

SOCIAL AND LEGAL CHALLENGES OF THE ROMANIAN COMMUNITY IN COVASNA, HARGHITA AND MUREȘ COUNTIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines demographic changes and cultural dynamics in Covasna and Harghita counties, Romania, where Romanian citizens constitute a minority. Analysis of census data from 1992–2021 reveals a significant decrease in the Romanian population, with approximately 30.000 fewer people in the last three decades. Furthermore, the study explores the distribution of Romanian communities in these counties, highlighting disparities between larger and smaller settlements. It also investigates the state of the Orthodox church heritage, documenting the loss of numerous churches due to historical events such as the Magyarization processes and the Vienna Dictate. In addition, the study addresses the challenges facing Orthodox parishes in ethnically mixed areas, where dwindling congregations threaten their sustainability. Further, it highlights the impact of the declining school population on Romanian language education, especially in administrative units such as municipalities and cities. Overall, this research highlights the complex interplay between demographic trends, cultural preservation efforts and institutional dynamics in regions characterised by ethnic diversity and historical transformation.

Keywords: administration, multi-ethnic communities, discrimination, legal work.

CURRENT STATISTICAL DATA ON THE ROMANIAN COMUNITY

In Covasna and Harghita counties, where Romanians form a numerical minority, the 2021 population and housing census showed a reduced presence of Romanians, numbering only 76.356 people (42.752 in Covasna – 23.3% and 33.694 in Harghita – 12.6%)¹⁸⁴, compared to 103.534 in 1992, when there were 54.586 Romanians in Covasna county and 48.948 in Harghita¹⁸⁵ (27.178 fewer people). Thus, over the last three decades, the Romanian population in the two counties has decreased by about 30.000 people (an average of 1.000 per year).

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¹⁸⁴ National Institute of Statistics, „Rezultate ale Recensământului din 2021: Tab. 2.2.2. POPULAȚIA REZIDENTĂ DUPĂ ETNIE, PE JUDEȚE, MUNICIPII, ORAȘE, COMUNE, LA 1 DECEMBRIE 2021” [“Results of the 2021 Census: Tab. 2.2.2 RESIDENT POPULATION BY ETHNICITY, BY COUNTIES, MUNICIPALITIES, CITIES, TOWNS, COMMUNES, ON DECEMBER 1ST, 2021”], Available at: https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate_rpl_2021/rezultate_definitive_caracteristici-etno-cultural-demografice/, Accessed on: March 20, 2024.

¹⁸⁵ National Institute of Statistics, „Rezultate ale Recensământului din 1992: Tab. 2. POPULAȚIA PE NAȚIONALITĂȚI” [“Results of the 1992 Census: Tab. 2. POPULATION BY NATIONALITIES”], Available at: https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate_recensamant_1992/, Accessed on: March 20, 2024.

Of the 45 localities in Covasna county (5 municipalities and towns and 40 communes), about half (21 localities) are home to Romanian communities with more than 100 inhabitants, while the other half (24 localities) is composed of small and very small communities with less than 100 Romanian inhabitants. In Harghita county, out of the 67 localities (9 municipalities and towns and 58 communes), about one third (19 localities) host Romanian communities with more than 100 inhabitants, while in two thirds (48 localities) the Romanian ethnic population is made up of small and very small communities with less than 100 inhabitants. All these communities, regardless of their size, face a lack of resources and adequate institutionalisation to maintain their Romanian identity¹⁸⁶.

At present time, the Orthodox church patrimony in the Diocese of Covasna and Harghita comprises 158 churches built between 1658 and 2023, including 14 monastic settlements (nine monasteries, three hermitages and two metoques) and 10 chapels in military units, hospitals and in the Miercurea Ciuc Penitentiary. This number would have been much higher if the 31 Orthodox and Greek-Catholic churches had not disappeared along with the respective communities as a result of the Magyarization process, and the 25 churches that were demolished during the Vienna Diktat period, most of which were built in the centre of the villages, which was not accepted by the Horthy administration¹⁸⁷.

