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Room for Manoeuvre – Szeklerland's Autonomy

"In the realm of the political advocacy and civil community having evolved over the past decade, autonomy seems to be a common denominator: a programme-like dedication to a national political goal. However, this autonomy has also been a constant matter of political negotiations and reconciliations on the one hand as well as, more recently, a source of disputes about implementation and feasibility. By now, it has become the wager of a falsely generated political rivalry, a wager that certain politicians are ready to put at stake for the sake of rhetoric, propaganda and profit, even if they make no secret of their conviction that they are fighting a losing battle" (Varga 2004). In my view, the above opinion expressed by Attila Varga (then representative, now university professor and judge in the Constitutional Court) about autonomy 12 years ago is still valid and worthy of consideration even today – which puts me into a difficult position. When I accepted Győző Cholnoky's request to write a paper about Szeklerland's autonomy for *Minority Studies*, I was driven by my commitment to the cause. There is a lot to say about autonomy, and I share the editor's conviction that it is important to examine the origin as well as the historical roots of the Szekler autonomy. It is equally important to study the failed attempts of Hungarian autonomy in the 20th century along with present-day conceptions and the international context. But most importantly: apart from public discourse, is the cause of autonomy going anywhere, and in what political context must this cause be promoted? Despite the fact that since Attila Varga's above cited study was written in 2004, and there have been significant changes in the Hungarian political arena in Romania, the situation of autonomy has changed only in one respect: now we have some politically exposed people who advocate the cause of autonomy with dedication and consistency.

Concerning autonomy, we need clear and transparent interpretations of the situation and responsibilities from ethnic Hungarian opinion leaders, political and civil leaders in Romania – from the Hungarian elite. Equally responsible are the actors of the public sphere (from politicians through civil activists to the press), but in general, we can and should talk about responsible Transylvanian Hungarian citizens as well because the autonomy is everyone's cause and everyone's responsibility. On the one hand, that is good news because autonomy is not a matter of policy – unlike education, for

example – where we can and should expect the solutions from the politicians in charge of a specific field. On the other, it is a catch-22 situation. Because if it is a common cause shared by all, there is a risk that the responsibilities will not be delegated and assigned to individuals and entities. Indeed, this is yet to be done. The most appropriate tool thereof would be strategy – but apparently, no common strategy has been agreed on by public figures, which would be crucial for the advocacy of autonomy. There are certain (academic) workshops that advocate autonomy on the professional level, there are pro-autonomy papers (few), and for some years now, there have been signs that indicate the emergence of a movement (the initiatives of the Szekler National Council). However, only the preparatory work has been completed so far. Several autonomy proposals have been drafted, and rightly so, because their integrity and feasibility depend significantly on the institutional structure and envisioned solutions of the planned autonomy. Autonomy is a community vision not only for the Romanian/Transylvanian Hungarians, but for the majority Romanian nation as well. For in this case, something new must be accepted and implemented. An inevitable pitfall is the reception and interpretation of this concept by the Romanians. In order to boost the receptiveness of the Romanian elite and society, the proposed institutional system of autonomy should relate to the principal current issues of the society.

Miklós Bakk says in an essay analysing the co-existence of dual citizenship and territorial autonomy (not intended for an expert readership) that the Hungarian community that seeks to have its position and arguments for autonomy acknowledged by the leading (political and social) elite of the majority Romanian society is already considered by most Romanians as potential or "clandestine" Hungarian citizens. The recognition of ethnic Hungarians as an autonomous political community does not strengthen the political community of Romania – on the contrary. It weakens the Romanian state, by turning the Romanian population into a multinational entity (Bakk 2014). This line of thought is pursued along historical arguments because the construction of the Romanian nation burgeoned in opposition to the construction of the Hungarian nation: for Romanian nation-building, Hungarians served as a constitutive contrast as well as a necessary enemy. Thus what needs to be deconstructed and reinterpreted in the context of the current Romanian politics and Romanian-Hungarian relations is a historically conditioned image. In other words, (one of) the fundamental question(s) of the autonomy debates is whether we will manage to reconceptualize the situation and mitigate the image of Hungarians as enemies playing a key role

in Romanian nation-building. This is the area of the nearly two and a half decades of autonomy history where the least has been achieved: there is no real dialogue between the Romanian and Hungarian elites about autonomy. One can find experts speaking the language of arguments on the Romanian side, too – but not politicians. This dilemma cannot be swept under the carpet: unless it is thoroughly considered and the necessary responses are formulated, no progress will be made.

The situation is further complicated by the fact – as pointed out by Zoltán Bognár in his work dedicated to the issue of autonomy – that in Romania, the autonomy of ethnic minorities appears only as a Hungarian issue in various discourses. Other ethnic minorities are not interested in autonomy: it is neither a goal, nor a topic for them. Consequently, the solution of general minority rights issues is conceived as a purely Hungarian issue, which is dangerous: it hampers both the discussion of autonomy as a public policy problem and the objective, academic examination of the topic (Bognár 2008). Political and social initiatives that qualify as singular have a much higher conflict potential than public debate about autonomy as a means to regulate the legal relations between the majority and the ethnic minorities in general.

As I have already mentioned, there is something that has changed over the past years. Let me quote János Csaba Pozsony's position, according to whom the autonomy initiatives of Szeklerland should be regarded as a political movement that is opposed to certain components of the Romanian nation-state framework. This movement transcends the realm of responsibilities assigned to public figures; it embodies a bottom-up expectation, which makes it clearly perceptible how significant a community cause the desire for autonomy is, how comprehensive it is and to what extent it can be generalized. Its goal enveloped in an ideological guise points beyond the present constellation of power and public law as it calls into question every segment of social life in a coherent manner (Pozsony 2013). It is common knowledge that movements can legitimize causes, increase the social acceptedness of issues or goals, and the individuals start to relate to the problem on a personal level.

And there is, indeed, a movement – we have been witnessing its manifestations for years.

The context of re-thematisation

Concerning the interpretations of autonomy, there are substantial differences both within the international scholarly literature and the Transylvanian/Romanian public life. The presence of the issue

of autonomy in the public sphere has been widely studied, and the post-1990 autonomy debates have been divided into periods by several scholars (e.g. Miklós Bakk, Zoltán Bognár, Zoltán Kántor). Therefore I do not wish to expand on that. Perhaps it should be noted here that there have been 16 bills on ethnic minorities/proposed autonomies since 1990.[1] Four out of these are related to Szeklerland, in chronological order: Statute of the Personal Autonomy of the Romanian Hungarian Ethnic Community (1995, József Csapó); the Autonomy Statute of Szeklerland (2003, Szekler National Council); Framework Act on Regions, Draft Autonomy Package (composed of three documents: Framework Act on Regions, Statute of the Autonomy of Szeklerland Enjoying a Special Status, Bill on the Creation of Szeklerland as a Region with a Special Status – 2003, expert group, co-ordinator Miklós Bakk); Statute on the Autonomy of Szeklerland in Romania (2014, Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania – RMDSZ).

In order to see the frameworks of re-thematisation, certain influential interpretations of autonomy should be evoked. As Zoltán Kántor and Balázs Majtényi pointed out, there are two ways to argue for autonomy for ethnic minorities: by referring to minority rights and/or by evoking democracy (Kántor – Majtényi 2004). The latter makes sense because phenomena indicative of the "tyranny" of the dominant majority can often be detected,[2] – and this pertains directly to the notion of democracy. The scope of minority rights is related

to rights assuring the conservation of identity markers, i.e. special rights whose lack endangers the individual and community survival of Hungarians and the preservation of a unique culture. In the latter case, the situation is often interpreted differently by the majority and the minority: the majority is reluctant and talks about positive discrimination, and questions the legitimacy of the so-called additional rights.

Autonomy means self-determination for a minority, "the highest legal status that a minority can achieve within a state". Thus it is the essence of ethnic minorities policy, and by autonomy, we mean the establishment/creation of such – administrative or other territorial – units in the framework of which those affiliated with the minority have a genuine chance to decide about issues pertaining to their lives (Kántor – Majtényi 2004).

