Religion and National Identity in Borderlands: Greek Catholics and Hungarian Reformed in Transylvania

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RELIGION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN BORDERLANDS:
A CASE STUDY OF GREEK CATHOLICS AND HUNGARIAN
REFORMED IN TRANSYLVANIA

By Beth Admiraal

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In the borderlands of Transylvania, the region of Romania north and west of the Carpathians and bordering Hungary, the postcommunist decades have showcased low-level contests between religious groups, each struggling to regain resources lost during the communist years. The struggles have emphasized identity as much as economics and exclusion at the expense of progress. With the national government preoccupied with (purportedly) more pressing issues, the intimate, daily discourse of the local populations in this border region suggests an eager if uncoordinated effort by politicians and the Romanian Orthodox Church (RoOC)—a clear majority in the region—to question the place of minority religious groups within the larger Romanian identity. The minority Romanian Greek Catholic Church (Greek Catholic, or RGCC), besieged by the Communist Party in the past, has found only limited support from newly-democratic Romanian politicians who favor the much stronger RoOC.
The minority (Hungarian) Reformed Church in Romania (RCR), watched suspiciously by the Communist Party for Hungarian nationalist activities, has found modest support for the return of churches but obstruction from RoOC leaders and politicians for the return of educational facilities; furthermore, it has faced demands to restrain its Hungarian roots in various ways. Despite intermittent international pressure for liberal, democratic reforms, religious minorities struggle, not with great intensity or violence, but in low-intensity struggles.

These shifting fortunes for religious communities in the Transylvanian region and their varying responses are tightly intertwined with questions of national identity. Which religious groups are “truly Romanian?” Is it better to attempt to appear “Romanian” or “other?” Does the border status of these religious groups impact the identity politics? The intersection between minority religions and identity at the border forms the theoretical core of this paper. As old fights linger and new fights emerge over which groups have claim to the Romanian identity or which groups pose problems for the identity, the question reemerges: how should we understand nation and national identity in border regions? This paper will begin with the larger theoretical question of nationhood, seeking from within the literature a fruitful way to think about the nation that helps to make sense of the way in which nation operates in border regions. The second section applies this theory to the Greek Catholics and Reformed communities in Transylvania, laying out the way in which national identity and religious groups operate in one of the borderlands of Romania. The article contends that border regions reveal a clearer picture of how national identity operates, exposing the way in which the idea of a particular nation has both descriptive content and is tied to practical motives. In the end, a study of border regions, such as Transylvania, uncovers the tension between the descriptive and evaluative components of nation and offers a richer understanding of national identity.
How To Think About ‘Nation’

A nation has been generally understood to be a community that imagines itself to be unified as a community and holds common political objectives; thus, it is viewed as a bounded, identifiable group. Many scholars rely on such “substantialist” definitions of nation, implicitly or explicitly, which assume that there is a groupness to nations that involves some recognizable and accepted features. The persistence of this substantialist characterization can be attributed to the recognition that nations and ethnic groups appear to be enduring, with shared traits that create some level of homogeneity. For instance, the Hungarian nation is understood to be held together (in part) by the shared Hungarian language, which clearly distinguishes it from its neighbors. Such attributions function not only as describing a (perceived) reality, but encouraging the relevant traits: the attempts by members of a nation to identify people as belonging to ‘people x’ or ‘people y’ has a way of inducing groupness through a shared trait. Thus, this basic substantialist definition of nation underpins a considerable amount of the scholarship on nations, national identity, and nationalism.

However, as it has been widely noted in the scholarship on nations for the past few decades, there is rarely a single (list of) feature(s) either invoked by or present in every group that perceives itself as a nation. To defend some relatively narrow set of traits as truly constitutive of a nation is likely to look like an arbitrary act of verbal legislation, unduly procrustean. To incorporate each member of the lengthy catalogue into a disjunctive definition would result in a conception of nationhood that has very little substantive content. And it might include too many people into the nation, if it suggests that any person who has at least one of the following . . . twenty traits . . . is, say, Romanian. A definition of nation must do more than rely
on substantialist grounds, according to these scholars. Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant go so far as to call scholars “to resist by all means possible our primary inclination [which is] to think of the social world in a substantialist manner.”

An increasing number of scholars who have pushed beyond substantialist understandings of nation (and ethnicity) argue for a process-based understanding in which nation (and ethnicity) ‘happens.’ This body of work starts with the question, "how does nation work?" rather than asking "what is a nation?" Rogers Brubaker, a scholar of nationalism at the forefront of this drive, notes that in practice, the idea of the nation is an ideal and not merely a category of analysis. In a monograph on national identity in Romania, he notes: “A groupist reading conflates groups with the organizations that claim to speak and act in their name; obscures the generally low, though fluctuating, degree of ‘groupness’ in this setting; accepts, at least tacitly, the claims of nationalist politicians to speak for the groups they claim to represent; and neglects the everyday contexts in which ethnic and national categories take on meaning and the processes through which ethnicity actually ‘works’ in everyday life.” The process-based definition of nation emphasizes the variability of the nation.

