

The Discrimination of Romanians in Transylvania in the 16th Century

Considerations on the Concept of Nation

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ETHNIC-NATIONAL feelings of a modern essence directly manifested themselves in the history of Transylvania for the first time in the 16th century, while those regarding the Romanians became visible during the reign of Michael the Brave. All these events concerning denominations and ethnicities seemed lost in the deluge of other developments, both good and bad.

Michael fought against the Turks, discussed and caroused with the Hungarian noblemen, collaborated well with the Szeklers, put together a heterogeneous army of mercenaries, went to the Christian emperor, received a sign of acceptance as ruler from the sultan, etc. His policy regarding the Transylvanian Romanians might be insignificant in the eyes of some people. It is true that the prince ruled Transylvania with the means he had at hand and with the help of the institutions of the country. He did not effectively unify Transylvania with Wallachia and then with Moldavia to make one Romania, but rather in order to create a confederate monarchy of three countries under him and his successors. But the Romanian sense of his special enterprise did not escape the attention of his contemporaries and followers. He was a Romanian Orthodox prince, coming from a country where the political power was Romanian, he behaved like a prince and he really was a prince in Transylvania. It seemed at times that he also tended to form a union or seek a harmonization with the rules of Wallachia. But something like this had never been seen in Transylvania since its occupation by the Kingdom of Hungary. The Voivode was always regarded as a “foreigner” and as someone of a different “law,” but a “foreigner” of the same ancestry as the Wallachian masses of the country, a “Wallachian” who had had the boldness and the power to defeat the armies of Cardinal Andrew Báthory and to establish “the kingly seat” of the three countries in Transylvania. As long as he fought against the Turks and won brilliant victories, protecting Transylvania as well, Michael was admired and praised by the Transylvanian estates in a humanistic manner, but after he crossed the mountains, the attitude of these officials changed radically. The humanist chronicler István Szamosközi or Zamosius could not understand or accept the reign of a Romanian prince in Transylvania, of one belonging to the same ethnic group as the despised Wallachians, the serfs, the traitors, and the second-class inhabitants. After October 1599, Michael is referred to by this scholar as “the Wallachian” and “the

Tyrant,” while the Romanian population as a whole is considered “lazy,” “dirty” and inclined towards “robberies” and “ravages.” The same chronicler observes the Romanians’ adherence to Michael the Brave’s policies and to the Romanian peasants’ rebellion against noblemen after the entry of the “The Wallachian’s” armies into the intra-Carpathian area. He ascribes all this to ethnic solidarity: “Indeed, at the news of the unfortunate struggle [at Șelimbăr on 28^t October 1599], which spread very rapidly throughout the country, the nation of the Romanians, living in each of the villages and the hamlets of Transylvania, plotting everywhere, joined the people coming [from Wallachia] and, both together and separately, plundered far and wide across the country. As they were encouraged by the confidence that they have a prince from their own kin [...], they occupied the roads and killed everywhere [...]. Now, being encouraged in their madness by the Romanian prince and increasing in boldness due to the war [...], they attacked on this occasion with more cruelty than earlier, when the country was at peace. Proven guilty in court for some bad deeds, they were punished with the heaviest of punishments. There were gallows, stocks, axes, hooks, ropes everywhere and all chastisement places were mostly full of Romanians.”¹ Similar views were expressed by the chroniclers Ambrus Somogyi (Ambrosius Simigianus) and Georg Krauss, the anonymous chronicler from Prejmer, and others. Somogyi points out that the Romanians, who caught and robbed the Hungarians, were rebelling, and Krauss spoke of “the dirty, thieving, murdering Romanians who were rising in rebellion at that time because the Tyrant belonged to their nation, that is, he was Romanian.” Ferenc Mikó says that the Hungarian noblemen were “terrified of the Romanian rule” of Michael the Brave.²

Many sources of the time consider the disorders of the years 1599-1601 a result of the war, of the abuses of the foreign armies, of the peasants’ hatred against the noblemen or even of an inclination towards violence on the part of the Romanians. Fewer such sources note that the Romanians were severely discriminated against, that they were “the Hungarians’ serfs,” despised and deprived of their assets. Some testimonies, such as those mentioned above, ascribe the disturbances of those years to Michael’s Romanian rule and even to a “plot” woven beforehand by the prince, by the Romanians in Transylvania and the ones in Wallachia. The peasants’ upheaval is considered a national uprising of all Romanians (*natio Valachorum*) against the Hungarians. The pair of social terms “peasants-noblemen” is replaced by the ethnic names “Romanians-Hungarians.”

