Transylvanian Autonomy: Romanian and Saxon Models between the Two World Wars

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Abstract: The establishment of Greater Romania between 1918 and 1920 induced several social, political, administrative, and economic problems in the new state. The differences between the history and traditions of the diverse parts of the country impeded the unifying centralization efforts. The peculiarities of Transylvania and the issue of the autonomous Transylvania appeared in the writings of several intellectuals and politicians between the two world wars. In addition to the Hungarian plans, Romanian and Saxon ideas were also born, emphasizing the importance and possibilities of Transylvanian autonomy. The study tries to present some aspects of the special regionalism of Transylvania between the two world wars and to analyse some Romanian and Saxon models.

Keywords: autonomy, Transylvania, decentralization, regionalism, Greater Romania

Introduction

The issue of Transylvanian autonomy, which has been raised and analysed so many times, has become one of the most topical debates in Transylvania and Romania nowadays. The recognition of Transylvania as a unique territorial entity faces various difficulties although its relevancy is difficult to dispute due to the historical, cultural, and other peculiarities of the region.

The idea of the autonomous Transylvania also appeared in the writings of several intellectuals and politicians between the two world wars as a possible solution to the special situation of the region. Interestingly, researchers can find not only visions of the Hungarian minority but also Romanian and Saxon models. However, it is not easy to navigate between these ideas due to the complexity of the historical background; especially since the sequence of events generated multiple intentions, participants tried to outline their own autonomy model from different viewpoints.

With the establishment of Greater Romania (dated on 1 December 1918 by the Romanian nation), Transylvania became the scene of peculiar phenomena. According to Brubaker's theory, the complicated East-Central European ethnic relations can be interpreted with the help of a methodological triangle: one vertex is the national minority, the other is the nationalizing state in which they live, while the third vertex is the external national homeland to which the nationality is linked by cultural and linguistic ties[1] (Brubaker 1996, Grúber 2002).

From 1867, when Transylvania returned to the administration of Hungary, until the establishment of Greater Romania, Transylvanian Romanians were the national minority, Hungary was the nationalizing state, and Romania was the external homeland. Changes had already been started by the Romanian National Assembly in Alba Iulia (and the preceding processes), and the Trianon resolution only reinforced them in 1920; so, the roles in the context of Transylvania altered according to Brubaker's logic: Hungarians became the national minority, Greater Romania became the nationalizing state, and the homeland was Hungary.[2] What kind of processes were started in Transylvania after this transformation regarding the special situation? How could the Transylvanian Romanians handle the new situation? How could they adapt to the new state-building processes since their nation-building approach differed from the vision of the Romanians in the Old Kingdom?[3] What was the viewpoint of the Saxon minority in that period?

This study cannot answer all these questions in detail, but it wishes to focus on some Transylvanian Romanian and Saxon plans and ideas which try to provide solutions in the new state-building processes by outlining the possibilities of an autonomous Transylvanian region within Greater Romania.

I. Historical Background: Greater Romania between the Two World Wars – Chaotic Diversity

The establishment of Greater Romania between 1918 and 1920 induced several social, political, administrative, and economic problems in the new state. The difference between the history and traditions of the diverse parts of the country impeded the unifying centralization efforts. There were tensions even between the Romanians of Transylvania and those of Regat (Old Romania, Old Kingdom) since they approached the unification from different perspectives, and they possessed diverse administrative and political heritage.

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1   Szarka 2008 – refers to the same classic triadic relationship.
2   Ágoston 2000 – underlines that the Hungarian minority fell into the same state of being in which Transylvanian Romanians were before and faced the same challenges.
3   For more details, see: Bakk 2019

Unification meant the building of a new Romanian state, which had been approached from two different 'nation-building projects': one of the Transylvanian Romanian élite, the 'awakening intellectuals' of the people, and the other, the approach of the Romanian political élite in the Old Kingdom. The former one tried to emphasize the importance of creating a national civil society and the respect of regional peculiarities in the new nation-state, while the latter one accentuated the 'bureaucratic, unifying nationalism' and became prevailing in the new state (Bakk 2019). For Transylvanian Romanians, the unification provided the opportunity to live in the same state with the other Romanians, but at the same time they lost a part of their identity: the feeling, the idea of being the inhabitants of another part of Europe. 'In contrast to Bucharest, they represented Central Europe within the Romanian nation' (Boia 2015: 76).[4] 1 December 1918, as a symbolic act, also involved the 'inner regional confrontation, the disunion of Transylvania and the Old Kingdom and the possibility of confrontation between the nation and the king' (Miskolczy 2019: 49).