Miklós Bakk worded the same thought in his free university lecture as follows[3]: *Let us decide about our own affairs*. But who is "us"? The (self-)definition of a community may be based on territory or identity: in the first case, classification is done on a territorial basis while in the second, one can join or register by one's own decision. The question of "we" also affects the form of autonomy. *Our affairs*: what questions, decision-making areas should be covered by the reflexive pronoun *ourselves*? The question is of political nature; it is always a matter of political bargains and agreements between the majority state and the minority community. A series of examples could be cited concerning the possibilities and existing models – what is important is that the disadvantages ensuing from being in a minority position should be counter-balanced. While the language of the majority is protected by the state (i.e. the Constitution and its bodies), the minority language is not protected, only accepted, or sometimes tolerated. Hence the allusion to *our affairs*. All in all, the matter to be decided is the following: the entitlements taken over from the state can be exercised through democratically elected decision-making bodies that do not deny the institutional system of the state, above which the state has legal control. The decisions of these bodies are normative – i.e. the autonomy has a public law feature. According to this interpretation, autonomy is a tool: it makes it possible for an ethnic or other group claiming to have a different identity to manage its own affairs directly while it also allows the more comprehensive entity to exercise power over the shared interests (Ghai 2000).

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[1] These were the following as collected by Zoltán Bognár: 1) Legal package on ethnic minorities (1991, Géza Szőcs); 2) Memorandum about the internal self-determination of the ethnic Hungarian community of Romania (1993, József Csapó); 3) Act on ethnic minorities and autonomous communities (1993, RMDSZ – SZKT); 4) Act on rights related to ethnic identity and the equitable and harmonious co-existence of ethnic communities (1994, Sándor Szilágyi N.); 5) Statute of self-governments with a special status (1994, József Csapó); 6) Statute of the personal autonomy of the ethnic Hungarian community of Romania (1994, József Csapó); 7) Statute of the personal autonomy of the ethnic Hungarian community of Romania (1995, RMDSZ ÜE Political Department, Barna Bodó – Alpár Zoltán Szász – Miklós Bakk); 8) Bill on the personal self-governments (1995, Bakk Miklós); 9) Autonomy statute of Szeklerland (1995, József Csapó); 10) Autonomy statute of Szeklerland (2003, Szekler National Council); 11) Framework law about the regions (Autonomy draft package, 2003, expert team, co-ord. Miklós Bakk); 12) Bill on the creation of Szeklerland as a region with a special status (Autonomy draft package, 2003, expert team, co-ord. Miklós Bakk); 13) Statute of the autonomy of Szeklerland as a region with a special status (Autonomy draft package, 2003, expert team, co-ord. Miklós Bakk); 14) Framework law on the personal self-government of ethnic communities (2004, Miklós Bakk); 15) Act on the legal status of ethnic minorities in Romania (2005, RMDSZ), 16) Autonomy statute of Szeklerland in Romania (2014, RMDSZ).

[2] Just one example: the use of symbols by the local communities. A town in the Olt region is free to use its own symbols (flag, coat of arms), but if it is done by a Szekler settlement, the local representation of the Bucharest power will take action against it.

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[3] Student camp of political science, Torockó, 2015.

A frequent, sometimes disturbing element of autonomy discourses is when they assume that autonomy is the goal itself. Little is said about the minority visions that it is an indispensable condition of and what the minorities wish to achieve thereby – or what specific advantages and drawbacks the status of autonomy would entail. The different narratives are primarily formulated from philosophical and legal perspectives; economic or sociologic factors are seldom mentioned (Bognár 2007). At the same time, it should also be clarified that autonomy as a tool cannot be substituted by another, similar tool. Autonomy as a vision determining the socio-political conditions cannot be replaced by another one. According to Miklós Bakk, public law autonomy (interweaving regional or cultural, and constitutional, legal and customary law rules) is created between people: it moves beyond individuals, and shapes the relationship between them. Autonomy as a political goal creates community, membership, and rules of action for its members and the collectivity (Bakk 2011). Autonomy is the simultaneous criticism of a certain policy and the starting point of the thematization of another policy.

The institution of autonomy is an arrangement within the state where nearly every component of power may be conferred. Autonomy can be interpreted as a process (i.e. how a community can manage its own affairs), or it can be a measure (in relation to the distribution of power between the central authority and the local communities), but it can also be a political test that shows how open a national community is towards other communities and to what extent it can rise above its own interests. It is in this context that we can fully comprehend the interpretation of autonomy by Hurst Hannum, according to whom autonomy is a relative notion that describes the degree of independence that a special entity enjoys within a sovereign state (Hannum 1992). This interpretation is further elaborated by Rudolf Bernhardt. Bernhardt gives two definitions for autonomy: a broader and a narrower one. In the first case, autonomy is the autonomous self-definition of an individual or an entity and its capacity to manage its own affairs without external interference. The expression of political will begins with self-definition. There are a lot of examples for that – he cites the autonomy of churches, municipalities or universities. The narrower definition of Bernhardt pertains to the protection and self-determination of minorities, which can be related to the topic of human rights as well (Bernhardt 1981). In his comparative analysis of works dealing with the question of autonomy, Lapidoth points out that a distinction should be made between the concept of autonomy and the theories

and conceptions related to it.[4] For while there is a certain agreement regarding the concept of autonomy (i.e. as a value and its related concepts), the theories and conceptions interpreting it are numerous and varied (Lapidoth 1997).

The presence/lack of the issue of autonomy on/from the political agenda of the era when there is a significant ethnic minority living in a country that has expressed its desire for autonomy is revelatory: it shows the well-being of democracy. Minorities also have the duty to build democracy, and perhaps it is easier to find a majority partner to fight for that cause. The context of autonomy changes continuously; in addition to its own community priorities, the majority sentiment and the international context are paramount. It is for that purpose that the questions of autonomy should be reconsidered so that the topic could be inserted into the dominant discourses of the/an age to make sure that public debate about it would become inevitable. Such a question was the Romanian administrative reform, which was put on and then taken off the agenda a couple of years ago.

History: a model and a resource

The central element of the discourse on Transylvanian autonomy is Szeklerland and the references to the history of the Szeklers. The autonomy of the Szeklers – going back several centuries – must be reclaimed: what existed before should be due today as well. Although the importance of the historical perspective is undeniable, historical processes are (or can be) interpreted differently by Hungarians and Romanians, so if reference is made to history as a model, it should be based on principles. This reference evokes the region of a population that enjoyed a special status as well as its relations of community and institutionalization over the centuries.

Szeklerland was part of the Hungarian Kingdom since the early Árpád age.[5] In the Principality of Transylvania, which grew increasingly independent after the Hungarian defeat in the battle of Mohács (1526), the Szeklers constituted one of the feudal (estate) nations of the state. After the termination of the independent principality, Transylvania and with it, Szeklerland was annexed to the Hapsburg Empire by the right of the Hungarian kings who used to own these territories. After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it became

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[4] Cited by Andrea Miklósné Zakar Andrea: Autonómia – elmélet és gyakorlat, *TÉT*. 2010 (3). 75-91.

[5] The essential elements and history of the autonomy of Szeklerland are presented here on the basis of the monumental work entitled *Székelyföld története* (Egyed et al., 2016).

a part of Romania, and with the exception of a few villages, it was briefly re-annexed to Hungary between 1940 – 1944.

