EXPERIENTIALLY RELEVANT BORDERS AND NEW CATEGORIES OF IDENTITY

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Abstract: The present paper aims to provide an analysis of the effect of the border, the social practices related to it and their consequences on the ethnic and national identification and categorization mechanisms that exist within the two biggest communities living in Transylvania. The paper examines the manners of crossing the border in any direction in the case of the Hungarian and Romanian speakers residing in Transylvania, inquires into the distinction and separation procedures as regards the existing borders and into the cultural consequences of travelling across the border. We use the following research questions to develop this study: What kind of identity categories appear when crossing the border? What types of transnational discourses of power are evoked that may qualify the Romanian speakers at the border crossing? What is the message that reaches the Hungarian speakers during the border crossing experiences? Can we identify any hybridization in the border zone of Transylvania?

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CONCEPTUALIZATION OF BORDERS

After the fall of the communist regime in December 1989 Romanian historiography has been obliged to perfect its methodology, modernize its discourse and integrate into the European historical science. Obvious progress has been registered through the rejection of myths constructed during the communist regime although in the years following the 1989 Romanian revolution the new institutions still followed the traditional directions and programs. The writing of history has been stimulated into a direction prohibited before the revolution, yet this period was full of convulsions and the transition from communism to a democratic, liberal society was prolonged. The scope of

research manifested in the tendency to align thematically with the European demands in historiography, covering deficient directions, elimination of old ideological taboos and introduction of new topics to the neglected areas. The topics and directions of the new historiography are constituted by the old historical experts' illustrations, royalty, historical myths, political parties, minorities and otherness. Therefore, in the post--revolutionary historiography we could witness a conceptual renewal prompted by the already existing models in the European historiography. Even so, the new Romanian history writing lacks the correct assimilation of the past without which the solidity of the future cannot be achieved. The recent past has been the most exposed to doctrinal distortions before the 1989 revolution. Due to the political changes that have occurred in Europe, the reevaluation of concepts including *identity*, *nationalism* and *border* was required. The subject of borders represents a recurrent cause of conflict, being thus a current topic in humanities.

A border that rather defines and it is not defined, can be geographical, political, military, maritime, cultural, social and linguistic. The border can also shape mental processes, ethnic and religious affiliations and can construct the space mentally. The Romanian historians have used the element of *border* to verify the preservation of national identity in areas where the border has separated peoples, has created latent tensions and repeated confrontations but also points of contact among several cultures so that cultural interference could arise. Furthermore, Romanian historians have dealt with topics such as the Romanians' relations with their neighbours, the power of national or ethnic identity and representations of the other.

If we consider the example of Transylvania, we can observe that for the Romanians it represents the heart of nationalism, while for Hungarians the same place represents a historical heartland of Hungarian culture and politics but also a symbol of national trauma after Trianon. Since Transylvania has always been ethnically mixed, the aspirations of the various communities related to building a nation state have led to political rivalries, "raising new psychological and cultural borders, reviving animosities and justifying only group solidarity".[1] For example, Romania's Western border was drawn based on the "principle of compensation"[2] that is with the ceding of certain predominantly Romanian regions in exchange for some mainly Hungarian localities, nevertheless it would seemingly give rise to divergent national interpretations for hundreds of years after it had been drawn.

Shifting focus to the ethnocultural borders, we can observe the existence of three different discourses that characterize the majority–minority relations in Romania after 1989. These are the majority discourse, a conformist minority dis-

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[1] "ridicând noi frontiere psihologice și culturale, relansând animozități și justificând doar solidaritatea de grup". Ş. Purici, H. Mareci, D. Vitcu. *„Frontiere" și „identități" în istoriografia românească postdecembristă*, "Codrul Cosminului" 2005, vol. 11, p. 174.

[2] A. Dragan, *Frontiera de vest a României – între diplomație și știință* [in:] *100. Gânduri și ipostaze*, ed. O. Hedeșan, Timișoara 2018, p. 71–84.

course and a demanding minority discourse (Purici et al. 2005). According to the last one the concept of the border implies the recognition of dissimilarity, autonomy, maintenance, preservation of the minority culture and identity that are threatened by the Romanian society. The majority discourse instead is characterized by cross-border dialogue, openness and avoiding isolation. From my perspective, in a world where borders are disappearing, Romanian historians and politicians are called to dialogue in order to maintain equality in relation with other ethnic and social groups. The degree of permeability of the borders plays an important role from the perspective of security. The opening of the European borders has played a key role in breaking down barriers among nations and developing harmonious relations between states.