A significant problem is the future situation of Orthodox parishes in towns with a mixed ethnic population, where the number of believers is low. Currently, there are 33 Orthodox parishes in Harghita and Covasna counties with less than 30 worshippers. Due to the old age of the parishioners in these communities and the impact on the natural increase of the population, there is a risk that most of these communities will disappear ethnically and confessionally in the next 20–30 years¹⁸⁸.

As a result of the decrease in the school population, there are currently 46 territorial administrative units in Harghita County and 24 in Covasna County, including some towns (Vlăhița, Băile Tușnad), where Romanian language schools are no longer operating. We continue to witness the perpetuation of the phenomenon of Hungarian pupils not learning Romanian within the national education system, which encourages segregation along ethnic lines and the accumulation of unnatural tensions in inter-ethnic relations¹⁸⁹.

¹⁸⁶ Ioan Lăcătușu, *Spiritualitate românească și conviețuire interetnică în Covasna și Harghita [Romanian spirituality and inter-ethnic coexistence in Covasna and Harghita]*, St. Gheorghe, Eurocarpatica Publishing House, 2002, p. 13.

¹⁸⁷ Ioan Lăcătușu, *Structuri etnice și confessionale în județele Covasna și Harghita [Ethnic and confessionnal structures in Covasna and Harghita counties]*, Târgu-Mureș, “Petru Maior” University Publishing House, 2008, p. 203.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 177.

¹⁸⁹ Address ISJ Covasna with No. 12 R.S./28.06.2024 and Address ISJ Harghita with No. 2925/07.06.2024, documents that I obtained from the county inspectorates after sending several requests in this regard.

ASPECTS OF INTERETHNIC COEXISTENCE

Romanians in Covasna and Harghita counties face a lack of legal means and effective instruments to counteract the negative impact of the decentralisation process in their relations with local public administration authorities, which are perpetually subordinated to ethnic Hungarian groups. The Romanian community has completely lost the capacity to promote its interests at local level and to influence important decisions affecting it, as its low degree of representation does not allow it to do so. In many administrative territorial units, Romanians have no representatives in local councils.

Local authorities and public institutions organise their daily activities satisfactorily, but the interests of the Romanian community are addressed only accidentally and only when imposed by external constraints. The feeling of powerlessness, accompanied by fear and discouragement, defines the mentality of the Romanian community today. The fundamental structures of the Romanian community, represented by the Church, the school and the town hall, are almost destroyed in more than half of the localities in Covasna county and in two thirds of those in Harghita. In addition, Romanians, as a numerical minority, face a lack of support from society and the state, bitterly noting that they do not see themselves in the area's vision for the future and wondering whether they should continue their existence there or seek other destinations.

Another major risk for the Romanian community in these counties is that they see their community framework destroyed, without resources and means to sustain and protect their Romanian ethnic identity. Sociological studies have shown that the Hungarian majority in Covasna, Harghita and partly Mureş counties is protected by obvious and excessive measures of positive discrimination, while the Romanian community is condemned to denationalisation, assimilation or emigration¹⁹⁰.

In Covasna and Harghita counties, public cultural institutions do not pay attention to the history and culture of Romanians in these areas. Local monographs, cultural heritage albums and tourist brochures reflect the mono-ethnic character of these counties, ignoring the contribution and existence of the Romanian population. Local history volumes, tourist albums and leaflets also promote separatism and territorial autonomy of the so-called "Szeklerland", thus neglecting ethnic diversity and Romanian identity.