The considerations with an ethnic substrate do not cease. The aforementioned Ferenc Mikó says that Mozes Székely, dealing with the captains of the Hungarian army in the Land of Bârsa, “urged them, as Hungarians, to be good towards their homeland and nation and not to endure such a tyrant, [Michael the Brave], not to suffer the wicked Wallachians as rulers over this noble nation.”³ The collective imaginary distorts realities, presenting them, perhaps under the power of fear, only in dark colours. Romanians are negatively characterized both as a nation and individually. Michael is regarded as a leader of modest origin, and his wife, Princess Stanca (who became the master of the domain of Făgăraș), is considered an old woman (*vetula*), forced to have two “companions” by her side. Theodosius Rudeanu, the chancellor and scholar, one of the greatest boyars in the country, is described as “an old man, mischievous with the Hungarians, who urged Michael to hurt the Hungarians.” A German chronicler says about the governor Mihalcea that

“he was the worst of all the Romanians from Wallachia and worthy of never being mentioned without a curse.” The Romanians who had served Michael the Brave and came to be captured by the opposing camp were treated cruelly. Baba Novac, born in the Timoc Valley and a captain of Prince Michael, was burned alive in Cluj, in February 1601. The noble Daniel of Zlati, as a punishment for having passed with his men, at the beginning of the battle of Șelimbăr (1599), from Cardinal Andrew Báthory’s army to Michael’s side, after faithfully serving the voivode had an equally sad fate: captured almost two years after the victory of the Romanians at Șelimbăr, with his hands bound behind his back, he was tied to the tail of a horse—says Szamosközi—and was dragged naked behind the running beast, then cut into four pieces and displayed ostentatiously to the crowd sight in four distinct places, ‘to spread horror among the Romanians’.⁴

The Szeklers are also blamed in national terms for joining Michael the Brave. Ferenc Mikó rebukes all the Szeklers, “who were glad to fight, to live and to die with the voivode, against the sons and gentlemen of their country.” In September 1600, the Saxons of Sibiu wrote to the Szeklers to leave Michael, for he would seek to overthrow the Hungarian noblemen, the Szeklers and the Saxons, “filling this beautiful land with Romanians,” a land which had previously “nourished” the sons of the recognized nations. One may identify an effort to overthrow the Romanian rule, an effort observed from the other perspective, as well: “The Hungarians [...] on one side, swore [faith] to Michael the Brave and, on the other hand, on all sides, they worked in all ways, hoping that they would save themselves, not to have a Romanian prince such as they had been given” (Internal Chronicle of Wallachia).⁵ Szamosközi sees in the troubles at Huedin, on a market day in August 1600, a clash between the Romanians and the Hungarians, and presents the Romanians as “mocking the Hungarians that they are so stupid that a Romanian with a bat could chase and scatter such a crowd.”⁶ Ethnic disputes become commonplace, and the ethnic content of some conflicts is often augmented by the collective imaginary. National identities become strengthened through alterity, through a comparison with the other, through action. For the first time, the idea of state acquires in Transylvania a Romanian meaning, not only because the prince was Romanian, just like some of his men, promoted to important positions, not only due to the measures taken in favour of the Romanians or through the use of the Romanian language by the officials, but also because the old masters of Transylvania are aware of this, they fear it and act against it. The estates see a threat in the “Romanian kingdom” about to emerge under Michael the Brave. For some members of the Hungarian elite, the conquest of Transylvania by Michael had been planned in advance, with the help of the local Romanians: “Michael, even before his arrival here, has incited all the poor Romanians in Transylvania, through the mysterious work of his priests who are called monks.”⁷ In several places, there emerges the idea of a close collaboration between the Romanians living south of the Carpathians and those from Transylvania, in order to establish a Romanian realm, to enact a plot against the recognized nations, and this “collaboration” starts before Michael and his troops crossed the mountains. All Romanians are considered potential collaborators of “the Wallachian,” and the accused were also punished. As early as September 1600, when Michael seemed lost, the estates commanded the killing of any Romanian who would respond to the advice to cooperate with the voivode. After his death (which took place in August