There exist several interpretations of the border which is categorized into a geopolitical, social or cultural border, but we can also conceptualize it as a symbolic border. All these concepts present a prevailing aspect of duplicity related to the border that has a recreating and dividing role while it also bears a passable and interceding function. Feischmidt (2004)[3] views the border as a demarcating line that allows movement of different groups of individuals in order to create contacts, cooperate, culturally intermix but also to regulate the circulation of the merchandise. In border areas conflicting identities are born due to legislative, commercial, linguistic and educational determinants.

The borders and jurisdiction of a nation-state are such elements that are made apparent not only to its citizens but also to foreigners by such components as marked borders, roads with their signboards, some original villages and their cultural heritage. The borders of a nation-state are guarded, the consciousness of the citizens are shaped and memories are constructed. Ilyés (2010)[4] points out that the state strives to construct an unceasing territory of affinity within its borders while also maintaining social differences.

In the case of unalike local cultures that often clash, not only cultural borders may be reconsidered but also the social unity and the singular persons of that given group. In the era of innovations culture cannot be restricted to a particular region since items are constantly moving and individuals are crossing borders and changing identities. In the 21st century the concept of location has been retraced by reason of the extensive use of the computer network. Nagy (2019)[5] even singles out the borderline between the offline and online spheres.

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[3] M. Feischmidt, *A határ és a román stigma* [in:] *Tér és terep: Tanulmányok az etnicitás és az identitás kérdésköréből*, Budapest 2004, p. 43–58.

[4] Z. Ilyés, *Etnicitás és szimbolikus geográfia. A táj kisajátítása, különösen határvidékek, kontaktzónák esetén* [in:] *Etnicitás. Különbségteremtő társadalom*, ed. M. Feischmidt, Budapest 2010, p. 116–127.

[5] K. Zs. Nagy, *A kulturális antropológiai terepmunka* módszertana, "Tabula: A néprajzi múzeum online folyóirata" 2019, vol. 20 (1–2), p. 1–33.

HUNGARIANS AND ROMANIANS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS BORDER

People's identities are carried across the borders and thus the creation of self-identity is influenced by manifold mechanisms. Identity proves to be fluctuating but it can be outlined unless it is confounded by legislative measures. In the 1960's Hungary, due to the restrictive migration policies and the closed borders there was a very small number of people settling down who had no Hungarian citizenship but in the 2000's the number of residents belonging to an ethnic minority who were not born on the Hungarian territory has increased substantially. The migration processes have been changed due to the open borders of the country and Hungary has also become a receiving state mainly for the Hungarians across the border. Thus, Tóth et al. (2004)[6] imply that besides the relevance of the territorial aspect of the border notion, we also have to examine the perspective of national identity.

The study of identity and nationalism cannot be separated from the investigation of the borderland. Since the national border between Romania and Hungary had become enterable, it can be shown that the border crossing process proves to be experientially significant. The narratives related to the border crossings between Romania and Hungary reflect resentment and injustice suffered by employees and tourists. Hardships have been suffered particularly by those speakers who had Romanian names or could not speak the Hungarian language at all. At the border crossings in Western Europe the Romanians have experienced even more distrust and rigor that is associated by them with a negative image of an Eastern nation and gypsiness. Hence, the speaker is thought of in connection with his country of residence. Nations are also qualified by transnational discourses of power, in this case the Orientalist discourse that uses specific advancement ideals that designate the European centre and peripheries. On the mental map, Romanians have been placed on an inauspicious position.

Borders and identities are reproduced by the governmental practices and narratives that remain undisclosed while disputes and conflicts arise between *our nation* and *the other nations*. Paasi (2002)[7] finds that borders are changing social constructions that hide historical narratives, clashes and existing power relations. Political institutions are the ones that protect and preserve borders which are part of the narratives of exclusion. The various representations of borders are produced and reproduced also by art, education, media and popular culture.

The discourse concerning the Romanian national identity comprises elements such as dilemma, adversities, associations with the stigmatized nation and apprehending the authority and prestige of the Other, Western civilization. The sense of anguish, disgrace and disobedience had been entrenched in the Romanian per-

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[6] Á. Tóth, J. Vékás, *Határok és identitás* [in:] *Tér és terep: Tanulmányok az etnicitás és az identitás kérdésköréből III.*, eds. N. Kovács, A. Osvát, L. Szarka, Budapest 2004, p. 135–189.

