

**Title: The Revival of the First of December in Szeklerland**

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## **1. Introduction**

The First of December, also known as the ‘Grand Union Day’, when Transylvania, Banat, Crişana and Maramureş unified with Romania in 1918 to become the then ‘Greater Romania’, is the main national day of Romania since 1991<sup>1</sup>. It is the most remarkable commemorative event taking place in all the cities of Romania and throughout the whole country, with special regard to the capital Bucharest and Alba Iulia (where the big reunion in 1918 took place and the ‘Declarations of Alba Iulia’ stem from).

Romania comprises a big Hungarian community living mostly in the territories near the Hungarian border and in the geographical centre of Romania (Szeklerland<sup>2</sup>). This community became part of Greater Romania right after the First World War, a century ago. Since the border changes after the First World War, Szeklerland forms a Hungarian island in the geographical centre of Romania with a vast majority of the population declaring themselves to being ethnic Hungarians who strongly preserve and cultivate their Hungarian language, culture and traditions. This is also obvious in the public space where Hungarian monuments, flags and other symbols dominate.

The way in which the most important Romanian commemorative event, the First of December, is organised and how it occurs and develops in reality has some particularities in these borderlands between the Romanian and Hungarian communities. In this urban space, many societal, economic, geopolitical and political transformations occurred during the last

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<sup>1</sup> Constituţia României 1991.[Constitution of Romania 1991].

<sup>2</sup> The historic Szeklerland is located in Romania, Transylvania, in the east and parts of the middle of the Transylvanian Basin within the Carpathian arc. It originated from the 12th to the 14th century as a privileged territory of the Hungarian crown. The Szekler were for a long time frontier guards in various border areas - most recently settled on the eastern border of the Hungarian kingdom - and received as such collectively special privileges. They sustained their territorial autonomy throughout until the beginnings of dualism in the 1870s. They were originally either a specific ethnic Hungarian-speaking group, or a community formed by the granting of special rights within a particular territory. Ninety percent of the historical Szeklerland are now in the counties Covasna / Kovászna, Harghita / Hargita and Mureş / Maros, and it is worth noting, “Covasna and Harghita are composed of 100 percent each from parts of the historical Szeklerland. On the other hand, this is only true about 40 percent for Mureş County.” Arens, 2004/2005. 424.

century. All these aspects play an important role when speaking about Romanian national commemorations in this inter-ethnic borderland.

This study<sup>3</sup> gives an overview of the history of the First of December in Covasna County, primarily in the county seat, Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy<sup>4</sup>, and in the second biggest city of the county, Târgu Secuiesc / Kézdivásárhely.<sup>5</sup> Hungarians inhabit both cities in majority, whereas Romanians – the majority component of the state – are in minority here. Varga E. Árpád's official census data and summaries of Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy<sup>6</sup> and Târgu Secuiesc / Kézdivásárhely<sup>7</sup> show that these cities have undergone significant changes in their ethnic composition over the past hundred years.

**Table 1.** City of Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy

<b>Year</b>	<b>Romanians</b>	<b>Hungarians</b>	<b>Romanians %</b>	<b>Hungarians %</b>
1850	422	1818	18	78.3
1910	108	8361	1.2	96.5
1920	1337	9345	11.9	83.5
1966	2560	17739	12.3	85.4
2002	14134	45012	23.4	74.5
2011	11725	40056	21.9	76.7

*Source: Varga 2012, Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy, ethnic distribution.*

**Table 2.** City of Târgu Secuiesc / Kézdivásárhely

<b>Year</b>	<b>Romanians</b>	<b>Hungarians</b>	<b>Romanians %</b>	<b>Hungarians %</b>
1850	24	3346	0.67	94
1910	50	5970	0.82	98.2

<sup>3</sup> This study is a short summary of parts of my monography aiming to present, analyse and interpret four Romanian commemorative events (24th of January, 9-10th of May, 23rd of August and 1st of December) in the two biggest cities of County Covasna with a Hungarian majority. Due to the high number of press articles already in the local Hungarian newspapers, the examination of the local Romanian press goes beyond the scope of this study and could be subject of further research. Ádám 2020.

<sup>4</sup> The city of Sfântu Gheorghe in Romanian /Sepsiszentgyörgy in Hungarian/ is located in Transylvania, in the geographical center of Romania, in the area of the former historical *Szeklerland* in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin.

<sup>5</sup> The city of Târgu Secuiesc in Romanian (Kézdivásárhely in Hungarian) is the most eastern city in the Carpathian Basin where Hungarian ethnics are forming a majority.

<sup>6</sup>Varga 2012, Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy, ethnic distribution.

<sup>7</sup>Varga 2012, Târgu Secuiesc/Kézdivásárhely, ethnic distribution.

1920	74	4634	1.5	96.5
1966	460	8328	5.2	93.9
2002	1582	17290	8.4	91.4
2011	1262	14840	7.4	87.6

*Source: Varga 2012, Târgu Secuiesc/Kézdivásárhely, ethnic distribution.*

Although in comparison with the census of 1920 the number of Romanian residents in Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy, in Târgu Secuiesc / Kézdivásárhely and in the Szeklerland has generally multiplied during the eighty years following the First World War, in fact the Romanian population in this area remains a minority in comparison to the Hungarian majority living here.

