

# Identity Geographies of Transylvanian Romanians in the Dualist Period\*

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## Introduction

**I**N THE nineteenth century, Romantic nationalism described Romania as the spiritual home of all Romanians, Transylvania being imagined and viewed as the core of the Romanian nation. During the second half of the nineteenth century, intellectuals employed a series of mostly geographic arguments in outlining Transylvania's identity. As contemporary authors elaborated them, geographic arguments have a host of cultural and identity implications. In the context of Transylvania's belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, this type of arguments underlined Transylvanian Romanians' close connection to Romanians from everywhere. Transylvania was portrayed as the heart of the Romanian nation and Romanians as the dominant demographic element, the ancient character of this population in the province being also indicative of their continuity in the area. Transylvania, as a Romanian area, presented reference-points employed to emphasize the legitimacy of the political demands of Romanians.

The geographic picture is allocated consistent descriptions in the oeuvre of contemporary authors, including elements of classic geography, ethnographic descriptions, anthropological elements and ideas that configure symbolic geographies. Geography is approached in both highly specialized works and the contemporary literature, Ioan Slavici being the author that provides most details from this perspective. Relevant to geography's cultural and identity implications are poems and certain press articles. The classic geographic demarcations serve to delineate the territory inhabited by Transylvanian Romanians, establish the area that they claimed as being their own permanently and continuously. The emphasis on landforms plays the same delineating role. In most works containing detailed geographic descriptions, approaches not only delineate the space, but also valorize it. Space becomes a symbol, its particularities revealing identity coordinates. It is not only a settlement or a place that belongs to a map, it does not represent a geographic demarcation, but becomes identity by emphasizing the people's relationship to the areas they inhabit and to whom they confer specificity.

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## Elements of general geography

**T**HE FIRST geographic issue is connected to the name of the country itself, and in most cases, it contains data on its spatial location and the dominant landforms. According to well-known historical data, the territory of Transylvania was part of the province of Dacia during the Antiquity. Later, it bore the name of *Ultrasilvania* which was first used as an adjective in two documents from 1103 A.D., namely *Dominus Simon Ultrasilvanus* and *Mercurius Princeps Ultrasilvanus*. As attested by historical sources, it was only in the twelfth century that the name Transylvania appeared, and it coexisted with the name *Ultrasilvania* for a time. Transylvania as the concept designating the name of the country became established only later. The significance of the two names is obviously linked to the dominant landforms, both designating a country located beyond the forests. From among the alternative names used in the spaces of neighbouring alterities, namely within the German and Hungarian milieus, the most popular were *Siebenbürgen*, the German name of the country, and *Erdély*, the Hungarian version (the name deriving from the Hungarian word *erdő* which translates into English as “forest”). To these, one should also add the Romanian alternative name of *Ardeal*, which is still popular and widely employed among Romanians.<sup>1</sup>

The classic geographic elements situate Transylvania in the border area of the Habsburg Monarchy and distinguish it as a region with a rich array of landforms, especially the mountains that surround the region: “Transylvania, a mountainous country, is situated on the eastern borders of the Monarchy and was considered in all ages as a natural fortress along the defensive line of the Carpathians” wrote Slavici.<sup>2</sup>

Landforms and the populations that inhabit them are prisoners of a triangle, the “mathematical” representation of the marked space. Transylvania is described as a “strategic” triangle with its tip pointing northward and its sides forming the borderlines: the western side separates it from Hungary, the eastern one from former Moldavia, and the southern one from former Wallachia. Thus, the proximity elements are also established.<sup>3</sup> The basis of the triangle was formed by the so-called Transylvanian Alps, the southern line, starting at the Retezat Mountains and running almost parallel with the Danube up to the Romanian Penteleu (near the town of Focșani). Slavici describes the tip of the triangle as pointing northward. The length of the territory stretching between the two lines is estimated at 50,000 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>4</sup> In Transylvania’s case as well, geography becomes a strong element of distinction and, consequently, of identity: “Nature itself wanted Transylvania to be an outstanding country, since it surrounded it with tall mountains, gave her climatic, meteorological, economic and ethnographic features that set her apart from the surrounding countries.”<sup>5</sup>