1601), the authorities released the news that the Wallachian “Tyrant” had ordered the killing of the Hungarian priests and decided, on this “basis,” that the “Romanian priests from the other two Romanian countries should never be allowed in, and all [Romanians] should be outlawed all over the country.” The Diet of January 1601 (when Michael was wandering in search of the Emperor) severely punished the [Romanian] priests in Transylvania with additional charges and banished from the country those responsible for rebellion and arson. Even the *Approbatæ Constitutiones* of 1653, which mitigated some of the measures taken against the Romanians and the Romanian Countries by the Diets of 1600-1601, stipulate that “Wallachian priests,” suspected of various evil deeds, may be seized and imprisoned by officials.⁸ The delegates to the same Diet of January 1601 demanded that the Emperor, as he had done before (especially after the episode of 1551-1556), would govern the country only with the help of Hungarian counsellors and Hungarian officials, that the country’s army should be Hungarian, and above all, that the prince should be chosen by the Diet only from among the Hungarian nation.⁹ Michael, “the Wallachian,” is accused of having ruined the country, of course, the legal country, i.e. the accepted nations and denominations. After the death of the voivode, the indictments against him and the Romanians grew in number, and the memory of the Romanian prince’s rule remained for decades in documents and papers: he was deemed guilty of having granted estates, fortresses, castles and manors to his Romanians, of having given them official positions, of having built a “schismatic church” in Alba-Iulia, which, of course, had to be demolished (as was indeed the case). The same Szamosközi even thought of the root-killing of all the Romanians, something—he says—that King Sigismund of Luxembourg (1387-1437) would have done in 1429.

The discrimination:

1. After the Fourth Crusade (after 1204): the schismatics could be assimilated to the heretics and therefore, according to the canons, “left to robbery and depredation” (*dati fuerint in direptionem et praedam*), because their error was no longer a formal one (the break with Rome), but one of substance (of dogma), by the non-acceptance of *Filioque*.

2. The 14th century: the constant battle against “pagans, heretics and schismatics” inside and outside the Kingdom of Hungary.

3. The 16th century: the confessional discrimination criteria begin to be duplicated by some ethnic groups.

The Situation in the 16th Century

AT THE end of the 15th century, the national component of the estate system in Transylvania is increasing and, gradually, throughout the early modern age, it comes to the forefront. During the reign of King Matthias Corvinus, in 1463, it seems that for the first time, instead of the concept of state (*status*), that of nation (*natio*) was used, in the form of *universitas trium nationum Transylvanicarum, Nobilium videlicet, Siculorum atque Saxonum*.¹⁰ The fact becomes habitual after 1506, when the country’s gathering in Sighișoara takes important decisions in the name of *tres nationes, Nobiles*

videlicet, Siculi et Saxones.¹¹ In 1541, Transylvania, together with the western territories, is detached from Hungary (occupied by Ottomans and Austrians) and transformed into an autonomous principality under Ottoman suzerainty. At this time, the new humanist terminology of the Transylvanian estates becomes established for a long period of time. In the decisions of the country's assemblies (Diets) held between 1542 and 1548 in Turda and Cluj, the noblemen, the Szeklers and the Saxons are called "master citizens" or rightful inhabitants (*domini regnicolae*) of the three nations of the country of Transylvania (*trium nationum Regni Transilvaniae*).

Hence, since the 16th century, the Transylvanian estate regime is, in fact and by right, the regime of the three nations. The term has a social-political meaning, an ethnic, and a territorial one.

A. The social-political meaning comes from their character of ruling elite of the country. In other words, the Transylvanian nations were the holders of power, enacted this power, made decisions, approved laws, applied them, and punished the offenders. The representatives of the three nations would attend, between 1540 and 1690, 430 Diets (on average, nearly three per year), and they would also hold all the central and local high offices.

B. Ethnicity was not visible from the beginning in the case of the nobility. At first, all those who had military capabilities and owned land (and, as a rule, had subjects), regardless of ethnicity and confession, were considered noblemen. Thus, *nobilis Hungarus* first meant noble of the Kingdom of Hungary and, after the 15th century, more and more often, Hungarian noble in ethnic terms. This evolution was favoured by the fact that most of the nobility was or felt ethnically Hungarian. Over time, the true noblemen of Transylvania had to be or become Hungarian and Catholic. Thus, from the 16th century, *natio Nobilium* becomes synonymous with *natio Hungarica*. The nations of the Szeklers and the Saxons had from the beginning a deep ethnic character as well, because they were of different origins, they spoke distinct languages and had different traditions. The three nations, under the authority of the prince, would lead the country with equal powers—at least theoretically—(the Diet vote of the noblemen, the Szeklers and the Saxons was equivalent), although in practice the power and influence of the nobility or the Hungarians were greater. A Diet of 1551 asked Ferdinand of Habsburg that the country's voivode be necessarily *ex natione Hungarica*, and, after 1600—namely, after Transylvania came to be ruled, in the name of the Austrian emperor, by a Romanian prince—the Diet asked the Emperor once more to govern the country only with governors of Hungarian descent, to admit only Hungarians in the province's militia, to give local positions only to Transylvanian Hungarians and aristocrats (Saxons) and to allow the Diet to choose the prince only from among the Hungarian nation.¹² In fact, all the princes elected by the Diet, without interference or outer pressures, throughout the era of the Principality (1541-1691), were great noblemen of Hungarian ethnicity.

