

Identity and Alterity in Transylvania during the Confrontations of 1599-1601

Ioan-Aurel Pop

Center for Transylvanian Studies, Cluj-Napoca

During “the 15 years war” in Eastern Europe, the King of France, Henry IV of Bourbon (1589-1610), said to the representatives of a province recently included in the French Kingdom: “Because your native tongue is French, you are naturally subjects of the King of France. I totally agree that the Spanish language belongs to the Spanish and the German Language to the Germans, but all the regions where people speak French have to be mine”¹.

After the battle of Mirăslău (1600, September 18), when Michael the Brave seemed to be removed from the political scene of Transylvania, Hungarian nobility decided, during the Let (Lecfalu) Diet, to break off all relations with the two Romanian Principalities: “Because our present ruin and danger had come from the two Romanian Principalities, we decided that from now on nobody can ever go and be in service in the two Romanian Principalities [...]; no Romanian priest can ever come here from the two Romanian Principalities; and the [Romanian] monks have to be totally proscribed everywhere in the country”².

Another Transylvanian Diet, at the beginning of 1601, asked the Austrian Emperor to govern the country (=Transylvania) using only Hungarian counselors and Hungarian commanders of the castles and other Hungarian captains and high officials; the army of the province had to be Hungarian; the salt office, the custom-house authorities and other income sources of the country had to be managed or administered only by Hungarian high officials; the prince – elected by the Diet – had to be a member of the Hungarian nation³.

Apparently, there is no connection between the two contemporary episodes which took place in France and in Transylvania. But a closer look and a new examination of realities show the opposite. The first text emphasizes the French conception concerning the national state and the French identity: every French speaker and every French speaking province has to be part of the

¹ R. Romeo, *Italia mille anni. Dall'eta feudale all'Italia Moderna ed Europea*, Firenze, 1981, p. 146.

² D. Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum. Din istoria formării națiunii române*, București, 1984, p. 113.

³ *Ibidem*.

French Kingdom. It is a point of view (older than the Western 16th century) which considers the nation – characterized by language – as the basis of the main political institution: the state. In this sense, all French speaking people have to be ruled or managed by the representatives of the French state. In the case of the other nations, the same procedure should be applied. In other words, the way of defining here identity and alterity is language: all inhabitants of France are French because they speak French and they are different from others (i.e. neighbouring nations) precisely since those “others” speak other languages.

While in France a French speaking province was to be unified with the rest of the Kingdom, in Transylvania – after a Romanian governing experience – the authorities tried to break every connection with the two neighboring Romanian Principalities. The adjective *Romanian* is used four times in the above-quoted fragment, as a sign that this delimitation had an ethnic meaning. The subsequent petition of the Hungarian nobility, pretending that all leaders of Transylvanian institutions, including the prince, have to be *Hungarians* is a result of the first request and a confirmation of its national sense. Transylvanian estates – but especially Hungarian nobility – perceived the reign of Michael the Brave in Transylvania (during a war period) as an attempt to transform the Principality into a Romanian state (having a Romanian political leadership to rule an important Romanian population). That is why what followed was an opposite reaction, in order to fortify the Hungarian political élite and to ensure the monopoly of power for this élite.

The two above-quoted episodes – one from France, the other from Transylvania – have their roots in a common national ideology, in transition now from the medieval to the modern outlook. It seemed only natural to the King of France that all French – defined as French by their language – have to be part of his kingdom. Historians do not know a similar text by Michael the Brave, a text which could explain clearly the Romanian national character of the 1599 union. Probably, the Romanian national will or sentiment was not the main reason for the union of the three Principalities, under the reign of Michael the Brave and during the new “crusade” started in 1593. But the formation of the “Dacian Kingdom”, *inhabited by a Romanian majority and governed for the first time by a Romanian Prince* (ever for a short period of time), generated a very strong impression, both among Romanians and among other nations. This fact produced a lot of ethnic reactions, attitudes and interpretations in Transylvania. Before 1599, Romanians and Hungarians fought together against the Turks, and even between 1599-1601, the army of Michael the Brave was, in a way, a general Christian army, not only a Romanian one.

