



Re-territorialization of Space in South Slovakia – Visual Practices of Village Signs¹

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ABSTRACT This article examines a recent example of symbolic geography and attempts to analyse the practice of re-territorialization of space by stressing the cultural and national character of particular settlements. The author shows that with expanding business, work and study opportunities globalisation may be causing the disappearance of borders, but on the other hand it can cause the emergence of renewed symbolic borders based on cultural and national identity. The article is based on a limited research project in a number of south Slovakian villages containing substantial ethnic Hungarian populations, focusing on village signs written in the runic *székely* script, which is identified by the author as a national symbol transported from Transylvania, and which recently became an ideal representation of authentic Hungarian culture. The signs link the towns with the memory of Greater Hungary, manifest the cultural and historical supremacy of Hungarians living in the area, and signify the territory, or in other words reterritorialize the space. The re-territorialization process creates a mental map that unites the Hungarian nation and shows that meaning and territory are strongly bounded.

KEYWORDS Symbolic geography, space, de-territorialization, re-territorialization, national identity, cultural identity, performativity, visual representation

Introduction

Brubaker (1996) sees nationhood as a practical category, an institutionalized form and contingent event. He examines the nation as a category of practice not as a category of analysis (1996:7). Inspired by Brubaker, I examine the manifestation of nationalism in the circles of the Hungarian national minority in south Slovakian villages from a cultural sociological perspective by focusing on the visual side of nationalistic performance. I explore the appearance of visual objects as a category of national identity that is a practical usage with a clear connection to the cultural perception of national symbols. Everyday experience organizes discourse and challenges political action, but it has a deep cultural and historical dimension that appears visually. I argue that national identity is seen as a map; an imagined mental map that tries to push itself onto the map of political borders. One of the most recent and visible manifestations of this struggle is the case of village signs written in *székely* writing in south Slovakian villages. The village signs are objects that are visible for everyone who travels

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between these villages and are known by the villagers themselves. I examine how Hungarian unification and the symbolic geography of the Kingdom of Hungary are performed, and analyze the meanings of visual representations and objects in this process. I point to the relations between nation and space (territory), national symbols (imagined Transylvania) and performance of national identity through *székely* writing. The representations of the nation, in this case the *székely* signs, need to be transformed to individuals.

Excursion to some Hungarian villages in South Slovakia

By taking road 572 and then following road 510 from Bratislava in a south-west direction, one goes through villages that have been founded and inhabited by various nationalities. The names of the former German villages *Pruck* (later known as *Bruk*, and from 1974 *Most pri Bratislave* and *Hidas* in Hungarian – though my Hungarian grandmother still calls it *Brück*) and *Eberhard* (now called *Malinovo* and *Éberhárd* in Hungarian) point to the German origin of these two villages. Continuing down the road to Tomášov (in Hungarian *Fél*) and Janíky (*Jányok* in Hungarian) and others, we see the performance of Hungarian history in the villages. Recently in this region there have been significant housing investments and an influx of new residents, influencing the “nationality” of these villages. The villages are becoming satellite settlements where the newcomers are mostly of Slovak nationality. Starting with *Malinovo – Éberhárd* and continuing with other villages south of Bratislava, when entering the region the traveller sees village signs announcing the names of these places in two languages, Slovak and Hungarian. The two signs, Slovak in black and white and Hungarian in blue and white, are given to every village containing at least 10 % of a national minority population. Some of the villages also welcome the traveller with their coat of arms. Upon entering *Janíky – Jányok*, a few metres behind the bilingual signs one sees a runic sign in white-black colours in a green frame. Continuing to the villages of *Dolné Janíky – Alsójánok*, *Zlaté Klasy – Nagymagyar*, *Čenkovce – Csenke*, *Maslovce – Vajasvata* and other mostly Hungarian villages, the traveller sees these bilingual signs in every one of them.

Based on the historical names and the etymology of the names, it is clear that the region was multinational, inhabited by Slovaks, Hungarians, Germans, Jews and Roma. For the topic of this essay it is important to keep in mind that the region was historically part of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy until the end of World War I, and then part of Czechoslovakia until the separation of the country in 1993, when it became part of Slovakia. Relations between the different nationalities were not always peaceful and were often politically motivated. During the 1990s the question of allowing Hungarian village signs was seen as an identity struggle for the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia.² From time to time it happened that during the night the Hungarian sign disappeared or was vandalised, and so the Hungarians defended their signs. By the end of the 1990s, the signs became practically invisible, becoming part of the everyday view of the landscape. Vandalism is no longer an issue. In addition, during this time the villages placed the community coat

² Similarly, the issue of bilingual school certificates was connected to the language law of the government led at this time by Vladimír Mečiar.

of arms next to or behind the signs in both languages. In 2012 the first runic signs appeared in the region.