C. The estates or nations of Transylvania also had a territorial character: the noblemen or Hungarians lived and were masters in the counties (later called "the Hungarian land"), the Szeklers in their seats, called "The Szekler Land" (*Terra Siculorum, Székelyföld*), and the Saxons on "The Royal Land," also called *Fundus Regius* or even "The Saxon Land." The Romanians, present almost everywhere (except for the urban environment) had no "land" or territory officially declared as theirs, since they were not among the estates or

nations. Therefore, three political nations with an ethnic substrate were ruling over Transylvania and all three of them were still Catholic at the beginning of the 16th century.

This complex picture is complicated even more by the appearance and the proliferation of the Reformation. The causes of this major change in the belief of the Transylvanian nations are the general European ones, with some particular features: the conflict of the Transylvanian Saxons (organized in an ancient prepositure in Sibiu and then in two deaconries, in Sibiu and Braşov) with the Bishopric of Transylvania at Alba Iulia and with the primate of the Archbishopric of Hungary at Esztergom (Strigonium, Gran); the appointment of prelates with little vocation, without the necessary qualities, eager for income, some of them even underage, at the helm of the Catholic bishoprics of Alba Iulia and Oradea; the internal battles for mastery over Hungary and Transylvania after 1526, the year of King Louis II's death at Mohacs; the lack of trust in the clergy; *scandala in ecclesia Dei*. The Transylvanian estates were eager to emancipate themselves not only from the centralized royal authority, but also from that of the Church, dominated by the powerful Catholic hierarchy. The spread of the ideas of the Reformation was followed by harsh measures from the state and the Catholic Church (the extirpation and burning of "heretics" between 1525 and 1545, the expulsion and punishment of the messengers of new ideas, the use of the Habsburg military force, etc.). The answer was to lay the foundations of a principality separated from Hungary, and the local armed struggle, carried out with the military support of the extra-Carpathian Romanians and of the Ottoman sultans.

The rapid success of the Reformation in Transylvania also occurred because of its acceptance by two estates or nations—the Saxons and the nobility—and even by Prince John Sigismund, who went throughout his life through four Christian denominations: Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism. The Saxons, who had close ties with Germany and tense relations with the Catholic hierarchy, had been the first to embrace the Lutheran Reformation, thanks in particular to learned pastors such as Johannes Honterus and Valentine Wagner. The centre of Lutheranism was Sibiu. In parallel with the Saxons, the nobility, especially the one in Banat and in the Western Parts, also passed to Lutheranism and organized its own hierarchy, distinct from that of the Saxons. Soon, however, Calvinism spread widely across Transylvania, especially among the Lutheran nobility and the Hungarian population. Its centre was in Cluj. In a short time, almost all the nobility of the principality (the noble nation) had become Calvinist. The local Germans Gaspar Heltai and Francis David (both formerly Lutherans) played an important role in the spread of Calvinism and the organization of the Calvinist Church in Transylvania. The latter, Francis David, after leading the Calvinist Church, passed to Unitarianism (anti-trinitarianism), just like the prince of the country, and organized the new Unitarian Church. The Unitarian ideas, more radical, found fewer followers, especially among the poorer strata of the Cluj and Turda population. Cluj is the world centre of Anti-Trinitarianism. Between 1542 and 1572, the new denominations are thoroughly organized and become officially recognized by the Transylvanian Diets. In 1564, "the Cluj religion" (Calvinism) and the older "Sibiu religion" (Lutheranism) are declared by the Diet to be "free or accepted religions." In 1572, the Diet recognizes the new Unitarian religion, but prohibits in the future any other religious innovations. The Reformation also slightly touched the Szeklers, but they remained largely Catholic.