For example, the National Liberal Party, which determined the politics of the Old Kingdom and controlled the bank capital, the heavy industry, and the latifundia system, considered the unification with Transylvania to be the success of the army and planned the transposition of Regat's administrative model to the new territories as the only way of homogenizing the new state. At the same time, the Romanians of Transylvania vindicated unification as their own result and saw it as the culmination of a very long process (Maniu 1999 [1924]). In addition, they would have preferred to preserve the administrative system of Transylvania. Obviously, they also wanted to occupy the administrative positions, the positions of power, although they had only few qualified professionals for this objective. Hungarians and Saxons dominated the Transylvanian culture and economy, wherefore the Romanians of Transylvania had to look for an ally in the élite circles of Regat to counterbalance this situation. In this form, one of the great contradictions of the twenties in Transylvania was that Romanians, although they came to power, still remained in minority in many sectors.

The Romanian National Council was the decisive political group of Transylvanian Romanians for a longer period, in which tensions arose during the session of the National Assembly in Alba Iulia regarding the future situation of Transylvania. Vasile Goldiş imagined the full autonomy of Transylvania,[5] defining military and foreign affairs as well as finance as common areas with Romania. On the contrary, Iuliu Maniu voted for full unification, but finally the party established a common approach including only democratic principles. Later, not all of these proposals were enacted by the Romanian king (only the first point of the decision concerning the

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4   Translated into English by the author.
5   Vasile Goldiş played a significant role in drafting the unification decision; he called it the 'ideal of civilization', emphasizing that the decision is not a political party programme (Miskolczy 2019).

unification) (Bárdi 2008a) although the administrative separation of Transylvania was maintained temporarily. The Directing Council (Consiliul Dirigent, set up after December 1918, the Resolution of the Romanian National Assembly in Alba Iulia) administered Transylvania between 1918 and 1920, its leaders being Vasile Goldiş, Iuliu Maniu, and Alexandru Vaida-Voievod.

In the early years of Greater Romania, the Transylvanian administration became very chaotic since pro-government civil servants from Regat were placed in key positions, but they were neither properly trained nor familiar with local peculiarities and tried to regulate the overturned system by various types of decrees. The confusion caused disappointment among the Transylvanian Romanians as well. After the union, they expected improvement in their situation, and not further uncertainties. 'In the early post-union years, Transylvanian politicians and patriots wished to act somewhat independently of the political parties, power structures, and institutions based in Bucharest. The Directing Council clashed with Bucharest over economic, political, administrative, and cultural matters' (Livezeanu 1995: 133).

However, in June 1925, the governing National Liberal Party codified the administrative unification law of the country, abolishing the administrative separation of Transylvania. During the debate on this law in the Parliament, Iuliu Maniu called this action unacceptable and absurd. He argued that the *political unity of the Romanian state required decentralization and the existence of local self-governments* (Bárdi 1997). In 1926, the National Peasant Party was created by the fusion of the Romanian National Party and the Peasant Party, and Maniu became its chairman.

'The National Peasant Party followed democratic and radical principles: its politicians promised liberal legislation, the regularization of minority rights, the reform of public administration and agriculture, the attraction of foreign capital in the economy, the elimination of corruption in public life' (Bárdi–Wéber 1999: 153).[6] Two years later, this Party came to power, and its first administrative bill already articulated the ideal of the regional autonomy. Eventually, this initiative was omitted in the final law.

Later, despite all the positive intentions, this government could not implement the well-sounding plans either since the global economic crisis intervened as an obstacle and an external force, just as the still existing and perceptible power of the Liberal Party as an internal problem. In this form, the peculiarities and ideas of the Transylvanian Romanian politics represented by Maniu became blurred and impossible towards the end of the 1930s.