The notion and the dimensions of Szeklerland changed from the Árpád-age South-Transylvanian settlement areas through the church administration of the 1330s to the 16th-century censuses within the Principality of Transylvania. In those times, the Szekler seats (i.e. territorial administrative units, or "szék" in Hungarian) had a different extension than at the end of the 18th century or in the 19th century. After the administrative standardisation in 1876 and even more emphatically after the change of empires in 1918 and 1940, Aranyosszék (Scaunul Arieşului) was mentioned only as "historical Szeklerland". From the 1950s, "Szeklerland" was used to refer to the Hungarian Autonomous Region (MAT), while in the last decades, it has mostly designated Harghita and Covasna counties.
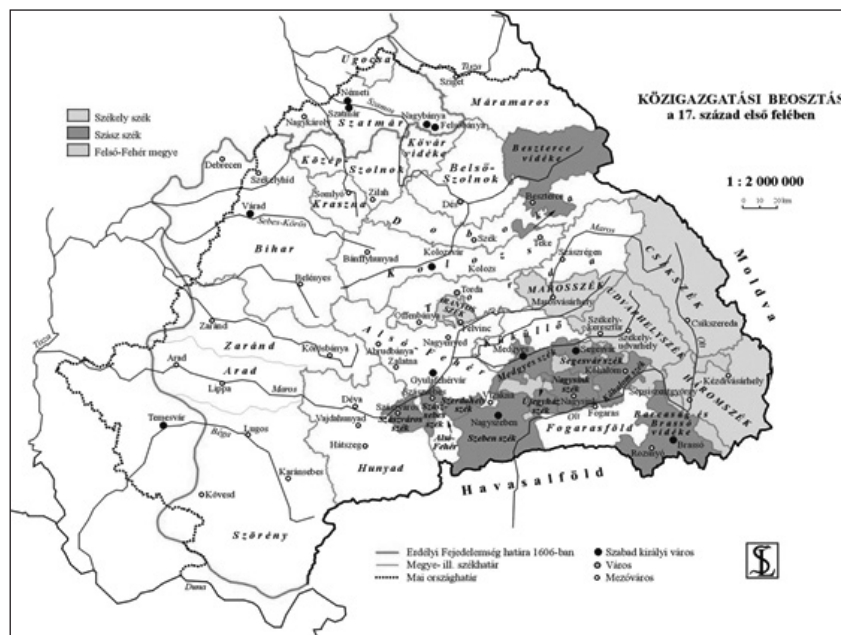
Figure 1. *The administrative division of Transylvania in the 17th century*
Source: Map collection of László Sebők[6]

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[6] See: http://sebok1.adatank.transindex.ro/legbelso.php?nev=ERDE17SZ   Last accessed: 15 September 2016.

However, the history of the Szeklers cannot be divided into periods in the conventional manner. When joining the Hungarian society, the Szeklers lived in a society organized on a military basis, and they held onto their collective freedoms through the joint owner-ship of the land even after moving into their present territory. With the spreading of the farming lifestyle, the clan-based organization of the Szeklers disappeared in the 14-15th centuries, and it came to be replaced by the organization of the seats ("szék"). The seats were the administrative and judicial units of certain ethnic groups (e.g. Szeklers, Saxons, Cumans) with a special legal status that did not belong under the authority of the counties. Their role and function were the same as those of the counties. The only major difference was that the Szeklers (unlike the population living under the county system) could preserve some of their ancient customary law as well. Within the seat system, they distinguished between so-called main or "mother" seats and subordinated affiliate "son" seats that oper-ated under their authority.[7] The Szekler seats constituted a "county" according to the Hungarian public law, so for a long time, the whole of Transylvania was directed by the "count of the Szeklers" ('ispán'). (Figure 2.)

While the majority of Hungarians sank into a serf or villein status, the Szeklers were almost entirely free. Their free status lasted till 1562 when the common Szeklers, who had taken up arms to defend their freedoms, were put down, and they were subordinated to the prince's authority – which meant the end of the first big period of the Szekler history. The second period lasted till 1848, the year of the civil revolution. The bulk of the Szekler people managed to protect their free legal status even in those times – with their blood, their

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[7] Over the past half a millenium, the following types of seats ("szék") existed in Szeklerland. The mother seat was Udvarhelyszék, earlier called Telegdszék. There was Csíkszék among the mountains of the eastern border, and two associated seats: Gyergyószék and Kászonszék. The latter two sometimes were sometimes independent from Csík while at other times they competed for their independence as "son seats" within Csíkszék until both of them could operate as the affiliate seats of Csíkszék. In the south-eastern corner of the country, there were Sepsiszék, Kézdiszék and Orbaiszék, which merged in the 16th century as Háromszék. Addi-tional Szekler seats were Marosszék as well as Miklósvárszék (located further away from the bloc of Szeklerland) and Aranyosszék between the Aranyos and Maros rivers. With time, Csík was broken down into two parts: Felcsík and Alcsík. The affiliate seat of Sepsiszék was Miklósvárszék, so it was also added to the affiliate seats of Háromszék (besides the earlier three independent seats). The affiliate seats of Udvarhelyszék were Keresztúrszék and Bardócszék. For a short time, Marosszék also had an affiliate seat, called Szeredaszék. The affiliate seats were considered to be organic parts of the mother seats, so when talking to outsiders, Szeklers would only mention the main seats.

sword and their perseverance. Here again, a new chapter began with the bourgeois transformation starting in 1848. The key notion of the region's history is military service because it was the latter that the local special freedoms derived from from the Árpád era till the Hapsburg era. Most free Szeklers became surfs in the 16th century, but they partly regained their freedoms in the next century, and in the 18th century, some of them became part of the border guard institutional system. To this was added another historical specificity, the administrative unit of seats, in which the established legal system of the Szekler autonomy operated from the 14th century till 1876. The Transylvanian self-administration was made up of the network of villages, market towns and seats, and its operation was regulated by the established customary law.

Figure 2. *The administrative division of Transylvania after the standardisation of 1867*
Source: Map collection of László Sebők

The privileged status of the medieval Szeklers and the architecture of their society are remembered as a military democracy. The

idealizing historical remembrance tends to consider the Szekler privileges as unique phenomena whereas contemporary analogies are well-known: the autonomous rights of the Jasz, the Cumans, the "lance noblemen" of Szepes county (today: Spiš, Slovakia), the Hajduk as well as the Romanian peasant communities of Fogarasföld (today: Făgăraș, Romania), South Banat and Kővárvidék (today: Țara Chioarului, Romania) of Hungary. Each privileged group from those listed had a specific regional and collective conscience that rested mainly on the privileges of the group. On the administrative, legal and military levels.The Szeklers organized their life according to clans. This condition was inherited from the times before King St. Stephen's state reform. The chronicles and the legal codices imply that the basis of their self-determination was ancient customary law. The seats were not integrated into the county system till 1876, and they were directed by the individual clans. The Hungarian king donated a territory from the Crown's estate to the Szeklers, who had taken a lion's share from the fight against the Cumans and the Mongolians. However, the foundation of the seats of the eastern bloc does not derive from a royal privilege, but to the conquest of the land: it goes back to 895 or even earlier. (Fogire 3.)

In harmony with this particular duality, which was conserved in the period after 1790, the Szeklers identified themselves with the Hungarian nation in the modern, civil sense of the word, but they still talked about their people as a privileged feudal nation. After the revolution of 1848, we can no longer talk about a "Szekler nation" because the Szeklers renounced to their privileged status in 1848 at the Assembly of Agyagfalva (today: Lutița, Romania). In the age of dualism, the "Szekler question" became inseparable from the modernization efforts of the region. The disintegration of the archaic communities, the belated urbanization and industrialization, the relative overpopulation and the pauperization of the region were important topics on the national political agenda, and the reaction to them was increased intervention on behalf of the state.

The administrative, legal and military leader of the Szeklers was the bailiff ('ispán'), who was appointed by the king, but usually not among the Szekler, but the Hungarian noblemen. However, the bailiff did not have unlimited authority: he had to comply with the oral, and later written, laws passed by the Szekler National Assembly. The Szeklers had the right to resist, just like the nobility could oppose the king in accordance with the Golden Bull. The seats could convene a national assembly themselves, where they could hold the bailiff to account. If the bailiff acted against the interests of the seats, he could be killed and his house and assets could be set on fire.