This functional understanding shows great promise. Following from this perspective, one might show, for example, that an appeal to “the Romanian nation” has more than a referential purpose. The speaker’s intention is not simply to bring to mind a more or less determinate group of people, with the implicit suggestion that they are unified by some salient traits. Instead, the appeal has a practical motive. The speaker desires to spur her fellow citizens to action, feeling,

or some way of thinking by construing the encouraged action, feeling, or way of thinking as an implication of membership in the nation. This motive reflects the insight that the phrase “the Romanian nation” is connected in the popular consciousness to norms of behavior, and to emotional and motivational sources and mechanisms.

This practical element is a fundamental feature of any practical identity. To illustrate, for the person who fancies himself to be a good specimen of masculinity, the admonition “Be a man” bears a special normative authority. This admonition rarely has anything to do with reminding him that he has one X and one Y chromosome. Instead, it serves to persuade him to seek out an opportunity to exercise machismo. Issued to a soldier before battle, this injunction serves to put out of mind any thought of flight, however grave the danger at hand. To flee would be unmanly and to give up one’s right to call oneself a man thereafter. In this way, the identity of manhood constrains the manly man’s behavior by ruling out options. And it makes the bearer of the identity search out the opportunity to exercise (and perhaps to prove) his identity.

The nation also works in this way. It is invoked to obtain certain kinds of behavior or ways of thinking; the nation operates with practical motive. And, given that some of the underlying grounds of Romanian identity are not completely formed in the popular mind, and levels of groupness vary across time and space, the nation as identity can be dynamic, and even readily exploitable. A process-based definition of nation, to its credit, emphasizes how nation is invoked and experienced in everyday life, through such things as word choices, verbal cues, institutions, and rituals, enriching the literature on nations and national identity.

However, this campaign to popularize a process-based understanding of nation, which rightly rejects the reifying of the nation, also brings with it potential problems. The experience of communities in border regions discloses both the prescriptive and descriptive elements of
nation. The term has prescriptive content: in public discourse and in private consciousness, the nation brings evaluative content and a practical purpose. However, the descriptive content is still evident; the invocation of the nation does call to mind a group of people and some general character traits. For example, speaking about “our nation” is similar to a military general speaking of a particular soldier’s “courage”. The general cannot call just anyone courageous. To call a soldier courageous implies that that soldier would not be motivated to act badly by fear; it is to attribute a descriptive property to him. If the general calls courageous a soldier crippled by fear, the other soldiers will interpret the general as being either perverse, ironic, or mistaken about the meaning of the word. But ‘courageous’ is also a term of commendation. For a general to call a soldier courageous is to praise him and possibly to commend his behavior to other soldiers.

The same goes for appeals to the nation. There are clearly constraints upon how the descriptive or prescriptive connotation of ‘the nation’ can be changed. The nation is an interplay between various elements: a more or less determinate group of people, with the implicit suggestion that they are unified by some salient characteristics, a perceived membership, and norms or practical considerations. Any of these elements can be altered or practiced differently, often affecting the other elements, but each has a determinacy about it as well. In other words, the idea of ‘nation Y’ is only so “flexible,” as the experience of nationhood in border regions illuminates so well. A political elite generally cannot construct her desired conception of nation Y from scratch. She needs to work with the descriptive content already contained in the public’s perception. To borrow from metaethical terminology, the nation is a thick normative concept, which is to say that it has descriptive and evaluative components. Whereas a thin normative term, such as ‘right’ or ‘good’ lacks much fruitful descriptive content, a thick normative term,
such as ‘courageous’ or ‘brutal,’ is more dense in content: many actions or entities can be described as good, only a limited set can be characterized as courageous, a term that has far greater evaluative and descriptive richness. The nation, similarly, operates as a thick normative term; thus, it is not an indeterminate category—a thin concept, as Brubaker and others seem to suggest—but a term with significant descriptive content and evaluative force. In this way, the nation is, to some degree, fixed by its descriptive content.

Border regions both clarify and amplify the need to understand the way in which the nation operates akin to a thick normative term, with both fixed and dynamic aspects. The rootedness of national identity is a critical factor in border areas: communities make more attempts to find commonalities on the general contours of the nation in the presence of other, often dominant, groups or when confronted by minority groups that threaten the territorial integrity of the region. Elites often have a vested interest in giving structure and permanency to a ‘group’ in order to maintain control and engender loyalty within the group. To overlook the embedded element of the nation in a border region is to miss (as badly as the EU optimists!) the historical continuity and staying power of a nation. At the same time, however, the nation, in its substantive and prescriptive connotations, does change over the course of time, fluctuate at the margins, and it does—to use Brubaker’s language—work changeably at the “everyday” level, though even here, only within limits. Elites, for example, will find it advantageous to toy with the popular understanding of the nation, more so in border regions where national identity has significant import, to improve their own positions or improve the prospects of their community. In sum, the process-based definition can signal how a nation is experienced and transforms, but it neglects the way in which the nation is perceived by people to exist, where there is a general understanding of what it means to be in a nation and what kinds of character traits and practices
are accepted or rejected for membership in the nation. To accept the process-based definition of nation without recognizing that there is a descriptive content to groups that is broadly recognized and accepted is to overemphasize the dynamism.

