

SZEKLERLAND – WHAT KIND OF COUNTRYSIDE?

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Abstract

Based on the research programmes carried out within the framework of WAC – Center for Regional and Anthropological Research, the present study aims to analyse the issue of how the interpretation of Szeklerland is shaped by the regional and extra-regional actors responsible for the representation of countryside and the forming of discourses on the one hand and by the regional social conditions and processes (everyday life of the settlement) on the other. Following an indicative presentation of the area the study will provide a brief preview of the Institution's research aimed at the investigation of the everyday life in Szeklerland.

Keywords: new rural paradigm, Szeklerland, rural change, redefinition of the countryside

1. Changing Countryside, Changing Concepts of the Countryside

The professional debate on the changes in the concept of rurality, which was launched by Marc Mormont's often-quoted study (Mormont1990), is still taking ever-new twists and turns for at least two reasons. On the one hand, this is so because the content and methodology of support is a constantly relevant topic due to the disadvantaged position of rural areas, and the definition of countryside plays a vital role in the development of aid policies and in making decisions (more on this in: Tovey 2008, Csurgó–Kovách–KucEROVÁ 2008). Efforts aimed at addressing the problems of rural areas continuously give rise to new approaches, in

relation to which new definitions of the countryside gain increased exposure (see in this context the rural proofing model – Nordberg 2021). In their study treating the professional approaches adopted in the two decades following 1990, Michael Mackay and his colleagues emphasized the multi-stakeholder and heterogeneous character of the countryside and proposed Jonathan Murdoch's (2000, 2003) hybrid countryside concept with a view to create a transition, a bridge between approaches on the nature of rurality (Mackay et al. 2009: 20).

On the other hand, there is a further consideration that ensures the topicality of professional interpretations discussing the concept of rurality. The post-socialist countries of the EU are home to quite a few rural areas where it was not until after the Eastern European regime changes that those processes (the progressive marginalization of agricultural activities, emergence of new actors shaping the rural discourse, development of the practices of representation of rurality) got underway – thus with a considerable time lag – that would eventually lead up to the comprehensive reinterpretation of the concept of countryside from the 1990s onwards among researchers of the rural areas in Western European countries. Specialized works on this topic contain a series of aspects, typologies, and methodological considerations that could be useful even today in the above-mentioned regions characterized with time lag. It would certainly be important to take a systematic stock of the concepts, considerations, typologies, and analytical procedures elaborated so far on countryside. However, our aim here is to draw attention to only some of them. Van der Ploeg and his co-authors (2000) specify five areas in association with the new rural development paradigm that involve change. When it comes to Eastern European regions, there may be merit in examining in what ways and to what extent changes emerge in these five areas and how various local actors interpret them. The four phases included in Christopher Ray's culture economy model (Ray 1998) offer further aspects of analysis. The post-productivist approach calls attention to the changes in the function of rural spaces (for a review of specialized works addressing this issue, see: Mackay et al. 2009: 6–8). Michael Woods looks into the relationship between rurality and globalization in accordance with five criteria (Woods 2007: 487–490) that provide a useful outlook for those keen to understand the conditions prevailing in areas that have come into contact with globalization processes at a later point in time. The rise to prominence of the discourse on countryside is a significant change, in the context of which analysing