## **2. Borderlands and cultural memory**

According to the census data the geographical scene of this research is both an ethnic and confessional<sup>8</sup> borderland and a contact zone. Initially the concept of *borderland* has been used by social scientists in a geographical sense, but since Fredrik Barth<sup>9</sup> introduced this concept to anthropology, it has gained new meanings and the emphasis has gradually shifted from geography to ethnicity. According to Barth, the territorial changes in public and ecclesiastical administration can also be interpreted as a macro attempt to homogenize the ethnic-cultural image of a specific area. The scale to which a group may have an effect to a border also depends, according to Barth, on its extent and on the homogeneity of its lifestyle. However, it is important that members of a given group are able to identify themselves with their own distinctive marks, in this way they can fight for their separate existence. The local institutions play in this “struggle” an important role in bringing together their actors, forging their actions and styles together and creating a sense of community among them, while supporting discontinuity between the community and outsiders, thereby reinforcing the boundaries between them. Thomas Hylland Eriksen also highlighted the relationship between *ethnicity and institutionalized politics* in his study from 1991. According to him, institutionalized politics is

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<sup>8</sup>Almost 90% of the Romanian population of the examined cities are of Orthodox religion, whereas the Hungarians are about half to half Roman Catholic and Protestant. Varga 2012, Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy, denominational distribution and Varga 2012, Târgu Secuiesc/Kézdivásárhely, denominational distribution.

<sup>9</sup>Barth 1969, 1996, 1-14.

organized along ethnic lines, meaning that ethnic discrimination plays an important role in public policy.<sup>10</sup> As stated by Eriksen, “*Ethnic conflicts are created by politics.*”<sup>11</sup>

According to Ilyés these zones are not static dividing lines, but dynamic, shiftable and permeable ones, which can be seen as “areas of cultural play and experimentation, but also a prime location for dominance and power”.<sup>12</sup> Thus Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy being a county seat, the Romanian and Hungarian commemorative feasts appear concentrated, transforming this city into an important place for struggling over dominance and power, as well as for important cultural games and experiments. The evolution of demographic conditions also explains the increased demand for ethnic representation of the growing number of ethnic Romanians living in minority during the past century. In this way, the county seat has become an important site for commemorative events, reflecting the desire for identity articulation of both the Romanian and Hungarian communities.

Furthermore, as stipulated by Jan Assmann, these commemorations may function as part of the cultural memory, aiming at remembrance; they are not only related to a well-defined space, time, event correlation, but also to a specific group whose members develop the basic identity of the group and pass on the necessary knowledge for its operation by participating in these cyclically joint commemorative events.<sup>13</sup> However, as Marianne Hirsch determines in her concept of *postmemory* related to Holocaust, “These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.”<sup>14</sup>

### **3. First of December in Szeklerland’s press: 1919-2015**

Based on a detailed content analysis of the local Hungarian-language written press of county Covasna, this study performs a systematic analysis of the comprehensive changes in the significance, meaning and structure of First of December for the period between 1919 and 2015, in this interethnic environment. The main research objective of this study is to present, analyse and interpret the *attitude of the local majority*, hence the attitude of local Hungarians towards the official national celebration of the Romanians. Further to this, it shows different methods of ethnic representation and articulation of identity in this festive period with the *anthropological method of participant observation* and through a series of structured interviews. Taking into account the events of the hundred year’s anniversary of First of

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<sup>10</sup>Eriksen 1991, 143.

<sup>11</sup>Eriksen 1991, 134.

<sup>12</sup>Ilyés 2008, 15.

<sup>13</sup>Assmann 1999, 43-57.

<sup>14</sup>Hirsch 2012, 5.

December in this specific multi-ethnic environment, it analysis the developments throughout the last century, as well as the current state of play of this commemorative feast.

My analysis proceeds using a detailed content analysis of the Hungarian press representation of the most important Romanian feast, based on *quantitative and qualitative research methods*<sup>15</sup>. The quantitative method focusses on the number of the press articles found on the commemorative feast in the regional Hungarian newspapers. The qualitative approach focusses on 247 press articles<sup>16</sup> and 16 structured interviews<sup>17</sup>. I conducted a series of *structured interviews* with members of the event organizing team and with the participants of the commemorations.

The research follows Michel Foucault's *theory of discourse analysis*, thus it does not focus on the traditional text-level analysis, but examines conflicting group identities related to ethnicity or language, while perceiving them not as inherent, but in relation to each other.<sup>18</sup>

The analysis is divided in four historical periods between 1919 and 2015, to obtain the optimal number of inputs for presenting, analysing and interpreting the attitude of the local Hungarians towards the official national celebration of the Romanians. The four historical periods are the following: (1) 1919-1944, to mark the period between the two world wars. Due to multiple border changes, this period has been subject to significant interethnic tensions; (2) 1945-1964, to mark the period between the end of the Second World War and the communist period under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the first communist leader of Romania; (3) 1965-1989, to mark the dictatorship of Ceaușescu-regime and the influence of its propaganda on the commemorations; and (4) 1990-2015, to mark the democratic period after the regime change in 1989-1990, and its corresponding commemorations.

Although since the state foundation of Romania in 1866 no clear definition of official national days was to be found until the 1991 Constitution, the individual national days became part of the celebration practice of the Romanians living in this specific environment, immediately after their genesis. These events are organized year after year and are organically integrated into the festive order and national imagination of the Romanians, but they are also

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<sup>15</sup> Antal 1976.; Krippendorff 1995, cited by: Kérdő 2008, 55.

<sup>16</sup> The list of the local Hungarian newspapers used for the research: Székely Újság; Székely Hírlap; Székely Újság, egyesülve a Székely Hírlappal; Népi Egység; Megyei Tükör; Székely Hírmondó; Háromszék.