The medieval individual used to identify himself, first of all, by his religious affiliation, then by his estate affiliation and only in the third place by his language or by some other ethnic features. But during the 16th-17th centuries, even in the Central and South-Eastern Europe, there are situations when certain persons and groups have ethnic affiliation in the forefront.

In Transylvania, at the end of the 16th century and at the beginning of the 17th century – against the background of the general confrontation between Christians and Moslems – there are serious signs that people, in some circumstances, thought and acted according to their national identity.

For instance, the Hungarian chronicler Zamosius (Szamosközi István) qualifies the support given by the Transylvanian Romanians to the policy of Michael the Brave and their uprising against the noblemen as *general Romanian solidarity*. “Hearing of the unfortunate battle [of Șelimbăr, October 28, 1599, when the Hungarian Prince was defeated] – he says – the Romanian nation, living in every Transylvanian village and hamlet, conspired everywhere and joined the newcomers [from Wallachia], and, together with them or separately, robbed all over the country. Encouraged by the confidence that they had a prince of their own nation [...], they controlled the roads and killed the runaways [...]. Stimulated in their perfidy by the Romanian Prince and growing bolder on account of the war, they hoped to go unpunished for their crimes; they plundered now more cruelly than before, since, when the country was quiet, they had served the most serious sentences; the Romanians filled the places where offenders were exposed, they were pilloried, put in the stocks, put to the sword, hanged, broken on the wheel.”⁴ The chroniclers Ambrosius Simigianus (Somogyi), Georg Krauss, the anonymous analyst from Prejmer and others expressed similar opinions⁵. Francis Mikó says that certain Hungarian noblemen were “terrified by the Romanian reign” of Michael the Brave⁶.

Generally speaking, the sources of that time explain the disturbances of 1599-1601 as a result of war and of the peasant’s hatred against their masters. But sometimes – as the above-mentioned examples proved – the causes of the riots were the Romanian reign of Michael the Brave and the “conspiracy” of the Transylvanian and Wallachian Romanians. The same way, the peasants’ uprising is not a social event, but a national revolt of all Romanians (*natio Valachorum*) against Hungarians.

The Hungarians’ self-identity has also some national features. Francis Mikó says that Moses Székely, negotiating with the Hungarian military leaders from Țara Bârsei, “stimulated them as Hungarians, to be inclined to their homeland and nation, to refuse the support for such a tyrant, to reject the domination of such miserable Romanians over this noble [Hungarian] nation”⁷. Consequently, the Hungarians have to act in a patriotic manner. Romanians, both as a nation and as individuals, are described in a negative way. They are considered born lazy, scoundrels, robbers

⁴ *Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, II. Scriptores, vol. II. p. 342-344.

⁵ D. Prodan, *op. cit.*, p. 115-116.

⁶ I. Craciun, “Știri despre Mihai Viteazul la cronicarul transilvănean Francisc Mikó”, in *Anuarul Institutului de istorie națională*, Cluj-Sibiu, IX, 1943-1944, p. 502.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

and killers⁸. Szamosközi is profoundly discontented with the usual diplomatic honors given by the Austrian Emperor, Rudolf II, to some Romanian messengers in Prague (1603): “The Emperor placed the lazy Romanian messengers, during their stay in the church, in front of the bishops”; he lodged them too well, with too much opulence, always in front of others⁹. Michael the Brave is scornfully named “the Walalachian” or “the Tyrant”, having a very low origin, and his wife, Princess Stanca, is described as an old woman (*vetula*), obliged to be always accompanied by two maid-servants¹⁰. Teodosie Rudeanu – chancellor of Wallachia and Transylvania, scholar and one of the greatest boyards (noblemen) – is considered “an old man, malicious with Hungarians and who urged Michael the Brave to slay the Hungarians”¹¹. A Saxon chronicler says that Mihălcea – the head of the Little Wallachia or Oltenia – “was the meanest man among all Romanians from Wallachia, being worthy of a curse upon his name”¹².

