities, being celebrated each year. The event organised in Sfântu Gheorghe, with its specific symbols and elements, emphasises first of all the importance of the unification, the solidarity of the Romanian nation. The over intensifying symbolic campaign in the past few years reflects the firm desire of the local Romanian elite to represent itself, with the objective to demonstrate the presence of Romanians in a city with a Hungarian majority.

The third examined period (1965–1989) proved to be the age when the most significant changes occurred in the meaning of the feasts; **23 August** became the most important feast which was organised with all the accessories of the communist era's megalomania. This commemorative feast is a perfect mirror of the "evolution" of the Ceaușescu-regime. The content and the language of the articles reflect a more and more effective and dominant dictatorship, which had all the power to control every aspect of life. The analysed articles' language and content show us exactly the techniques, tendencies and methods of the system. From the interviews we can discover the true background of the feasts, the scripts, the organisers and the methods as well as those unexpected, almost anecdotic, happenings which could not pass the filters of censorship, but are still living today in the memory of the participants. We have to mention the fact that after 1989 this feast has suddenly disappeared from the official events, but due to numerous previous propagandists, several false historic concepts of that era survive in the present day commemorative actions and historical approach.

In the fourth period (1990–2014) the most important event is **1 December**. This previously marginalised feast which was reinvented and revised by intensive communist propaganda at its 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary, was practically recycled by the political elite of the transition period. It has since become a Romanian feast of great dimensions, heavily mediatised and overloaded with interethnic frustration. The newspapers of Trei Scaune region present the specific evolution of this feast in Szeklerland, its specificity being the Romanian–Hungarian coexistence, respectively the minority conditions of the Romanians in this region. Regarding Hungarians, their main concern about this feast from the beginning of the 1990s is the constant claim to respect minority rights as included and promised in the Proclamation from Alba Iulia. The press also provides for a comprehensive analysis of why Hungarians of Transylvania do not celebrate this festive event.

In the 1990s the Romanians of Szeklerland often attend the festivities organised by the prefect, but the event is less mediatised and there are no press news on interethnic conflicts. In

these years we witness a parallel and silent nation building process, the consolidation of the community's ethnic identity on both sides. The political tensions at the end of the 1990s can be observed within this feast too when, in 1999 a great, heavily mediated ceremony is organised at Sfântu Gheorghe. At the beginning of the 2000s the number of ethnic tensions and mutual messages are increasing in this area. From 2007 this feast stands out with its overdimensioned symbolic, intense nationalist speeches, and it is in 2009 the first time that an extremist organisation, the New Right, arrives to the city, marches on the streets, shouts provoking, insulting anti-Hungarian slogans, and wears paramilitary outfits and symbols.

The festivities between 2010 and 2014 are characterised by an increasing ethnic tension between Romanians and Hungarians, taking mostly the form of scandals related to plaques, anthems and flags. The Civic Forum of Romanians from Harghita, Covasna and Mureş Counties which is meant to represent the local Romanian inhabitants along with the local leaders of the Orthodox Church, and the silent accord of the prefect's office as well as the law enforcement forces, invited every year the members of the New Right to the local festivities – saying in order “to celebrate together with the local Romanians” –, but in fact with the aim of mounting local interethnic tensions and intimidating the local Hungarian community. They came three more times after their debut in 2009.

As a response, the local Hungarians have delimited themselves even more from this national feast, holding several times different meetings and assemblies before this event, reflecting on the lack of respecting the Romanian promises of the Proclamation from Alba Iulia.

*In the second stage of the research* I have used the anthropological method of participant observation in order to document, analyse and interpret the most important Romanian commemorative event of our times, 1 December, held in Sfântu Gheorghe, more concretely the example of the events from 2014. This method has enabled the ethnographic and anthropologic analysis and documentation of the event, which was a missing element in the discipline. The detailed analysis of the narratives, discourses, system of symbols and codes of the event demonstrates that the local Romanian community celebrates this day in a more and more mediated manner. The construction of the feasts's several elements is carried out in opposition to the local Hungarians. And the elite that organises the event has realised the increasing urge of the local Romanian community to represent its ethnicity, therefore it uses the majestic atmosphere of the feast to march and demonstrate its power and institutions, to model the conceptual aspect of the community and to consolidate its identity. As regarding

the means and methods, it does not refrain from instigating interethnic tensions, a quarrel of symbols, and other elements, as it is reflected in the scandals regarding plaques, anthems, flags, the appearance of the New Right, all organised around this festival. All this can represent a precursory potential of a local geopolitical conflict. In opposition to the cases from Northern Ireland and Hungary, presented in full detail within *the third stage of the research*, we can affirm that local Hungarians have responded to this increased desire of identity articulation in the spirit of democracy, and by doing so they decreased the chances of bursting out a real conflict.

The results of the research were formulated based on cases from Trei Scaune region, from the city of Sfântu Gheorghe, then these were placed into a wider international context, and interpreted. As a result of the analysis I have come to the following conclusions:

1. The Romanian national feasts had been slowly but gradually established in Trei Scaune region during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gaining new functions and symbolic meaning after every major political change. Therefore the commemorative feasts are constantly changing, specific future-modelling periods.
2. Commemorative feasts are periods mean for interethnic relations periods which are full of expectations, with intense emotional and spiritual feelings, and are very rich in symbols, accessories, and codes.
3. In this concentrated period all confessional, cultural, local, regional, national and political identities are represented at a higher intensity, through specific instruments and methods.
4. The main objective of the commemorative actions organised in such frontier zones is the symbolic occupation of space, building of strategic positions and hegemony, a profound reformulation and modification of interethnic relations, positions, and statuses.
5. The discourses related to these events are institutionally regulated; their contents are shaped according to the political objectives of the current period and system. In some cases contents that are often unknown to the members of the community, become true via the channels of communication tools, and they may shape and determine the everyday attitudes and representations. While the main objective of the institution which provides for the discourse is the consolidation, formulation and transformation

of the ethnic group's identity. Therefore the commemorative feasts, beyond commemoration, have a very strong political and identity building role, during which false contents may often become part of everyday thinking via the communication channels. The high intensity condition and desire of identity articulation experienced at these festive occasions might generate potential interethnic or interconfessional conflicts; the actors and institutions at macro-level have a key role in avoiding these conflicts.

6. While during the communist era the Hungarian media in Romania () was constrained to present interethnic relations in an idealised manner ex-post, nowadays we are witnessing an ever more dramatised version of this representation.

To sum up, we can say that the statements projected in our hypotheses have been demonstrated and validated. I have managed to carry out a detailed documentation of the evolution and contemporary construction of the Romanian commemorative feasts in Szeklerland, and the presumptions formulated at the beginning of this paper show a strong correlation with the phenomena occurring at the real festivities.

**Key words:** commemorative festivals (January 24, May 9 and 10, August 23, December 1), ethnic representation, coexistence of ethnicities, ethnic conflicts, borders, interethnic relations, extremist groups.



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