Figure 3. *The historical and current borders of Szeklerland*

Source: Tibor Elekes
(http://tortenelemportal.hu/2010/01/negyvenket-eve-szunt-meg-a-szekely-autonomia/
Last accessed: 15 September 2016)

Despite the fact that the Szekler seats were directed by the clans, their social life was characterized by a great degree of democracy. With the exception of the bailiff, all their administrative, legal and military officials were elected only for a year. No one – and not even their close relatives – could be re-elected within 12 years. The administrative and legal power branches were interpreted as being one, so a person – or his relatives – could not be re-elected for 24 years either as a public crier, a judge or a juror. In those times, there was no such thing as a "subsistence politician". Legal compliance was strictly controlled. If a judge or a juror committed perjury or passed a corrupt

sentence, or withheld important information concerning the truth, they could be punished by death. Their skin was stripped off, stuffed with straw and displayed in public.

Figure 4. *North Transylvanian territories re-annexed to Hungary*
Source: Nándor Bárdi's presentation[8]

The Szeklers were treated as free people, what is more, as noblemen. They did not pay taxes even to the king. For a long time, the only kind of tax they had to pay – theoretically, on a voluntary basis – was imposed by the resolution of the Szekler National Assembly: when the king was crowned, got married or a son was born to him, each Szekler family offered an ox to the ruler. The basis of the freedom and self-determination of the Szeklers was their personal and collective freedom. Although they were exempt from tax payment, when the country was attacked, they were obliged to join the army at their own expense – similarly to the rest of the Hungarian nobility – and defend the country.

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[8] http://slideplayer.hu/slide/1942192/ Last accessed: 15 September 2016.

The Szekler military force was always one of the most powerful units of the Hungarian troops. They could mobilize as many as 40-50 thousand persons. The rosters of certain armies have been preserved up to this day in military documentation. Several kings and princes wanted to end to the Szeklers' right to self-determination because they needed the taxes receivable from the Szeklers. However, over the centuries, the sovereigns realized that they were much better off if they relied on the military force of the Szeklers instead. In fact, the Szekler freedoms were confirmed in the royal deeds precisely when the country was threatened by a war situation. The Szeklers went into battle on foot or on horseback. The wealthier rode horses, hence their name: "lófő" (horsehead).

The Szekler society was not heavily layered. Everyone had as much land as he and his family could cultivate. Private, collective and national property was equal. Their laws did not allow for the creation of big estates, higher nobility or the concentration of power. As a result of this social and legal arrangement, no cheap(er) labour force had to be imported from over the mountains. The Szeklers did not serve anyone and held no servants, either.

In reality, the situation was not that simple. Szeklerland was a country within the country, a state within the state, but it could not exist in total isolation inside the Hungarian Kingdom. Certain personal, legal, and economic relations and overlaps had always existed. Szeklers could also obtain an aristocratic title for their merits from the king and a royal estate with it, mostly outside Szeklerland, but after some time and to a smaller extent, in Szeklerland, too. It was especially in the age of the Principality, during wars and civil wars that the relations became especially complicated. Despite the self-determination of Szeklerland, there were certain overlaps between the Szekler archaic society and the Hungarian feudalism. Non-Szekler noblemen also appeared in the territory of Szeklerland: Hungarians, Romanians, free peasants and serfs, workers – for example, in the salt mines. Originally, salt mining and trading was the right of the local Szeklers in the Sóvidék ('Salt Region'), for instance, but eventually, it became a royal monopoly. Later on, by circumventing the customary law, bigger estates were formed in the territory of the seats, where the landlords would gladly welcome Romanian workers coming from over the mountains, fleeing the deadly embrace of the boyar system. This was contrary to the spirit and practice of the Szekler customary law, but it does not question the consistency and rightfulness of the social and legal establishment in which the Szekler autonomy was rooted.

From the end of the 19th century, Szeklerland was assigned a distinguished role in both Hungarian and Romanian nation-building. With the change of empires in 1918, the socio-economic modernization problems remained intact, but the main objective of the Romanian nationalism in the new context was the ethnic restructuring and national homogenization of the country, for which Szeklerland became one of the most important target areas in addition to the Transylvanian towns. After the re-annexation of Transylvania in 1940, the organized infrastructural and cultural development of the region became a priority model of social organization for the Hungarian nation-building.

Autonomy and minority existence

The Szeklers fought for survival with weapons, intellect and labour. They protected their homeland, preserved their mother tongue and safeguarded their traditions. They did not give up fighting after the change of empires or in the era of anti-minority practices of Romania, nor are they giving it up today. Romania continues to be a nationalist and centralized state, which curbs collective rights. It does not tolerate the use of the toponym "Szeklerland"[9] in its official documents, boards featuring Szeklerland must be taken off at the borders of the region, and it persecutes the Szekler flag. According to the Romanian constitution, Romania is a nation-state.[10] It is understandable that Romania's interests go against the formation of a strong Szekler national identity.

According to Gábor Vincze, the emergence of the issue of Szekler autonomy at the end of the First World War is inseparable from the violent change of empires. For the Szeklers, who came under Romanian rule, found it necessary to revive the idea of autonomy in defence of their own identity. The first autonomy proposal was drafted by Árpád Paál in January 1919 under the title *Emlékirat a semleges, független székely államról* [Memorandum about a neutral, independent Szekler state] (Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc, 13 January 1919) (Vincze 2000).

The common point of reference of the interwar proposals was the historical traditions and two international documents. The first

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[9] At the same time, the conventionally used Romanian names (e.g. Ţara moţilor – Mócvidék, Ţara Oaşului – Avasföld) designate historical regions similar to Szeklerland.

[10] Romania is the only European country that states such a tenet.

one was the resolution of the General Assembly of Gyulafehérvár (today: Alba Iulia, Romania) of 1 December 1918, which promised absolute national liberty to the ethnicities living side by side. "Each nation has the right to education and government in its own mother tongue by individuals elected from its own people with its own public administration" – says Point III/1 of the resolution. The other document was the Paris minority treaty signed – if reluctantly – by Bucharest on 9 December 1919. Article 11 promised "self-governments in religious and educational matters" to the Szeklers (and to the Saxons). Note: the resolutions of Gyulafehérvár guaranteed cultural autonomy to the entire Hungarian population of Transylvania while the minority treaty limited it only to the Szeklers. It was a serious problem that the interwar Romanian governments never signed either of the documents into law, nor did they want to enforce them.

The question of Szekler autonomy was discussed by Hungarian minority politicians and jurists mostly at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of 1930s when it seemed that a certain public administrative decentralization would take place in Romania as well, and there would be a meagre chance for at least cultural autonomy. As Sándor Balázs commented on these proposals: wishful thinking had always been abundant.[11]

The issue of autonomy appeared for the second time in Gábor Tusa's work entitled *A székely vallási és tanügyi autonómia* [The Szekler religious and educational autonomy] (Minerva Rt., Kolozsvár/Cluj, 1930). The first bill was prepared by Árpád Paál in 1931: he elaborated the proposal entitled *Törvény a székely közületek közművelődési önkormányzatáról* [Law on the public education local government of the Szekler public institutions] based on Article 11 of the Paris international treaty signed on 19 December 1919. The central concept used by Paál is the Szekler public institution: "the totality of those citizens who are permanent residents of Szeklerland or of the territories directly adjacent to it, who consider themselves as Hungarian natives and who register themselves in a joint census as the basis of their organization". The purpose of the institution is that the religious and educational matters of its members would be managed in tandem with the self-government under state supervision. Its territory: those settlements and towns of the historical Szeklerland where the proportion of the native Hungarian population was bigger than 50%. The Szekler institutional autonomy was put into focus in 1933 as one of the political goals of the National Hungarian Party. Paál's

concept was developed by Gábor Pál, a lawyer from Csíkszereda (today: Miercurea Ciu, Romania) in his proposal (*Törvényjavaslat a „Szövetséges és Társult Főhatalmak", valamint Románia között 1919. évi december 9-én Párizsban kötött kisebbségi szerződés 11. cikkében biztosított kulturális önkormányzat életbeléptetéséről* [Bill about the enforcement of the cultural local government guaranteed by Article 11 of the Paris minority treaty signed on 9 December 1919 between the Allied and Associated Main Powers and Romania], who envisaged to set up the Hungarian Cultural Alliance as a self-governing body from those residents of the old seats who declared themselves Hungarian. It was to that body that he wished to entrust the management of the educational and cultural needs of the Hungarian population of the given area. Finally, the last attempt was related to Károly Kós and his strategic vision formulated in the 1930s. According to Kós, the general aim would have been to build local administrative autonomies from the settlements to the province. The cultural needs of the Transylvanian nations would have been managed by the national cultural autonomies whose budget would have been funded from the state budget. He envisioned the creation of an independent Transylvania as his ultimate goal because with the changing international power relations, it became clear for the minority politicians and experts that the settling of the question of Transylvania was not subordinated to the Romanian state-building, focusing on national supremacy (Bárdi 2004). Towards the late 1930s, however, when the chances of a border revision came to the fore in the changed international context, the age of various schemes concerning Szekler autonomy ended.