Picture 1: The village Janíky – Jányok



Source: Author

As a consequence of the peace treaty ending World War I which was signed in 1918 in the castle of Trianon at Versailles, the region became part of Czechoslovakia – but the nationalities remained. Brubaker et al. (2008: 97–101) show that in the case of the city of *Cluj – Koložsvár* in today's Romania, what happened there after 1918 was very similar to the case of southern Slovakia. Brubaker et al. write that “while language *policies* changed overnight, language *practices* and *repertoires* did not” (emphasis in the original). For everyone it was most practical to use the language that everyone understood, Hungarian. Similarly, after Versailles the people of Cluj found themselves in a new country with a new official language.

The Hungarian minority in Slovakia, according to the last census in 2011, is 8.5 % of the total population (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2011). Still, while there was a decline in the Hungarian percentage from 9.7 in 2001 and 10.8 in 1991, the number of Hungarians is significant. After the Versailles treaty, a revisionist movement³ (Zeidler 2007: 65–78) was

³ In the Hungarian case the common understanding of revisionism is territorial. Hungarian revisionism questions the legitimacy of the treaty of Trianon and questions the result of the territorial division of Hungary after WWI.

born in Hungary which sought to reclaim lost soil. More recently, today's radical right party criticises the treaty as a tremendous injustice committed against Hungary. The revisionist movement is a reaction to the treaty's consequences, especially the loss of the lands of the Kingdom of Hungary. The aim of the revisionist movement is to gain back the lost lands. Some of this land is today part of Slovakia. The idea of revision is very popular in Hungarian radical right circles, which includes the political party Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom, the Új Magyar Gárda Mozgalom movement,⁴ and others.

Picture 2: The village Eliášovce – Illésháza



Source: Author

During the course of this limited qualitative research project I met some of the representatives of the Felföldi Baranta Szövetség (the Upperlands Baranta Association) who are organizing the placement of signs in székely writing in the villages of the area under study. The Baranta Association is an organisation focusing on Hungarian heritage and martial arts. I made semi-structured interviews with them and with other inhabitants from the villages with the signs. In the interviews I focused on the cultural meanings people give to these signs, what the signs mean to them, how the signs are connected to their national identity, and the relationship between the materiality and visibility of these objects. The interviews

⁴ The Magyar Gárda Mozgalom (Hungarian Guard Movement) was founded in 2007 and was dissolved by the bench in 2009. The same year it was re-founded and exists today under the name Új Magyar Gárda Mozgalom (New Hungarian Guard Movement).

were conducted in the villages mentioned above. Other sources of information include media reports about the events of erecting the village signs and video recordings of them which are available online.

This study is based on a talk titled “Symbolic occupation of space in south Slovakia – everyday visual practices of statues, objects and village names” that was performed at the “Visual Studies Conference: Science, Art, Institutions,” which I presented in Brno on December 7th, 2013. By reflecting on the village signs I was inspired by Brubaker et al. (2008) to study nationalism in everyday experiences, the cultural sociological understanding of performativity (Alexander 2006) and the recent nationalistic political discourse in Hungary.

The text is organized into the following parts. First I briefly introduce what I mean by *székely* writing and invite the reader into the context of Slovakian Hungarian culture. I then deal with the theoretical inspiration behind this work, namely the discourse of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of the border area between Slovakia and Hungary. I also describe the theoretical context of nationalism in relation to the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Then I explain the relationship between the Hungarian ideal representation of Transylvania and the Hungarian region of Slovakia, and point to the nostalgia for Greater Hungary, cultural supremacy and symbolic unification of the Hungarian nation. The article concludes with analysis of the visual representation of these identity manifestations through cultural performance.

Runic, old-Hungarian or *székely* writing

Runic writing is a topic debated not only by lay Hungarian nationalists but also in academic and linguistic discourse (Sándor 2014). In the Hungarian context, this form of writing is often called “Hungarian writing”, “old Hungarian”, “Hun writing”, “*székely* writing”, “Hun-Scythian writing”, “Hun-Hungarian writing” or just “runic writing” (the term *rovásírás* is used by my respondents, as well). Until the 19th century the Hun and Scythian names were the official scientific terms in the runic writing discourse. As Sándor (2014: 18) explains, probably the most popular title is “Hungarian writing,” and this term is used ideologically to support Hungarian nationalism and is believed in these circles to be the oldest writing of mankind, even a manifestation of cosmic power. The argumentation over the use and meaning of the script has a long and rich history. Sándor (2014: 18–23) calls it *székely*⁵ *írás* (*székely* writing) and argues that the reason for calling it thus is that most of the ancient chronicles define it as “*székely* writing”, and most of the artefacts displaying the script were found in the *Székely* land. The term “runic writing” is not really correct because it defines the method and the material of writing, not the technique of writing and the writing itself. Even the ancient Roman writing in tables is runic writing – so we need to further specify what we mean. The runic writing found in *Székely* land has its origin in Asia and was first brought to Europe by Iranian tribes in the 7th century, eventually spreading to the Pannonian Basin (Sándor 2014: 22). In this paper I will use Sándor’s term “*székely* writing”.