each type of discourse and making a distinction between them is a necessary step to take (Jones 1995). With regard to these discourses coming to the foreground of attention, Cloke stresses that the countryside is now only a discursive category created and maintained by society (Cloke 1997 – qtd. in Kovách 2012: 23). Under this approach, it becomes perhaps even more important to remark that the agents shaping and maintaining the discourses can develop and create the substantive elements of the discourse on countryside in keeping with their own criteria and practically without impediments. This observation draws attention to the fact that the representation of countryside takes a separate path from the social processes of the place under discussion. Hence, Halfacree treats research on the social representations of countryside separately from the analysis of the local characteristics concerning the given place (Halfacree 2006). In his concise and essential summarizing work presenting the cultural turn in rural sciences, Imre Kovách indicates that several authors point out the relationship between the concepts of countryside and national aspects (Kovách 2012: 24), and he goes on to note that the national/ethnic element is given a key role, and thus it can be subject to analysis, also in areas lagging behind in coming to grips with the new rural development paradigm. Last but not least, the relationship between the definitions of the countryside and politics is also an important aspect of analysis (Tovey 2008), in particular the interrelation of power and use of knowledge (Csurgó et al. 2008). Furthermore, in respect of areas catching up belatedly with the new rural development paradigm, the adoption of analytical methods as well as of the typologies already developed in other regions can serve as important contributions. In these terms, the following could be considered among others: analysis according to ideal types (Soliva 2007); examination of scripts (Vanclay–Enticott 2011); research on the process of embeddedness (Hinrics 2000, Floysand – Sjøholt 2007);¹ contextual (Korsgaard – Anderson 2011, Korsgaard et al. 2015) and constructivist (Welter 2011) approach applied in the analysis of enterprises carrying the new rural development paradigm.

In the case of areas joining the new rural development paradigm with a certain time lag – the Eastern Transylvanian (Romania) region of Szeklerland can be considered

¹ In the context of our research addressing the innovative rural enterprises in Szeklerland, we aimed to perform an analysis based on ideal types (Pall 2016), examine the scripts (Bíró – Sárosi-Blága 2017), and investigate the process of the social embeddedness of enterprises (Bíró – Sárosi-Blága 2018, 2020).

such an area –, it is an important professional target to examine how the interpretation of the area is shaped by the regional and extra-regional actors responsible for the representation of countryside and the forming of discourses on the one hand and by the regional social conditions and processes (everyday life of the settlement) on the other. The latter issue has been the focus of several research programmes conducted within the framework of our Institute in the past few decades, while the investigation into the actors and practices of representation and discourse has not become a matter of interest until recent years. In what follows – subsequent to an indicative presentation of the area –, we will provide a brief preview of our institutional research aimed at the investigation into the everyday life in the Szeklerland area.

2. Regional Research

The Szeklerland area is a region situated in the central part of Romania, including settlements with Hungarian ethnic population for the most part: smaller and larger villages and cities with a number of inhabitants between 10 000 and 40 000. This region is not an administrative unit and is limited to Harghita and Covasna counties as well as the eastern part of Mureş County. There is a fairly high number of works describing the region that highlight the peculiar social organization characterizing it throughout several centuries (Egyed 2013). After WWI, Szeklerland became part of Romania: from this time up to the 1989 social-political changes in the country, both its name and the recognition of its specific social character were largely relegated to the background in official discourses and development programmes alike. Following the 1989 regime change in Romania, the economic structure and labour market of the region underwent a complete transformation given that the industrial structure developed during socialism completely disintegrated and the previous agricultural economy based on family properties was restored upon the liquidation of the community agricultural property. Against this background, a multi-element, multi-stakeholder process of regional identity building was unfolding. In the light of the dominant discourses developed by regional and extra-regional actors, Szeklerland is an area with unique features, a region considered valuable and beautiful, which is situated at the same time in a peripheral and less developed part of the country, most of its development opportunities not having been harnessed as yet. This general context for interpretation opens up the possibility for the creation and distribution

of a wide range of Szeklerland definitions, which in some cases overlap with the actual social processes of the regional society while in other cases differ from them.