Between the two world wars, the Hungarian-Romanian nation-building contest continued in relation to Transylvania, including Szeklerland. The Transylvanian communities did not even try to elaborate models that would have surpassed the ethnic fault lines and built on a regional identity. While the mosaic structure of Transylvania constructed on the interests of multiple communities disintegrated, the two national centres (Bucharest and Budapest) wanted to organize the region from above. There was no connection established and even less distribution of roles between the community interests and the various cultures. It would have been possible to represent the concept of Transylvanian autonomy as an alternative to forced state integration (Union, county system, then the standardisation of Great Romania). The evolution of the vision would have been heavily influenced by the preservation of the tradition of the feudal independence and the need for a modern cultural autonomy (Bárdi 2004).

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[11] Quoted by Gábor Vincze on the basis of a manuscript (2000).

After World War II, the most important goal of the Romanian central power was to regain Transylvania. Prime Minister Petru Groza, who was known as a pro-Hungarian politician, declared it repeatedly that the Hungarian-Romanian question was not about borders, but about how to make these borders "aerial". The essence of his vision was that the Hungarians of Transylvania had an interest to live under Romanian rule because the humiliating minority position was over for them, and "the nations would soon be made completely equal before the law". As it is well-known, this statement was no more than a misleading political bait, and Bucharest pursued an anti-Hungarian policy all along. Gábor Vincze warns that after 1944, the plan of Szekler autonomy was just as much rejected by part of the Transylvanian Hungarian political elite as between the two wars. The reason was similar, too: the "Szekler ghetto". They feared that the rights that normally would have been due to all the Hungarians of Transylvania would be limited to the Szeklers only. In 1945 an autonomy proposal was prepared upon the commission of the Hungarian government, which was taken to Paris by the official Hungarian delegation to be presented at the peace conference – which never happened.

After 1947, in the Communist era, the relationship changed between Hungary and the ethnic Hungarian communities living outside its borders. The mother country undertook no protective role whatsoever; it turned its back on these communities. It was in this context that was created the Hungarian Autonomous Region (MAT) in the territory of Szeklerland in the summer of 1952, which was radically transformed in December 1960 (i.e. it was basically terminated), and was totally erased in 1968. Despite its name, it did not provide real autonomy because that the Communist administrative order did not allow for that. The so-called autonomy was not demanded by anyone from the target community, so the underlying reasons of its creation by the Communist regime – if upon Moscow's order – still remain a puzzle for many. The Russian domestic policy was familiar with the institution of autonomy (which I shall not treat in detail here), but in Romania even the thought of it was considered to be alien and dangerous. (Figure 5)

According to Stefano Bottoni, the MAT set up in 1952 did not promote the extension of ethnic minority rights or a "more perfect" solution of the minority question (that had been repeatedly claimed to be solved). By the creation of the MAT, the Hungarian problem, which had been handled as a national-level problem, was now downgraded as a regional issue (Bottoni 2008). The creation of the MAT marked the beginning of the ruthless curtailment of the language use rights

of the Hungarians forming a local majority from Kolozsvár (Cluj) to Szatmár (Satu Mare) and from Nagyvárad (Oradea) to Zilah (Zalău), and the assimilation policy was set in full swing in the other parts of Transylvania. While Romania displayed the autonomy of Szeklerland in the political shopwindow, the top leadership of the party opened a bottle of champagne in Bucharest when the first majority Romanian citizen of Cluj was born (at the end of 1958). The MAT can be interpreted as a premeditated diversion, which the assimilation policy no longer needed from the end of the 1960s.
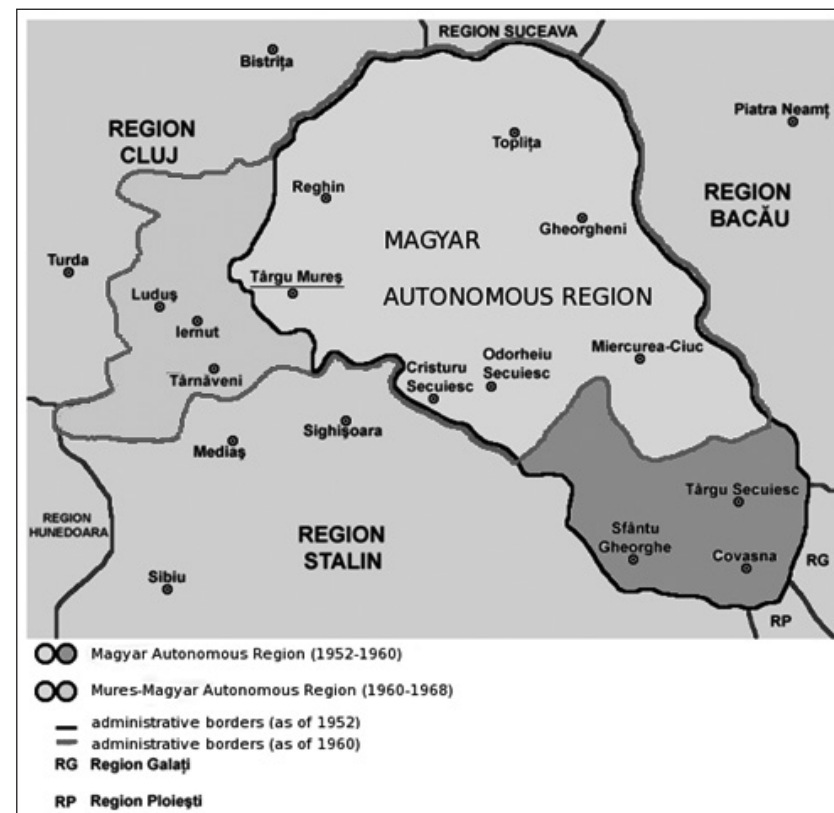
Figure 5. *Hungarian Autonomous Region / Mureș-Hungarian Autonomous Region*
Source: Wikipedia

Autonomy and (public) policy topics

In order to enhance the autonomy debate between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority elites (and because the debate is inevitable), the question should be placed into a different, broader context: that of the Transylvanian question. The Transylvanian question is the problem of state-building, and this applies both to the Romanian majority and the elites of the minority communities. It is common knowledge that in East-Central Europe (i.e. the region between Germany and Russia, and Finland and Greece), the past century saw the disintegration of empires and the awakening of ethnic minorities parallel to each other. Since the simultaneous nation- and state-building efforts had no considerations for regional interests, universal nation-building prevailed over regional aspirations. In the new context, the Transylvanian question is not about where Transylvania should belong, but about how this region is treated within the country and how much administrative independence it has. The modernization advantages of Transylvania are well-known compared to the other Romanian historical regions, so this is a question in which the Romanian, Hungarian and other ethnic minority elites of Transylvania can advocate their interests together. Transylvania – taking the lead in modernization – can inspire different ideologies, visions and expectations for each region – and it is, indeed, possible to have a theoretical debate transcending ethnic fault lines: it is possible to have a joint vision. Naturally, it is a crucial question how such a vision would fit into the concrete system of political and legal relations, and to what extent the daily political interests allow for the regional advocacy of interests.