In addition, books continue to be published that downplay the contribution of Romanians in the former Szekler seats and distort the historical truth. The previous example is relevant, with the history textbook of the "Szeklerland" where they seriously insult the Romanians and falsify historical events. The republication of the "History of the Szeklers" textbook by the Harghita and Covasna County Councils,

¹⁹⁰ Radu Baltasiu, Gabriel Săpunaru and Ovidiana Bulumac, *Slăbirea comunității românești din Harghita-Covasna: raport de cercetare [Weakening Romanian community in Harghita-Covasna: research report]*, Bucharest, Sociological Studies Collection, Ethnological Publishing House, 2013, p. 47.

with public funds, cultivates the denial of responsibility for the past and promotes separatism, with serious consequences for the education of young people. Thus, these practices encourage the formation of a generation of young Secessionists with a separatist and segregationist attitude, preventing natural communication and collaboration with young Romanians.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND PARALLEL PERCEPTIONS OF THE PAST

We can observe that in multi-ethnic communities, the perception of controversial, violent or painful events for the collective mind comes to be perceived in completely different, even parallel, forms. To this day, many Romanian villagers from Gurghiului Valley or Hungarians from Nirajului Valley prefer to remain anonymous or not to discuss the days of March 1990 at all, for example. An important step in this direction must be taken to identify mistakes on both sides and then accept and ultimately forgive and reconcile. Casting a shadow, tabooing the subject only provides fertile ground for those who wish to politically speculate and divide communities.

In this context, identifying the “truth” and accommodating the collective memory with it becomes extremely difficult as the two communities have completely different perceptions not only of historical events but also of recent moments in their common past. The case of March 1990 is a perfect illustration of these antipodal conceptions. Finding “common ground” in Transylvanian politics has never been an easy objective, especially when it comes to recovering the truth and confronting the past. Inevitably “what is the middle way?” becomes the most difficult question to answer¹⁹¹. However, more often than not, this is a question that political partisans use tendentious rhetoric to argue that a mutually agreed upon settlement, in which all past wrongs are acknowledged and documented, is impossible.

One possible method for dealing with the past is to set up truth commissions. One of the most common and obvious political and moral justifications for the use of truth commissions in post-conflict societies is that they offer a non-adversarial, temporary, non-judicial and non-combative method of resolving difficult questions about the violent past. Truth commissions can have significant social, cultural and political power. Governments, policy-makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the general public in societies in transition often invest great hope in the ability of truth processes to build post-conflict “meaning”¹⁹² and, consequently, to make sense of the chaos of political violence.

¹⁹¹ Kirk Simpson, *Truth recovery in Northern Ireland: critically interpreting the past*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009, p. 25.

¹⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

Unfortunately, the elites of the minority community, in their efforts to preserve cultural identity, often apply methods that isolate the members of the two ethnic groups, in some cases leading to enclave and, in the common perception of the majority, to an unhealthy separation, especially for the younger generation. If the Târgu Mureş phenomenon was an isolated episode, the minority-majority relationship must also be analysed in the immediate vicinity, where the demographic relationship is clearly changing. The local reality is characterised by a symbolic imbalance, which then leads to the development of all other administrative, economic, educational and cultural imbalances. Instead of an open dialogue and mutual support, we observe in these areas that the Hungarian majority are over-strengthening their community while the Romanian minorities, lacking the general support of society and the state, remain without a real community¹⁹³. Thus, ethnic Romanian minorities are encouraged through non-specific fear and by promoting a partial pragmatism, to forget their collective identification elements of the community. The inevitable result is a collective sense of insecurity and mutual suspicion.

This lack of effective engagement in dealing with sensitive issues and establishing bodies that actively work to heal the wounds of the past and bring communities together will generate widening rifts. Without cultural interference and honest dialogue, misinformation will reach new heights and parallel narratives will continue to develop. Victims of violence need to be heard and understood and oral history becomes an easy means for this. As part of the process of critically interpreting the past, people need to create and maintain shared spaces and places of remembrance where relevant social and political meanings are produced. In the context of a discussion about confronting the past and coming to terms with painful truths, political and social public memory must be shaped as a necessary part of post-conflict transition and democratic reconstruction.