From 1990 onwards, WAC – Center for Regional and Anthropological Research has conducted research on several subjects, addressing some of the groups of regional actors, analysing various forms of discourse, or describing the different types of social representation practices. As a matter of course, these research studies cannot be termed exhaustive or systematic since the topic and duration of institutional research has often changed² given that the non-profit organization conducting it functions based on project grants. As part of the research programmes addressing regional actors, questionnaire surveys were carried out among the households in the area (Laki–Biró 2001a, 2001b, KAM 2004, 2011). The resulting studies indicated that more than half of the families living in the region are landowners and have direct or indirect links to the agricultural sector. A further important research finding reveals the high-level homogeneity of the regional society: data suggest that 85% of the families reported to have an average lifestyle while also pointing out the lack of possibility of savings. These findings show the dominance of a model of self-sustaining family farming that has socio-historical antecedents in the region. Other research programmes were centred on regional actors such as foreign workers (Bodó 2008, Oláh 1999a, Biró 1995, Biró et al 1999), individuals starting their businesses after 1989 (Biró et al 1995), rural élites (Biró 2008, Sárosi-Blága 2019), innovative agricultural entrepreneurs (Biró 2018, Biró–Sárosi-Blága 2020), or institutions of regional development policy (Biró–Mátéffy–Kosztá 2004). Some of the issues receiving special emphasis among the discourses and social representations are as follows: the analysis of the Hungarian–Romanian (Biró – Gagyí 1999, Biró – Bodó 1999) as well as Hungarian–Roma interethnic relationships, (Oláh 1999b), symbolic use of space, (Biró – Oláh 1999, Bodó 2000, Bodó 2004a), and the post-1989 rehabilitation process of local identities (Biró et al. 2019).

The wide range of thematic approaches is connected by a socio-anthropological research methodology that was developed in the second half of the 1980s by the Institutes' staff collaborating in an informal setting at the time and that – partly on an experimental basis and partly programmatically – placed the emphasis on analysing the social roles and actors, the construction of discourses and representations.

² On the operation of the Institute, see Biró 2017.

Naturally, besides the institutional projects, a number of other, smaller- or larger-scale research programmes have also been conducted in the region and addressing the local issues, and several attempts have been made at the scientific and development policy construction of the Szeklerland area as a social product. These works and programmes – just as the ones taking place within the scope of our Institute – are fact-finding/analytical professional activities on the one hand and, implicitly, attempts or processes of rural construction on the other. In this latter sense, social research functions as one of the actors that have some level of shareholding in building the knowledge – as a social product – about the Szeklerland area.

The considerable changes taking place in the sphere of social actors, discourses, and representation practices can also be accounted for by the fact that the results of research activities carried out in the region before 1989 – in an informal organizational structure operated at the time of the Romanian dictatorial regime – reveal patterns that are different from the post-1989 practices. Research addressing the period of collectivization (Bodó 2009, 2004b, Oláh 2009), analyses focused on the socialist industrial development (Biró et al 1994), examinations of ceremonial practices (Bodó 1999, 2004a), investigations into the informal procedures of daily life management, and the public social representation of ethnic features (Biró–Gagyi–Péntek 1987) all indicate that in the case of the different social actors the order of discourses could be clearly distinguished according to the categories of the ‘up’ and ‘down’, the official and unofficial, and the public and private (Bodó 1999); consequently, the region as a social product came to be constructed on at least two, practically independent levels.

3. Current Processes of Change in Szeklerland

If we wish to visualize the constituent elements and vital construction processes of the Szeklerland area based on the regional processes taking place in the past three decades (admitting the insufficient knowledge of social sciences available to us), then we should not lose sight of the fact that changes in the actors, discourses, and representations are first of all part of the global impact. Even though with a considerable time lag, a modernization process got underway, as part of which several phenomena can be observed as follows: the position of the agricultural sector is going through a change in this area as well; some forms of mass tourism have emerged; the rural–urban direction of population movements shows an upward

trend; beliefs and practices related to environment protection and healthy nutrition are increasingly gaining ground; local values fall within the 'sphere of attraction' of consumption and/or recreation in addition to identity-building processes; there is a growing number of programmes and narratives representing places (settlement, region, natural conditions in Szeklerland) and cultural values; the economic and political actors aim to organize and finance more and more marketing processes that are responsible for the outward visualization and marketing of the region as a whole.