A possible intersection of the agendas of the various elites is the issue of self-governance. The efficiency of public administration is a priority issue nowadays, when nearly half of the gross domestic product is spent in the public sphere through the central and the local budgets. Public administration is going through a crisis in most European countries, and there are efforts to find ways for a flexible renewal. In order to do that, one must be thoroughly familiar with the current situation – and this is no trivial task. The international science of public administration is yet to come up with an indicator that would measure the efficiency of a state or a government. There is a general agreement about the fact that low-efficiency operation can usually be put down to poor, deficient situation analysis and task assessment. It is necessary to re-interpret the scope of public administration both in terms of geography and competences, and the competences themselves should be clearly distinguished. We need to have a citizen-friendly public administration, which is characterized by the following: it is efficient, economical, effective, safe/flexible, manageable, adequate and accountable. The (professional) competences belonging to the local public affairs as well as self-governance competences must be redefined. A register of state-level and local-level duties must be compiled, and the relation between the various levels of public administration as well as the internal functioning of the various organizations must be revisited and precisely defined. They must be mutually approved. And naturally, the independence of local decision-making must also be ensured. The components of the latter are the autonomy of the performance of tasks (the principle of subsidiarity) – i.e. the local body can regulate and direct local public affairs autonomously – , the autonomy of the creation of organizations, and economic autonomy – i.e. own funds, proportionate to the prescribed and performed tasks. The above listed questions would facilitate and enhance communication between the two communities with different public administration traditions. The Hungarian public mentality associates representation and public administration with a bottom-up system, when legitimacy is constructed from the grassroots, from the direction of the community. On the other hand, the Romanian political history prefers de-concentration, where the central power delegates certain competences to the local-level bodies. In this sense, the Hungarian countryside is not equivalent to the Romanian province.

Thirdly, we can mention the problematics of regions and regional policy. Within the European integration process, a certain regional division has developed in Romania, which refers to regions based on development and not on public law. Thanks to certain intellectual groups, a discourse has also evolved and more or less crystallized about regionalism. At the same time, the majority of the political stakeholders acknowledged the 2009 report of the Stanomir Committee, according to which "the current administrative division of Romania *does not make sense* in the present conditions because it was not created for a free country, but so that they could control and monitor the citizens. Romania is no longer a police state, where a lean public administration is required. Let there be *9-12 counties* in accordance with the provisions of the current Constitution, or *regions* in the framework of a future Constitution. […] The reason for that is the balanced and sustainable development of the regions. This will only be possible if a genuine local autonomy is created as a result of re-organization" (Stanomir 2009). The dilemmas raised by the re-organization of the public administration are the following: do the questions of regions and re-organization signal a genuine

political will? Or are they just building blocks of a political game played in a political context? How genuine is the will to re-organize public administration and amend the Constitution? What weight ethnic minorities would be assigned in the re-organization of public administration?

The necessity of the administrative reform has been raised several times since 1995. In addition to politicians, experts and the civil sphere have also expressed their views on the topic. It was added to the priorities on the agenda of government policies in 2011, and the conceptions of that time were significantly influenced by the Stanomir Report. Indeed, the elements of autonomy can be built around this topic, and regionalism lends a language to the repre-sentatives of autonomy initiatives that will make these initiatives presentable before EU forums as well. This has been long discov-ered by experts and politicians, and debates and discussions have been conducted around the topic. However, Hungarians warn that according to Transylvania's unwritten constitution, a developed and well-institutionalized indirect governance had been in operation here, and the Ancient Kingdom was governed by the ruler's decrees in the first place . At the same time, the Romanian Ancient Kingdom was governed by a less institutionalized version of indirect govern-ance, which was transformed into direct governance by the reforms of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, and this is what became the cornerstone of the nation. This was the predecessor of the centralized state, which promotes nation-building even through regionalization. Transylvania had traditions of indirect governance: here the region is perceived as one of the forms of mediation between the state and its political communities, i.e. regionalization brings the community element to the fore (Bakk 2013).

Discourses, players – partners and adversaries

Regarding the autonomy of Szeklerland, it is worth setting up several categories for the stakeholders on both – Hungarian and Romanian – sides. On behalf of the Hungarians, parties should be mentioned in the first place, then the civil sphere and thirdly, the press[12]. It is a smaller problem whether those who undertake roles in the local authorities of the settlements of Szeklerland (e.g. mayors, local representatives, or to use the Romanian technical term, councillors) should consti-tute a separate category, or since they have obtained their mandates as party candidates, they should be classified with the parties. The

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[12] I will not discuss the role of the press in this paper.

exploration of this dilemma points beyond the scope of this paper. On the Hungarian part, the citizens have also taken an active part in several autonomy-oriented actions and events – I will refer to them as a movement. On the part of the Romanians, parties and state-power institutions should be discussed separately. The question arises whether a Hungarian-language prefecture should be classified as part of the Romanian power architecture or not. Opinions have also been expressed on the Romanian side by civil organizations as well as in the press. And there are experts and researchers studying this topic on both sides with diverse academic affiliations. On the Hungarian side, the circle of experts is completed by the specialists of the mother country, but I do not intend to discuss them this time.

The dividing line between politics and civil actions is not clearcut because the Szekler National Council, which has organized the biggest events in the past years, has created a public authority struc-ture, but in fact, it has no public law status. Its legal background is provided by the civil organizations operating behind or in coop-eration with the Council (e.g. "Siculitas Egyesület" in Romania and "Székelyföldért Társaság" in Hungary). An additional organization supporting the fundamental aim of the Szekler National Council is the "Sepsireform Egyesület", which defines itself as the permanent partner of the Szekler National Council.[13]

The most significant Hungarian player in Transylvanian politics is the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (RMDSZ). The alliance, which operates as a party, approved an action plan and a programme for several fields of activity at its 2015 Congress,[14] but autonomy was not one of them. The programme document entitled "Nemzetpolitikai törekvések" [National policy efforts] contains the concept of cultural autonomy, which – according to the text – "can be implemented only with broad social solidarity and in cooperation with professional and civil organizations and historical churches. Political engagement is not enough – there is no alternative for collec-tive thinking and joint action." The other keywords of the one-page document are the following: social organization, local government framework, solidarity, community. That is all.

The previous Programme approved at the 2013 conference declared as an imperative that the Hungarian community "must

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[13] Its actions are important in the realm of legal protection e.g. for language use rights or the settlement of the situation of the quarry of Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe).

[14] The programme documents approved at the RMDSZ Congress in Cluj by areas: education, family policy, economic policy, national policy, foreign policy, youth policy, women's engagement in the public sphere.

have autonomy". The document defines autonomy (p. 3), then says the following: "The RMDSZ wishes to achieve the legal formulation and the enforcement of the forms of autonomy – including territorial autonomy – through legislation. It encourages general decentralization and the application of the principle of subsidiarity, for which it relies on the positive traditions of the co-existence of the Transylvanian ethnicities and the exemplary models of self-governance that have been implemented in Europe. Until such legislation is drafted, the RMDSZ will set up autonomy councils via internal elections that will perform limited local government duties in issues pertaining to the identity of the community with a limited scope of authority and in the framework of the rule of law and in harmony with the laws in force." The document also talks about the issue of personal autonomy. ("As a result of the personal autonomy, the Romanian Hungarians will see the emergence of their own system of institutions in the area of education, culture, information and the protection of cultural heritage. This autonomy will be practiced by the public bodies elected by individuals belonging to the Romanian Hungarian community. The local government of the Hungarian national community will be implemented by way of general, secret and direct elections held on the basis of electoral lists based on registration (applying the principle of free choice of identity). Its legitimacy will be guaranteed by the state in a specific law. We attribute a special importance to the Cultural Autonomy Council functioning on the basis of personal autonomy, the Alliance of the Self-Governments of Szeklerland, which has set the goal of the creation of a regional self-government."), and indeed, reference is made to self-governments with a special status (in accordance with the earlier proposals). However, the programme itself does not contain any information as to how these goals should be achieved, and there is no addendum concerning the anticipated manner of implementation.