⁵ *Székely* is the name for the group of inhabitants in Transylvania with Hungarian nationality. *Székelyföld* (*Székely* land) is the Szekler land, from eastern Transylvania.

Picture 3: The Hungarian alphabet in székely with additional letters



Source: <http://rovas.info/>

The first artefact of székely writing that was successfully interpreted comes from the 13–14th century (Sándor 2014: 118). Until the 19th century the Hungarian majority defined the Székely people as the ancestors of the Huns, and székely writing was believed to have originated within the Hun writing, though there is no proof for this connection (Sándor 2014: 123).

In today’s nationalistic, radical right context, székely writing is considered to be proof of the European origin of the Hungarians, the depth of their culture and its ancient pedigree. However, this argument is not supported by the scientific community. Székely writing is becoming increasingly popular not only in Hungary but also outside its borders, within the circles of Hungarian minority groups living in neighbouring states. Székely writing appears at different levels and in different forms of everyday life (e.g. alphabet pasta, on t-shirts and clothes with text, calendars, books, even the Bible) and celebratory objects (e.g. high school matriculation tablets, memorials) and also in education (as courses for children). Of course, one cannot deny the business model that has developed around székely writing, with special shops offering the goods mentioned above.

De-territorialization and re-territorialization

We started with an excursion on a map showing that the signs in the place might be important for the local people. The idea of looking at a locality in the Hungarian context as an imagined national place comes from Feischmidt (2005: 5–6), who argues, referring to Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 3–5), that there is a shift in contemporary societies’ understanding of places and the space around us. The meaning of places and space is being de-territorialized. According to this argument, under today’s globalised conditions real places and localities seem to lose their original meaning (Feischmidt 2005: 5–6). On the other hand, there are places like battlefields, places of commemorative events, cemeteries, buildings, fortresses and city squares that have become symbolically important and meaningful for imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson mentions in *Imagined Communities* (2006). Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 39–40) argue that localised culture is being abandoned and for this reason we need to focus on the way that people’s everyday lives and identities in places are imagined. In much of the world, there is a certain mobility of businessmen, laborers and students in border areas and one could get the impression that state borders are losing their meaning and the idea that

homogenous nation states are eroding. Ferguson and Gupta (1997: 7) stress the notion of the need to “ask how to deal with cultural difference while abandoning received ideas of (localized) culture.” The authors also argue that cultural difference is becoming de-territorialized and identity and cultural difference are being spatialized in a new way. They react to the new conditions in the context of mass migration and transnational culture. Cultures are no longer fixed in place; all “associations of place, people and culture are social and historical creations” (Gupta, Ferguson 1997: 4) that are taken as natural. Cultural territorializations are the results of ongoing historical and political processes.

Power relations and political motivations strongly influence the position of space and identity issues in public discourse. The example of *székely* writing shows not only that power relations in the political field are important, but that culture plays an important role as well. De-territorialization of identity – if it is happening – cannot be seen as a short term process. The meaning of a place in relation to memory does not disappear, as György (2013: 433) argues. The meanings of places are recontextualised or transformed over a long period of time. Cultural meanings are fixed in physical places, which are connected to national identity and cultural memory. I would argue that national and cultural identity is spatialized in a new way, not only as a result of mass migration but also as a result of cultural trauma and nostalgia. Through this process, the cultural meaning of places is growing even stronger in the context of south Slovakian villages with a significant Hungarian population. It seems that in the national context the relationship between place and identity is taken for granted, and the feeling of locality is taken as naturally given to the group. From an analytical perspective we can look at the ways in which the issues of place and identity visually appear and ask how their relations are historically and discursively constructed.

By studying visual objects, the research moves from text towards images, and asks what, how and where they are seen. Approaching objects from a visual perspective allows us a wider variety of inquiries. Issues such as spatiality, performativity and semiotics become central to the understanding of visual objects and through them social reality. Emmison and Smith (2009: 107) argue that “objects can operate as indicators of wider socio-cultural processes and therefore serve as tools for a theoretically informed exploration of social life.” I am arguing with an imaginary, and at the same time material, map as a metaphor for national and cultural identity. A map is an object taken as an objective carrier of information (Anderson 2006: 173) which can show the borders of a state and the size of a city, but can also culturally connect a nation. A map can also show where someone would like to belong. One can draw his/her own map based on subjective criteria. In other words, the attempt to stress the identity and origin of places can create a cognitive representation of a homogenous map culture and identity.