The fixedness and flexibility—simultaneously—can be seen very readily in many parts of Eastern Europe, which has been a fault line for so many questions and issues in political organization and where border regions are prevalent. One of the most conceptually muddled—and yet politically calm—border regions in which questions of nation are paramount is Transylvania. In particular, the interplay between national identity and religious belief and behavior in Transylvania suggests nations, particularly in borderlands, should be studied in both fixed and dynamic terms. In this region, one can trace invocations of nation, through which groupness is invented and reinvented, yet the content is only modestly and slowly shifted. The following section exhibits how this theoretical framework can be fruitfully applied to the thinking of Greek Catholics and Hungarian Reformed religious leaders who find themselves in a border region in postcommunist Transylvania, Romania.

The Greek Catholics in Transylvania

Transylvania’s history involves incorporation into many different empires but never independence. It constituted the core of the province of Dacia in the Roman Empire; it was an integral part of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary; subsequently, it became an autonomous principality under Turkish protection. In the mid-seventeenth century, it was incorporated into the Hapsburg Empire, enveloped into the nineteenth-century Hungarian state and then became part of Romania in 1918. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, this multireligious, multiethnic region has engendered chronic tension between Hungary and
Romania, among the various religious and ethnic groups, and between the seat of power in Bucharest and regional and local officials.

The Greek Catholic Church in Romania (RGCC) emerged in 1700, when the Hapsburg invasion of Transylvania forty years prior induced members of the Romanian Orthodox Church hierarchy in this region to accept the authority of the papacy and enter into communion with the See of Rome without needing to forfeit their Orthodox rituals. In addition, the RGCC was permitted to use the Romanian language in services at a time when the Romanian Orthodox Church relied on Old Church Slavonic. The Greek Catholic hierarchy established the Transylvanian School in the 18th century, a vehicle for articulating the contours of the Romanian identity, thereby becoming “a vocal class expressing ‘national’ aspiration.”\(^4\) Romanian Orthodox then and now assert that Greek Catholics converted due to foreign coercion; whether or not this is true, the historical role of the Greek Catholics in forging a Romanian identity suggests that their loyalties remained eastward-facing. This role in developing a national consciousness was eventually usurped by the Romanian Orthodox, who, according to Romanian scholars Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, “borrowed, and eventually monopolized, the Transylvanian Greek Catholics’ nationalist discourse centered on the Latin character of the Romanian language and descent.”\(^5\) Even having been supplanted as the leading role in forming the nation, the Greek Catholic Church was awarded the status of a second national church in the 1923 constitution precisely because of its role in Romania’s national movement. The number of Greek Catholics placed them consistently in the minority—in the 1930 census, around eight percent of Romania’s

population designated itself as Greek Catholic\textsuperscript{6}--but they remained politically influential up until the communist revolution. In fact, many leaders in the National Peasant Party, one of two main parties in Romania during the interwar period, were Greek Catholic. For two and a half centuries, the idea of the Romanian nation included both the Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities, establishing a fixed sensibility of the religious content of the nation.

The Communist period ushered in the first systematic, widespread assault on the Greek Catholic population in Romania. The Church’s spiritual allegiance to Rome and the anti-government hostility of Greek Catholic clergy led the Romanian Worker’s Party, under the leadership of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, to unveil an openly antagonistic position towards the Vatican and the Catholic Church in Romania.\textsuperscript{7} In 1948, the Greek Catholic Church was formally disbanded and the Party began an aggressive campaign to vilify the Church with the objective of eliminating any claim to the Romanian identity. The nation, as it was envisioned by Gheorghiu-Dej and his successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu, could only be identified as Orthodox—not Greek Catholic—and, at that, even the Romanian Orthodox Church faced periods of repression by the Communist Party. Through a series of laws, the Party gave the bulk of Greek Catholic churches to the Romanian Orthodox Church while the rest of its property went to the state. The Greek Catholic Church survived only in and through underground networks and from within the RoOC, which absorbed many of its members.

With the collapse of the communist regime in late 1989, the Greek Catholic Church in Romania reemerged both physically and legally. Yet, despite the official recognition, the old scenario was not restored: the Church faced a complete deficit of property, an evaporated

\textsuperscript{6} The General Census of the Population of Romania, Recensământul General al Populației României, Central Statistical Office [Directia Generala de Statistica], Bucharest, 1930.

\textsuperscript{7} Cristian Vasile, “The Suppression of the Romanian Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church,” \textit{East European Quarterly} XXXVI, no. 3 (September 2002), 313-322.
community, and no clear state supporters. It called for restitution *in integrum*—immediate and complete return of all property—as a starting point for recovery. Beginning in 1990, though, the process of returning this property to the RGCC has been slow, due in part to resistance on the part of the RoOC, but also because some of this property was transformed into museums and public cultural houses.  