There is a reference to the autonomy of Szeklerland: "The autonomy of Szeklerland is a public law organizational framework and an institutional structure with decision-making rights for the local authorities. We consider it important in order to preserve the rights already acquired and broaden their scope as well as to advocate the rights and interests of the community of Szeklerland more efficiently. At the same time, autonomy entails additional competences as well with respect to the special cultural and linguistic traditions and heritage of the region. We support the use of Szekler symbols and colours as widely as possible and the registration of the .sic domain

name" (p. 4). However, there are no plans or conceptions proposed concerning the execution of the latter.

In 2014, the RMDSZ elaborated an autonomy proposal (The Statute of the Autonomy of Szeklerland in Romania) after President Hunor Kelemen promised at the closing press conference of the 2013 RMDSZ Congress that a more detailed proposal would be elaborated and submitted to the Parliament. The identities of the elaborators of the draft are officially not known; all we know is the names of those who were delegated by the Hungarian Civic Party (MPP) into the committee having elaborated the document (equally supported by the MPP). The bill was supposed to be submitted during the 2014 spring session of the Parliament, and its public debate was supposed to take place in February. However, these actions were either delayed or never took place at all.[15] The draft was analysed by Miklós Bakk[16], according to whom the RMDSZ draft statute of Szeklerland's autonomy proposed the creation of an associative (development) region of Harghita, Covasna and Mureş counties and its endowment with "a special status". The draft would ensure a much more restricted competence to the region of Szeklerland than the proposals of the Szekler National Council or the EMNP, perhaps from the strategic consideration that such competences and rights are more easily acquired "in course", by the "expansion" of the region's autonomy. The insertion of the planned region into the Romanian constitutional framework seems to be impossible from the perspective of public law. However, the chapter on public finances is much more elaborate than that of the previous attempts.

It is important to present the situation in such detail because it is hard to decide what the RMDSZ was trying to achieve with this autonomy proposal. If the purpose was to keep the President's promise – then this has been done. Even if it intended to promote the cause of the autonomy, there was no public debate about it with the involvement of multiple actors, and it was not followed by specific measures, which show that what we have at our hand is just another piece of paper, no more.

The question of autonomy could be kept on the agenda by the Council of Cultural Autonomy, which is an entity within the RMDSZ.

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[15] The text of the Statute can be found on the RMDSZ website, and the opinions related to it can also be searched on a separate tab. There is only one (anonymous) response to the criticism formulated by Levente Salat.

[16] See: http://mensura.ro/iras/az_rmdsz_szekelyfold-torvenye_a_kozvita_elott Last accessed: 20 September 2016.

However, the decisions of this council[17] and its activities[18] in the past two years cannot be related to the goal of the practical implementation of autonomy.

There are two more parties that are active in Transylvania: the Hungarian Civic Party (MPP) and the Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania (EMNP). The MPP, which does not have its own autonomy proposal, supported the 2014 proposal of the RMDSZ, and took part in its elaboration. At the same time, there is a politician within the MPP who thinks that there is no need for the party to deal with this question separately. Earlier, József Kulcsár Terza declared that the proposal of the Szekler National Council would be politically appropriate.[19]

The EMNP has an elaborate programme concerning autonomy. The party's framework programme discusses not only the importance of autonomy, but it envisions its implementation as well. They plan to achieve autonomy by the reform of public administration and the execution of asymmetrical regionalism. The EMNP plans to shape the regions in consideration of the efforts manifested in the associations of the local governments and movements and in line with the principles of asymmetrical regionalism. The regions will acquire their competences in the given constitutional framework, in accordance with their qualities, traditions and identities, in a regulated legislative procedure, which will allow them exercise self-governance in political life and public administration. The state will continue to be mandatorily and exclusively in charge of national defence, foreign affairs, finances and national security, and it will delegate as many competences to the regions as it deems appropriate for the well-being of the given regional-political community. Nevertheless, it is necessary to regulate (in a framework legislation) the minimum level of competences and duties that the self-government of each region must be endowed with and must ensure. The regions themselves must be delineated through political agreements, consultation by

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[17] "In accordance with the decision of the Cultural Autonomy Council (KAT), the Executive Board of the RMDSZ will conduct a representative survey about the implementation of minority language use rights. In the first part of the survey, the Alliance examined place name signs, the signs of municipalities and their institutions as well as the inscriptions of county-level facilities under ministerial control. During monitoring, our colleagues will work from the 2002 census data and in consideration of the act amended in 2007." (Decision of February 2016)

[18] The event series entitled National Policy Panel Discussions organized by the Cultural Autonomy Council (KAT) touched upon interesting topics from 2014, but none of them was related to the question of autonomy.

[19] See: http://www.kronika.ro/erdelyi-hirek/mpp-idohuzas-az-uj-autonomia-tervezet/ print Last accessed: 21 September 2016.

popular votes, with due respect for the existing historical, linguistic, cultural and ethnic minority identities and in compliance with EU regional policies. At the same time, those constitutional mechanisms must also be ensured that make it possible – with certain conditions – to adjust the borders of the already created regions with popular consent (i.e. the local inhabitants concerned). The legal frameworks of the envisaged autonomy were elaborated by an expert team (led by Miklós Bakk). Since the EMNP is an extra-parliamentary party, it can have recourse to different means in order to advocate autonomy than a party inside the Parliament. The EMNP organizes autonomy road shows all over Transylvania, the aim of which is to propagate the concept of autonomy and clarify the questions that may arise. At the same time, the party regularly brings up autonomy in its statements as a quintessential component of the future of the community.

There are certain authors who see autonomy as the wager of the competition between the Hungarian representations. I do not share their view. The question of autonomy is connected to the long-term subsistence of ethnic Hungarians – even if there were some kind of competition between the Hungarian parties regarding autonomy, it is not about rivalry between the parties, but about their interpretation of their political role.

From the civil actors, we should first mention the Szekler National Council.[20] According to the President of the SZNT, the Szekler National Council communicates the will of the Szekler people that in the autonomous Szeklerland to be created once again, all policy issues related to the everyday life, existence and survival of the indigenous community of this region should be managed by its own legislative and executive bodies so that Szeklerland would have financial autonomy, its own tax policy and investment and development system. For the SZNT, autonomy is not just a proposal, but a fundamental community right, the self-determination of the Szekler people within the country, which it exercises through the local and regional powers and self-governance tools. The Szekler National Council itself was brought to life by the will of the local communities of the settlements for the advocacy of these community efforts. According to Balázs Izsák, the purpose of autonomy is not to solve a policy issue, but to refer all the policy issues of Szeklerland created by an organic law to the regional legislative body and its executive organs endowed with public authority by law. This public authority must have all the powers through which it can assure the survival of

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[20] For lack of other civil actors similarly important to the SZNT, I will not discuss any other civil organizations.

the indigenous community in its homeland and the preservation of its Hungarian ethnic identity.[21] Finally, it declares concerning the local Hungarian-Romanian relationship that the autonomy proposal of the SZNT assumes the equality of all the inhabitants of Szeklerland before the law, and even prescribes the creation of those circumstances which guarantee the complete and effective equality and freedom of the individuals and their communities, and avert all those obstacles that might prevent or impede the full-scale development thereof, and facilitate participation in political, economic, cultural and social life for each citizen.

As illustrated by the above quote, the SZNT represents a clear and professionally grounded position concerning autonomy, and it advocates and serves the objectives set forth through a movement as well. The high-profile events of the recent years (the Big March of the Szeklers (2013),[22] watch fires on the borders of Szeklerland (2015),[23] the Day of Szekler Freedom on 10 March each year[24]) have demonstrated the claim for a Szekler autonomy and have given emphasis to it. The social role of the movements based on a common identity is significant because they defend the values and interests of certain communities and reinforce resistance. A movement signifies collective action – in this case: protest. The SZNT has looked for and found the appropriate occasions to express that. These manifestations of the social movement embody the political crisis situation, channel the opinions expressed by the society and provide an opportunity for active participation.