The Romanians who served Michael the Brave and were captured by the opposite side, were treated with medieval cruelty. Before the battle of Şelimbăr, Daniel of Zlaşti (Hunedoara County), a Romanian nobleman from Transylvania, left suddenly – together with his men – the army of Cardinal Báthory and joined the army of the Romanian Prince. Because of this deed and because he served Michael the Brave with loyalty, he was punished not only as a rebel, but as a Romanian: captured two years after the Romanian victory at Şelimbăr, he was tied with his hands back to a horse’s tail – Szamosközi says – and dragged by the animal until death; then his body was quartered and exposed to the crowds in four different places, “in order to terrify Romanians”¹³.

The Szeklers, who joined Michael the Brave, are also condemned for treason against the homeland. Fr. Mikó reproaches the whole Szekler community its joy to fight, to live and to die by the side of Michael and “against the sons and lords of their country”¹⁴. In September 1600, the Saxons from Sibiu, asked the Szeklers to live the Romanian Prince, because he strives to diminish the number of Hungarian noblemen, of Saxons and Szeklers, “and to fill with Romanians this nice land”, which earlier “fattened” the sons of the privileged nations¹⁵.

The Romanians did not feel drawn towards the Hungarians either. As we have seen, the great chancellor of Wallachia and Transylvania was malicious with the Hungarians. The chronicle of Wallachia emphasizes the perfidy of the Hungarians: “Hungarians [...], on the one hand, swore to

⁸ *Ibidem*; D. Prodan, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁹ I. Crăciun, *Cronica Szamosközi și însemnările lui privitoare la români (1566-1608)*, Cluj, 1928, p. 179.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

¹² N. Iorga, *Istoria românilor din Ardeal și Ungaria*, vol. I, Bucureşti, 1915, p. 214.

¹³ I.I. Russu, “Daniel din Zlaşti (Un aderent hunedorean al lui Mihai Viteazul)”, in *Apulum*, XIV, 1976, p. 161-172.

¹⁴ I. Crăciun, “Ştiri despre Mihai Viteazul...”, p. 503.

¹⁵ L. Szádeczky, *Erdély és Mihály Vajda története*, Timișoara, 1893, p. 368-369; Şt. Pascu, “Mişcări ţărăneşti prilejuate de intrarea lui Mihai Viteazul în Transilvania”, in *Studii și materiale de istorie medie*, I, 1956, p. 134.

be faithful to Prince Michael and on the other hand, tried, by all means, to get rid of the Romanian King they had”¹⁶. Szamosközi described a fight between Romanians and Hungarians in Hunedoara (Hunyad, August 1600): Romanians “made fun of Hungarians saying they are so stupid that a single Romanian with a club could chase and disperse such a crowd”¹⁷.

Naturally, the question is: Where did this mutual negative image of the two nations come from? Was it exclusively a result of the war and of the Romanian short authority in Transylvania? It is not difficult to notice that the events which took place in 1599-1601 stimulated this mutual negative image. It was a different and even opposite perception of the events: while Romanians considered Michael the Brave as a liberator and later as a national hero, Hungarians and Germans qualified him as a tyrant and as a conqueror. From this point of view, the attitude of Szamosközi is relevant: in 1593, in his work *Analecta lapidum* ..., the classical scholar admired Romanians as being descendants of Roman colonists in Dacia¹⁸, but a few years later, when Michael the Brave crossed the Carpathians in Transylvania, he had only deprecatory and outrageous epithets for the same nation. As a matter of fact, the medieval foreign authors did not create a negative image of the Romanian people, but a normal one: the Romanians were admired for their Roman origin and Romance language (very similar to Italian), for their persistence in Dacia, in spite of all the barbarian waves, for their effort in defence of Christianity; they were pitied for their misfortunes and for their modest life. U Cluj / Central University Library Cluj