Thus, beginning with the 16th century, the political-religious system of Transylvania was based on the three recognized nations (Hungarians, Szeklers, and Saxons) and four “accepted religions” (Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Unitarian). The acceptance of the new denominations born due to the Reformation was, of course, a result of the evolution of the idea of freedom at the end of the Middle Ages. However, it was not achieved without conflicts and rivalries, with the old Catholic Church and even among the new confessions. In 1556, the old and important Catholic bishoprics of Alba Iulia and Oradea were dissolved and expropriated, and the Catholic clergy came to be persecuted. In most towns and boroughs, the activity of Catholic priests was forbidden. In essence, however, the transition to the Reformation in Transylvania, despite some unrest,¹³ was done without the bloody armed conflicts encountered in other parts of Europe. This system, through which the new denominations were relatively easily given the right to manifest themselves legally and coexist, has been called the “tolerance system.” It rightfully raised to a certain extent the admiration of contemporaries and, above all, of historians from more recent times.

Nevertheless, this freedom of the three nations and four denominations was exclusive, because it left behind many other inhabitants of the country, among whom Romanians, Jews, Armenians or Gypsies, with adjacent religions and confessions. In 16th century-Transylvania, an interesting and quite simple thing happened: the old Catholic masters, grouped into three estates or nations, passed almost entirely to the Protestant denominations which they themselves made official, and they recognized them. It would have been strange for this not to happen, since they were the same people, transformed from Catholics into Protestants. They led the country before the Reformation, and they would continue to lead it. The most serious problem was that of the Romanians—the most numerous inhabitants of the country—and of their Eastern confession, because these Romanians and their religion were eliminated from the “constitutional system” of Transylvania for centuries, and the establishment of the principality after the first half the 16th century only strengthened this exclusion, precisely when there was a chance of renewal in this area as well.

Since the Middle Ages, the Romanians had been relegated to an inferior position, as they were “schismatics,” enslaved by the new masters, removed from official positions and locally isolated. Their noble elite—the one officially recognized and affirmed by special military merit—was largely lost in the mass of the Hungarian nobility and gradually changed its ethnic-confessional status. Only the Făgăraș elite remained, and the nobility of Hațeg-Hunedoara, Banat, Beiuș, Chioar, Maramureș and from several other places (former royal estates). Still, the great mass of the Romanians was made up of Orthodox peasant serfs, so that the term Romanian became synonymous with “bondsmen” and “schismatic.” The Calvinist Principality strengthened the Hungarian political structures of Transylvania. The Calvinist princely power seemed inclined to encourage at one point the Romanian nobility and the Romanian clergy to embrace the Reformation, but when these components of the Romanian elite tried to establish thus an estate (a privileged group), the whole project collapsed. Some Romanians, however, asserted themselves through individual exceptional careers (secular and ecclesiastical), but within the Catholic or Protestant nobility. The conversion of the Romanians as a distinct group,

en masse, to Lutheranism and especially to Calvinism, did not occur, for many reasons. First of all, the Reformation was designed for Catholics, not for the Orthodox, for whom the pope's authority, the indulgences, the exaggerated pomposity, the celibacy of priests, etc. meant nothing. Secondly, the extreme simplification of the dogma and ceremonial, the attack on tradition, on saints, on icons, on the cult of the dead, on the candles, etc. meant for the Romanian peasants, simple and ignorant, the breaking of the old foundations of their faith. Thirdly, the quasi-complete illiteracy of the Romanians, their precarious material condition, their miserable life as serfs, made them less fit to understand the elevated theological disputes and the rationalization of the faith proposed by the Protestants. Fourthly, there were also signals of resistance from the Romanian rulers and clergy in Wallachia and Moldavia (to whom the churches of the Transylvanian Romanians were subordinated since the 14th century). A temporal Calvinist hierarchy in Transylvania (1566-1582) was created for the Romanians, but was quickly suppressed as a result of the inadequacy of the masses and of the Counterreformation supported by the princes of the Báthory family, who after 1571 doubled the Calvinist hierarchy with an Orthodox one. Thus, thanks to the Counterreformation and to the churches from the south and east of the Carpathians, the hierarchical organization of the Orthodox Romanians in Transylvania was perfected in the form of a metropolitan see based in Alba Iulia. Therefore, while the churches of the official nations are declared "accepted," i.e., the holders of power in society, the church of the Romanians is eventually allowed to exist and operate, but without access to state power.