Particularly in the case of an event that has caused major wounds and rifts between communities, the role of sociological study and oral history becomes even more important by treating and comparing points of view. Thorough analysis of the personal experiences of victims or ordinary participants can provide new insights into the wrongs that occurred at the time and how we can understand the unfolding of events. Oral history is inherently subjective: its subjectivity is both inevitable and necessary to understand the meanings we attribute to our past and present. The great task of qualitative research, especially sociological interviews, is to expose the meaning of lived experience. The value of the in-depth interview is that it allows us to experience the world of another person and even a community in all its complexity¹⁹⁴. And by compiling the in-depth interviews and combining the insights

¹⁹³ Radu Baltasiu, Gabriel Săpunaru and Ovidiana Bulumac, *quoted work*, p. 46.

¹⁹⁴ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording oral history: a guide for the humanities and social sciences*, 2nd ed., California, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, 2005, p. 41.

gained from them with various types of information from other types of documents, we can get a better picture of how we have come to interact as communities.

Interaction between multi-ethnic communities is often complicated by divergent interpretations of the past. Finding common ground in confronting sensitive historical events is a persistent challenge. The establishment of truth commissions could provide an appropriate framework for managing and reconciling divergent perceptions. To better understand divergent perspectives, sociological study and oral history are valuable tools. Detailed analysis of personal experiences and individual recollections can reveal important nuances and contexts in interpreting the past. By listening to and understanding personal stories, we can gain a more comprehensive picture of the impact of events on individuals and communities. This approach allows us to approach a deeper understanding of the complexity of the past and build bridges of communication and empathy between different social groups.

MARKING THE TERRITORY IN AN ETHNIC SENSE BY PLACING AND MODIFYING PUBLIC MONUMENTS. CASE STUDY – EREMITU COMMUNE, MUREȘ COUNTY

The work carried out as president of the Civic Forum of Romanians from Covasna, Harghita and Mureș included observing, documenting and reporting to the competent institutions about certain buildings, monuments, statues or other symbols that were illegally placed, modified from the original project or even moved or transformed entirely, all without respecting the legal provisions in the field. A relevant example of how the local authorities led by representatives of the Hungarian minority understand to relate to the legal and legal framework of the Romanian state is the Hungarian monument in Eremitu commune, Mureș county.

In fact, we are talking about an obelisk located in the commune of Eremitu, on County Road 153, near street number 313 in Mureș County, entitled “Millennium Monument”, respectively the legal conditions under which it was placed, the way it was intervened on and subsequently completed with new elements. Following the reply received from the local authorities in Eremitu after a long time, its representatives told us in an address dated July 2022 that the monument had been erected in the commune in 1896, without providing any concrete evidence in this regard, such as documents from the town hall archives, relevant deeds or minutes.

It is also mentioned that alterations and additions were made to the monument after it was built, and the year 1996 is mentioned for the application of the plaque which reads “*1.100 éve itt vagyunk*” – (*we have been here for 1.100 years*). Of course, the Mayor of Eremitu deliberately refuses to give details of the other elements of the monument, which were clearly added after the year of adoption of Law No. 120/2006 on public monuments, Law No. 50/1991 on the authorisation of building works and Law No. 350/2001 on planning and urban development. In this regard, photographic

evidence was even obtained on the condition of the monument from 2008, 2012 and 2014, at which time the bird “Turul”¹⁹⁵ was missing from the top of the obelisk, the coat of arms of Hungary had a different shape and elements, and notably, the map of “Greater Hungary” was missing from the monument! It should be pointed out that changes to the monument were made extremely recently, as recently as 2019, when the plaque where “Greater Hungary” was depicted was replaced from a rectangular piece into a plaque cut out with only the borders, as can still be seen today. In this context, we observe the fulfilment of the constitutive elements of the offence of material forgery of official documents provided for in Article 320 of the Criminal Code, an offence committed by the author of the address, the mayor of the municipality of Eremitu. In the very vicinity of the monument, an informative poster mentions that in 2013 works were carried out to modernize the space and modify the monument, information presented by the authors themselves on the spot, a fact intentionally omitted and contrary to the law in the documents communicated.