Landforms confer a polychromatic beauty to the landscape as well as a symmetrical structure. The three great rivers of Transylvania, namely the Someș, Mureș and Olt, stream from the three mountains belonging to the Carpathian chain. The topographical centre of the province is located in the valley of the Mureș River which divides it into two equal parts. The widest riverbed is situated at Zam, in the Mureș Valley.<sup>6</sup> Landforms generally appear described in a descending order (as Slavici describes them). Thus, at very high altitude and in a very rarefied, almost intangible, atmosphere, one can note the

pastures covered in “constantly fresh grass” and “streams that never run dry.” Barely accessible to man, these heights are yet not devoid of human presence, shepherds taking advantage of what nature provides here in the summer and autumn. The perspective changes a bit from another angle revealing deep precipices and waterfalls, seamlessly integrated into the mountainous landscape which is barren and sometimes treacherous to humans. Lower, one can find orchards and fields bearing the traces of human presence and providing the inhabitants plentiful nourishment and good livelihood. Besides, people and nature resonate strongly. Thus, nature is a genuine workshop that constantly transforms and renews itself, and people explore the accessible areas which they take over and make more useful.<sup>7</sup> The distinctiveness of the landscape described in a descending order is conferred by its paradisaical aspect and beauty.

Landforms are also mentioned as contexts delineating population groups that “borrow” the features of the environment in which they have to survive. Population groups are named according to the geographical areas they inhabit: *Munteni* (the inhabitants of mountainous regions), *Pădureni* or *Codreni* (those living in forested areas), *Podgoreni* (those inhabiting wine regions) and *Câmpeni* (those in the lowlands). To this, one can also add a left/right type of delineation according to the banks and valleys of the two major rivers (the Someș and Mureș).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, such a division is also mentioned with respect to the economic conditions and living standards that are tightly connected to landforms.

The geography of the population reveals a mixed structure. What surprises in regard to the human context is the mixture of populations and ethnic groups: beside Romanians, one can find Hungarians, Saxons, Szeklers, Swabians, Serbs and Ruthenes. This heterogeneity also represents one of Transylvania’s distinctive features. The preponderance of the aforementioned ethnic groups at the level of the regions delineated by landforms allows for the establishment of the strongly-Romanian areas: in the Olt Valley, there were few Saxons and even fewer Hungarians, Romanians thus making up 90% of the total population.<sup>9</sup> On the right bank of the valleys belonging to the tributaries of the Olt River, Romanians were mixed with Saxons. The Mureș River is depicted as the most genuinely Romanian of all rivers. Upstream, the population was purely Romanian, while further downstream one can find a predominantly Szekler population.<sup>10</sup> The Someș Valley is inhabited by a similarly significant number of Romanians, their number being especially high in Năsăud, “the most important centre with Romanian population,” while Cluj, the province’s most important city, was identified as a Hungarian centre.<sup>11</sup> Through the presence of each ethnic group and their proportion in every area, accompanied by a short historical background of each of them, one can justify the legitimacy of Romanians as the only ethnic group with an uninterrupted existence in the province. The picture and mixed structure of the population is outlined in most sources, being reflected in the classic contemporary literature: “What a multitude of people and what a mixture of types and costumes and languages! As if this is the centre of the world, the meeting-point of all nations.”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, in general, the geographic framework overlaps with the territory inhabited by Transylvanian Romanians: “In talking about Ardeleni or Transilvăneni, whom some people also call Ungureni, we usually refer to all Romanians living in the lands of the Hungarian Crown. However, they also differ among themselves: Transilvăneni, Ungureni, Bănățeni, Sălăgeni and Maramureșeni.”<sup>13</sup> According to Slavici’s delineation, in a strict sense,

the *Ardeleni* lived in the regions situated between the Mureș basin and Zam, as well as between the Someș basin up to Chioara. The *Ungureni* were those who lived outside Transylvania, especially on the right bank of the Mureș River and along the Criș rivers. The *Bănășeni* inhabited the area situated between the left bank of the Mureș river and the Danube. Finally, the *Sălăgeni* lived in the region between the Crișul Repede River and Sătmar, whereas the *Maramureșeni* lived in the north, in the region of Maramureș.<sup>14</sup>