<sup>17</sup> I conducted the interviews in 2015. The respondents are Romanian and Hungarian women and men living in and around Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy of different age and educational backgrounds. When selecting the interviewees, I used the same periods as during the analysis of the newspaper article: from 1940s to 1960s - four interviews; from 1965 to 1989 - four interviews; Celebration habits after 1990 - four interviews and four interviews with organizing committee members. Those interviewees, who still had memories of this period from their childhood, covered the period 1919-1944.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault 1991.

widespread and consciously mediatized. However, in line with the concept of ethnic representation and concepts related to the collective memory and postmemory, their significance, meanings and functions have changed over time.

### 3.1. The inter-war period (1919-1944)

In this period, I examined three newspaper articles related to the festivities of First of December.<sup>19</sup> From an interethnic point of view, the historical events between the two world wars - in light of multiple border changes and the Romanian-Hungarian coexistence in Szeklerland - are a very problematic period. The press reports are irregular - their number changes every year and there is no annual cyclicity - which refers to a kind of inconsistency in celebration. At the same time, we can also assume that Hungarian journalists remained "deeply silent" on the events related to the celebration of the Romanian nation-state building.

The fact that the First of December appears only three times in the form of short news in the press articles, allows two conclusions to be drawn. First, due to the proximity of the events of 1918, this festive event had not yet entered the celebration traditions of the Romanians from Szeklerland so to serve as an authoritative source of news for the Hungarian-language newspapers. The exchange of local administration and governance from Hungarians to Romanians took place around 1924 when local Hungarians started to realize for the first time that there would be no reversal after the First World War changes. Hence, though the Romanians in Szeklerland celebrated this anniversary regularly, the local Hungarian media deliberately ignored, suppressed and underestimated the Romanian national day, and did not even want to inform about the existence of this event. The few reports published during this period testify that this commemorative event was in fact one of the most important arenas of the distinctive system between Romanian and Hungarian, as stated by Barth, between "us" and "them", the most important "message exchanging" option between the two communities.<sup>20</sup> In these years, the question of revision was still openly raised in the short local news:

*"ASTRA MEETING. The local Astra Association<sup>21</sup> held its season-opening gathering on 1<sup>st</sup> of December, where speakers delivered about the significance of the union. Dr. Valer Bidu*

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<sup>19</sup> The most important national feast of this period was the 10th of May, the day of proclamation of Romanian Kingdom in 1881.

<sup>20</sup> Barth 1996, 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> The Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (Romanian: Asociația Transilvană pentru Literatura Română și Cultura Poporului Român, ASTRA) is a cultural association founded in 1861 in Sibiu (Hermannstadt). It played an important role in the cultural life and the movement of national awakening of the Romanians in Transylvania (then part of Hungary).

*spoke about Transylvania, Cornel Nastasi<sup>22</sup> about Bukovina. In this context, the issue of revision was raised, but the speeches were calm. In the evening, there was a social dinner in the lower hall of the Vigadó<sup>23</sup> without incident.”<sup>24</sup>*

In Romania of the 1930s the rise of the far right Iron Guard organization, the Romanian national mythology and the revival of “Daco-Roman continuity theory”<sup>25</sup>, did not favour a good Romanian-Hungarian relationship.<sup>26</sup> This group was yet to discover and use the events related to First of December as an effective, symbolic tool for achieving their admittedly nationalist and chauvinistic aspirations in the areas inhabited by Hungarians.

### 3.2 The communist period

In this period two articles have been published in the local Hungarian press about this important Romanian commemorative event. The articles are now longer and cover not only local but also nation-wide events. Reports are still irregular though, and after careful analysis of the articles, one may conclude that first of December has slowly infiltrated and became an integral part of the celebration practice and commemorations of Romanians in Szeklerland. The commemoration scenario was very similar to the contemporary celebrations. In fact, today's commemorative scenarios and practices go back to the traditions of the 1930s and 1940s, however they kept the rhetoric of communism. The commemoration reports of this period, the emphasis on reconciliation and the emphasis on the equality of rights between Hungarians and Romanians are strikingly pathetic.

*“On 1st of December, Bucharest celebrated the solemn opening of Romania's first democratically elected House of Representatives with a traditional exterior decoration and pomp. At 11 am. a solemn worship was held at the Patriarchal Church to commemorate the anniversary of 1st of December and to celebrate the annexation of Transylvania to Romania. His Majesty King Michael I and members of the royal house attended worship.”<sup>27</sup>*

In most of the articles of this period, the names of the authors are not known, they report from Braşov, Bucharest or Cluj. Based on the emphasis on minority issues, the need for

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<sup>22</sup> In January 1928, Nastasi Cornel was elected Mayor of Târgu Secuiesc / Kézdivásárhely. With his support, Dr. Bidu Valer, Chief Medical Officer of the Hospital, on 22 November 1931 established ASTRA's branch organisation in the city. (Dimény, 2018. 160-161.)

<sup>23</sup> The cultural centre and theatre of Kézdivásárhely, built between 1902 and 1904. (Dimény, 2018. 199.)

<sup>24</sup> Székely Újság, egyesülve a Székely Hírlappal, 1932. december 4. Translated from the original by the author.

<sup>25</sup> The theory - which was highly instrumentalised during the dictatorship of Ceauşescu - traced the origin of the Romanians back to the Roman Empire, trying to prove that the only indigenous people in Transylvania were the Romanians.