By the mid-1930s, Romanian politics had finally succeeded in breaking Hungarian economic and employment dominance, which until then had been interpreted as an obstacle to the emergence of Transylvanian Romanians and state unity. The positions of civil servants and teachers were linked to the knowledge of Romanian language, and this competence was checked via several language exams. More than

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6   Translated by the author.

ten thousand Hungarian employees were laid off due to failed language exams (Bárdi 2008b). The labour market legislation, introduced in the 1930s, obliged companies and banks to hire employees of Romanian nationality: 80% of their staff and 50% of their management positions. Economic life was also greatly influenced by the land reform since different land reform laws were enacted in the four historical regions of Romania, and the most radical one was applied in Transylvania. In this region, entire estates were expropriated – confiscated without compensation – if the owner stayed abroad for a shorter or longer period between 1 December 1918 and the summer of 1921 or chose Hungarian citizenship (this was especially true for Hungarians) (Simon–Kovács 2008, Bárdi 2008c).

Considering the regional differences of the country in the examined period, the development benefits of historical Transylvania and Banat were indisputable until the end of the period. These differences did not decrease significantly between the two world wars due to the lack of a coordinated territorial development policy, and the global economic crisis also affected the country between 1929 and 1933. Moreover, differences widened: by 1930, the western regions had developed even more dynamically, mainly in terms of the number of industrial companies, with a surplus of 53.5% in the historic Transylvania, Banat, and Bukovina, while the proportion in Regat was 22.4%. The situation of Banat was conspicuous: 6.5% of the country's population lived there, but its industrial production accounted for 15% of Romania's total production (Benedek 2008). Thus, there is no doubt that Banat was the most developed region in Romania in the examined period.[7]

II. A Romanian Draft Constitution Including State Reorganization: Romul Boilă's Idea

In 1931, Romul Boilă, a professor of law at Cluj-Napoca, a member and leader of the National Peasant Party, published his draft constitution to resolve the territorial reorganization of Greater Romania.[8] Although the professor was closely connected to the party, his draft did not become an official document of the party. (The issue of administrative decentralization did not arise during Maniu's new government formation in October 1932.)

Boilă wrote his ideas thirteen years after the unification and, looking at the Romanian reality of that time, formulated a startling opinion. He wanted to respond to this unfavourable situation and to formulate the idea of state reorganization since, according to him, centralization was not an appropriate solution for Romania.

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7   On Banat's economic development and the special territorial identity of Banat, see the articles of Barna Bodó: 1994, 2003.

8   We have to mention that in the same year, 1931, Pope Pius XI published the encyclic entitled Quadragessimo Anno, which included the principle of subsidiarity.

> All these findings and the painful state in which we are entitles us to believe that the blame for the great disaster which reaches to the foundations of the most significant goods of our existence as a state and nation is on the system and government which has been established since the unification. A centralizing system, which now and then raises its hideous head, destroys everything by lack of organization and prevents the success of the country and the happiness of its sons in the provinces who have run so enthusiastically to the bosom of the motherland. (Boilă 2010 [1931]: 376)

Boilă highlighted that his idea would have in no way curtailed the unity of Greater Romania, but he sharply criticized the work done by the post-union central parliament, which, in his opinion, had lost its credibility. He would therefore have appointed a Council of State to replace the central parliament; in addition, the author imagined a central government, the members of which would have been appointed from among the members of the Council of State. In Boilă's draft, the central government would have been responsible for foreign affairs, military affairs, the railway system, postal, telegraph, and telephone services, maritime water and air transport system, customs policy, cash flows, public loans, and state security issues. However, Boilă would have delegated administrative tasks and the management of most public affairs to decentralized organizations. In three provinces, Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania, he planned the introduction of a provincial assembly (Diet) consisting of one chamber, which together with the Council of State would have formed the so-called National House of Representatives.

In order to emphasize the importance of the idea of decentralization, Boilă mentioned several foreign models as examples such as the practice in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America. He also highlighted that decentralization was not contrary to the unity of the state, contrarily:

> Decentralisation serves the national idea and stops irredentist actions also. In the decentralized state the centrifugal currents and the extremist fractions lose their supporters and weaken. They are channelled in the decentralized life of the bodies of local provinces. If in the economic world, through the system of incentives, the production capacity will be strengthened, in the life of villages a wider and more direct participation of the citizens strengthens their solidarity, develops the citizens' dignity and love for the common country. (Boilă 2010 [1931]: 378)

As we can see, according to Boilă, decentralization was also a stimulus to the national economy, so it had beneficial effects on a wide range in terms of socio-economic life. Provinces would have collected the state income, of which a predetermined percentage or quota would have been transferred to the central treasury, while the

rest would have provided the province's own resources, the same as taxes, which the provinces would have been entitled to impose. Each province would have had its own education system meeting specific regional (religious or ethnic) needs.