It should be noted that for the location of the elements added later on the monument, the necessary urban planning documentation was not obtained, the approval of the Ministry of Culture was not received and no rules in this field were respected, they are pure elements of marking the territory in an ethnic sense by elements that make obvious reference to identity themes such as “the millenary homeland”, “the Turul bird” “Greater Hungary”. Also, in total defiance of the law, the monument underwent massive structural changes by placing the so-called “tower bird”, the top of the obelisk was cut and modified, also without requesting and obtaining the necessary documentation according to the law. Such chauvinist symbols have been placed on Romanian territory with the even illegal complicity of local authorities who have no regard for the Romanian Government, the relevant ministries and, in particular, the laws of the state and the country’s constitution. In these circumstances, the constituent elements of the crime of destruction provided for in Article 253 of the Criminal Code by permanently and irreparably altering the original state of the monument are met. It also meets the specific elements of the intervention on historical monuments provided for by Law No. 422/2001 as well as the execution without building or demolition authorization or with disregard of the provisions in the field provided for by art. 24 of Law No. 50/1991.

Administrative complaints and even a criminal complaint were filed on all these facts so that the Public Ministry can act on the one hand to restore the monument to its original state and remove the irredentist elements from it, but also to identify the perpetrators and bring the criminal investigation procedure to a successful conclusion. It is important to understand the true significance of these facts, the subtle and often unknown way in which local authorities in areas ethnically

¹⁹⁵ “the falcon or turul, which in shamanic tradition rested above the tree of life that connects the earth to the world beyond and to heaven, has remained longer [than other clan totems] as a symbol belonging to the ruling (Arpadian) house. But even this was soon eclipsed by the symbol of the double cross and, around 1200, by the red and white striped shield of the Passion of Christ”, in Martyn C. Rady, *Nobility, land and service in medieval Hungary*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 12.

dominated by the Hungarian minority place and alter monuments with irredentist symbolism. At the same time, it is difficult to understand how such offensive and insulting elements towards the Romanian state are tolerated on the national territory by the central authorities.

Such actions illustrate not only a violation of the law, but also subtly express the symbolism and cultural identity of the communities involved. They highlight a deep attachment to another state, an identification with a “great – millennial” nation. At the same time, these manifestations also show a complex relationship with national history and their minority status in the host country. By placing and altering monuments with irredentist symbolism, local authorities in areas ethnically dominated by minorities seek to express their affinity with neighbouring countries and to underline their cultural and historical belonging to these nations. Such actions can be interpreted as attempts to assert identity in the context of a minority community but can also be perceived as challenges to central authorities and the host state.

These symbolic manifestations show that the relationship of minority communities with their countries of origin and national history is complex and nuanced. They reflect a desire to preserve cultural identity and to assert ethnic belonging, but also a struggle for recognition and rights within the host society. At the same time, they can fuel tensions and conflicts within communities and between communities and central authorities, highlighting the fragility of the inter-ethnic balance and the need for deeper dialogue and mutual understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the observations made in this analysis, the complexity and sensitivity of inter-ethnic relations in the regions mentioned becomes evident. Issues of cultural identity, recognition of minority communities and interpretation of history are often subjects of dispute and tension. Each community seeks ways of affirming and protecting its identity, and this can be expressed through symbols, monuments and actions that may be perceived differently by the various parties involved. Each community has the right to express and promote its own values and traditions, subject to respect for the laws of the state and the rights of the majority ethnic group in the state but the minority in the region. Open dialogue and mutual understanding are fundamental to overcoming inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts.