The city of Alba-Iulia was described as the capital of Transylvania. It is also known according to its alternative name of Bălgrad, and also bears special historical significance given that several major events in the nation's history took place here.<sup>15</sup>

## Symbolic geographies

**T**RANSYLVANIA APPEARS as a space of paradoxes. While the region seems to have a conservation destiny reserved to it through its geography, history does not confirm it. This space receives a double valorisation: it is a topos of virtues and suffering. Transylvania is mostly a peripheral and liminal space of autochthonistic and autarkic manifestations. From a different perspective, Transylvania is a periphery "in search of" a centre: Vienna, Budapest or Bucharest.<sup>16</sup> It is also a periphery in relation to a centre.

Represented as an equilateral triangle, Transylvania embodies the concept of distinct space, of a region of "celestial" geometry and harmony, articulated through very well-defined nuclei. It is precisely this symmetry that characterizes and distinguishes it, the region being under the sign of the magical number three: the three sides of the triangle it forms are equal, the region is crossed by three major rivers, three valleys, and three mountain chains. Besides, the mountains surrounding it provide the sensation of an enclosure and play the role of genuine gates that make it appear naturally protected and inaccessible. The same inaccessibility is also conferred by its portrayal as a fortress. However, paradoxically, it has always been "a distinct country, but dependant on the stronger masters of the plains."<sup>17</sup> What surprises in the case of this province is the concordance between the geographic perspective, which is closed and limited by the surrounding mountains, and the lack of the horizon of liberty: "There is no sadder and darker shroud in universal history than the one covering and wrapping our hopes of liberty, which die in Transylvania and are reborn for thousand years."<sup>18</sup>

In its first valorisation, Transylvania appears as a static, harmonious, and isolated region. This representation is associated with a predominantly rural landscape. It is precisely because of this that the region appears as a space of virtues and original purity. The predominance of the rural landscape bears another meaning as well. The reprise of the opposition village/city, peasant/citizen does not reflect here the well-known opposition between civilization and wilderness but, given the circumstances, it essentially conveys the opposition between foreign and indigenous.

The representation as a topos of the suffering provoked by the lack of liberty and by the presence of "stronger masters" is eloquently expressed in the epic, and perhaps the most artistically conveyed in Octavian Goga's poem *Noi (We)*:

“At us, fir-tree woods are green  
And plains are silky smooth,  
At us, there are so many butterflies  
And much sadness in our homes.  
Nightingales from other countries  
Come and listen to our *doinas* here.  
At us, there are songs and flowers  
And plenty, plenty of tears . . .

At us, up in the heavens,  
The old sun burns stronger  
Ever since in our lands  
It rises for us no longer.  
At us, the wild-woods  
Tell stories of sadness,  
And it flows down the Mureş  
And the three Criş rivers.”<sup>19</sup>

The symbolic title is encompassing and covers both the geographic and ethnic frameworks of the poet’s country of origin, Transylvania. One can find in Goga’s poetry a pastel landscape as background for the sadness of the collective soul which lost its liberty. Landforms confer beauty to a country which, similarly to a human being, is burdened by sadness and whose suffering is shared by the humanized nature.

The same idea is reiterated by another Transylvanian poet, George Coşbuc, and conveyed through the voice of nature, the imaginary dialogue between the two rivers, the Olt and the Danube:

“From there I arrive dejected,  
With anger I descend upon the field,  
For where I come from, there is  
Horror and trembling.  
Romanians live there as well,  
A nation from the days of old,  
Yet their necks are still today  
Fastened to a yoke.

Oh mother, I arrive so angry  
Out of sympathy for them  
And spite against the enemies  
Who trampled on them.”<sup>20</sup>

Coşbuc, through the humanized nature witnessing and bearing his people’s feelings of suffering, which he takes over and carries further, expresses the same idea of the prevalence of suffering among Transylvanian Romanians.

