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## **Ethnicity, the Labour Market and Returning Migrants between Hungary and Transylvania**

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### **Abstract**

Since migration flows to Hungary are an object of international comparison among sociologists and anthropologists, one of the most emphasised features of the phenomenon is that a great proportion of migrants are ethnic Hungarians from the neighbouring countries. This fact is usually traced back to the seemingly shared cultural identity of the migrants and the receiving society (see: Brubaker 1998; Stewart 2004). In this case, the role of the kin state is not just the creation of an attractive image about the receiving society. As the argument continues, the shared cultural identity can facilitate the process of migration in practical terms. Namely, ethnicity can be a convertible form of capital: the language competence, or the former relations to Hungary, guarantees cultural, social or network capitals for ethnic Hungarians.

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This model of relation between the kin state and the migrant is an ideal typical construction, the product of a more or less hypothetical comparison between the type of migration where the receiving country is seen as a 'mother country' for an ethnic minority and those cases when migrants are regarded as an alien group in the receiving society. In this paper I would like to refine this approach by discussing ethnicity not merely as a given feature which emanates from the cultural background of the migrant's sending society; but rather as a relational and situational factor in the process of migration. While ethnic belonging is not a stable variable of the process at the starting point of the migration flow, it still could be a problematic factor at the point of arrival. In this paper I discuss the various contexts of ethnic Hungarian labour migrants' self-understanding in terms of ethnic or national belonging. On the one hand, these contexts are related to their everyday engagement in the construction industry of Hungary; on the other, to their trips back to their sending societies. The often short-term returns of migrants to their home communities tend to be encompassed by ritual activities for the

maintenance of their identities in an alien land and also for the reinforcement of their social networks between the sending and receiving localities (Massey et al., 1987.). The forms of identification in the contexts of such ‘homecoming rituals’ and in the contexts of their everyday life as a labour migrants are oppositional but also complementary ones. The paper is based on my fieldwork done between 2002 and 2005. One part of the research took place in Budapest, Hungary among ethnic Hungarian labour migrants from Romania; the other in a Transylvanian village (Szék/Sic, Cluj County) where labour migration to Budapest has become the main source of income for adults during the last one and a half decades.

### **Ethnicity and the Labour Market**

The construction industry has been one of the primal segments of the Hungarian labour market where ethnic Hungarian men established themselves during the last one and a half decades. After the post-1989 reformulation of Hungarian industry, it became one of those sectors where the proportion of native employees declined (especially in the circles of the less-skilled workforce) mostly most noticeably compared to the infrastructural and housing demands of Hungary’s capitalist transition. The labour migrants from Hungary’s Eastern neighbours are most discoverable around the buildings of private houses, housing-estates, shopping malls or office-blocks. Labour migrants from these countries typically enter the Hungarian labour market without the necessary working and residential permission. For numbers of smaller entrepreneurs and subcontractors, the members of the foreign workforce became nearly the only available employees, since the use of the more expensive native labour force or the costs of a foreigner’s permanent legal employment (in terms of time, the costs of legalisation, etc.) were often unprofitable for them. The position of ethnic Hungarian migrants from Romania is quite special in this context as ‘co-ethnics’ and ‘alien labour migrants’ at the same time. Both the political and the everyday discourses (and the relating practices) in Hungary show a huge diversity from the treatment of them as ‘ethnic brethrens’ to a ‘cheap and alien workforce’, or a ‘reserve army’ on the labour market.

Because of the interwoven nature of legal and illegal work, and the formal and informal economy, we have no exact data about the number of foreign workers in the Hungarian construction industry. But from the point of view of this analysis, the wide spread opinion – due to the lack of inhabitant workforce – among guest workers is more meaningful: if all the workers from Romania or Ukraine would leave the Hungarian construction industry, the result would be the collapse of the sector. A 26-year old man reported the following:

“At my workplace, all the workers are from Transylvania, the building contractors are from Hungary. I use to keep telling them, if we wouldn’t be here, you wouldn’t succeed. Last year we worked on a shopping mall near to Budapest. In the last days before the completion we were working on the park around the building. We had to work during the whole night, and after it they gave us the same money as for the work during the day. Which worker from Hungary would do it for this money? They can only do it just with us, with the people from Romania or Ukraine. Our presence is not good for the poor Hungarian workers, because we

force the prices down. What they do for three hundred thousand HUF, we do it for one hundred thousand. So that's why the poor people hate us, and the rich people are forcing us, this is the result."