Taken together, this can be considered an attempt, a process on its way leading up to the topic of the professional debate related to Marc Mormont's study published in 1990. As postulated by the author: the definition of rurality, of the countryside undergoes certain changes, the clear separation of the countryside comes to an end, the rural use of space is differentiated, more actors contribute to the redefinition of the concept of rurality, and in this process the role of discourse and representation is characterized by a strong appreciation. The issues at stake regarding the Szeklerland area are, of course, where we are in this process, who the essential actors of the rural construction are, which the important discourses and representations are, and how this concept of the countryside fits together as a social product. Obviously, societal stakeholders in this process partly correspond to the groups mentioned by professional analyses also in connection with other regions. In his earlier cited 1990 study, in the context of a region in Belgium, Marc Mormont calls attention to actors of mass tourism, environmentalists, people moving out of urban areas, and local producers as relevant groups. At a later period of time, Imre Kovách and his colleagues – in relation to the analysis of the rural image and based on examples taken from Hungary – place special emphasis on the decisive role played by the 'project élite' (Kovách 2012).

In the region of Szeklerland, which has come into contact with the effects and approaches of the new rural development paradigm at a much later stage, it was found that there was a higher number of actors taking part in the process of defining rurality, the roles are less specified and can be characterized by a continuous repositioning. This is largely due to the fact that there are two determining – partly overlapping, partly functionally independent – orientations and processes of the post-1989 changes in the Szeklerland area. One of them is connected to the above-mentioned turn in rural development, the appreciation of rural areas, whereas the other process of change is of a regional-ethnic nature and is carried by the set of

identity-rehabilitating and identity-building initiatives linked to this region and regional society.

It is safe to say that through the processes of the past three decades this region has set out on the road that professional works on the transformation of rural areas indicated already at the turn of the 1990s and the 2000s in relation to other regions as the post-productivist era (Almstedt et al.2014, van der Ploeg et al. 2000, Woods 2007) and contextual turn (Welter 2011, Korsgaard et al.2015), the rise of economy culture (Ray 1999). This means that the region under study also witnessed those initiatives and processes that authors stressing the cultural turn of rural research investigated as now decisive or complete social phenomena in other, primarily Western European regions.³

Below we will list a few examples of initiatives launched in Szeklerland that can be linked to the new rural development paradigm:

- A growing array of regional features becomes a commodity (clothing, foods, products of folk crafts, panoramas involving natural elements and settlements, regional humour, and so on) in such a way that – as Cloke (1997) indicates in connection with the topic – the producers/distributors and users can shape the components of rural representation without any restriction. Needless to say, this entails the selection and poeticization of the available components, the prioritization of elements with a positive connotation, and ignoring the negative elements.
- Rural discourses are gradually gaining ground in the region: in addition to the four discourse types (everyday, layman's discourse; consumer discourse; development policy discourse; scientific discourse) mentioned by Jones (1995), a prominent role is assigned to the ethnopolitical discourse associated with regional lobbying and to the ideological discourse thematizing the historical past of the region. These discourses reveal an increasing determination in their efforts to provide a definition of the countryside (several authors highlight this role played by the discourses – see Frouws 1998), and the known procedures of the nation-building paradigm (Anderson 1983) are also granted a prominent role in this process. As a result of this

³ Imre Kovách provides a concise and essential summary on the topic in his book (Kováč 2012).

latter process, the unique ethnic designations (Székely/Szekler) as well as the symbols of the Hungarian population living in majority in this region but having a minority status in Romania become the centre of self-definition initiatives (narratives, actions, programmes).