<sup>26</sup> Boia, 1998, 16, 1999a, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Népi Egység, 1946. december. 2.

Hungarian-Romanian peaceful coexistence and the Hungarian-Romanian parallels, and based on the wording “annexation” (of Transylvania, and not “union” of Transylvania with) used in the quotation shows that articles were written by Hungarian journalists and not by Romanians. However, contrary to the hard formulations and statements of the minority aspect of the previous period, the tone of the announcements is too pathetic, which has already perceived the pervasive "order" from the communist power, which we will often meet later. Although the Romanian Communist Party was characterised by anti-nationalism in the period between the two world wars,<sup>28</sup> the above-mentioned declaration of equality and fraternity already shows the myth of the Soviet Union, the Russian pattern, the new trend, the beginning of which comes from Mihail Sadoveanu *Light comes from the East* (Lumina vine de la Răsărit) published in 1945.<sup>29</sup>

In Romania, a short transitional period occurred until 1947. In a few years a radical material, social and mental transformation forced by communism took place, the most significant events being the crushing of the former civilian leadership, the collectivization, the massive industrialization, the moving of masses from rural areas to cities, and the creation of the hegemony of a new leadership, the so-called “new working class”. In this way, one of the most important Central-Eastern European bases of Stalinist, internationalist communism could be established in Romania.<sup>30</sup> An interviewee explains the situation as follows:

*“Participation was not mandatory during the kingdom, but after 1947, when the republic was proclaimed, celebrations became mandatory. In 1965, when Gheorghiu-Dej died and Nicolae Ceaușescu was elected, it was only then that they became truly compulsory. (...) The national flag was used as a symbol, but after the kingdom the red flag, the Soviet influence was very strong. By then everything was about the Soviet Union.”*<sup>31</sup>

After the dissolution of the *Népi Egység*<sup>32</sup> newspaper and the creation of the Hungarian Autonomous Province in 1952 (from 1960, the Autonomous Province of Maros), it could be assumed that the revival of Hungarian culture and media was also a key factor in Szeklerland. The research by Stefano Bottoni and Péter O. Váry<sup>33</sup> confirms that before 1956 a kind of local nation-building continued, culture and media being an important part of this process, but none

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<sup>28</sup> Boia 1999b, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Cioroianu 1998, 21-68.

<sup>30</sup> Boia 1998, 72.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with T.C.

<sup>32</sup> The *Népi Egység* was edited from 1944 to September 1946 in Brașov, from March 1946 to March 1948, until its cessation in Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy. Thus, it can be assumed that residents of Sepsiszentgyörgy were informed of this newspaper, and the numbers of the *Népi Egység* were therefore documented in the Bod Péter County Library of Sfântu Gheorghe (Sipos, 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Bottoni, 2008. Váry, 2006. 151–152.



of them could freely develop, and could not be independent of the mass media and centralised power. It soon became clear that the Autonomous Province is managed in reality not from Târgu Mureş / Marosvásárhely, its seat, but of from Bucharest and Moscow. All this could be clearly mapped out in the evolution of the written press. Although from 1945 onwards, the church papers, then the sports magazines, and in the 1960s the student papers attempted to take over the role of non-existent local papers, apart from minor successes, they were usually ephemeral. The Hungarian population of County Covasna was forced to get the information from daily newspapers and magazines in monopoly, impregnated by Moscow's all-pervasive communist propaganda, which attempted to address the Hungarian population through these organs and keep it under strict control. The youngest age group was no exception from this process either.<sup>34</sup>

The glorification and uncritical following of the Soviet Union in Romania of the 1950s and 1960s began to weaken, as nationalism gradually came to the fore. This slow but steadily detectable direction reached its peak in 1964 in the "Independence" statement of the Romanian Workers' Party, whose discourse had praised nationalism rather than internationalism, and practically - as Boia stated - against the failed "brilliant future" has sought his roots and legitimacy in a glorious national past.<sup>35</sup>

The interviews conducted with the participants of the commemorative events, which played an important role in this period, show that the First of December was not highlighted in their memories. They spoke primarily about the less formal ceremonies related to the 1<sup>st</sup> of May<sup>36</sup> and compared it to the significant commemorative days of the previous (the 10<sup>th</sup> of May) and subsequent periods (the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August<sup>37</sup>). Similarities between the 1<sup>st</sup> of May and the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August are common; these newly created, grandiose and obligatory celebrations of communist and socialist life have largely determined the community memory. While 1st of May was more memorable due to its informal celebrations, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August was characterized by obligatory, endless preparations, parades and slogans, where in fact everyone was thinking on how to physically leave unnoticed the event.

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<sup>34</sup> Bottoni, 2008. 168–180.

<sup>35</sup> Boia, 1999b, 76–77.

<sup>36</sup> Labour Day in Romania was celebrated for the first time in 1890. It was a popular event associated with political propaganda during the Communist era. However, after 1989, Labour Day was toned down to simply being a day off work and a holiday marked with social events.

<sup>37</sup> On this very day in 1944, Romania suddenly quit its former ally Hitler and soon ended the war on the side of the victorious powers. The date of the royal coup, primarily through the propaganda of the Communist Party, soon became the memorial day of the "anti-fascist armed uprising" and the "national and social, antifascist and anti-imperialist liberation revolution (Boia 1999b, 83.)