Suffering, as the dominant feature of the province, becomes filled with drama in wartime: "Today our Transylvania is mute; the Transylvania which until yesterday was a prison, today is a graveyard . . . the Transylvania which lies scattered on every battlefield of Europe, which dies the most unjust death, not for its own sake, but for the sake of others, a country with so little luck and so much hope."<sup>21</sup>

Climate and landforms have symbolic functions. Apart from conferring the picturesque aspect to the region, they are also characterized by functionality. They serve a higher purpose, having a defensive function. Thus, Transylvania is described a "fortress" surrounded by natural walls, the mountains (the same role being played by river valleys acting as natural boundaries, barriers), which contribute to the province's identity delineation and individualization, protecting it from the vulnerability of exposure. Under these circumstances, climate and landforms become exponential to the region and constitute, at the same time, sources for historical myths.

Landforms play an essential role in the life of the community, determining and characterizing the population groups. They not only generate and decide the economic status, dividing the population into relatively homogeneous groups according to their predominance, but also operate with respect to the population's separation by regions and groups whose features become specific to one region or another. The relationship between people and the areas they inhabit is characterized by inter-conditioning.

In the same descending order of heights, one can distinguish several groups of Romanians. The first one is that of the *Munteni*, the inhabitants of mountainous areas, also called *Mocani* or *Bârsani*, who were generally shepherds. Their features are borrowed from the natural environment in which they live and adapted to the requirements to which they have to conform.<sup>22</sup> Symbolically, the *Munteni* distinguish themselves precisely due to their robust features and a certain toughness of character conferred by the geographical area they inhabit. The mountains, as the predominant landform in the province, have a functionality and illustrate the ability for natural defence. Transylvania, surrounded by mountain ranges, appears as an "intangible" region to all those willing to conquer it. However, the heights are tamed and humanized under the circumstances in which the presence of man is felt even at very high altitudes. Mountains provide little, and the development of qualities required by nature are indispensable to survival. Generally, all inhabitants of high-altitude areas are known under the name of *Munteni*. A distinct group among them are the *Mopi*, the inhabitants of the Apuseni Mountains in eastern Transylvania, who became known especially as hard-working and gifted wood craftsmen after completely abandoning sheep raising. Their feature resonate with the geographical area they inhabit: robustness, vigour, toughness, and firmness of character.<sup>23</sup>

Forests, the same as mountains, are core elements in the life of Transylvanian Romanians, contributing to the identity delineation. As integral parts of mountain landscapes, forests can constitute natural obstacles, thus playing the same protective role for the region. The essence of Romanians' relationship with the forest (also called *codru* in Romanian), is synthetically expressed in an old and well-known saying: "The forest is brother to the Romanian" (*Codru-i frate cu românul*). The history of the region is testimony to the truthfulness of the saying: "The storm of the world scattered us across dark valleys and we hid in mountain crevasses, forests were home and friends to us, poverty, shortages and

hardship were companions to us, while the doinas and pipes provided comfort and art—and we did not perish.”<sup>24</sup> In general, the name of *Pădureni* refers to Romanians living on the forested slopes of the Carpathians. What set them apart was their small height and their state of poverty which was the worst among Romanians living in the Empire, simply because forests could not provide a decent enough livelihood. They are characterized by certain timidity, which makes them somewhat reticent toward outsiders. However, this reticence does not derive from their closeness, since they are also described as very communicative with one another. They like to sing, dance and say riddles, which could make them appear somewhat frivolous.<sup>25</sup>

The plain, situated especially in Hungary and the fertile region of the Mureș River, is inhabited by the *Câmpeni* whose name translates into English as plainsmen. They distinguish themselves through their industriousness, the plain providing them substantial means of support.<sup>26</sup>

The group of Transylvanian Romanians known as *Podgoreni* live in the wine regions. Given that the group’s specificity is determined by the geographical area they inhabit, one can argue that they make up the economically most advanced segment of Romanian population in the Empire. Nevertheless, they are also characterized by certain inconsistency regarding their living standards, alternating between periods of poverty and prosperity. What sets them apart is a certain frivolity, being described as people who “rely too much on luck.”<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the fact that each landform confers features and individualizes the groups, the destiny of each community appears to be greatly determined by them.