Territorialization is the practice of organizing space and creating a meaningful place out of it. How space is territorialized depends on political and cultural factors. Territorial borders that seem objective are presented in the maps that we see in every geography book. A cognitive map of cultures might be different because it would not have clear borders, at least not the same as with the territorial one. If we take a look at a map of Europe we see states separated clearly by colour. The distinctiveness of nations and states might be at first glance unproblematic. The state’s borders are often formed by natural objects

(e.g. mountains and rivers) and are represented as coterminous with one nation; it is the case that the outside observer is confronted with a representation of a state with a homogeneous nation.⁶

Territories are also understood as imagined maps that have controversial relationships with maps of political borders. Visual representations seem to be the peak of the identity process that is able to hold collective memory and national identity together and draw a direct line to territory. Durkheim (1995) in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* reintroduced ritual as the means by which collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced, and affirmed as real by the community. Individual identity is socially conditioned and organised and experientially (including visually) manifested through rituals. Alexander (2006: 29–32) argues that rituals in contemporary societies have transformed into ritual-like actions and performances. National representations and their meanings are transmitted to the society and to individuals by these ritual-like events and performances. Tsang and Woods (2014: 5–18) show that rituals and performances are central for the demonstration of one's national identity. Exploring national identity through performativity seems to be a working model to study the particular manifestation and representation of national identity (Woods and Debs 2013; Alexander 2013). I see the erecting of village signs as an attempt to create a ritual-like event provided as a performative act. I will show later by describing the revelation of the event as a performance.

Borderlands, nations and territory

Important factors in the relations of borderland nations are *memory* and *spatiality*. Similarly to Zombory (2011: 8) – who points out that national identity is seen as a territorial issue and the key to understanding it is collective memory – the issue of borderlands may also be partially connected to collective memory. Brubaker (1996: 2) argues that we can identify different forms of revival and rebirth of the nation state and the national idea in Europe. There are territories that are under dispute between two or more nation states. In many cases the question of the *borderlands* is still taboo and represents a sensitive topic in the society (e.g. the case of Germans from Sudetenland in the Czech Republic, or the consequences of the population change between Hungary and Czechoslovakia after World War II). Brubaker (1996: 5) defines external national borders (the national minority within a state) and transborder nationalisms (the strategy of fellow national representatives) as processes challenging nationalizing nationalisms (the strategy of the nation state). This happens when ethno-national kin are seen as threatened by the majority nation's policies and practices. Brubaker calls this activity homeland nationalism, in contrast to nationalizing nationalism. The term “homeland” is not seen as an ethno-national category but as political category because the argument is that policies and practices are the internal matter of a nation state. The homeland becomes an external

⁶ If we look at the last world football championship in Brasil in 2014 (or any other international sporting event) we see only representatives of one nation state. But if we take a closer look we see that e.g. in the German national team there are players with Turkish origin, players with different religions, ethnicity, etc. But multi-ethnicism is not a common representation of nation states.

national space for the members of the national minority. National minorities are caught between nationalizing states and external national homelands. The situation of being trapped between two states and being unable to fully identify with either of them makes the situation even more complicated. Citing one of my respondents,

We are homelandless⁷ people; in the last census I put “other” to the question about citizenship because there was no choice for “homelandless.” The Slovaks would like to send us across the Danube and in Hungary they call us Czechoslovaks. I am a homelandless woman.

These sentences were spoken by an old Hungarian lady who was born after World War I. The respondent’s attitude is a good example of a view opposite that of those who erect the signs with *székely* writing. Homelandless or stateless is a passive state of being, a situation in which the homeless cannot influence his/her status. At the individual and also collective level this way of thinking tends towards a sense of victimhood. Those people who are now a national minority once were members of the Hungarian majority. Their ancestors did not move from Hungary to Slovakia, but lived in the same place for many years. Only the states and the regimes were changing over time. Sympathisers with the *székely* writing group have an active approach to their own and the local Hungarian community’s fate, by re-territorializing and giving different meanings to the spaces where they live.

Benedict Anderson, in the tenth chapter of *Imagined Communities*, writes about the role of maps as a “basis of a totalizing classification” (2006: 173) which can work as a representation of a homogenous nation state but also as an imagined map based on cultural identity. Nationhood is imagined as a map based on collective memory. Telling stories about a nation’s past does not mean anything unless the past is related to a territory. The process of nationality and nationhood is also characterized by localization practices that, as Zombory (2011) argues, form a map that plays a crucial role in narrating national identity.

Hungary as homeland cares about its fellow (Slovak) Hungarians and plays the role of the external homeland. The first Hungarian prime minister after 1989, József Antall, announced after his election that he would be representing 15 million Hungarians and he would like to be the prime minister of those 15 million Hungarians. By saying this, Antall created a precedent that all following prime ministers had to follow. Antall’s statement demonstrated the virtual unity of the Hungarian nation. The image of Greater Hungary, the great Hungarian nation politically and culturally, continues to live. The statement became representative for all the following Hungarian prime ministers in that they must appeal to the same statement after being elected. The statement also works outside of political discourse. Culturally, Antall reopened space for the external homeland to take care of nearby minority Hungarians and also legitimized the struggle for cultural unity outside the country’s borders.