*“The event started days earlier, when people were organised how to leave the factory to join the parade, what slogans and banner to carry, what to shout on the street. It was often tiring, especially for the young ones, because in the eighties outdoor sports and cultural festivities were part of these commemorations, and students were mainly prepared for days and weeks of rehearsal for these parades.”<sup>38</sup>*

### 3.3 The Ceaușescu-regime

After World War II, the new national day, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, has gradually established and became the most important national day in the *third targeted period (1965-1989)*. About First of December 31 articles haven been found in the local newspapers. The reorganization of the post-1965 celebrations is a typical example of how the propaganda machine that created Ceaușescu's personal cult could manipulate and integrate via its historical ideology the entire series of national days into a historical arch, and then using its dictatorial methods to maintain and increase its legitimacy. At the same time, the national day was one of the means of self-expression of the regime's elite, and it was an opportunity to strengthen its position.

During the press review of this period, two types of “rearrangement” methods were outlined. The first is the example of the creation of historical and personal myth, which was accomplished by editing and unimaginably simplifying the messages of the commemorative events. Regardless of which national day was commemorated the structure and message of all feasts was built on the same arch of the Communist Party's propagandists. In the first, milder period of the Ceaușescu era, its beginnings was the unification of Mihai Viteazul from year 1600, and its endpoint usually culminated in the contemporary actions of the party and the masses. Meanwhile, for the given historical dates, the propagandists of the system have even assigned a historical person, a writer, a poet or a statesman, whose actions and words have proved the legitimacy and success of the ideology they propagated.

*“At the end of the 16th century, the troops of Mihai Viteazul started fighting under the banner of national and linguistic unity. Nothing justified their just, noble purpose more than the fact that for the first time Romanian people managed to extend a fraternal hand in a unified Romanian state. (...) In the middle of the 19th century there were recorded two events of great historical significance: the unification of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859 and gaining of state independence in 1877. (...) This century-old aspiration was elevated to a higher level by the growing labour movement which was decisively influenced by the Great Socialist Revolution*

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with P.S.

*of October: it opened the path of social and national liberation of the oppressed nation. (...) The Romanian-speaking and Hungarian-speaking residents of Covasna County express their thanks and gratitude to the Romanian Communist Party which made it possible the full equality to materialize.*"<sup>39</sup>

Later, in the second half of the Ceaușescu era when communist propaganda has infiltrated all areas of life, this historical arc had expanded considerably. The origins of the Romanians and the circle of mythical persons were usually brought back to the Daco-Roman period, and ultimately dominated and crowned by the hyperbolised figure of the party and its 'beloved' leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu.

*"The unification of 1918 was a legal and legitimate historical act that sanctified a reality, the unity of the Romanians living on both sides of the Carpathians and making up the vast majority of the population. This unity was, by the way, a historical permanence and its origins are rooted in the Dacian-Roman statehood of the territories, ensuring more than 2050 years of legal continuity. The Romanian people, born from the unification of the Dacian people and the Roman settlers, has fought throughout the history a persistent struggle to maintain unity. (...) Thanks to the politics of the Party, we can celebrate this great event as a society and a country that has earned the respect and admiration of the entire world. (...) The inspirer and custodian of this policy is the most beloved son of our people, the Secretary General of the Party, the President of our country, Comrade NICOLAE CEAUȘESCU."*<sup>40</sup>

The second type of "rearrangement" is the way that the propaganda of the commemorative events was forged and edited. The focus of each celebration was no longer a distant event in the past, but a contemporary one, which was soon radically rebuilt by well-defined ideological aspects of Ceaușescu's propagandists, and regularly highlighted in the written press. In the early 1970s, the myth of the *worker standing out from the crowd* emerged, together with the myth of *heroic work* based on party congresses and five-year work plans of the Communist Party. However, with time the myth of the outstanding worker has gradually decreased, giving space to the party leader's growing *one-man's cult*. One of interviewee equally confirms this dominance on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August:

*"The goal of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August was always to demonstrate the party's power, the power of Ceaușescu and that of the Ceaușescu couple. The national element was secondary, of course, as it was merely the sauce, but the meat was always Ceaușescu. The 'national' was just a sauce*

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<sup>39</sup> Megyei Tükör, 1973. december 1. Translated from original by the author.

<sup>40</sup> Megyei Tükör, 1983. december 1. Translated from original by the author.

around him and all the ceremonies were made for this. From this point of view, there were two things that could be considered as national: the statue of Mihai Viteazul [in the center of Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy since 1982] and the monument of the Unknown Romanian soldier [in Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy since 1974<sup>41</sup>]. The solemn inauguration of these monuments - as Ceaușescu himself uncovered the statue of Mihai Viteazul - they were messages clearly directed towards the Hungarian community, telling this is Romania, you have to understand this.”<sup>42</sup>

### 3.4 The period after the regime change

With the sudden fall of Ceaușescu regime in December 1989 the person and the system of trumped admiration and worship suddenly disappeared from the public space, moreover the whole context of the commemorative events would have changed at this time.

During the *fourth targeted period (1990-2015)* the new constitution of 1991 declared the First of December to be the most important and for a long time the only official national day of Romania.<sup>43</sup> The analysis of 210 newspaper articles dealing with First of December after the regime change, highlights how a commemorative event that played a marginal role in the past could become, with the help of the new political power, a grandiose, highly mediated and from interethnic point of view a problematic commemoration of a nation. First of December was finally chosen to be the only national day of Romania due to its relatively constant connotation, but its scenario goes back to the traditions before the Second World War, while its discourse evokes the traditions of the Ceaușescu era.