The Romanian government set up an organization to oversee the restitution of public property—the Special Restitution Commission (SRC)—but its decisions are often ignored by local authorities or priests in the RoOC, or the judicial system has overturned these decisions. The International Religious Freedom Report (IRFR) registers that by 2010, the SRC had returned 130 of more than 6,000 properties under its control and offered compensation in 41 other cases on paper, but the actual turnover rate has been lower. There have been only a handful of additional properties returned to the RGCC since the IRFP’s last accounting. And as the Greek Catholics argued for restitution, all the while the Orthodox received aid. With this state funding, the RoOC has been on a building spree: according to a report from the BBC in 2013, the RoOC has been putting up churches “at a rate of one every three days;” in addition, it is constructing, largely with taxpayer money, the Cathedral for the People’s Salvation in Bucharest, slated to be the tallest religious building in all of southeastern Europe. The property restitution difficulties faced by the RGCC contrasted with the tax-payer funded RoOC church-building efforts suggest that the religious content of the Romanian nation might include today, only Orthodoxy.

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8 For a detailed overview of the debate over property restitution for Greek Catholics and the status of restitution up until 2005, see Stan and Turcescu, *Religion and Politics*, 97-117.
10 The most recent report from the US State Department does not tally the return of church properties to the RGCC, but it does highlight instances where court-ordered returns of church buildings to the RGCC has not been executed by government officials. See *International Religious Freedom Report: Romania*, 2013, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm/#wrapper.
The Greek Catholic Church has reported other forms of overt discrimination, including impediments to putting up new buildings, refusals to allow it to take part in public events (to which the RoOC is invited), and difficulties finding burial space in public cemeteries. In an analysis of contemporary church-state relations in Romania, Iuliana Conovici writes: “While the State professes to be “neutral” with respect to religious belief (or the lack thereof), this notion is the equivalent of “benevolent support,” with a preference for large religious communities, and with an even more marked practical bias towards the largest of them, namely the Romanian Orthodox Church . . . .” The RoOC, though failing to garner status as the national church in legislation, has inserted such language into its own statutes, beginning in 2008 with the claim, in article 5.2: “The Romanian Orthodox Church is the Church of the Romanian nation.”

Overall, the RoOC has kept a distinct financial edge over all other churches in the fight for state funding and state-sponsored roles. Again, Conovici notes:

The principle of ‘proportionality’ of State support in the distribution of institutional, legal, and financial advantages (even qualified by the State’s pretention to understand the “real needs of religious denominations”) allowed for a de facto dominance of the Orthodox Church in several areas, particularly in the fields of religious assistance in public institutions and religious education in the public education system.

The social and economic disparity results from a view of Orthodoxy as the religion of Romania, and other religions—including the Greek Catholic—as less relevant or irrelevant to the Romanian nation.

A shift in the understanding of the Romanian identity emerges in this favoritism towards the RoOC and discrimination against the RGCC, in which the RoOC is invoking a view of the Romanian nation as one that does include the Greek Catholics. Since those in the Greek Catholic

church are missing a now recognized and broadly accepted marker of Romanian identity—namely membership in the Romanian Orthodox Church—this opens the door to the invocation of 'Romanian' with new exclusionary borders that leave out Greek Catholics, a continuation of communist efforts, though by new or transformed elites, with new motives. The contestation in this borderland region, where the Romanian identity faces more threats than elsewhere, highlights the way in which political and religious elites will advocate for a modification of the long-established view of the content of the nation.

In addition to the historical understanding of the Romanian Orthodox Church as the centerpiece of the Romanian nation, with Greek Catholicism excluded from the community, religious elites are finding more dynamic ways to reinvent the Romanian nation as exclusive of Greek Catholics in an overt, though sporadic, effort to convince Orthodox believers that Greek Catholics are, in fact, Hungarian. This reestablishment of a Romanian identity without Greek Catholics—by labeling them Hungarian—is a charge leveled against Orthodox priests through Transylvania, and appears to be increasingly accepted by Orthodox believers, particularly (though not exclusively) in rural areas. The effort to reinvent Greek Catholics as Hungarians is motivated by a quest to make the RoOC the only religious marker for the Romanian nation. This crusade was publicly denounced by the Social Democrat and popular movie director, Sergiu Nicolaescu, who accused the Orthodox of abusing the rights and property of Greek Catholics: “By accepting that ‘Romanian’ equals ‘Orthodox,’ and ‘Catholic’ equals ‘Hungarian’, we negate the beginning of Christianity on our territory and the contribution of the Greek Catholic faith to the liberation of Transylvanian Romanians during the first half of the 18th century . . . Are these Greek Catholics not Romanians because they have different Christian beliefs?!”

14 Dan Ruscu, University of Babes-Bolyai, Interview with author, October 2011.
15 Quoted in Stan and Turcescu, Religion and Politics,” 105.
invocation of Greek Catholics as not Romanian, but Hungarian represents a more dynamic shape to the understanding of nation, in which the invocation of Greek Catholics as Hungarian may, slowly, shift the contours of ‘Romanian’ and ‘Hungarian’.