The picture is less complicated on the Romanian side. There is no public institution in Romania that would accept autonomy as an institution providing total equality to the ethnic minorities before the law. The declarations of the leading politicians of the parties in the Romanian Parliament reject autonomy unanimously; the only difference is in their tone, depending on the temper of the given statesman. In 2013, the analysis of the argumentation of the politicians taking

the floor in the professional and political debates related to the public administration reform showed that the Hungarian claims are unanimously rejected in the national political arenas.[25] In the local and regional levels of politics, especially in Szeklerland, there is a different strategy for refusal: legal or political assaults are usually launched in relation to specific issues. It should be mentioned here that the local Romanians living in the Szekler counties regularly complain about not having real representation. There is a Hungarian majority in the local authorities, so they are not in a dominant position there, on the contrary. The prefect is usually Romanian, but he or she does not represent anyone, but holds people to account, orders or brings court action on behalf of the central power. Here the Romanian parties are weak – this is why the Civil Forum of Romanians Living in Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties was set up in 2005.[26] However, the legitimacy of the latter is questioned by the Hungarians, for various reasons. First of all, it is a civil organization, therefore it has no general mandate to represent the local Romanian population. Second, although the organization declares it to be its fundamental goal to create and maintain an interethnic dialogue, it does nothing to promote it. It could be categorizes as an organization created for propaganda purposes: its main task is to proclaim and propagate the "Romanian minority model" and the Romanian interethnic relations. Moreover, they also demand justice for their alleged grievances with reference to their local knowledge.

In light of the statements of the Romanian state authorities and party leaders, the question justly arises: do they understand what autonomy is essentially about? Let me just cite one example here. A recurrent notion is ethnicity-based territorial autonomy[27], which does not exist in either the Hungarian, or the international literature or political language use. In Hungarian as well as in English, we talk about territorial autonomy. In this case, the population of a given territory is granted autonomy to manage its own affairs. The population of the territory includes all its inhabitants, whether they belong to the ethnic majority or minority. The Romanian misrepresentation (i.e. ethnicity-based territorial autonomy) is a dangerous misconception. For if we have an ethnicity-based territorial autonomy, all those who do not belong to the local ethnic majority should leave – which would be equal to Fascism. The proposed autonomy for Szeklerland

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[21] See: http://www.sznt.sic.hu/hu-sic/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=132%3Aaz-autonomia-a-szabadsag-intezmenye-es-nem-koezpolitikai-alternativa&catid=19%3Atanulmanyok&Itemid=25&lang=fa Last accessed: 20 September 2016.

[22] The Big March of Szeklers event was attended by tens of thousands in Romania. It demanded Szekler autonomy with a 53-km-long march from Bereck (Breţcu) to Kökös (Chichiş).

[23] On 24 October, watch fires and upward turned streaks of light signalled the natural, historically established regional border of Szeklerland.

[24] It was on 10 March 1854 that the Szekler Martyrs were executed in Postarét in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş), who wanted to rekindle the flame of the defeated Hungarian revolution and freedom fight as members of the Makk conspiracy.

[25] See Barna Bodó's talk ("Romanian politicians about autonomy") at the 2014 conference organized by the EMNT (Autonomy drafts and regionalism on the table of political representation).

[26] In Romanian: Forumul Civic al Românilor din Covasna, Harghita şi Mureş

[27] In Romanian: Autonomie teritoriala pe criterii etnice.

does not mean that anything would be taken away from anybody, or that anyone would be made to leave, but that the local Hungarians would receive additional rights while the Romanian population would preserve their existing ones.[28] These additional rights pertain to the right to decide about their existence and culture. It gives reason for concern that the Romanian media is consistently using the term "ethnicity-based territorial autonomy" – anyone would be revolted by that idea and rightly so. But this is, in fact, either a misinterpretation or ignorance. Whatever the explanation may be, the political parties are talking past each other.

The situation is different in the professional arena. There are Romanian researchers with whom it is possible to carry on a dialogue (Gabriel Andreescu, Ioan Stanomir, Valentin Stan, Renate Weber), and there have been joint works as well. However, that does not change the initial problem: namely, that there is no common search for a solution.

Not long ago Csaba Zahorán has prepared an analysis about the Romanian-Hungarian dialogue about the minority issue.[29] He summarized the rather hostile discourse as follows: "The majority of the Romanian political elite – both centrally and locally, in Szekler-land – continues to insist on the classical nation-state concept (the idea of the Romanian political nation, the uniform organization and homogenization of the Romanian society) and the greatest possible control over the resources (centralization, though it will be changed as a result of the regionalization process). The Romanian elite groups are jealous of their positions that they acquired in Szeklerland back before 1989, and on the other hand, they are also building their community." Thus, what we have at hand is different conceptions of history, different points of reference and different social logics (visions and emancipation efforts). To this should be added the international impacts interpreted differently and the effect of the changing

domestic policy factors. In sum, certain Romanian politicians are willing to negotiate about the details of ethnic minority rights, but they absolutely refuse to discuss autonomy. They are suspicious of any Hungarian initiative in that respect, and "their gut reaction is to firmly reject the expansion of the tightly interpreted frames of the nation-state" in accordance with the traditional nationalist pattern.

Before summarizing the main claims of my paper, let me call attention to one more interesting and important factor that also influences the chances of autonomy in East-Central-Europe, i.e. where we can witness simultaneous and rivalling nation-building processes to this day. The international environment, the European events and trends have an impact on the chances of the Szekler autonomy as well. I will not present the stance of international law on the issue of autonomy: the most important documents are well-known, and few new statements have been made recently.[30] At the same time, we have seen several events in the past decade that indirectly affected the enforcement of minority rights in Romania (e.g. Kosovo's cessation from Serbia, the Catalan autonomy movement, the Scottish independence referendum) whose analysis would be worthy of a separate article.

Finally, let us see the key statements and conclusions of my analysis concerning the Szekler autonomy. 1) The theoretical preparations have been completed, so there is no theoretical obstacle that should stop the political and movement/civil elite from advocating autonomy in a more emphatic way. 2) The Romanian Hungarian political circles have not formulated a common, all-inclusive strategy for the representation and implementation of autonomy. There is no real explanation why the negotiations, which were announced and then put off a long time ago, have not been launched within the political elite. 3) Finally, virtually nothing is being done to redefine the initial situation; namely that the Romanian nation-building took off in opposition to the Hungarian nation-building, and the latter served as a constitutive contrast and embodied the necessary concept of the enemy for the Romanian nation-building. In other words, the concept of Hungarians as enemies, which has had a fundamental role in the Romanian nation-building, should be tamed to begin with.

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[28] In March 2010, the Romanian Civic Forum held a general assembly in Maroshévíz (Toplița) in protest against the efforts for the *ethnicity-based territorial autonomy of the "so-called Transylvania". Besides the representatives of the nationalist parties, Victor Ponta, the newly elected president of the Social Democratic Party (then in opposition) also took the floor at the general assembly and said: "No Romanian has to leave the place where he or she was born in order to feel at home, in his or her country." Then he continued: "I think Szeklerland is not Romania because there is no such thing as Szeklerland."*

[29] Csaba Zahorán: A székelyföldi autonómia a román politikai diskurzusban. https://www.academia.edu/7933029/Zahor%C3%A1n_Csaba_A_sz%C3%A9kelyf%C3%B6ldi_auton%C3%B3mia_a_rom%C3%A1n_politikai_diskurzusban
Last accessed: 15 September 2016.

[30] We should also mention the Report about the situation and rights of ethnic minorities in Europe, submitted by Ferenc Kalmár politician (from Budapest) and approved by the Council of Europe on 9 April 2014, which was another milestone and point of reference in Europe in the area of minority collective rights.

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