According to the historian Maria Bucur,<sup>44</sup> in the first ten years after 1918, in the capital Bucharest and in other parts of Moldavia and Wallachia, due to the Kingdom being established, there is hardly any commemoration of the First of December. Whereas in Transylvania - with the support of the Orthodox Church and the encouragement of the ASTRA Association - significant celebrations with political influence took place in the years following the Decision

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<sup>41</sup> The monument was set up near the town's train station on the left bank of the Olt river, where a new housing estate was built, for a large number of Romanian-speaking residents coming to work in the industrialised city, from other regions of the country. Köztérkép. Román katona emlékműve. [Public map. Monument of the Romanian soldier].

<sup>42</sup> Interview with. K. J.

<sup>43</sup> In 2014 the 24th of January (unification of the Romanian Principalities, Moldavia and Wallachia), in 2015 the 10th of May (the day of proclamation of Romanian Kingdom in 1881) and in 2020 the 4th of June (anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon) was declared by law to become a national holiday.

<sup>44</sup> Bucur, 2001. 286-326; Ádám, 2016. 117-121.

of Alba Iulia .<sup>45</sup> In the 1930s, this celebration became a part of the public consciousness in the kingdom, although for many years, Bucharest tried to minimise the importance of Transylvanian events. Thus, in the period between the two world wars, the 1<sup>st</sup> of December was a regional, Transylvanian commemorative event; however in parallel with the raise of antirevisionist movements, it became a semi-official feast. After 1947, it disappeared for some time from the public space, until 1968, the fiftieth anniversary of the great unification, when it started to gain space again, but it was still not celebrated as an official national day. Finally, the disagreements on this commemorative feast between Transylvania and the rest of Romania disappeared in the 1980s, in the melting pot of Ceaușescu's homogenising cult and policy. After the regime change the First of December became the most important commemorative event in Romania, however according to Maria Bucur, the official and semi-official commemorations have had such a rigid institutionalised framework that, a survey made in 1997 shows, many Romanians considered it boring, and in lack of emotional and patriotic bonding.<sup>46</sup>

One of the reasons could be the slow democratization process of the early 1990s that mirrors, the extent to which the historical, rhetorical innervations and historical attitudes, lacking self-reflection of communism, continue to be seen in the Romanian public space. Commemorations continued to follow the context of the Daco-Roman continuity theory, while political dilemmas characterized the period. This uncertainty was visible also during the commemorations on the First of December in 1990, which was used by the government on the one side, and by supporters of a parliamentary monarchy on the other side, to spread their ideas and retain or gain power. Preventing the King's visit to Romania on occasion of the commemorations was the main goal of the government leaders. Parallel to this, they clearly gave an ethnic colour to the meaning of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December in their domestic politics and their verbal struggles with Hungarians, while in Bucharest and Alba Iulia this day was commemorated in a more and more mediatized manner.

In the local Hungarian newspapers of Háromszék<sup>47</sup> one can trace the specific evolution of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December in Szeklerland, the peculiarity of which was determined by the Romanian-Hungarian coexistence and the minority existence of the Romanians in this geopolitical site. From the beginning of the 1990s, the Hungarians demanded equality of their rights as laid

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<sup>45</sup>The Union of Transylvania with Romania was declared on 1 December 1918 by the assembly of ethnic Romanians delegates, held in Alba Iulia. The Decision of Alba Iulia stems from this day.

<sup>46</sup> Bucur, 2001. 286-326; Ádám 2016b. 117-121.

<sup>47</sup> Originally Háromszék (Three Seats; in Romanian: Trei Scaune) was an administrative county (*comitatus*) of the Kingdom of Hungary. Situated in south-eastern Transylvania, its territory is now in central Romania (in the counties of Covasna, Brașov and Bacău). The capital of the county was Sepsiszentgyörgy (now Sfântu Gheorghe). Háromszék is also the name of a local Hungarian newspaper in county Covasna.

down in the declarations of Alba Iulia. They gave a recurring analysis of why the Hungarians in Transylvania did not celebrate the 1<sup>st</sup> of December: this commemoration does not mean any unification for the Hungarians, since this "union" is only about the majoritarian nation; furthermore the rights promised to minorities in 1918 have not been implemented and respected for nearly a hundred years:

*“According to the noble ideals declaring the equality of people and nationalities 75 years ago, today's descendants can only pay tribute if they resolve the nationality issue in accordance with the expectations of Romanians, of the people belonging to national minorities in Romania and in Europe, thus ensuring the democratic development of the country and the establishment of rule of law.”<sup>48</sup>*

The Romanians in Szeklerland had regularly attended the commemorations in the 1990s organized by the Prefecture in the county seat. However, these celebrations have not been mediatized and there was no reports found in the news regarding interethnic conflicts. In these years, a silent nation-building and the strengthening of the identity of their own ethnic community has happened in parallel on both sides.

After 1996, during the presidency of Emil Constantinescu, the Hungarians gained a restrained confidence in the Romanian national day. The new president did not use the rhetoric known from the time of communism, but welcomed the celebrating community with forward-looking thoughts of the country. Rule of law and Euro-Atlantic integration became a priority in his policy, which led the RMDSZ (Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, in Romanian: UDMR) to take part in the commemorations of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. In 1997, the Hungarian-Romanian inter-state relationship have substantially improved, and on the Romanian side a new way of public thinking emerged: the possibility of replacing the 1<sup>st</sup> of December as a national day with 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, the day of the victory of the 1989 “revolution” and the fall of Ceaușescu regime,. However, due to converse domestic politics in the following years, Hungarians became more pessimistic about the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, and their fears have been confirmed in 1999 when a major, highly mediated commemoration with torchlight parade and strongly nationalist discourse took place in Sfântu Gheorge / Sepsiszentgyörgy. As a result of this event, the Hungarians repeatedly asked for the equality of rights laid down in the Declaration of Alba Iulia in the columns of the Háromszék newspapers and not only there.