- The phases of the culture economy model credited to Christopher Ray (1998) can also be traced in the rehabilitation⁴ and the expansion practices of local identities. Regional actors seek to control local development (or at least underline the need in this regard), increasingly see local values as local development resources, and assign an essential role to traditions. The past few years have seen a growing number of events associated with gastronomic culture.
- Regional actors aim to bestow a particularly important role to investing physical places with meaning, to organizing festivities and events promoting regional history, local popular traditions, and ethnic features, and to the symbolic use of physical spaces in general.
- In the institutional, professional, and public life narratives in the region, the emergence of certain new concepts can be observed such as: local development, endogenous values, built heritage, local product, healthy lifestyle, or the protection of environmental assets.
- Enjoying the support of regional institutions, a range of image-producing programmes are organized that are primarily based on the agricultural products of the region, products of traditional folk culture, and the tourist facilities in the region. An economic competition unfolds between individual and group initiatives, in the context of which a series of professional competencies come to be appreciated such as: design, marketing, technological innovation, more recently digital competencies (development and operation of social media platforms, web-based/online marketing) as well as competencies that help – on a smaller or larger scale – to generate changes in value (Nygard – Storstadt 1998) point out this role with respect to the regions).

⁴ Concerning the rehabilitation processes, it should be pointed out that the visualization of local identities was absolutely prohibited by the Romanian Communist regime before 1989.

- This implies that – as Kovách – Kucerova (2006) co-authors stress the correlation – the role of professionals taking an active part in rural development and having knowledge and intellectual capital gradually comes to be appreciated. Although we cannot yet speak about a project division, the roles of the project élite taking centre stage is already happening (particularly in the fields of preparation of applications and drawing up development strategies).

The above-provided schematic overview suggests that in fact now is the time that the thematization of the professional turnaround in rural research 20 years earlier could be exploited in the region under study. Processes of rural change in the Szeklerland area are present in the form of initiatives, experiments, and programmes of shorter or longer duration. Their number is significant, but, for now, their appearance and modes of operation can be considered as the diffuse mass of spot-like initiatives rather than a regional process displaying synergistic features.

At this point, it should be noted that in connection with rural development the public, political, development policy, and scientific discourse in the region all mention development gap, efforts aimed at catching up, and the unhurried nature of the catching-up process; and the external scientific, development policy, and public discourse addressing the region also shares this view. At this stage, the question arises, of course, as to whether it is only about a time lag or there are other factors as well contributing to this catching-up process considered as slow. In this context, we would like to formulate four observations based on our research carried out in the region:

- From a regional perspective, there is a considerable number of external incentives favouring the new rural development paradigm, and much information on the appreciation of rural areas and foreign initiatives falling into the new rural development paradigm comes to the knowledge of regional actors, such as: knowledge bases, training programmes, technological offers, models, best practices, incentives, and aids (Biró 2020). It cannot be said that the slow nature professionals and public figures attribute to the catching-up process would be a result of isolation or lack of information.
- Extra-regional actors play a major role in constructing the concept of rurality (complying with tourists' expectations, politically-oriented thematizations directed towards the region, development policy programmes and grants,

images of the region developed and distributed by external actors). However, the active, diverse, and strong involvement of the regional actors can also be shown in this construction process. As an illustrative and successful example of this, we can mention the activity aimed at the rehabilitation and further development of local identities, where the operation of local-scale community institutions plays a particularly important role. It would not be true to say that regional change initiatives are determined exclusively by adaptation to external actors. Internal and external needs for change, initiatives, and interpretations are at most times pursued in parallel, side by side and are only occasionally interlinked.

- The decreased role of local economy and the shrinkage in the amount as well as function of agricultural production are linked by professional analyses as a decisive condition to the rise to prominence of the post-productivist era (Woods 2007, Shucksmith 2010), and they also stress that in order to compensate for the dwindling agricultural sector new types of procedures and new types of local activities are necessary for the sustenance of rural areas. Having said that, agriculture has not yet lost ground in the studied region. What is more, following the 1989 regime change in Romania, the liquidation of agricultural cooperatives and state farms established during communism took place. As a result, the system of small family holdings was restored, and most of the regional households made an attempt at the restitution of the farming model abandoned in 1962 (this year marked the end of the collectivization programme in Romania). Consequently, local economic activity has a crucial importance in the lives of the families even today: over 50% of the regional families are small-scale farmers with land ownership and do some sort of farming; there is a persistence of fragmented land structure; the proportion of land sales and leases is low. Although farming is not the mainstay for most of the families, it consumes a significant portion of their time and energy, and the role of agricultural production as a monetary surrogate is of key importance in the operation of households (Laki – Biró 2001a., 2001b).
- All we have mentioned above as signs of the new rural development paradigm, of culture economy, are truly present and operational, but apart from that, family farming based on traditional cultural patterns also plays a

vital role. This parallelism certainly contributes to the slow nature of the regional emergence of the new rural development paradigm. An analysis of the correlation between the two processes – the continued existence of traditional farming and the penetration of the new rural development paradigm – is yet to be performed.