However, in some aspects, the influence of the Reformation was beneficial for the Romanians, because it hastened the transition to the use of the Romanian language in church and culture and stimulated the printing of Romanian (or Slavonic) religious books, either for the support of Protestant ideas, or in order to combat them and to strengthen Orthodoxy. A great cultural centre in this respect was Braşov, where the largest amount of printed material in Romanian was issued and where the unification of the literary language began. The financial supporters of the printing effort of the 16th century were both the Lutheran Saxons from the fortress of Braşov, the Calvinist rulers, the Romanians from "the Romanian city" of Şchei (lying next to the fortress of Braşov) and the Romanian princes from the south and east of the Carpathians. Other major cultural centres of the Transylvanian Reformation were Sibiu (especially for the Saxons) and Cluj (for the Hungarians and the Saxons), where numerous books were written and printed in German and Hungarian.

At the same time, the transition from the medieval to the modern nations gradually took place. The Transylvanian nations strengthened their ethnic, confessional and territorial components, relying on an ensemble of distinct elements, some of them typical medieval, others foreshadowing the modern world. The Hungarians are Calvinists and live in the counties, the Szeklers are Catholic and live in the Szekler Land, while the Saxons are Lutherans, live mostly in the Royal Land and are proud to be members of what was called *Universitas Saxonum*. The Romanians—Orthodox and spread throughout the country—are not officially recognized as a political nation, but are sometimes referred to like this in an ethnic sense. Officially, in Transylvania, Romanians have no right to the name of "nation," because they are denied access to the exercise of power, but they

also begin to be given the name of nation, in an ethnic sense, in certain writings. For example, the humanist Nicolaus Olahus (1593-1568) speaks of the many nations (a total of 13) that make up Hungary, among whom he also mentions the Romanians. About his native land, Transylvania, the same Olahus writes: “There are four different nations in it, of different origin—Hungarians, Szeklers, Saxons, and Romanians. The Hungarians and the Szeklers use the same language, while the Szeklers have certain words belonging to their own people [...]. The Saxons are, as they say, some colonies of Saxons from Germany [...]; what would plead for the truth [of this view] is the likeness between the languages of the two peoples. Traditionally, it is said that the Romanians are Roman colonists. The proof of this is that they have much in common with the language of the Romans, whose coins there are very many in these places; they are undoubtedly important testimonies of ancient Roman domination here”¹⁴. Regarding the confession of the Romanians, the humanist notes that they “are Christians, but that, following the Greeks in the procession of the Holy Spirit, they differ from our [Catholic] Church also on certain less important points.”¹⁵ Olahus, a humanist and Catholic prelate of Romanian origin, born in Transylvania, knew very well which the three official political nations in his country were, established on the basis of medieval privileges, but he preferred, as a Renaissance scholar, to speak of nations as ethnic, modern groups. He defined nations by origin, language and confession, not by privilege. For him, Romanians are, therefore, a nation among others, and even more prestigious, because they are descended from the Romans, so admired by the humanists. Olahus does not even call the Romanians “schismatics,” as was the rule, but “Christians.” The Italian Giovanandrea Gromo (1518-after 1567), the commander of Prince John Sigismund’s guard, in his “Description of Transylvania,” dedicated to Cosimo de Medici, Duke of Florence, also does not speak of the Transylvanian nations only in an ethnic sense. He says that there are five nations in the country, namely Hungarian, Saxon, Romanian, Polish and Gypsy, all of them characterized by their language, origin, traditions, faith, way of life, inhabited territory, etc. The Szeklers are included in the Hungarian nation because they speak the same language as the Hungarians, while the Romanians are presented as descendants of the Romans, with a language similar to Latin, and of Orthodox faith.¹⁶

True connoisseurs, i.e. the members of Transylvania’s privileged nations, do not make such “mistakes” because they use the term of nation dominantly in its political sense. The Saxon Georg Reicherstorffer says that Transylvania is inhabited by three nations, Saxons, Szeklers and Hungarians; the Romanians are added at last without the qualificative of nation, but with the observation that they are spread throughout the country; instead, the Romanians in Wallachia, masters of the lands south of the Carpathians, are called a nation.¹⁷ Another humanist (Croatian-Hungarian), Antonius Verancius or Verancsics (1504-1573), wrote about the inhabitants of Transylvania and about the Romanians: the country “is inhabited by three nations, the Szeklers, the Hungarians, the Saxons; I would however add the Romanians, who, although they are easily as numerous [as the others], still have no freedom, no nobility, no rights of their own, apart from a small number living in the Hațeg district, where Decebalus’ capital is believed to have been, and who, in the time of John Hunyadi, a native of those parts, acquired nobility, because they had always relentlessly taken part in the battles against the Turks. The others [Romanians]

are all common men, serfs of the Hungarians and without settlements of their own, spread all over the country” and living “a wretched life.”