On the other hand, it is essential that the symbolic manifestations and actions of local authorities are consistent with democratic principles and respect for the law. The use of irredentist symbols or challenges to the host state can fuel tensions and hinder progress towards harmonious and cooperative coexistence. The authorities must therefore act responsibly and promote a climate of understanding and tolerance in ethnically diverse regions. Finally, solving inter-ethnic problems and strengthening social cohesion requires sustained efforts from all parties involved –

local authorities, minority and majority communities, civil society and state institutions. It is essential to encourage dialogue, promote mutual respect and value diversity as a source of cultural and social richness, not as a reason for division and conflict.

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ATTACHMENTS



Figure 1. Photo of the Monument in Eremitu in 2008.

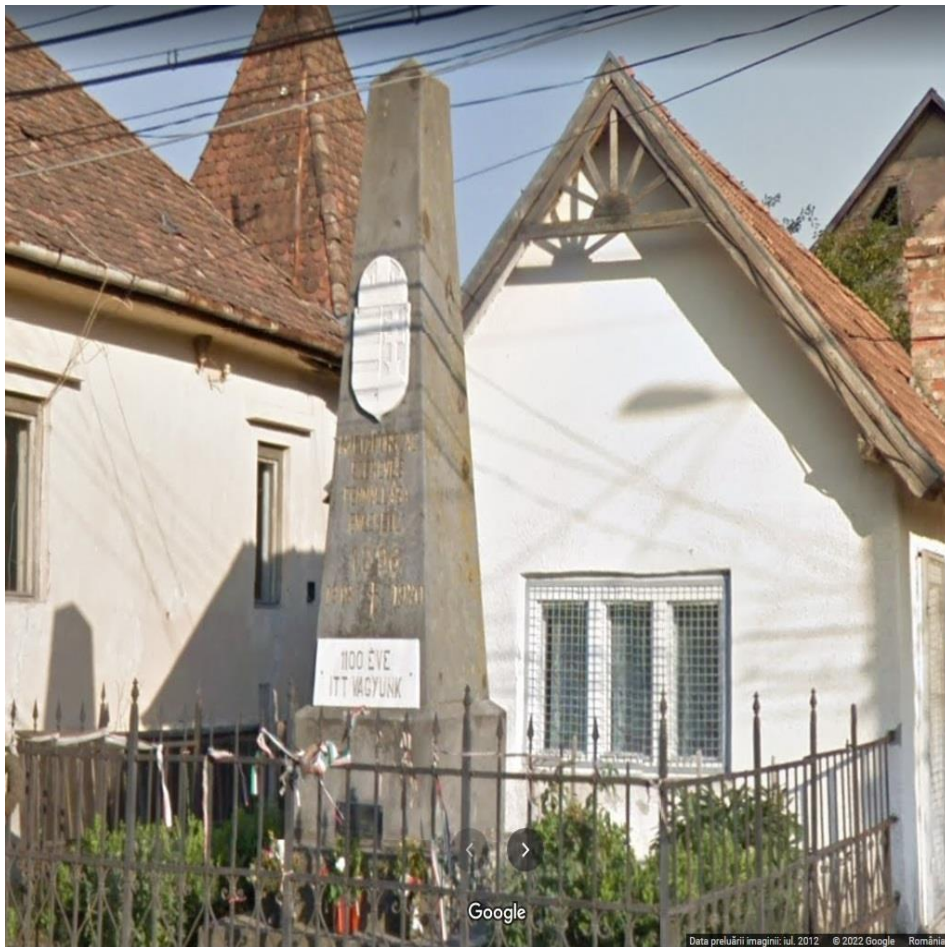


Figure 2. Photo of the Monument in Eremitu in 2012.



Figure 3. Photo of the Monument in Eremitu in 2014.



Figure 4. Photo of the Monument in Eremitu in 2019. (see the Turul bird, the rectangular plaque and the cross on the crown added).



Figure 5. Photo of the Monument in Eremitu in 2022 (map of “Greater Hungary” added in place of the previous rectangular plate with the same content).



Figure 6. On-site information poster about the changes to the monument: (the relocation and modernisation of the monument is mentioned as well as the location of the bird “tour”).