But the mutual negative image of Romanians and Hungarians is much older than Michael the Brave’s short reign in Transylvania. A Hungarian historian, studying the Latin chronicles from Hungary, established the existence of a national nobiliary consciousness during the 13th century: at that time, there was this idea, a cliché, that in Hungary, nobility was descendant of the initial founding Hungarians and that common people descended from the other nations, which existed before the Hungarian’s arrival in Pannonia¹⁹. This idea generated an aristocratic national outlook and mentality, originated in the Middle Ages. For example, Szamosközi could not accept that Romanian noblemen had a Romanian origin. He explains that Romanians from Caransebeş (Caraş-Severin County) are more educated, more industrious and more honourable than the others, because their nobility descends from “Hungarian ancestors”²⁰. The chronicler mentions King Sigismund who, in the Council of Luca in 1429, was said to have proposed to stamp out the whole Romanian

¹⁶ P.P. Panaitescu, “Unificarea politică a Țărilor Române în epoca feudală”, in *Studii privind Unirea Principatelor*, București, 1960, p. 69.

¹⁷ I. Crăciun, *Cronicarul Szamosközi...*, p. 134.

¹⁸ D. Prodan, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁹ J. Perény, “La conscience nationale des chroniques hongroises du XIII-e siècle”, in *Le développement de la conscience nationale en Europe Orientale*, edited by Institut d’Etudes Slaves, Paris, 1969, p. 53-57.

²⁰ I. Crăciun, *Cronicarul Szamosközi...*, p. 41-42.

nation (*totam Valachorum progeniem a stirpe delendam esse*) and he regrets the failure of this plan²¹. However, Szamosközi was a humanist and admired general qualities of human being.

Romanians, especially after the 4th crusade (1203-1204), had not a good image because they were Orthodox. Members of the Orthodox Church were called “schismatics” (by Catholic circles) and schismatics – according to the interpretation given by Pope Innocent III to the Christian canons (=dogmas) – were assimilated to heretics. Consequently, it was no longer a sin to molest or to deprive an Orthodox of his goods, because the Roman Church declared them *iniusti possessores*²². This was a very good theoretical and theological argument for King Louis I (the Great, 1342-1382), who decided in 1366 that true noblemen had to be Catholic and they had to possess a royal donation diploma in order to remain masters of their lands; naturally, Romanians, being Orthodox and customary landowners, protested; that is why, the King decided also that all kind of malefactors, *but especially Romanians*, should be eradicated²³. At the end of King Louis’ reign, following the most important proselyte effort in Hungary, *propter omnium opinionem*, more than a third of the population in the Kingdom was Catholic²⁴.

Romanians, as “schismatics” subdued to the Catholic masters and deprived of their lands, could not have a good image in the official mirror, among the estates. Actually, after the 14th century, the Romanian élite was not allowed anymore to form a privileged group (estate) in the name of its nation. During the 16th century, when the new political and religious system of Transylvanian Principality was created, the representatives of the three “nations” (=estates) adopted a discriminatory legislation in the Diet: Romanians (Orthodox) were treated by law more severe than the other inhabitants of the country²⁵. This was very clear for the great Romanian majority, namely for peasants, but there are sources which testify that even Romanian priests and noblemen were treated in a different manner²⁶. Szamosközi says – as we have seen – that earlier, during the quiet times, everywhere, all over the country, Romanians were punished. Fr. Forgách, bishop of Oradea, criticized Nicolaus Olahus, archbishop and regent of Hungary (dead in 1568), because of his low Romanian origin²⁷. This happened in spite of the fact that Olahus was a Catholic, member of a princely family, having the highest secular and religious position.

²¹ *Ibidem*; D. Prodan, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²² Ș. Papacostea, *România în secolul XIII. Între Cruciată și Imperiul Mongol*, București, 1993, p. 54.

²³ Idem, *Geneza statului în evul mediu românesc. Studii critice*, Cluj-Napoca, 1988, p. 83-89; Ioan A. Pop, *Instituții medievale românești. Adunările cneziale și nobiliare (boierești) din Transilvania în secolele XIV-XVI*, Cluj-Napoca, 1991, p. 21-22.

²⁴ A. Bonfini, *Rerum Ungaricarum decades IV cum dimidia seu libri XLV*, Vienna, 1744, p. 274.