The inferior status of the Romanians is increasingly reflected in the Diet (legislative) decisions of Transylvania taken by the three nations. Some examples of such decisions, taken between 1542 and 1555, are edifying: a Hungarian (*Hungarus*) accused of robbery can defend himself through the oath of the village judge and three honest men, but the Romanian (*Valachus*) needs the oath of the village ruler, of four Romanians and three Hungarian “Christians” (1542); a Romanian cannot denounce a Hungarian or a Saxon, but a Hungarian or a Saxon may denounce a Romanian (1552); a Hungarian peasant cannot be accused with only three witnesses, but only with seven trustworthy men and can be punished only afterwards, but a Romanian is punished if accused by three trustworthy people (1554); the peasant and “Christian” (Catholic) man can be taken (jailed) by the oath of seven “Christians” and a Romanian by the oath of three “Christians” or seven Romanians.¹⁸ Therefore, in Transylvania even justice was applied in a discriminatory fashion, on the basis of political and ethno-confessional criteria, depending on whether the person belonged or not to the group of official nations and accepted “religions.”

There were also attempts to balance the situation, because the Romanians represented the great mass of the population and could be a major factor of instability. The first such attempt after the Reformation was initiated by the Báthory princes (especially Stephen Báthory and Christopher Báthory), starting with 1571. They were Catholics, followers of the Counterreformation and, willing to strike at the Protestants, recognized some old orders of the clergy and of the Romanian Church (in danger of Calvinisation).¹⁹ The second major attempt was made by the Romanian prince Michael the Brave (holding by force the power in Transylvania, in the name of Emperor Rudolf II), in the years 1599-1601, when he offered high public positions to the Romanians, forced the Diet to recognize certain rights of the Romanian peasants and priests, and asked the Habsburg emperor through a petition to include Orthodoxy among the “accepted religions” (alongside Catholicism and Lutheranism).²⁰ Finally, the third attempt to “elevate” the Romanians (and the last before the similar attempts made by the Austrians) took place at the end of the reign of Prince Gabriel Bethlen (1613-1629), when the Ecumenical Patriarch Cyril Lukaris was requested to give his opinion about the “homogenization” of the country and about attracting the Romanians to Calvinism. Among the reasons why it was believed in 1629 that the Transylvanian Romanians could not become Calvinists was the “connection of blood and feelings” between the Transylvanian Romanians and the inhabitants of Wallachia and Moldavia, and the possibility of an interference in Transylvania of the princes from the neighboring Romanian countries, “if not with weapons, at least with mysterious inducements.”²¹ These attempts, some of them completely unrealistic, did not succeed, but they showed how acute the question of the discrimination of Romanians in Transylvania actually was.

The political and religious system of the Principality of Transylvania, i.e., the exercise of power by the official nations and the accepted confessions of the country, gave its distinct personality to an era and to a world. It was surprising how, under the notion of “tolerance,” issues with relatively different meanings could be concealed. From the point of view of the estates (political nations), the Transylvanian society was “tolerant” because

it allowed the peaceful coexistence and even the prevalence, alongside the old Catholics, of the members of the denominations born of the Reformation. For the Orthodox Romanians, however, the same “tolerance” meant being kept in a state of inferiority, of forced acceptance, “as long as the goodwill of the citizens lasts” (*usque ad beneplacitum regnicolarum*). That is why the system of political nations and “accepted religions” in Transylvania in the 16th century (and in the following centuries) was a *sui generis* reality, surprisingly modern (by accepting the other, through equality between different power holders) and at the same time medieval (by perpetuating and legislating discrimination and privilege). The society that was established in Transylvania after the victory of the Reformation was meant to last for several centuries, but it carried from the beginning the seeds of its own disintegration, always augmented by modern national, liberal and democratic ideologies. Nevertheless, the nations and denominations of old Transylvania remain a fascinating experience, worthy of study and of a thorough examination.