Brubaker’s argument that minority status, the nationalizing state and the external national homeland should together be conceived as a field of competing positions, as an area of struggle among competing stances (1996: 67), gives us space to examine the mental

⁷ The Hungarian word “*hontalan*” in this context cannot be translated into English as “homeless.” Its meaning refers to the state of being homeless, without having a corresponding citizenship with nationhood. The feeling of being excluded from a state where one has lived his/her whole life.

map of the Kingdom of Hungary as a struggle for acquiring lost lands and reconnecting all Hungarians in one nation in a cultural-pseudopolitical sense. There might be a competing position, but when stressing the cultural level of nationalism we must also differentiate between the political and the cultural levels of this struggle. Brubaker refers to the political level of competing fields for territorialization. Gupta and Ferguson argue that space is de-territorialized in borderlands. By returning to the region of my childhood in Slovakia I experience the need for a Hungarian cultural re-territorialization. In other words, there is a tendency at the cultural level to re-territorialize the space that politically belongs to Slovakia but culturally is Hungarian. Transborder nationalism is challenging the nationalizing nationalism of the state not by appealing to territory but by practices of localizing culture, re-territorialization by stressing cultural memory, and recontextualizing the meaning of the space. It is an attempt to transform the imaginary map of identity into concrete places in a material-visual-performative way.

Visualization of Imagined Transylvania

... A proud nation with a great history; you need to dispossess their people from their past because with this you destroy their nation. And this is visible today too. Everywhere, even in the stumpstate⁸, and also behind the border, but only in Székely land and Csángóland,⁹ you can see that the people have national self-awareness, that they have national identity, that there they could not take it away from them. And why? Because they still, that the history is not learned from books, and so on. I know because my grandfather said to my father. Son do not forget that we are from the Szittya¹⁰ land. That there the scythian traditions are still alive and the motives and the ornaments, the patchwork, the carvings, the folksongs, and it is enough to look at the székely anthem...

The cultural meaning of Transylvania has become one of the strongest national symbols and visual representations for Hungarians. After the revolution in 1989 the Hungarians turned their focus to Transylvania. There was an impressive shift in the representation of Transylvania in Hungary. The imaginary ideal representation of the Hungarian man and woman of the Great Plain (Nagy Alföld, Puszta) transformed the representation of the székely people, the Hungarian traditional minority in Romania (Feischmidt 2005:18–19). The image of the true Hungarian moved to the mountains of Transylvania and to Transylvanian culture and heritage. It became an idealised place where the ancient, authentic Hungarian culture is still cultivated, and became a counterpoint to the post-communist reformist Hungary as a rural and authentic Hungarian community that still cultivates the ancient traditional Hungarian culture and that needs help from the external homeland. The localisation of this authentic culture

⁸ Contemporary Hungary; after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 Hungary lost cca. 2/3 of its territory.

⁹ Territory of the Hungarian minority in Moldavia.

¹⁰ *Szittya* is the term for the nomadic tribes that came into the Pannonian basin during the migration period between the 4th and 7th century.

appeared in literature (for instance, in the revival of the writings of Albert Wass¹¹), movies (that take place in Transylvania, e.g. “Kalandorok,” directed by Béla Paloczay, 2008), symbolic objects related to Transylvania (e.g. kopjafa, székeleykapu) and cultural heritage (e.g. signs written in the runic alphabet, folk dances, folk songs, and traditional clothing). There was also a shift in travel destinations that was directed toward Transylvanian historical places, towns and nature. There is a whole range of activities connected to Transylvania as well, like traditional Transylvanian folk dance workshops. There are guided tours visiting famous places related to historical events and symbolic places.

To go to Transylvania means to search for authenticity (Feischmidt 2005: 2), which is a quest for difference and similarity. In authenticity both difference and similarity are available. An authentic national and cultural expression like székeley writing is creating and confirming the image of Hungarian culture as completely unique and different from the surrounding cultures. This cultural characteristic defines the nation in relation to other nations. The meaning of authenticity also creates a feeling of similarity for every fellow Hungarian.