According to the official newspaper of the National Hungarian Party, Boilă's draft did not constitute a real decentralization model. They criticized it because the Party considered Boilă's plan as one of the signs of pursuit of Romanian supremacy. The National Hungarian Party also complained that the draft did not take into account the resolutions of Alba Iulia and the existing minority treaties, the autonomy of Saxon and Szekler groups, including education and religion. In the journal *Magyar Kisebbség* (Hungarian Minority), László Fritz, the rapporteur of the Minority Section of the Party, analysed the draft searching for minority rights and their protection.[9] Another interpretation of Boilă's work also mentioned that:

> it is indicative that the regionalism advocated by the representatives of the majorities was rarely formed in dialogue with the local minorities – in fact, Boilă hardly ever mentioned the Hungarians, Germans and Jews, and rejected centralisation mainly from the perspective of the Transylvanian Romanian elites, who considered themselves to be in many ways superior to the bureaucratic center. (Trencsényi–Kopeček 2018: 40)

Besides Hungarians, Boilă's work was criticized by Romanians as well: the liberal Romanian press called the draft an aspiration which opposed the unity of state (Bárdi 1998).

III. Transylvanian Saxon Concepts: The Theory of Hermann Müller, the Saxon Lawyer

For a long time, the Saxons of Transylvania represented a significant socio-economic force in the region, giving the widest stratum of bourgeoisie. Their ideas about the future of Transylvania between the two world wars were formulated along Saxon and all-Romanian interests until 1933, but from that year on they articulated all-German interests (Bárdi 1997).

The Germans in Romania also desired the internal unification of the state, but for other reasons as described above. In 1919, the central political representation of the Saxons in Transylvania declared that they accepted the new state framework together with other Germans in the region. They planned this and their future in a spiritually coordinated alliance with their motherland (K. Lengyel 2007: 12).

The Germans in Transylvania wanted to stabilize the close relationship between their own groups and maintain their own self-government at municipal, town,

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9   See: Fritz, L: Boilă professzor román alkotmánytervezete. *Magyar Kisebbség* 1931/22–23.

and county levels, as Hans Otto Roth, the Attorney General of the Association of Germans in Romania and then President of the German Party, explained in 1920 (K. Lengyel 2007). Observing the problems of unification of the Romanian state, Roth voted for autonomy, which – according to him – would have solved these problems of the country. Roth emphasized the raison d'être of regionalism and the constitutional autonomy of part of the country since the problem of unification was the most serious one in Romania compared to the other successor states of the former Austro–Hungarian Monarchy (K. Lengyel 2007).

Hermann Müller, who graduated as a lawyer at Hungarian and German universities and then practised in Sibiu (Hermannstadt) and Cluj-Napoca (Klausenburg), presented his extensive knowledge in his journalism. In 1926, he published his work *The Autonomy of Transylvania – A Study on Transylvania's Political Past and Proposals for Its Autonomy within the Romanian State*. His work did not have much resonance (Bárdi 1998) although it was a great illustration of how a country with as many provinces as Romania could have been united through decentralization. Müller assumed that, at the time of writing his work, six years after the establishment of Greater Romania, all three 'indigenous' peoples were dissatisfied and were victims of the conditions prevailing in the country. Since he experienced a deteriorating situation in all areas, a simple change of government could not have been the solution to this situation. According to him, the solution would have been possible only with some kind of comprehensive reorganization and through a paradigm shift. Müller called this process a rapid and general regime change.

According to the Saxon lawyer, the situation of the country was complicated by the regional dividing line that stretched between the parts and provinces of Greater Romania. This dividing line was visible both in the way of thinking and in the diversity of cultural, legal, and economic systems. 'The way of thinking in the Old Kingdom is radically different from that of Transylvania, the administrative system modelled on and operating according to the French model is significantly dissimilar from that of the German-style Transylvanian (…) the different Western European, Eastern European, Russian, and the Balkan legal, economic, and administrative systems are intermingled' (Müller 1998 [1926]: 131–132).[10]