In the recent years, several studies were made on the labelling practice concerning ethnic Hungarian migrants from Romania in Hungary, since the categorisation of them as 'Romanians' is a quite frequently mentioned experience in their accounts (see: Fox, 2003) In the context of the labour market, the 'Romanian' or 'Transylvanian' label is often perceived as a stigma – just as any other national, ethnic or class-category which entails the connotation of a cheaper and alien workforce. The migrants shape their image on the Hungarian majority and vis-à-vis themselves as a result of this interaction. The experiences connected to differentiation and alienation are phrased in impressive stories. As a 34 years old employee from Oraşul Gheorgheni/Gyergyószentmiklós city mentioned:

"I felt distress, that I'm looked down upon here because I speak with a Transylvanian accent in a public place. I was embarrassed if I had to go to get the permits, I asked my boss to come with me as well, even though I could have done it alone. I only discovered quite late that I can stand on my own feet and I don't need help. Sometimes I didn't have enough self-confidence. Maybe sometimes I couldn't take it that I'm Transylvanian. I had no atrocity because of this, and I never felt ashamed about it, but if they didn't ask it I didn't tell it. There were so many negative stories, so I didn't want to make a big deal of it. There was some bad news about Romanians, it could be heard almost every day and sometimes people are stupid enough to think that everything and everyone related to that country is bad. There was a pub called 'Matróz Kocsma' on the bank of the Danube. That was the haunt of Transylvanian workers. There were scuffles sometimes, and I heard that these were always announced in the police news. I met Hungarians several times who said that these bloody Romanians knocked out each other out again. So I thought: I will not advertise myself."

### **Uniting the Nation: the Local and Nationalist Meanings of a Commemorative Ceremony**

It is one of the common-place understandings of nationalism studies that national belonging and self-awareness is something that has to be made and remade constantly through mediums like education, museums and also rituals or public ceremonies (Anderson 1983). However, such developments in the promotion of national cultures are connected to former – usually 'non-national' – cultural forms that are supposed to be effective elements that become the basis of evolving nationalist practice. That's one possible form of the overlapping relation between religious and nationalist interpretations even for the very same celebration. After 1989 in Eastern-Europe the public rituals and commemorative ceremonies were among the most important sites for the public representation of renewed national ideas and self-definitions (Feischmidt, Brubaker 2002). The significance of such public rituals was even higher in those post-socialist settings where the political change happened without any form of explicit violence or revolution. The incorporation of national or nationalistic issues into formerly religious ceremonies is one type of these developments throughout the post-socialist

Eastern-Europe. In this chapter, I discuss a special form of ritual which accompanies the temporary return of migrants to their sending communities. The 24<sup>th</sup> of August (or ‘Bertalan’s Day’) in the Transylvanian village Szék/Sic<sup>1</sup> was a local religious event before its transformation into the ritual re-integration of migrants. The outcomes of this transformation can be also interpreted in *local* (in the sense of re-integration) and in *national* levels of identification.

Bertalan’s Day in Szék/Sic was a religious holiday before becoming a symbolic political performance charged with national meanings. Originally, Bertalan’s Day was a commemorative ceremony of the villagers’ martyrdom that happened in 1717 during the last raid of the Tartars in Transylvania. There were 600 victims of the attack in the village, with only 100 people living through it. The survivors decided to have a resolution: since then the villagers of Szék have a fast (eating only maize) and three worships in their Protestant church every 24<sup>th</sup> of August. During the worship the village priest talks about the importance of perseverance and reads an old text that was written after the Tartar demolition as a memorial by the priest of that time. Nowadays for most of the villagers Bertalan’s Days also provides an occasion to return from their migration – for example in 2002 approx. 80% of the adult inhabitants were abroad as household servants or workers at construction sites in Hungary. The village is among the popular sites for Hungarian tourists (from Hungary) who are searching for remote and ancient places in Transylvania where the sense of an archaic (Hungarian) culture lives on; where at least the older generations are still wearing their traditional costumes and the sounds of the local folklore tunes are audible. However, nowadays Szék/Sic is not so ‘remote’ in the sense that is connected to the capital of Hungary through the vans of local entrepreneurs on a daily basis, and the inhabitants of the village often know more about the current sales in the Budapest shopping malls than their visitors.