The visual goods that are transported from Transylvania to Hungary and to the Hungarian minority in neighbouring states function as strong symbols. The appearance of székeley writing in south Slovakian villages is the transported ideal representation that should reunite the whole nation spiritually and culturally. The activities of the external homeland legitimise the activities of the Hungarian minority whose actions challenge the idea of loyalty to the nationalizing state and offer the possibility of revision. Feischmidt (2005: 18) identifies two forms of mechanisms by which this occurs. The first focuses on lost land and its institutions. An example of this kind of mechanism is represented by the Office of Transborder Hungarians (Határon túli magyarok hivatala) that coordinates governmental work and is in touch with transborder Hungarian minorities through forums such as Hungarian-Hungarian meetings (Magyar-Magyar Csúcs), the Hungarian Permanent Conference (Magyar Állandó Értekezlet) and also the Status law (Státusz törvény), which was passed in 2001 by the first government of Viktor Orbán to support Hungarian minorities, and the recently introduced possibility of obtaining Hungarian citizenship for transborder Hungarians.

The second mechanism is the focus on symbolic geography. This leads us to the study of symbolic localisation practices and to the Transylvanian representative objects like székeley writing (Picture 4), kopjafa (Picture 5), and the Turul bird (Picture 6). Localising these objects in Hungarian villages creates a national discourse of similarity and difference, and cultural and historical supremacy. The practices of localising cultural meanings are supported by performances, by ritual-like events¹² (Alexander 2006: 29–32) that – if they work

¹¹ Albert Wass was a Hungarian aristocrat and writer, born in Romania. During WWII he fled to Hungary and enlisted in the Nazi army. Recently his writings have become popular and even compulsory reading for children in schools. See also Verseck (2012).

¹² “At both the micro and the macro levels, both among individuals and between and within collectivities, our societies still seem to be permeated by symbolic, ritual-like activities. It is precisely this notion of ‘ritual-like,’ however, that indicates the puzzle we face. We are aware that very central processes in complex societies are symbolic, and that sometimes they are also integrative, at

the proper way – confirm the society, in the Durkheimian sense. The aim in the context of our case study is the symbolic re-occupation of the lost lands, uniting the Hungarian people and anchoring particular places to Hungarian culture on a cognitive virtual map. I will briefly introduce these practices and ritual-like performances in the next chapter.

Picture 4: Visual of symbolic objects – sign in székely writing



Source: Author

the group, inter-group, and even societal level. But we also clearly sense that these processes are not rituals in the traditional sense. Even when they affirm validity and authenticity and produce integration, their effervescence is short-lived. If they have achieved simplicity, it is unlikely they will be repeated. If they are repeated, it is unlikely that the symbolic communication can ever be so simplified in the same way again.” (Alexander 2006: 31)

Picture 5: Visual of symbolic objects – "kopjafa" in Janíky



Source: Zoltán Oláh

Picture 6: Fallen soldiers memorial with the turul bird in Čenkovce – Csenke



Source: Author

The Practices of Re-territorialization

Now let's get back to the villages. I remember from my childhood the struggle to exercise the right to have a family name according Hungarian customs (this means, in Slovakia, for a woman to omit the suffix *-ová* from her last name), the right to bilingual education, the use of bilingual signs, and the right to use our mother tongue in official communication with state institutions and bureaucracy. For many years in the 1990s, the village signs in Hungarian represented an identity issue as well. It was a constant struggle in villages with a Hungarian minority, where the signs in Hungarian were removed, shot, defaced or damaged in other ways. A few years later, in the early 2000s, the bilingual signs began to form a natural part of the horizon for my eyes, until recently. After seeing the signs with *székely* writing, I started to ask what does this mean.

I personally could not participate in the erection of the village signs, but there are plenty recordings on YouTube¹³ depicting the events.

I use these videos together with articles in online magazines and interviews to reconstruct a sign erection. There are organisations that deal with these issues and organise the village sign erections (Picture 7). The organisation with which I was in contact started to localise the village signs in the region described in the excursion introduced at the beginning of this text. The one erection I will write about in more detail happened to be recorded,¹⁴ at least partially, so the reader can get a sense of what such a performance of a *székely*-script village sign erection looks like.

The whole event has its origin long before being approved by the mayor of the village. As I was informed, the preparation and production of the signs are supported by local businessmen, so the organisation's costs are very low, or nothing. Then the event starts with lectures and a discussion about the runic signs and *székely* writing, which is followed by the unveiling of the signs, and concludes with a reception. Those present include non-profit organisations that deal with the issues of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, members

Picture 7: Invitation for a sign revelation event in Čenkovce – Csenke



Source: www.felvidek.ma

¹³ Rovástábla avatások. [online] (accessed 17.11.2014). Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8A39B4D0E25EC75C>.

¹⁴ Homoly, Erzsébet. Felvidéki rovástábla avatás Csengén, Vajasvatán és Csörgén. [online] (accessed 17.11.2014) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jl_0DUcp6ik.

of the local scout association, and a member of the far-right Hungarian political party Jobbik gives a speech as well. The signs are covered with the flag of the Árpád dynasty, which has become one of the symbols of the radical right. The men in uniform are representatives of the Csenkey Baranta group, who are the main organisers of the event.