[7] A. Paasi, *Rajat ja identiteetti globalisoituvassa maailmassa* [in:] *Eletty ja muistettu tila*, eds. J. Tunturi, T. Syrjämaa, Helsinki 2002, p. 154–176.

ception for the last two centennials by the local academicians themselves. Since it is disagreeable to respond to a designated identity, Romanian speakers attempt to identify themselves with the more cultured and advanced localities of their country, they try to escape the assimilation with their real group or they recreate stigmatization and pass it on.

The orientalist power discourse is restored when the official borders are crossed by Romanian citizens in the direction of Western, civilized countries. In this case Romanian speakers are subject to foreign identification at the newly established social borders. Feischmidt (2004)[8] identifies the sequence of civilization where Romanian residents are placed on the non-western, primitive end of the continuum.

In a political apprehension the border area is a peculiar region and contact zone whose development is determined by the scheme of connections between the states while the border also has the capacity to set apart or bring people together for collaboration. Meeting and living together with representatives of various languages, cultures and religions in the border zones may stimulate neighbouring peoples to benefit from the adjacent culture and refine themselves. Thus Pál (2009)[9] depicts borders in their context.

Identity construction also takes place in the narratives of Hungarians living in Transylvania even though from a diferrent perspective. Border crossing experiences are detrimental again like in the case of Romanian co-citizens since Hungarians have often been labelled as Romanians based on their travel documents. Another source of indignation is when Hungarians are identified as Romanian speakers depending simply on their country of birth and citizenship. Hungarian speakers do not feel stigmatized when they deny the Romanian national identity and are not ashamed of it as the Romanian citizens but they identify themselves as an ethnic community dissimilar from the majority one. Hungarian speaking citizens dwelling on the territory of Romania consider it important to emphasize their unalike ethnicity and the fact that they are barely disconnected from the Hungarian motherland by a borderline. Hungarians living in Transylvania are aware of the fact that on the other side of the border there is a more numerous group of Hungarians that are more prosperous and in a more advantageous position. Public discourses repeatedly stress that the border changes during history have had a cultural impact that still shapes today's reality. Yet, nowadays in Transylvania there is no interactive practice among the Hungarian speakers about the remembrance of the past when the old borderline represented a better age for each generation. Narratives about the border changes are not enhanced anymore in Western Transylvania, and among the younger generations the political encounters are not elucidated in the framework of preceding border changes.

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[8] M. Feischmidt, *A határ és a román stigma* [in:] *Tér és terep: Tanulmányok az etnicitás és az identitás kérdésköréből*, Budapest 2004, p. 43–58.

[9] Á. *Pál, A Dél-alföldi határvidékek kutatásának rövid története*, "Jelenkori társadalmi és gazdasági folyamatok" 2009, vol. 4 (3–4), p. *282–287.*

The function of borders has been interpreted in new ways in the last decades, in a manner that political interests have been suppressed by the economic ones with the flourishing of tourism in the border areas. In the 21st century we can experience the free flow of people, services and goods but also the prevention of the maintenance of diversity as a result of the ideology of breaking down the European borders. Michalkó et al. (2022)[10] emphasize that the border regions nowadays benefit from the prosperity assured by tourism that utilizes the cultural, social and landscape particularities existing in the border zones.

Rather, in Eastern Transylvania there exists a different understanding of the border between Romania and Hungary. At this point, the historical border area with its monuments and local businesses has given place for border and legacy tourism. Hungarians from Transylvania consider that the border does not have a separating function since it only denotes the bigger and smaller Hungarian societies on both sides of the border. The Hungarian speakers who cross the border towards Hungary often experience anguish when their imagined and known identity is rejected by the customs officer and they are treated as Romanians despite their Hungarian names in the travel documents. However, customs officers do not always ascribe a negative worth to these Romanian citizens.

The critical space of borderland presupposes all kinds of encounters and blendings and calls up for another concept such as hybridity. This concept has existed for a long time nonetheless it has not had a constructive sense. Hybrid and marginal spaces along with ambivalent identities are the consequences of globalization and modernization.

Characterizing hybridity at the Romanian–Hungarian border involves exploring the intersections of history, culture, identity and language that have developed through long periods of coexistence, cooperation but also conflicts between the two nations. Hybridity in the border zone is not just a mixture, but a dynamic process shaped by everyday cross-border interactions and socio-political changes. After the Treaty of Trianon the Hungarian minority populations remained within the Romanian borders and this historical context laid the foundation for entrenched nationalism as well as complex hybrid identities. Even if we intellectually deconstruct the border, that does not dismantle its power and will still persist albeit we expose its contradictions. A possible strategy is to not try to erase the border but instead occupy it, stretch it, use its contradictions to weaken its power and treat it as a site of possibilities and not oppression. This idea is aesthetically rendered by Karakayali (2010): "if you cannot eliminate borders, sit on them, enlarge them, and play them against themselves."[11]

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[10] G. Michalkó, M. Tömöri, N. Ilyés, *Utazók, kalmárok, szélhámosok: a határvidékek szerepe a kereskedelemorientált turisztikai tevékenységekben*, "TVT Turisztikai és Vidékfejlesztési Tanulmányok" 2022, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 6–19.

