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**The Identity Reconstruction of the Slovak Minority in  
Transylvania.**

*A constructivist and discursive approach*

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## Abstract

In the work *The Identity Reconstruction of the Slovak Minority in Transylvania. A constructivist and discursive approach* we focused our attention on the Slovak communities in Transylvania after 1989. Through our approach we aimed, on the one hand, to contribute to the enrichment of information about the Slovak community in Romania by bringing to light archival documents, on the other hand, to analyze a topic little debated in the literature – the identity-collective of Slovaks in Romania after 1989. Through the method of discourse theory, our research was a novelty in the field, especially in research in the Romanian academic space.

This written paper is part of the postmodernist current of constructivism, the optics of the theory of discourse, symbols of language and representation being very little used in the analysis of the Slovak collective identity in Romania.

The novelty that this paper brings from a methodological point of view is the use of discourse theory and the analysis of archive and media video materials. The study interprets fragments of the past and present of the community through the speech of its members, whether we are talking about political leaders in the rostrum of the Parliament, or we are talking about ordinary people in everyday life and during the holidays.

In all these cases, we constantly kept in mind that the speech cannot be neutral, but is influenced by the personal character and the common social representations (shared opinions) of the group, which is why we tried to take into account details such as the occasion of the event, participants and expected social actions.<sup>1</sup>

The present paper aims to be innovative also from the perspective of research hypotheses formulated based on the review of the literature and following field research. We formulated three research hypotheses from which derive several questions to which we tried to provide answers using a multidisciplinary methodology:

- the Slovak minority has built a collective identity of the "trouble-free" identity<sup>2</sup>, meaning that it set up as a cooperating group with a majority power and formulated its identity demands in consensus and harmony with the state of residence;
- the rebirth / re-launch of the specific demands of the minority group responds to the need for the political affirmation of a community leadership;
- due to historical and cultural fluctuations, the Slovaks in Romania rather assume a regional identity related to Transylvania as a multiethnic space.

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Teun A. Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Ed. Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts, 2001, 354- 356

<sup>2</sup> Piotr Sztompka, *From East Europeans to Europeans: shifting collective identities and symbolic boundaries in the New Europe*, *European Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 481–496 (2004),

In carrying out our approach, we structured the thesis in four chapters, as following: *The conceptual and methodological framework, Slovaks in Transylvania before 1989. Historical and cultural-identity evolution, Identity of the Slovak minority in Romania after 1989: discourse and practice, Identity landmarks of Slovaks in Romania: perceptions and self-perceptions.*

The main objective of the thesis to understand and analyze the process of construction and representation of the collective identity of Slovaks in Romania after the fall of communism was achieved. The empirical data gathered by applying a methodology based rather on qualitative methods were processed in the discourse theory grid which allows us to state that the research hypotheses have been confirmed.

The research showed that Slovaks refer to the idea of cultural diversity in Transylvania and to an internal cultural diversity related to the "Slovak": differences between Slovaks in Bihor and those in Arad, differences between Slovaks in Romania and those in Slovakia. These differences find their reconciliation in the concept of Transylvanian identity, which covers under the same identity umbrella the Roman Catholic Slovaks of Bihor county and the evangelical Slovaks of Arad county, offering an answer to the internal identity dilemmas.

Throughout its history in Transylvania, the Slovak minority has built a collective identity of the "trouble-free"<sup>3</sup> type, meaning that it has formed itself as a cooperating group with a majority power and has formulated its identity demands in consensus and harmony with the state of residence. The collective identity of the Slovak minority as a cooperating group, without a wide range of radical requirements, is influenced, first and foremost, by the role of the dominated community it has held since the first years it settled in Transylvania.

From an ethnic point of view, the Slovaks in Transylvania have always been in the position of the dominated group. In terms of religion, within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, only the Lutheran Slovaks in the Arad area were a minority, while Catholics in the area of Bihor-Sălaj were part of the majority, which changed after 1918, when both major Slovak families in Transylvania become a minority and from a confessional point of view in Romania, mostly Orthodox.