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<sup>48</sup> Háromszék, 1993. december 1.

At the beginning of the 2000s, ethnic tensions continued to increase in Szeklerland. Just to mention a few examples: in 2001 Csaba Sógor, senator of RMDSZ, called on the Hungarians to stay away from the large-scale local commemoration of 1<sup>st</sup> of December that was moved to the center of Miercurea Ciuc / Csíkszereda, county seat of Hargita, with a Hungarian majority of 85%. Further aggravating factors caused palpable interethnic tensions, such as the Hungarian Status Law<sup>49</sup>, the Har-Cov Report<sup>50</sup>, and the disproportionate expansion of the Orthodox Church in Szeklerland. Due to these factors, the Romanian-Hungarian interstate relations have also deteriorated as the joint celebration and clinking of glasses of Prime ministers Năstase and Medgyessy in Budapest on first of December 2002 triggered a great indignation, and thus Hungarians in Transylvania distanced themselves from the celebration. In 2003, graffiti condemning the 1<sup>st</sup> of December appeared in Alba Iulia on the day of the commemorations. Although in 2006 the RMDSZ took part in the celebrations on 1<sup>st</sup> of December in Sfântu Gheorghe, the Hungarian-Romanian interethnic relationship was bleeding from several wounds: in the Romanian Parliament the speech of the parliamentarian Dezső Becsek-Garda, of Hungarian origin, on the occasion of the national day was drowned out by the whistling of other MPs; Cluj-Napoca and the country were in uproar over the Babeş-Bolyai University's multilingual inscription scandal which resulted in the firing of two ethnic Hungarian professors .<sup>51</sup>

An interviewee reports as follows about the mutual participation of the Hungarian and Romanian political elite in each other's national commemorations in the county seat:

*“In the mid-2000s, we tried to get closer to each other and discussed with representatives of Romanian parties to participate reciprocally in each other's national commemoration.. It was not in use to do so before, so we asked them to attend the 15<sup>th</sup> of March commemoration (Hungarian national day). Accordingly, we participated in the commemorations of the 1st of December with the entire Hungarian leadership of the county. Ervin György as a prefect mentioned in his speech the events of 1918, the promises of the declaration and our*

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<sup>49</sup> In 2001 Hungary as a kin state passed ‘the Status Law’, which entitled ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries to a number of benefits, most of them available within Hungary, with the aim to protect the cultural identity of Hungarian minorities in the lands where they have lived for centuries.

<sup>50</sup> Named after the counties **H**argita and **C**ovasna, this report adopted by the Romanian parliament to take stock of the actions ‘against Romanians in these two counties during the December 1989 revolution.’ The report was discussed in the parliament within days of the autonomy proposal, timing that many Hungarians viewed as intentional. The RMDSZ considered those events were a consequence of the revolution in 1989, not ethnically motivated; they condemned the report.

<sup>51</sup> In November 2006, two lecturers at Babeş-Bolyai University placed Hungarian inscriptions on the wall of the university, protesting that the university's decision on multilingualism in 2005 had not been enforced. Subsequently, the university senate removed the two lecturers from the university's teaching community.

*expectations. So we tried such an approach, but on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March no representative of a Romanian party showed up, so it ended and no one from the Hungarian leadership has been involved in these events ever since.”<sup>52</sup>*

The commemoration of 2007 in the county seat was characterised by overloaded symbolism and by overheated nationalist speeches. In 2009 the extremist nationalist *Noua Dreaptă* (New Right Wing) organisation stood for the first time on the streets of Sepsiszentgyörgy, chanting harsh, insulting and provocative slogans addressed to the Hungarians living there. The members of *Noua Dreaptă* were wearing paramilitary clothing and symbols. In the meantime, a parallel commemoration was also emerging: on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2009 the extremist Hungarian youth organisation *Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom* (Sixty Four Counties Youth Movement) commemorated the day of formation of Székely (Szekler) Division in 1918. During the commemorations of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December between 2010 and 2014 the interethnic symbolic conflicts between Romanians and Hungarians have intensified, mutually provocative symbolic banner, hymn and flag scandals have multiplied.

The Civil Forum of Covasna, Harghita, and Mureş County, representing local Romanians, together with the local representatives of the Orthodox Church, and the tacit consent of the government office and law enforcement agencies, regularly invited members of *Noua Dreaptă* extremist organization to the national commemorations of Sfântu Gheorghe / Sepsiszentgyörgy. On this occasion, between 2009 and 2015, the organization participated four more times on the commemorations - according to their leaders, to celebrate with the local Romanian - but in fact, their motivation being to stimulate hatred and deteriorate the positive interethnic atmosphere and to intimidate the local Hungarians.<sup>53</sup> As a response, local Hungarians distanced themselves even further from commemorating the Romanian national day, and on several occasions held meetings where they recalled the promises of the Decision in Alba Iulia in 1918 day. The members of HVIM regularly commemorated the Székely Division in their centers in Kézdivásárhely, Sepsiszentgyörgy and Barót. In 2015 another special event with interethnic aspect was reported by local newspapers: the Romanian Directorate for Organised Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT) and the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) obtained a warrant for searching the house of the local HVIM organization's leader, accusing him of terrorism, and placing him in a pre-trial detention during the night before the national day. One month later the same happened to the Transylvanian president of

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with P.B.