The treatment of the Greek Catholic Church by the RoOC and Romanian authorities is reported by some to be far worse than the experience of other religious groups, even those that materialized in Romania more recently.16 Denied the protection of the state, the RGGC has had difficulties that extend to the official counting in the census reports. In the 2002 census, the official number of RGGC adherents stood at only 200,000, far less than the 1.4 million declared by the Vatican. Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu surmise that the census miscalculates the actual number, though it is nowhere in the vicinity of 1.4 million.17 According to Frans Hoppenbouwers, who offers a detailed report of the situation of the Greek Catholics in the post-communist era, “Enquirers [census workers] allegedly refused to take down the answers of Greek Catholic believers during the [2002] survey.”18 A repeat census in 2011 reports just over 150,000 Greek Catholics, rekindling criticism about the integrity of the census reporting. Though the extent to which the census underreports Greek Catholics is not known, the numerous complaints about the reporting and the surprising drop in the numbers suggest that either there is an effort to undermine the Greek Catholic community in the census, or that the RGCC’s numbers are diminishing due to the years of difficulties in retrieving property, discrimination, and decreasing financial help from the state (ironically tied to census numbers).

The identity politics playing out between the Greek Catholics and Romanian Orthodox,

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16 For one example, see Gabriel Andreescu, “The Romanian Church United with Rome (Greek-Catholic) under Pressure: The Rcc's Bad Behavior as Good Politics,” Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies 11, no. 32 (2012).
17 Stan and Turcescu, Religion and Politics, 94-95.
with the state largely standing on the side of the Orthodox, has not erupted into a violent conflict in Transylvania. Yet, the border region of Transylvania is loaded with perilous anxiety, a site of a historical and ongoing tug-of-war for property and identity rights. Although there has been much less anger between ethnic and religious groups in the region over the last decade, the potential for renewed confrontation exists. As Rogers Brubaker writes about Cluj in particular and Transylvania in general, “Social life is powerfully, though unevenly, structured along ethnic lines; and ethnic and national categories are part of the taken-for-granted framework of social and political experience. Nations, nationhood (or “nationness”) “happen” every day in Cluj, even if many such happenings are invisible or uninteresting to students of collective action or ethnic violence.”19 These seemingly small-stuff efforts to marginalize Greek Catholics by labeling them Hungarian from the pulpits, depriving them of their property, and excluding them from public life might lead, quite easily, into a reestablishment of the Romanian identity into something that does not include Greek Catholics. The nation is a dynamic process that involves construction and reinvention on the ground; yet, the descriptive elements are not easily shifted. The fixedness remains; even as verbal cues and aggressive discrimination work to displace the Greek Catholics from the Romanian identity, the historical memory of the importance of the Greek Catholics as leaders in the Romanian nationalism movement make this a tough sell. This is not to suggest that the Romanian nation is a homogenous and bounded group; rather, it is to suggest that those practicing the nation accept, in broad contours, a view of the nation, and this acceptance brings historical continuity and everyday groupness.

The Reformed Church in Romania

The historical position of the Reformed Church in Romania (RCR), often referred to today as the Hungarian Reformed Church for its roots in the Hungarian community, differs considerably from that of the Greek Catholics. The Hungarian Reformed community emerged in the mid-16th century with the Protestant Reformation, initially with Lutheran tendencies but increasingly open to Calvinism, and within two decades, the Reformed faith had taken root in the region of Transylvania. The Kingdom of Hungary controlled and administered the Transylvanian territory until the Battle of Mohacs in 1526, after which it was considered independent but still tightly connected to Hungary through Hungarian princes aligned with the Reformed (Calvinist) tradition. Even after Hapsburg acquisition in 1683 at the Battle of Vienna and subsequent catholicization efforts in Transylvania, the Reformed Church persisted alongside the Lutherans (largely German), given relative freedom by the Hapsburg administration. In 1867, with the establishment of a dual monarchy, Transylvania was officially enveloped in the Kingdom of Hungary, and the Reformed Church prospered, aided by the official policies of Magyarization. Throughout these political changes, the Reformed Church remained an integral piece of the Hungarian identity in the region of Transylvania.

While Transylvania was officially a part of Hungary into the early twentieth century, the population was multiethnic. In the census of 1910, 54 percent of the population of Transylvania identified themselves as Romanian speakers, as opposed to 32 percent Hungarian-speaking and 11 percent German-speaking. The ethnic distribution justified the decision of the Allied Powers, in the peace agreement at the end of WWI, to weaken Hungary by apportioning out Hungarian land to surrounding states. Thus, Transylvania was given over to Romania. This critical shift in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 created a completely altered border region in which the Hungarian
population, around half of whom were identified as Hungarian Reformed, were folded into a new political structure in a much disadvantaged position.

The Reformed Church in Romania fared only moderately better than the Greek Catholic community under communism. Although it was not formally disbanded, and thus able to hold worship services, it lost hundreds of schools, including primary schools, high schools, and colleges; theological education was restricted, budgets were monitored, and church personnel were monitored in their activities. After the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the Romanian state intensified its persecution of the ‘Hungarian’ Reformed Church, accusing it of organizing efforts to rejoin Hungary. The most intense persecution ended by the early 1960s, but low-level harassment and discrimination continued throughout the communist era, mainly focused on pastors and candidates for pastoral training whose work was severely hampered by the Communist Party.