In 1999 the leaders of the village decided to ‘bring out’ the commemorative ceremony from the church and to complement it with ‘secular’ festivities. In this case ‘secular’ means transparently ‘political’: they built up an open-air wooden stage in the centre of the village to have an appropriate site for political speeches and other festivities. Since 1999 the commemorations of Bertalan’s Day are integrated into the broader process of the Hungarian nation building among the ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2002 the former Hungarian right-wing PM Viktor Orbán was also among the guests. Foremost this transformation of the event required the extension of the ceremonial discourse from a local scale to another one, which is meaningful in national terms. This discursive change was initiated by the politicians of the Hungarian minority in Romania who were invited to make speeches, but later – as the Bertalan’s Day became prestigious enough to also invite politicians from Hungary (or in other words: the ‘mother-country’) – the discursive and ritual transformation was continued via the representatives of the right-wing Hungarians. Their discourse was based on the former local and religious one in the sense that the notion of ‘perseverance’ remained its core element but with new connotations: evidently the unit of

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<sup>1</sup> The official Romanian name of the village is Sic, but since the 90 % of the approx. 2000 inhabitants are ethnic Hungarians, I found it relevant to use also the Hungarian name of the village, Szék.

those people who have to maintain themselves as a community was not the villagers of Szék/Sic anymore, but the 'Hungarian nation' as a whole. According to one speaker, "This village teaches us that we can only survive in the form of a community and not as individuals". From 2002 most of the villagers came to consider themselves as 'right-wing supporters' in terms of the internal political context of Hungary. The crucial point here is the development of their identification and self-understanding as 'Hungarian right-wing supporters' in a context which has seemingly nothing to do with the internal political struggles of Hungary.

One possible answer for this question can be provided by the concept of ritual as a performative act providing powerful definitions for the participants (Turner, 1969). In the course of such performances otherwise hidden or un-reflected meanings of identification and belonging are made explicit and strengthened by symbolic tools. The power of such definitions derives from their ability to remain valid after the time and outside the space of the ritual. The arrival of national discourses from Hungary to the village of Szék/Sic is a part of the broader import of goods and information that characterises the border-crossing activities between sending and receiving societies. Some of the frequent experiences of ethnic Hungarian guest-workers in the Hungarian labour market is due to their unequal position and often lower salaries for the same work compared to Hungarian citizens. Such degradation is often accompanied by incidents when they're labelled as 'Romanians'. The social positions evolved by such incidents are even more polarised by the fact that these migrants are claiming the same national identity as those people whom they experience 'on the other side' of these encounters. Nevertheless in the ritual process of Bertalan's Day – and through the 'mediation' of the invited politicians – this unequal and often humiliating relation seems to be turned on its head. As one politician from the Hungarian conservative party Fidesz claimed in his speech on Bertalan's Day 2003: "We are the ones who have to learn from this community, and all our fellows who remained on this side of the border, we should learn from them!"

In the transformation of the celebration the invited Hungarian politicians have a crucial role: they are supposed to be the 'masters of the ceremony' who explicate the community's own values, and who have credibility to do so. The ritual process of Bertalan's Day poses the principle of being 'real Hungarian' – something that is apparently the villagers' own property as a traditional and also marginal community which 'saved its moral values over the course of history'. The everyday experiences of these people as labour migrants in Hungary and the roles attributed to them in the ritual are strongly oppositional. The 24<sup>th</sup> of August is a day when they stay at home as a united community, while politicians from Hungary arrive to visit them and to perform symbolic political gestures such as the 'empathy towards our co-nationals living in alien countries' or their willingness to feel with them.

The performance of politicians on Bertalan's Day is involved in the ritual re-unification of the villagers – migrants and locals – through common national understandings. Nevertheless the political project of the ceremony should be rather interpreted as a ritual exchange. On the one hand the politicians are participating in the ongoing construction and re-construction of a

positively valuated identity of the villagers that is opposed to their everyday experiences. On the other they are also gaining symbolic power and legitimacy through the performance as they present the villagers as the 'real Hungarians' which provides usable symbolic material for their arguments – and also for their policies to expand the ties of nationally defined solidarity beyond the borders of their nation state.

In sum, the symbolic exchange of the ritual is based on practices that are mutually segmented from the everyday life or the structural positions of the participants. These practices are elementary tools in the construction of a symbolic space where the idea of the 'unifying national origin' seems to be the only relevant source of social categorisation – despite all of those everyday situations in which social divisions are based on completely different principles and the very same notion of 'common belonging' fails to operate as an effective counter-force of the exclusive labour market rules. Concerning the ethnic Hungarians from Romania there are several meanings and practices, from the alienation of the migrants in the receiving country to their treatment as 'ethnic brethrens' in nationalistic political discourses. The case of Bertalan's Day could be taken as a meaningful example for the ways how such contradictory forms of social categorisation appear and interfere in the space of the migrant's homecoming rituals.

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