<sup>53</sup> Ádám 2011b, 142-147.



the organization. The action was highly mediatized. The defendants suffered years of legal proceedings, were imprisoned for several months, and finally, on 4 July 2018, on the basis of numerous questionable accusations and in the absence of specific evidence, sentenced to five years in prison. Thus, the Hungarians of Szeklerland have been collectively stamped with terrorism by the national media, provoking the tensest moments concerning the commemorations of 1st of December between Romanians and Hungarians of Szeklerland.

#### 4. Conclusions

The incorporation of First of December into the Romanian Constitution as a national day, following the regime change, clearly determined the destiny and defined the significance of this commemorative day. The selection of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December by the central power as a national day has been accepted by a majority of Romanians and disputed and refused by most of Hungarians living in Romania, which indicates the disputability of the commemorative event from a historical, interethnic and political point of view. This very day which marks the unification of Transylvania with the then Kingdom of Romania and celebrates the creation of today's modern Romanian nation-state, gives a new approach to a long-standing, often conflicting, historical situation: Romanian historians see Transylvania as the cradle of the nation. In the field of competing Romanian and Hungarian nation-building, in Transylvania, consciously selecting the 1<sup>st</sup> of December as THE national day has created more favourable conditions for the Romanian party, thus increasing the interethnic atmosphere year after year. Thus the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, as a national day, not only reveals the problems of two conflicting nation-building models and identities, but also two conflicting country models. Miklós Bakk writes about the Decisions of Alba Iulia as follows: “*it became the distorted proof of centralist state-building of Bucharest and leached out the specificity of Transylvanian Romanian nation-building, which supported the ‘confederacy’ of ‘parallel societies’ in Transylvania.*”<sup>54</sup>

Romania's most important national day is a good example of how the central power, following the French homogeneous nation-state model, is trying to eliminate the diversity of Transylvania's characteristic feature for centuries, of which Transylvanian's Romanian culture is an integral part, moreover Germans and Jews in Romania had already fallen victim to this endeavour at the time of Ceausescu.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Bakk 2014, 19.

<sup>55</sup> After the First World War, 600.000 Germans lived in Romania (Romsics, 2010. 145-146.), by 2011, their number dropped to 36.000 (Pan– Pfeil – Videsott, 2018. 173).

By means of the anthropological method of participant observations, I have several times made the detailed documentation of the commemorations in Háromszék.<sup>56</sup> These analyses confirm the results of media representation research and the results of structured interviews as further evidence that the 1<sup>st</sup> of December celebrations became established gradually in the twentieth century in Szeklerland, and that following the regime change, an initially marginal day through conscious selection became the most important national commemoration day in Romania. Moreover, it became one of the most important tools of the identity building of Romanians living in Szeklerland and a priority area for creating interethnic tensions.

In 1999, on the occasion of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December a large-scale, highly-mediated commemorative event with strongly national discourses took place for the first time in Sepsiszentgyörgy. In the 2000s the repertoire of interethnic tensions around the feast was expanding, and in its amplitude became increasingly intense and absurd. Starting with flag and banner wars, besides the regular messaging and provocation of extremist groups, national media and public opinion were loud after the celebrations in 2015 from the absurd accusation of terrorism and the subsequent imprisonment. On the eve of 1<sup>st</sup> of December, in the year of its centenary, the central administration tried to revive this celebration against the Hungarians and with their enemy image. It achieved this with the powerful collaboration of scientific bodies, secret services, and the Orthodox Church.<sup>57</sup>

Although the Romanian political and intellectual elite have had the opportunity to develop the modern Romanian nation as a western liberal democracy, it nevertheless made use of well-established old nationalistic methods. Meanwhile, the Romanian-Hungarian dialogue remains deadlocked, and from the viewpoint of the Hungarian community it is not necessarily a positive message that 18 November 2020, with the law 256/2020 June 4, the anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, was declared the fourth official national day of Romania.

We can conclude that although by the mid-1990s the celebration of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December at national level starts to lose importance, commemorative events taking place in Szeklerland gain much emphasis among Romanians living in the cities with Hungarian majority. Hence the official commemorative events related to 1st of December in Szeklerland not only serve the remembrance and identity building of the local Romanian community, but with the help of political, ecclesiastic and academic elite, they build, form, and reformulate the collective

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<sup>56</sup> The commemorative events of 2008 and 2009 in Sepsiszentgyörgy are documented here: *Ádám 2011a*; The commemoration of 2014 in Sepsiszentgyörgy is documented here: *Idem 2016a*. 76-85.

<sup>57</sup> See also the ten-point statement of the Romanian Academy of Sciences on the occasion of the centenary: *Academia Română și Centenarul Marii Uniri*. See Hungarian translation of the text by Pászkan Zsolt: *Centenáriumi Románia – Nemzetépítés és zűrzavar. Kisebbségi Szemle*. 2018/1. 21-24.

memory in the present. Even further, these commemorations perform a historical memory about this charged and strained coexistence. Accordingly, they provide a good frame for a symbolic reoccupation of the space, whose primordial objective is to build up new strategic positions and allocate power. This results in a drastic reformulation of the local interethnic relations, strategy and power.

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