The Reformed Church in Romania, alongside the other Hungarian religious groups in the Transylvanian region, has had modest success in advocating for its rights and resources in the postcommunist era. The RCR has been able to secure some access to educational institutions, social services, and—to a lesser extent—cultural spaces. In the area of education, in particular, the RCR has managed to set up schools, including universities, with Hungarian as the primary language of instruction. Yet, the concerns are real, and many of them are connected with property restitution: properties that were lost by the Reformed community during the communist era, primarily converted into public space, have only partially been returned; others that are slated for return to the Church have been caught in endless litigation.  

The current bishop of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District, Béla Kató, remarked in February, 2014: “Our contact might be sufficient in a formal way but its content has not convinced us that we are treated on equal terms with the Orthodox Church, which without being officially admitted, operates as a state church, and this means several privileges for it. We just have to think of the special arrangements between the state and the Orthodox
concerns of the RCR, as well as all other religious minority groups, are over favoritism towards
the RoOC in such areas as the allocation of state funds (particularly off-budget funds),
opportunities to take part in charitable events, and a favored position in the teaching of religion
in public schools.

While both the Reformed and the Greek Catholic churches struggle for better access to
public goods and space, and a return of confiscated property, the RCR is in a sharply different
position with respect to the Romanian identity. The Romanian identity, as it is historically
understood and experienced in daily life, has not included the RCR, or, for that matter, the other
Hungarian religious groups. As such, the RCR represents less of a threat to the RoOC than the
Greek Catholics, and the critical fight of the RCR is largely to minimize its exclusion from the
advantages secured by being Romanian. Crucially, in this battle, some within the RCR are
gauging the advantages of putting space between the Reformed community and its Hungarian
identity—reinventing their identity—even while Greek Catholics face the prospect of being
reinvented by political elite and the RoOC, unsolicited.

The reengineering project of some within the Reformed Church of Romania, though
limited in scope and effort, offers valuable insight into the way in which the nation operates
within borderlands, which is to say akin to a thick normative concept with significant descriptive
content and evaluative force, but still with flexibility. The RCR, rather than try to appear more
 Romanian, which given the embedded traits of Romanian and Hungarian would be protracted
and arduous, is at times engaging in efforts to detach from its counterparts in Hungary, pushing

Church in the fields of education and social work. Not to mention that with state support 800 orthodox churches are
being built in Romania at the same time, while we could hardly finish our 2-3 small churches. The state does not
acknowledge the more than hundred-year old traditions of the Reformed education either, which is a constant source
of tension between us, and it does not give us enough support to maintain our social institutions. Of course we could
manage with financing our institutions on our own, with the financial retransfer, but the state apparatus hinders this,
as much as possible. We could only get back one of our real estates in Cluj-Napoca after 12 years of litigation,
which was an enormous waste of time and money for us.” See Kató,“Over the Border: Interest in Unity,” February
slowly for a new ‘Transylvanian’ identity. While the Romanian identity is descriptively “fixed” in a way that makes shoe-horning the Hungarian Reformed community into the concept an unlikely prospect, there are political reasons not to try to identify, too directly, with the state of Hungary. The efforts of the RCR during the postcommunist era suggest that some members of the Hungarian Reformed community are considering a Transylvanian identity even while trying to ensure that Romania becomes a committed (pluralist) democracy that accommodates many groups.

The historical basis for ‘Transylvanianism’ goes back to the post-Trianon era, when a group of intellectuals, Hungarian and Romanian, nurtured a distinctive identity for the region, as opposed to wholesale identification with either the Hungarian or the Romanian state or culture.21 This movement has reappeared recently in Transylvania, with formal associations, informal meetings, or simply online groups, that are molding a regional identity of ‘Transylvanian’ apart from the identities of Romanian, Hungarian, etc. Some of these are driven by Hungarians but more recent groups claim primarily Romanian or mixed membership.22 As overviewed below, however, public support for Transylvanian autonomy, particularly by those who identify themselves (also) as Romanian, is low.

These pro-Transylvanian groups may over time be successful at creating a significant Transylvanian identity; this section, however, focuses on the potential for a new Transylvanian identity arising out of a religious context. In particular, the problems faced by the Reformed Church in Romania, and its response to a situation that remains tense, appears to be driving it to revisit this historical endeavor and contemplate the possibilities of a new identity.

22 For example, the Democratic League of Transylvania (in Romanian, Liga Transilvania Democrată), which supports the Autonomy for Transylvania campaign, has solid Romanian membership.
One of the most forceful voices in the effort to reposition Hungarians within Transylvania is a bishop in the Reformed Church in Romania, László Tőkés, whose actions as a pastor in Timișoara in 1989 triggered the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu and the end of the communist period in Romania. Tőkés, currently an independent representative in the European Parliament, is a member of the Hungarian People’s Party of Transylvania, a small party that aims for autonomy, even independence, for Transylvania constructed on its Hungarian minority. He promotes such autonomy based on the Kosovo precedent, highlighting persecution of Hungarians in Transylvania both to a domestic and international audience, and even resorting to hyperbolic language of a future ‘Kingdom of Transylvania.’ In addition to the example of Kosovo, he has also held up Palestinians as a model, who, he says, have based their demand for autonomy on the principle of ‘peace for territory’. Tőkés invokes the Hungarian nation as a basis for autonomy, but the language stretches towards a reinvention of Hungarians in Transylvania as ‘Transylvanians’ who, though tightly connected to Hungary, can create a space—and identity—of its own.