Notes

1. Ștefan Pascu, *Mișcări țărănești prilejuite de intrarea lui Mihai Viteazul în Transilvania*, in “Studii și materiale de istorie medie,” vol. I, 1956, p. 132.
2. Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Identity and Alterity in Transylvania during the Confrontations of 1599-1601*, in “Transylvanian Review,” IV, 1995, no. 4, p. 173.
3. *Ibidem*.
4. I. I. Russu, *Daniel din Zlaști. Un aderent hunedorean al lui Mihai Viteazul*, in “Apulum,” vol. XIV, 1976, pp. 161-172.
5. Ioan-A. Pop, *Solidaritatea românească medievală: Unirea înfăptuită sub Mihai Viteazul*, in “Academia Română. Memoriile Secției de Științe Istorice,” series IV, tome XV, 1990, p. 112.
6. I. Crăciun, *Cronicarul Szamosközy și însemnările lui privitoare la români. 1566-1608*, Cluj, 1928, p. 134.
7. Szamosközy István, *Történeti Maradványai*, p. 344.
8. Liviu Marcu (ed.), *Constituțiile aprobate ale Transilvaniei (1653)*, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, p. 232.
9. David Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum. Din istoria formării națiunii române*, Bucharest, 1984, p. 113.
10. Hurmuzaki-Densusianu, *Documente privitoare la istoria românilor*, vol. II, part two, pp. 146-148.
11. See David Prodan, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-101.
12. *Monumenta Comititalia Regni Transsylvaniae*, vol. V, Budapest, 1879, pp. 77-78, 80-82.
13. Francisc Pall, *Frământări sociale și religioase în orașul Cluj în jurul anului 1570*, in “Anuarul Institutului de istorie din Cluj,” vol. V, 1962, pp. 7-34.
14. Nicolaus Olahus, *Hungaria et Atila sive de originibus gentis regni Hungariae...*, ed. F. Kollarius, Vienna, 1763, p. 61.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 59. For Nicolaus Olahus, with texts excerpted from his work, see Maria Holban, *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. I, Bucharest, 1968, pp. 484-500.
16. Maria Holban et al., *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. II, Bucharest, 1970, pp. 333-338. The mention of the Poles as a distinct nation in Transylvania is not justified,

except for the fact that the prince's mother, Isabella, had been Polish and had come with retainers from her country.

17. *Chorographia Transylvaniae, quae Dacia olim appellata...*, Viennae, 1550, f. 5; Maria Holban, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 208-210; D. Prodan, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
18. Maria Holban et al., *op. cit.*, II, p. 410-411. Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Națiunea română medievală. Solidarități etnice românești în secolele XIII-XVI*, Bucharest, 1998, p. 126.
19. Hurmuzaki-Densușianu, *op. cit.*, II/5, pp. 206-207, 227; Ioan Lupaș, *Documente istorice transilvane*, vol. I, Cluj, 1940, p. 395; Ioan-A. Pop, *Națiunea română medievală...*, pp. 61-62.
20. Avram and Susana Andea, *Principatul Transilvaniei sub suzeranitate otomană (1541-1691)*, in "Istoria României. Transilvania" (coord. A. Drăgoescu), vol. I, Cluj-Napoca, 1997, pp. 544-646.
21. Ioan-A. Pop, *Națiunea română medievală...*, p. 30.

Abstract

The Discrimination against the Romanians in Transylvania in the 16th Century: Considerations on the Concept of Nation

This study deals with the way in which the people living in the Principality of Transylvania cohabitated in the 16th century, when, after the victory of the Protestant Reformation, the old bipolar confessional configuration (with a majority of Orthodox Romanians and some privileged Catholic groups) drastically changed through the rapid transformation of the Catholics into Lutherans (Saxons), Calvinists (Hungarians) and Unitarians/Antitrinitarians (Hungarian and Szekler strata). Thus, through some decisions of the Diet, the regime of the "three nations and four religions" (Catholicism remains legally recognized, but it is seriously in the minority) is imposed in the country, at the level of the elites. The system of political nations and "accepted" (acknowledged, recognized) operating in Transylvania in the 16th century (and in the centuries that followed), was a *sui generis* reality, surprisingly modern (through the acceptance of the other, through the equality between different power holders) and at the same time medieval (through the perpetuation and the enactment of discrimination, of privileges). The Romanians (i.e. about two-thirds of the country's population) and their Orthodox Christian confession remained outside official recognition, being still "tolerated," namely, allowed to exist as secondary residents, "as long as the goodwill of the princes and citizens would last" (*usque ad beneplacitum principum et regnicolarum*). The society shaped in Transylvania by the victory of the Reformation was meant to last for several centuries, but it carried within, from the very beginning, the germs of disintegration, always augmented by modern national, liberal and democratic ideologies. Nevertheless, the nations and denominations of old Transylvania remain a fascinating experience, worthy of study and of thorough research.

Keywords

ethnic and religious discrimination, 16th century Transylvania, Romanians, system of political nations, "accepted" religions