Village signs in székely writing can be found not only in south Slovakia. They are also seen in Transylvania, Hungary and other states in which a Hungarian minority lives. There are more and more organizations and civic movements with an interest in erecting village signs. There is even a discussion between “traditionalists” who strictly use the old alphabet without any changes and “modernists” who create new symbols for letters like “w.” There is also support from Hungarian politicians. The Hungarian radical right political party Jobbik is also engaged and supportive in the case of village signs. There are two interpretations for this that I have encountered by talking to people. One supportive view says that the signs in székely writing represent national and cultural unity and refer to the Hungarian history of the land. The signs for them demonstrate the Hungarian identity of the villages; they refer to the historical past and to the present. The other interpretation says that the signs are provocative and only create unnecessary friction in the relationship between the minority Hungarians and the majority Slovaks. The borders are fixed but we are in the European Union and there is no need to do anything like this.

The erection of székely village signs in south Slovakia is a powerful identity performance seen by the actors as celebrating the unity of the nation. There is a difference between commemoration practices in Hungary and in the circles of the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring states. Commemoration ceremonies in Hungary are typically less sacralised and are framed in more universalistic terms. Commemoration in Slovakia has higher status. Brubaker describes this distinction by differentiating the terms *holy day* and *holyday* (2004: 170–171). A qualitative comparison is also drawn by a respondent:

... there was an erection of runic village sign, this begins, as usually anywhere in Hungary. There it works, that people go there, eventually they sing something, erect the sign, reveal it and that's it. In my opinion today Hungarian self-identity is in such a bad shape here, consequently the knowledge of history is very deficient, then the people's morality is totally debauched, they do not even care too much about... We try to forge as much as possible, to address them, persuade them to come to the local community house... and then we also prepare a presentation about the runic writing...

It has the form of celebration. Now we have a lecture, often we invite a singer, and there we have a kind of celebration ritual. The erection of the village signs is not happening the way that we simply put there the sign and reveal it.

The actors themselves are aware that they live in Slovakia so it is not possible to speak about uniting the nation in a political sense. It is symbolic geography and the mental map that unites Hungarians culturally. The map is not only mental or virtual. Similarly to the székely writing, the map of the former Kingdom of Hungaria appears in many places, such as cars, t-shirts, cups or on the fence of a family house (Picture 8).

Picture 8: The symbol of Kingdom of Hungary on a fence



Source: Author

The whole act of erecting the signs also has a deeper spiritual dimension, as one actor who places the runic village signs says:

According to ancient Hungarian mythology we try to initiate the signs ritually. So to say the knowledge of our ancestors, to let them know that yes, a new sign, a new village, a new village sign was restored with the help of the old alphabet, that the runic writing is at the beginning of the village.

The organisers developed a script for the performance of the sign erections. They refer to Hungarian mythology and ancestors. Through the ritual-like act a reunification of territories is happening. An imagined ritual-like event with references to Hungarian mythology is an elemental part of the performance. The performative part of the event is visually powerful. The actors wear medieval uniform-like clothes and make a performance by singing songs (the one in the video is the Székely anthem), mostly the Hungarian national anthem and use the swish (Picture 9). The backstage of the event is built up by use of Hungarian symbols, including the Árpád dynasty flag and the Hungarian flag. One actor says:

... yes for us, for the Hungarians there are lucky numbers, 1, 3 and 7. And these numbers are included into the celebration ritual, into the erection of the runic writing sign. Usually three actors used to swish with the whip – that means the number three. There are seven swishes – that is the seven and the unity of the runic writing means the whole, the number one.

Picture 9: A moment from the revelation event



Source: www.felvidek.ma

The demonstrative part of the event refers to the act of demonstrating Hungarian identity for the actors themselves, for the audience, for the ancestors, for the village (its representatives and inhabitants), for Hungary (through the politicians of the Jobbik party from the Hungarian parliament) and for Slovakia. The act demonstrates that this is a land of Hungarians, the land of ancestors. The *székely* sign demonstrates Hungarian cultural supremacy over Slovakia (Slovakian territorial claims are not accepted in Hungarian radical right circles, where the Treaty of Trianon is questioned).

The event described above is representative for what has taken place in the other villages of the region. The first signs appeared in three villages (Čenkovce – Csenke, Čörge – Csörgepusztá, and Maslovce – Vajasvata), and were followed by more villages (Eliašovce – Illésháza, Tonkovce – Tonkháza, Vojtechovce – Bélvata, Malý Máger – Kismagyar, Rumince – Runya, Oldza – Olgya, Zlaté Klasy – Nagymagyar, Janíky – Jányok, Dolné Janíky – Alsó

Jányok, Čakany – Csákány, Štvrtok na ostrove – Csallóközcsütörtök). Wagner-Pacifici (2011: 1362) argues that this kind of representative event needs to be copied.