László Tőkés’s calls for autonomy play out particularly well in the Székely Land (in Romanian, this land is referred to as Ținutul Secuiesc), a region within Transylvania that is inhabited by a Hungarian-speaking population associated with the frontier of the Hungarian Kingdom, who identify themselves variously as Hungarian or Székely. Three counties in Romania are settled by the Székely people: Harghita and Covasna, with a majority Székely population, and Mures, of which approximately half is considered Székely land. In 2013, the call for autonomy swelled when the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zsolt Nemeth, stated that Hungary would use diplomatic means to counter the Romanian authority’s decision to ban

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the Székely flag from flying on administrative buildings anywhere in Romania. This decision against the Székely flag from Bucharest came in response to an easing of restrictions by the Hungarian government on the granting of Hungarian citizenship to Hungarians in Romania. This offer of Hungarian citizenship was eagerly accepted by many Székely, including the elected presidents of the County Councils of the three counties in which the Székely population dominates. The Hungarian government might have in mind eventual territorial reunification with Transylvania, but within Transylvania, there are few serious efforts at reunification with Hungary. Instead, efforts are directed towards autonomy—even independence—from Romania. This autonomy is based loosely in the Hungarian identity, but without strong networks and shared institutions between the Székely people and other Hungarians in Transylvania, it is not a principally Hungarian project.

The Reformed Church in Romania, while not actively calling for formal independence for the Székely communities, plays several roles in promoting autonomy: for one, it is active in fighting for the return of church property, a substantial proportion of it in Székely Land. By extension, then, the Reformed Church positions itself on the side of the Székely against the Romanian authorities. For example, Bishop Béla Kató of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District (one of two districts that make up the RCR), released a memo in early 2014 calling for international support for the RCR, which recently lost an appeal for the return of Székely Mikó Reformed High School, a school that was given back to the Transylvanian Reformed church district in 1999 but then returned back to the Romanian state in June of 2012. He writes, “We recognize with bitter displeasure that the Romanian administration of justice and current political powers will polish their worn prestige by once more taking away – based on half-truths and false
testimonies – what was already lawfully returned . . .". More directly, the RCR has supported demonstrations for self-governance in these areas. The newsletter for the Reformed Church in Hungary, posted the following notice:

Szekerland's pursuit of self-governance has been met with widespread support from all Hungarian political parties and churches in Romania. Ecumenical services were held before the demonstration in 14 cities, showing strong support from the religious community regardless of denomination. Bishop Béla Kató, similarly to other church leaders in the country, encouraged congregations to participate in the demonstration. Church leaders in Romania emphasized that the pursuit of this goal is a peaceful endeavor which serves not only the ethnic Hungarians interest, but the peaceful cohabitation and prosperity in Transylvania and Romania.  

This show of support for the Székelys focuses on Hungarian groups in Romania, for a group that both positions itself within the Hungarian nation but also distinguishes itself in dialect, customs, and historical memory. As to the latter, the Székelys’ national anthem, itself, references an alternative history: that the Székelys are descendants of Attila’s Huns. It should not be assumed that self-governance in the Székely Lands means automatic subservience to Hungary.

The Reformed Church in Romania, in addition to promoting distance between itself and a problematic Hungarian identity within Romania, has found itself disadvantaged in its relationship with the Reformed Church in Hungary. This space between the two entities dates to 1990, when it re-engaged with the greater Hungarian Reformed Communities with whom it was severed during the communist era. The reconvergence of the Hungarian Reformed communities has involved not only complicated church politics, but also questions of identity and place. Some of this can be seen in organizational structures and behavior. With the fall of communism, the Hungarian Reformed Church, released from legal constraints, formed a new organization, the

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Consultative Synod of the Hungarian Reformed Churches. This organization, with full legal status, included all of the districts of the historical HRC, including the two districts in Transylvania. However, in 2005, a counter organization—the General Convent—was built by the bishop of the Dunamelleki Reformed Church District, headquartered in Budapest, and then joined by the bishop of the second most-powerful district in the Church, the Tiszantuli Reformed Church District, headquartered in Debrecen. Although the Reformed districts in Transylvania joined the newly formed General Convent, its seat of power is clearly in Hungary. Hungarian scholar, Robert Hunlich, notes, “They [the two districts in Transylvania] see that someone always wants to represent them without asking if it is needed.” In addition, the constitution of the General Convent was signed after general assemblies in each of the four church districts in Hungary, but without general assemblies in the districts outside of Hungary who were nevertheless asked to sign on. Other voices in the Reformed Church echo the view that the Hungarian Reformed Churches outside of Hungary feel, at times, isolated from the Hungarian Reformed Church within Hungary. George deVuyst, an American missionary with the Hungarian Reformed Church, concedes that the Hungarian Reformed in Ukraine and Romania feel “unappreciated for their struggles.” Thus, the sentiment that the Reformed Church in Romania should reinvent itself as Transylvanian, as a matter of identity, is not a surprising response to rejection from Romanian identity and marginalization from Hungarian society. This embryonic shift—while still tentative and impossible to quantify—suggests that there is flexibility in the content of a nation, with clear efforts to fill content in the idea of Transylvania. And yet, there are constraints on how the descriptive and prescriptive connotations of a nation can be changed: the Hungarian state’s overtures to Hungarians abroad, the ecclesiastical ties of