But what did Müller call 'regime change'? He envisioned a 'permanent central government body' composed of the prominent representatives of all the major parties that, accompanied by large social acceptance, would have carried out 'unification'. At the same time, according to him, there was no hope for this under the conditions of that age. However, this process would have been quite long (at least a quarter of a century); therefore, he considered it important to ensure 'far-reaching autonomy' for the country's provinces during the transition period in order to achieve an effective unification. He compared the provinces to brothers who had been alienated from

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10   Translations by the author.

each other for a long time, so it took time for them to get used to each other under the same roof. Müller emphasized the situation of Transylvania separately:

> During the transition period, Transylvania (…) would be self-governing under the national laws of the Bucharest Parliament, having its own jurisdiction, and the Transylvanian provincial parliament would issue decisive decrees valid within its borders. This provincial parliament would be composed of the representatives of all indigenous nationalities. (Müller 1998 [1926]: 132)[11]

In the system imagined by Müller, all nationalities would have found their state-creating role, and Müller also suggested that in areas where at least 20% of the population spoke one of the country's historical languages, the equal use of this language should have been ensured in schools, churches, administration, and courts of law.

The author considered the ensuring of autonomies to be a precondition for unification and a condition for gaining the trust of foreign countries as well, which could have promoted economic recovery. Müller also mentioned past and contemporary examples confirming the effectiveness of autonomous provinces. One example was the Roman Empire, whose 'logical simplicity' and its existence for such a long time were also ensured by the broad autonomy of the annexed (conquered) peoples. Müller also referred to Switzerland as an example: the ethnically mostly homogeneous cantons with far-reaching autonomy proved to be a stable system even in the most dangerous times (he thought primarily of World War I). Thus, he believed that Romania had no reason to fear the autonomy granted to Transylvania as, on the one hand, it was not ethnically homogeneous, and, on the other hand, the autonomy would have brought spiritual benefits to the Transylvanians, which would have been 'priceless' and 'invaluable' benefits for the country.

In the age of Müller's writing, Romania had to take into account external threats in addition to the internal tensions (for example, due to the increased unemployment rate linked to badly managed economic policy). Müller saw Russia primarily as a source of danger, which could have been fulfilled by the actions of the Little Entente Slavic states joining Russia in the name of Pan-Slavism. He suggested an alliance with German people and Hungary, which he considered to be the only non-Slavic and the least dangerous neighbouring country. 'After a peaceful settlement of the current conflicts, this alliance could be the core and starting point for narrow economic and maybe later political co-operation of all the peoples of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe (…)' (Müller 1998 [1926]: 137).

In conclusion, this particular suggestion shows the positive relationship between the Saxons of Transylvania and Romanians between the two world wars, but at the same time it reveals the image of a very far-sighted thinker looking for Western patterns

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11   Translated by the author.

and models to solve the problems of the country. Müller also tried to find a way out of the Hungarian–Romanian conflicts when he wrote about the idea of an alliance between the states. It is important to point out that Müller, in his analysed concept, rightly did not consider unification and decentralization or autonomy to be opposing concepts, and he saw the latter one to be the precondition of unity, stating that there was no unity without self-determination and (in his words) 'complete freedom'.

Conclusions

In summary, the case of Transylvania was one of the important objects of confrontation in the discussed period since its incredibly unique ethnic map provided a good reason for conflicts in difficult historical moments. It is hopeful that, in addition to the Hungarian plans, Romanian and Saxon ideas were also born, emphasizing the importance and possibilities of Transylvanian autonomy. The Romanian and Saxon plans considered decentralization to be a viable way to unify the country, and they emphasized that decentralization and unification are not opposing concepts. All this can be regarded as a modern idea, which has now gained ground in Western Europe together with the different forms of autonomies. Each plan outlined foreign examples (Switzerland was the eternal pattern for almost all plans), proving that the existence of autonomies and decentralization may even increase loyalty to the centre. What the plans also had in common was that the diversity of Romania's provinces, having several peculiarities and traditions, was considered to be the main reason for decentralization. These traditions represented political, cultural, administrative, or economic characteristics at the same time, but these authors also believed in discovering differences in mentality. Besides the lack of opportunities, the analysed Romanian and Saxon models were definitely forward-looking. The authors understood the European processes and envisioned their country to be built in conformity with these European trends. They were certainly the remarkable predecessors of the regionalist movements which, in the current situation in Romania, are trying to steer the country towards the acceptance of decentralization and autonomy.

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