I tell you how it was. People from village A came to me and told me that they would like to have a runic village sign. So I asked them, A is in such a good condition? Thank God, not because of that, but because villages like B and C, but mainly B have it – they were talking like this condescendingly. Now as you are telling this so interestingly, just be well informed, listen. I would not exchange one man from village B for ten men from village A. Did you get it, what I just said? Do you know why? They did not want it because it is elsewhere as well, but because they feel like they would like to have it, they need it, that there should be a runic village sign. So, this is the difference.¹⁵

The events of erecting signs have found their own audience. The signs became representative because they helped influence the status position of a village. There is a need to perform identity and confirm cultural belonging.

Often in the interviews the issue of the thousand-year history of Hungarians in the territory appears. At the time Hungary entered the European Union, its political leadership spoke about returning Hungary to where it belongs, to Europe. In their argumentation, when the king St. Stephen converted to Christianity, the Kingdom of Hungary became part of Europe. Actors in the *székely* sign erection events see the nation's golden age in the pre-Christian past to which the *székely* script belongs. One respondent takes for granted that the Hungarians were already in the Pannonian basin when the Hungarian tribes arrived in the 9th century:

...so king Attila, and it starts from the Szittyia times, so what they say, that the foundation of the state was in 1000, that is not mentioned by any chronicle. So there was no foundation of state in 1000, and we did not arrive here that time but we converted to a, for us unknown religion and then started the hunt for runic writing. There is written about it, there is proof for that. So St. Stephen as the one who wanted to destroy the so-called pagan writing, he wanted to tuck it away.

This argument refers to and corresponds with the recent nationalistic, radical and restorative process in Hungarian society and memory politics. As György (2013) argues, the mental map of the Kingdom of Hungary and cultural space is being legitimised and internalized by the masses in Hungary. Finding the imagined golden age of the nation, using symbols, visual objects and referring to myths, ancestors and ancient knowledge is a recently observable process in Hungarian political and cultural life. The symbols of Transylvania are idealised and are becoming strong visual and mental elements in performing national identity in the bilingual villages of south Slovakia.

¹⁵ I have changed the names of the villages to A, B, C to ensure anonymity of the informant.

Conclusion: The Map as Identity

As Péter György (2013: 433) has mentioned, the *de-territorialization* of the memory of place is a long process. The places of memory do not disappear; this process is rather the recontextualization of the meanings of the place and the transformation of their meanings. *Re-territorialization* of the land is happening through visual and material objects and performances. The meaning of the territory never left the place. De-territorialization of the land might work on a political level based on the ideals of a liberal economic model, but culturally it seems that there are attempts that prove that meaning is embedded in the territory and is connected to collective memory. I have argued that the reason for the re-territorialization of this space in south Slovakia is connected to trauma and nostalgia. For Hungary, the Trianon Treaty is a trauma that partially defines and constructs Hungary's relations with neighbouring countries like Slovakia. The same thing is the case with the nostalgia for the Kingdom of Hungaria. These two characteristics manifest themselves in the székely signs because they refer to the Kingdom of Hungaria, the former golden age of the Hungarians. This golden period is always presented with an historical map.

Picture 10: A map not including the villages of the researched area



Source: <http://rovas.info/>

More village sign erections are planned and have been announced. It seems that it is a growing trend. The image of Transylvania and Transylvanian symbols as true national symbols has spread to south Slovakian villages. Székely writing seems to be one of the strongest symbols that is used in the symbolic geography of Hungary. Székely writing defines the space where it appears so unequivocally with its differentness that the message for the

environment is clearly broadcast. But the runic alphabet is just an element of the imagined Transylvania that is becoming a unifying symbol for true Hungarian identity. The radicals, for example, use this symbol very consciously; they privatize the national symbols and use them as visual representations of their party (e.g. the Árpád flag, the turul bird, kopjafa, and runic signs). The nationalized meaning of Transylvania has become a product, an image that can be “sold” everywhere a Hungarian minority lives. It is a sort of memory business where runic signs are placed alongside the above-mentioned national symbols.

For Hungarians the map of the Kingdom of Hungaria is very well known either from school history classes or from the rightwing practices that display them everywhere possible. Students learn about the Treaty of Trianon in school and also at home from their parents. The Hungarian minority in Slovakia is in a constant struggle of position between Hungary and Slovakia. The lack of homeland partly describes the situation of respondents who are aware of the fact that they live in Slovakia and are Slovak citizens, but culturally refer to Hungary. The mental map of a culturally and spiritually united Hungarian nation evokes the feeling of the imagined golden age for radical right-oriented Hungarians. On the other hand, and problematically, the mental map does not correlate with the political map, with borders pictured as red lines on paper. Creating a new map (Picture 10) on the basis of runic village signs opens up space for acknowledging the reality of the political map while focusing on the cultural and historical map of Hungarians. In this way the mental map of Greater Hungary begins to feel real for transborder Hungarians.

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