- Last but not least, it should be observed that in the overwhelming majority of the cases the acquisition of development resources relevant to the region (national development resources are key in this regard – proportionally speaking, all other resources are insufficient compared to that) takes place within a patronage system linked to an ethnopolitical network. An obvious sign supporting this statement is that all development strategies in the region have a ‘framework’ character – the aim pursued in its preparation phase is to include all fundraising opportunities that can be taken into account, while the success of grant applications is tightly connected to the current lobbying power of the patronage system. In this development model, top-down infrastructure investments are the dominant type, while there is a much lower proportion of bottom-up grants, i.e. contributions linked to rural development, provided directly to the producers, entrepreneurs (investments in assets, purchase of breeding animals, property development). There is minimal connection between the developments associated with the post-productivist turn in the region and the centralized, patronage-based regional development processes – these two processes run in parallel. This parallelism can also contribute to the slow progress in catching up with the new rural development paradigm.

To conclude, we can say that the region is open to the external effects representing the new rural development paradigm, both external and internal actors are interested in change, and the traditional family farming model is also heavily present in the region besides the elements of the new rural development paradigm. Top-down developments as well as bottom-up initiatives are simultaneously present in the area. A highly relevant question based on the above is perhaps: what kind of definition of the countryside is actually constructed through the activity of the regional and extra-regional actors? In what follows, we will formulate the conclusions that, as the results of our research so far, are connected to the components playing a fundamental role in the day-to-day functioning of the Szeklerland region. We are

hopeful that the further analysis of these components can be more consistent and continuous, and opportunities will arise for the clarification and expansion of the outlined components.

4. What Kind of Countryside?

The Region Has a Mosaic Structure

The region of Szeklerland is made up of several sub-regions, the closed or half-open basins developed along river valleys serving as the geographical divides. The social organization based on geographical division is a historically formed condition; a small town is situated at the centre of each sub-region and is surrounded by a network of villages. This configuration is still in place today and fully operational based on its labour market, consumption, educational, and cultural functions (having also administrative roles to a lesser extent). In many cases, the individual sub-regions are also reflected by the social publicity, the political structure, or the organization of civil societies. All sub-regions have their own identity constructions and presentation as well as advocacy practices referring to these constructions and competing with each other. Development policy experts addressing the region as a whole consider this mosaic structure as a negative aspect, a barrier to development, whereas professionals studying the individual sub-regions see it as an independent operational capability.

Predominance of the Family Self-Sufficiency Model

Results produced by surveys addressing the regional households clearly illustrate that the majority of the population still considers a family life model directed towards self-sufficiency as an example to follow. The modes of landownership and land use, the securing and oversecuring approach to farming, investments, and money management, and how family working time and family workforce are organized all point out the dominance of this family farming model. This operational model does not apply solely to families engaged in agricultural production. Following the self-sufficiency model has a whole set of lifestyle, labour market, learning, and other implications: e.g., one of its essential elements is striving for 'full' employment covering the entire working day, related to which is 'resource division' between activities of various types and statuses, while restrained identification with the principal occupation also needs mentioning.

Following a lifestyle model aimed at self-sufficiency is reflected in countless ways in individual career development and the creation and daily operation of local or smaller-scale communities. Typical examples are as follows: short-term planning, aiming for security, relying exclusively on own resources, the small scale of initiatives, and the prioritization of adjusting to already existing models over innovation challenges.