²⁵ Ioan A. Pop, “Ethnic and Confessional Sensibilities in Transylvania during the Time of Nicolaus Olahus”, in *Transylvanian Review*, II, 1993, no. 3, p. 91-96.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ F. Gyimesi Forgách, “Magyar historiája (1540-1572)”, in *Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, II. Scriptores, vol. XVI, Pest, 1866, p. 254; D. Prodan, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

Under the circumstances, Romanian mentality reflected also a negative image of Hungarian domination. Even Romanians living in Wallachia and Moldavia, where Hungary did not succeed to impose its direct domination (but tried hardy), were suspicious of the neighboring Hungarian authorities. Antonius Verantius (Verancsics), a classical scholar, wrote about this attitude: “Very often, feeling how a certain spirit of their former glory was growing in their mind and trying to restore again their old power [Romanian Princes] rose in arms. This was the situation, especially in Wallachia, during the reigns of Charles, Louis and Sigismund [around 1308-1437], *because the Hungarian domination was more detested than words can say*”²⁸. Charles Robert, Louis I and Sigismund of Luxemburg are kings of Hungary who, during the 14th and 15th centuries, put political, military and religious pressure upon Moldavia and Wallachia, in order to impose the Hungarian domination there. Verantius detected a real situation of conflict when he mentioned Romanian rebellions: for example, several times during the 14th century – in 1359, 1364-1365, 1374 etc. – Wallachia and Moldavia were simultaneously at war with Hungary²⁹.

As a conclusion, it is not possible to maintain that the mutual negative image of Hungarians and Romanians was created during the confrontations of 1599-1601. This image was shaped some centuries, when Romanians became a conquered and marginal people in Transylvania and when the Hungarian pressure over the Romanian Principalities was very strong. Hungarian domination and the Romanians’ Orthodox faith determined the estates to create for Romanians an inferior statute, which was soon reflected in the official mentality, but also in everyday life. This statute generated scorn and even hatred. Naturally, in 1599-1601, when a Romanian Prince ruled Transylvania and Transylvania was on the point of becoming – politically speaking – a Romanian Principality, everything looked like a challenge and hatred and scorn appeared more violent. The subdued and despised Romanians were, for the moment, masters of Transylvania and this fact emphasized their negative image in the eyes of privileged estates.

The typology of alterity³⁰ defines the marginal place of Romanians as a typical situation of an oppressed ethnic group. Such a situation lasted some centuries, that is why the Romanians’ behavior and manners were quite modest and their level of integration in the official society was not very high. Already during the 16th century, the word *Romanian* meant serf and schismatic (or even something different from Christian), because Romanians were usually serfs and Orthodox. But, for public opinion, to have a good social standard meant to be Catholic or Protestant and a freeman of nobleman. Moreover, to speak Hungarian as mother tongue represented an important quality. As we have seen, the nobility asked in 1601 that only Hungarians should be accepted to

²⁸ Maria Holban, *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. I, București, 1968, p. 405.

²⁹ Ș. Papacostea, *Geneza statului...*, p. 77-81, 113-120.

³⁰ Hélène Ahrweiler, “L’image de l’autre et les mécanismes de l’altérité”, in *Rapports du XVI-e Congrès International des Sciences Historiques*, vol. I, Stuttgart, 1985, p. 64-65.

govern Transylvania. Similar petitions were addressed to the Austrian Emperor in 1542 and 1551. In 1551, the Transylvanian nobility said clearly: *the Prince has to be a member of the Hungarian nation (ex natione Hungarica)*³¹.

In other words, in Transylvania, during the 16th century, the group identity had already a strong ethnic, linguistic and religious foundation. “The other”, the neighbor, was characterized in the same way, according to the language, religion, customs, origin and he was treated in a different way. The late crusade, that is the Christian alliance against the Turks in South-Eastern Europe – alliance which was difficult to achieve even during the heroic period of the 15th century – did not succeed in uniting Christians around 1600, when ethnic consciousness was already strong.

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³¹ Ioan-A. Pop, *Ethnic and Confessional...*, p. 94.