[11] N. Karakayali, *Borders and hybridity in contemporary literature and social theory* [in:] *Society, history, and the global human condition: essays in honor of Irving M. Zeitlin*, eds. Z. Baber, J. M. Bryant, Lanham MD 2010, p. 263.

Cultural hybridity is characterized by a blend of Hungarian and Romanian cultural traditions visible in bilingual folk and religious practices, cuisine and festivals. Linguistic hybridity is reflected in bilingualism, code-switching in everyday speech especially among younger generations, place names and road signs. Cross-border interactions have been enhanced by economic activities, businesses, families and cultural institutions that often span on both sides of the Romanian–Hungarian border. As part of the political contestation, there exist debates about autonomy for the Hungarian minority and symbols like flags, minority education rights and language use in public institutions often become battlegrounds. Nevertheless, cross-cultural projects and civil society initiatives aim to promote hybrid cooperation and interethnic dialogue.

CONCLUSIONS

If the Romanian nation is ranked in accordance with its civilizational attainments, the citizens of the Romanian state experience stigmatization and humiliation during border crossing. When Hungarians of Transylvania are identified as Romanians following the border crossing, they are identified with a firmly stigmatized Romanian identity. Furthermore, in the perception of Hungarians in Transylvania, Romanians are regarded as having a lower prestige than Hungarians. The Transylvanian Hungarian national identity is reinterpreted when the speakers do not succeed in identifying with the Hungarians across the border. Otherness is emphasized due to the experienced humiliations and self-reflection. Hungarians in Transylvania consider themselves as real and venerable Hungarians coming from a special area with strong national values and heritage. In the narratives about border crossing not only symbolic borders are created but also new types of identities while the role of the political border is gradually reduced. Rejection, stigmatization and a certain national category upon border crossing is experienced both by Romanians and Hungarians but the two communities find different ways of resistance. Although identification at the border proves to be strenuous and the political and symbolic borders present different challenges, there is a high mobility between the two countries that can be explained by economic reasons. Romanians and Hungarians alike are identified and stigmatized by other groups in the narratives related to the border. Stigmatization increases the social distance in this multiethnic area of Transylvania and highlights the perception of otherness between the Romanians and Western European nations on the one hand and the differences between the citizens of Hungary and the Hungarian ethnic group in Transylvania on the other hand. In the border zone between Hungary and Transylvania hybridization and intercultural transition can be identified and that is rooted in the multiethnic reality of Transylvanian establishments.

At the Romanian–Hungarian border both communities experience various forms of experiental and symbolic exclusion. Yet, the exclusions do not result in similar identity responses. While Romanian speakers engage themselves in strategies of distancing from their stigmatized identity, Hungarians in Transylvania seek to reaffirm their distinctiveness. The asymmetrical nature of the border leads to such divergences in self-representation strategies. The experience of border crossing becomes a performative moment when national, cultural and ethnic categories are reaffirmed or contested. For these two communities the border is a social and psychological space where belonging is negociated. It produces hierarchies of recognition mediated by documents, name, language and appearance. In spite of the persistence of stigmatizing narratives, the border region of Transylvania gives rise to hybrid forms of identity. These do not erase ethnic or national affiliations but complicate them through the realities of biculturalism, bilingualism and transnational mobility. Thus hybrid identities in the border zone are not merely a consequence of marginalization but also a resource for intercultural dialogue. The border that once was a symbol of division or conflict, can now be interpreted as a site of cultural redefinition. Furthermore, the ease of mobility in the European Union has contributed to the weakening of borders and enhancing different forms of cooperation such as cultural exchange, tourism and economic cooperation.

We cannot overlook the political dimensions of identity and border discourse since historical memory, autonomy, language policies and minority rights continue to shape the collective consciousness of both Hungarian and Romanian speakers in this region. The practices of border crossing and cultural exchange continue to coexist with struggles over belonging and legitimacy.

In my opinion, the Romanian–Hungarian border continues to operate as a place of exclusion but also a facilitator for hybridization. As a material and symbolic construct, the border compels both communities and their speakers to reinterpret their relations to themselves and others.

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