## Conclusions

**I**N THE Dualist period, geography was a prominent element in the identity discourse of Transylvanian Romanians. The context of a province that was ethnically-heterogeneous, but with a Romanian majority, and which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, determined the recourse to several arguments, including geographic ones. Thus, Romanians pointed out their numerical domination in most geographic areas and their continuity in the province. Undoubtedly, the dominance of geographic elements in the Romanian identity discourse is determined, among others, by the prevalence of the ethnic component within nineteenth-century nationalism. However, the cultural implications of geographic arguments are also evident.

From a geographical perspective, Transylvania appears as a puzzle with each piece representing an area and with diverse features integrating into a coherent overall identity. Outlined with the help of symmetry and harmony elements, the Transylvanian space acquires paradisaical virtues in the vision of contemporary intellectuals.

At symbolic level, there is a surprising concordance between the closed and limited geographical perspective on the one hand, and the absence of the horizon of liberty, on the other. In addition, from the poetical perspective, nature resonates with the emotions of people living in this space.

Geography is another element that helps Transylvanian Romanian intellectuals construct a sense of superiority of their ethnic group by emphasizing its ancient character and continuity in this space, thus constructing a powerful identity argument.

Approached in more or less specialized works by outlining the space, the human context and the scenery of the province, geography establishes the living space of Transylvanian Romanians and reveals identity delineations.



## Notes

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2. Ioan Slavici, *Ardealul: Studiu istoric* (București: Thoma Basileescu, 1893), 48.
3. Ioan Slavici, *Românii de peste Carpați* (București: Editura. Fundației Culturale Române, 1993), 206.
4. Slavici, *Ardealul*, 49.
5. *Tribuna* (Sibiu) 2, 29 (1885): 113.
6. Slavici, *Ardealul*, 49.
7. Ioan Slavici, *Opere*, vol. 13 (București: Minerva, 1984), 661–667.
8. *Ibid.*, 661.
9. Slavici, *Românii*, 9.
10. *Ibid.*, 10.
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12. Ioan Slavici, *Mara* (Galați: Porto-Franco, 1991), 78.
13. Slavici, *Românii*, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 6.
15. Slavici, *Ardealul*, 57.
16. Sabina Fati, *Transilvania, o provincie în căutarea unui centru: Centru și periferie în discursul politic al elitelor din Transilvania* (Cluj-Napoca: Centrul pentru diversitate etnoculturală, 2007), 13.
17. Slavici, *Ardealul*, 64.
18. Octavian Goga, *Naționalism dezrobitor. Permanența ideii naționale* (București: Albatros, 1998), 184.
19. Octavian Goga, *Poezii* (Budapesta: Luceafărul, 1906), 10–12.
20. George Coșbuc, *Cântece de vitejie* (București: Minerva, 1988), 85–87.
21. Goga, *Naționalism*, 183–184.
22. Slavici, *Opere*, 668–669.
23. *Ibid.*, 669.
24. “Lupta noastră,” *Tribuna poporului* (Arad) 2, 6 (1897): 2.
25. Slavici, *Opere*, 670.
26. *Ibid.*, 672–673.
27. *Ibid.*, 673.



### **Abstract**

#### **Identity Geographies of Transylvanian Romanians in the Dualist Period**

In outlining the identity of the province of Transylvania in the second half of the nineteenth century, an important place should be assigned to geographical arguments. The geographical descriptions provided by the authors of the time, together with historical, economic, religious and linguistic arguments, are all major identity markers. Geographically located on the borders of the Habsburg Empire, Transylvania represented in the Dualist period a borderland distinguished by strong identity elements. A series of geographic arguments, its location, the ancient character of its inhabitants, their number and dissemination are significant identity elements that the article analyses, concomitantly underlining their cultural and identity implications.

### **Keywords**

Transylvania, border, symbolic geography, identity, modern era