Possible identity threats have been resolved by compromises with the majority. The geographical space played an important role, the speech of the first leaders of the Slovak community in Transylvania involved a strategy of "rooting" in the new places of residence. The identity construction appealed to stimuli in order to strengthen internal ties in newly founded communities; the church, the parish, the school, even the cemeteries, became significant dominants of the new places, being at the same time evidence of the continuity of the Slovaks in these lands.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Piotr Sztompka, *From East Europeans to Europeans: shifting collective identities and symbolic boundaries in the New Europe*, *European Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 481–496 (2004),

<sup>4</sup> Ján Botík, *Lokálna komunita ako analytická kategória obrazu Slovákov na Dolnej zemi*, in *Identita, historia a kultúra. Dejiny Slovákov na Dolnej zemi*, zborník konferencie 11.-12. novembra 2010, ed. Anna Kováčová, Ed. Výskumný ústav Slovákov v Maďarsku, Budapešť, 2011, p. 45

Secondly, Slovakia was formed as an autonomous state only at the end of the twentieth century (with the exception of that short episode in the interwar period), which made it difficult to create a very close link with the country of origin.

The "trouble-free" identity status was also facilitated by the very good Romanian-Czech (Slovak) bilateral relations, because since the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romanians and Slovaks collaborated against the Hungarianization process to which both communities were subjected, after the First World War, they made again a common front against Hungarian revisionism, continuing until now on similar claims of the Hungarian minority in Romania and Slovakia.

After the fall of communism, the international context regarding ethnic minorities and Romania's desire to join the Euro-Atlantic structures, created favorable conditions for the ethnic minorities in Romania: political representation in Parliament, access to special funds on ethnic criteria, creation of dedicated state institutions minorities etc. Taking into account their numerical inferiority, the Slovaks framed their demands in the institutional-legislative framework developed by Romania in the transition to democracy, a process that included the undertaking of a large number of measures for the integration of national minorities, including public language and education policies.

The analysis of the Slovak MP's political discourse in the public sphere, but also of the questionnaire and interviews conducted showed us that Slovaks do not feel negatively discriminated on ethnic grounds, but rather positively, which shows that the collective identity of the "trouble-free" type satisfies group desires. This situation is of a win-win type, because it responds to the needs of the community, but also the needs of Romania to outline a profile that supports multi-ethnicity, to which Slovaks make an important contribution.

The presence of deputies of Slovak origin in the Parliament is not a specific feature of post-communist Romania, because the first Parliament of Greater Romania after the Union of 1918 had in its composition two Slovak deputies from Nădlac. In a distinct framework, starting with the first elections held in 1992, the Slovaks along with the Czechs have a representative in the Chamber of Deputies. The articulation of the discourse of these Slovak political leaders is based on identity landmarks, which underline the contribution of the Romanian state to preserving and promoting the values of ethnic minorities. The discourse of Slovak political leaders has two main components: one formed around the requirements and the other focused on the thanks given to the state of residence - guarantor of the rights of ethnic minorities.

Thus, the rebirth / relaunch of the specific claims of the minority group also responds to the need for the political affirmation of a community leadership, a fact impossible to conceive

during the communist period. In the absence of the elements of a radical extremist language, their speech emphasizes the mutual advantages that the presence of ethnic minorities in the Romanian Parliament brings to both the minority and the Romanian state.

The situation between two worlds (Romania and Slovakia) without belonging entirely to either, leads to the emergence of identity dilemmas solved by the Transylvanian concept. In search of their own identity, Slovaks reinvent a "tradition" related to a regional reality - the uniqueness of the Transylvanian space that can feed the needs of an identity authenticity through a "cultural hybridization."<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, our research allowed the understanding of the springs through which the Discourse of collective (re) construction of Slovak identity in Romania is structured, clarifying the ways in which the mixture of political commitment and representation of ethnic specificity intensified after the fall of communism, even if we are aware that we could not analyze in detail the multitude of possible identities. However, the results allowed us to trace the most predominant identities in the Slovak community in Transylvania, which can be supplemented with new details and particular cases targeting Slovaks in other regions of Romania, which were not covered by this written paper.

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<sup>5</sup> Homi K Bhabha, *Culture's in between*, in David Bennett (ed.) *Multicultural States. Rethinking difference and identity*. London: Routledge, 1998, p. 30.