27 George DeVuyst, Interview with author, March 2014.
the RCR to the Hungarian Reformed Church broadly speaking, the overlap in language and
customs, and the historical bonds are not easily relinquished or forgotten. The borderland status
of the RCR amplifies both a fixed and a flexible aspect of nation.

Apart from institutional issues within the Reformed Church in Romania, an additional
complication resides both within the Church and outside of it. In 1903, the International
Christian Endeavour Movement, an evangelical Christian youth-oriented movement, set up a
branch in Hungary, which then included the territory of Transylvania, working from within the
Reformed communities. During the communist era, the Christian Endeavor (CE) Association, as
it was called in Romania then, played a critical role in the underground movement against the
government, and for their resistance, popularity, and connection with the Hungarian Reformed,
became key targets of the Romanian Communist Party. Thus, following the collapse of
communism, this group emerged with a trump card over the official leaders in the RCR, among
which there were higher levels of collaboration with the Romanian Communist authorities. This
moral authority boosted the membership of the CE movement after 1990, even promulgating a
CE member to the level of bishop of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District, one of the two
Transylvanian districts of the RCR. Today, the CE movement, while not in any official role in
the hierarchy, hosts Bible studies, community events, and children’s camps. Those outside of the
movement have expressed dissatisfaction with what it sees as a non-collaborative nature. Jozsef-
Tamas Soós, a pastor at a church outside of Oradea, argues that the “members of the CE
Movement call themselves the true Christians, not true Reformed” and “take advantage of the
[Reformed] Church and are out only to catch people for their own movement.” The CE
Movement, in addition to provoking the non-CE sector of the Reformed Church in Romania, is

28 Hunlich, March 2014.
29 Jozsef-Tamas Soós, Interview with author, March 2014.
more evangelical in style and sentiment, which led to its decision to translate the historical Reformed confessions into Romanian and start a Romanian-speaking mission. As Robert Hunlich concludes, “The conventional part of the church [the non-CE part] has seen this as the first step towards assimilation.”\(^{30}\) Although it is too early to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of the CE movement on the Reformed Church in Romania at this juncture, it may be one of the prompts for the Church to stress its Transylvanian heritage—and even emphasize this as an identity—in the face of a community that can claim the mantle of ‘solidly Hungarian’ because of its persecution by the Romanian Communist authorities even while it is embracing the Romanian population. In seeking to reformulate itself as the Reformed of Transylvania, the RCR is exhibiting the opportunities for reinventing the nation. The long-drawn-out process and subdued response to the project reveal the constraints on such efforts.

Rogers Brubaker, et.al., found that Hungarians reflexively support Transylvanian autonomy while the Romanian elite in Transylvania rejects it. The Romanian Clujenis’ view, as a whole, depends on the framing of the question: if autonomy is introduced in the context of tension between Transylvania and Bucharest, there is strong support; if raised in ethnonational terms, there is strong disapproval of autonomy among Romanians in Cluj.\(^{31}\) It is not clear if the Hungarian Reformed community and church officials’ view of autonomy differs from the position of the larger Hungarian community in Transylvania, but the church, as a repository for Hungarian identity, would undoubtedly offer a basis for autonomy in strictly ethnonational terms, as a matter of (Hungarian) Transylvanian versus Romanian.

\(^{30}\) Hunlich, March 2014.

Conclusion

The experience of the Greek Catholic and Reformed communities in Transylvania, both of which inhabit a borderland that raises the stakes of identity and religious markers of identity, suggests that we should accept neither a wholehearted substantialist nor a process-based view of the nation. The nation—in its descriptive and prescriptive elements—is often perceived as a fixed entity by those within and outside of the group; likewise, the way in which nation is invoked and prescribed, suggests flexibility in the way it is experienced and, over time, this can lead to significant changes. The nation is not a homogenous, unchanging group; neither is it an entirely dynamic process without limitations on the way in which it is invoked. The RGCC, as it responds to attempts by hierarchy in the RoOC and government officials to ‘kick it out’ of the Romanian identity and, even more extremely, turn RGCC members into Hungarians, can rely on a history of being seen as a significant component of Romanian identity and even postcommunist legislation and actions that give it legal status with support from the state on paper. Likewise, the Reformed Church in Romania, as it responds to feelings of isolation both from the Romanian identity and, in some instances from life in Hungary, can raise the specter of a Transylvanian identity, but not without resting partially on its Hungarian past and present. The nation, akin to a thick normative concept, has significant descriptive content and evaluative force that, though experienced in numerous ways across time and space and with the possibility for gradual change, is constrained by historical and contemporary stabilizing forces.