Locality: Powerful Identity Rehabilitation Processes

The most spectacular process in the region, traceable at almost all levels of lifestyle, concerns the rehabilitation of settlement-scale local identity structures. Some of the characteristic examples are: restoration and operation of local community institutions (community properties, traditional forms of organization and farming), strengthening of local awareness, organization of local events and festivities, community knowledge and the associated system of values and norms, and creation of local symbols – first of all in rural settlements.

The Regional Model of Networking

A prevalent trend in the region is the avoidance of weak ties and the continuing efforts to forge these weak ties into strong bonds. Blood, social, and regional ties are strong relationships. Following the same pattern, they would like to see the set of informal weak ties as strong bonds. The pursuit of strong relationships and the reliance thereon generates smaller strong groups and communities, separate from each other. The social organizing power of weak ties can be utilized to a lesser extent.

Labour Migration as the Regional Modernization Factor

Labour migration to foreign countries does not emerge as a topic in the regional discourse or policies, and even if it does, it comes up as a negative aspect. Having said that, research results indicate that labour migration has affected in some way or another almost all families in the region in the course of the past three decades. For over hundred years, labour migration has been a known and practised element of family lifestyle in this region (Oláh 1999a), its social role and value having been determined by cultural patterns developed throughout several decades (Biró et al.1999). The socio-economic benefits (experiences, financial aspects, innovative role) of the still massive labour migration do not find their way into the

regional policy design or the local development strategies. Their results, positive and negative effects are more likely to be reflected at the level of the households. Labour migration in the region is dominated by the transnational model (Bodó 2008).

The Ambivalent Role of Consumption Patterns

The various forms of consumption practice now break away from the previously established dominant order pertaining to the lifestyle models, which was traditionally based on running the households in alignment with each other. Consequently, this consumption practice is an ambivalent one. Family-scale civilizational accumulations, personal consumption patterns are increasingly individualized. However, there are two factors imposing limitations in this regard. One of them is of financial nature. Research results suggest that 80–85% of the regional households are unable to set aside any savings (Laki – Biró 2001a). Material conditions impose constraints on the individualization of consumption. The other factor is related to the observation that the renewed consolidation of local communities provides a new impetus to community norms and to the practice of families' adaptation to each other, which can again put a limit to the volume or nature of consumption. In the light of the foregoing considerations, it can be said that consumption patterns in the region divide and unify at the same time.

The Decisive Role of the Centre-Periphery Model

The region of Szeklerland considers itself as a rural area and lives accordingly. It is through many ties and many ways that the key mental and practical elements of rurality generate an asymmetric attitude towards extra-regional centres. The consequences of this rurality are manifold in terms of development policy. These include the peculiar – distant and polemical – attitude towards the politics represented by these centres, towards the centre as the governing entity. This asymmetric attitude, in principle, includes subordination, submitting to the will of 'those above', and accepting to wait out. On the other hand, this rurality also produces self-confidence and sense of initiative, although the latter usually refers to short-term and small-scale endeavours.

Regional Modernization Deficit

There have been three waves of modernization in the region during the 20th century. The first modernization attempt was marked by the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the early 1900s (construction of the railway, emergence of the first smaller timber-processing plants, primary education becoming universal, etc.), and the so-called ‘Szekler Action’ as the Hungarian state’s modernization programme. The years between 1940 and 1944 also mark the period of industrial location in the Szeklerland area – once again with the engagement of the Hungarian state – and of the operation of an institutional system much better organized and much more bureaucratic than the previous one (Oláh 2004). The comprehensive socialist industrialization started in the late 1960s meant the most ambitious modernization attempt, when a very significant portion of the population changed their place of residence, occupation, and lifestyle model, while secondary education becoming universal unleashed a never-before-seen wave of upward mobility.

All three external development interventions brought about changes, but all three processes would be eventually broken off. The first two support schemes were arrested by the big changes of history. The effects of the third modernization attempt were dampened partly by the exhaustion of central development resources and partly by the prevailing ‘stabilization’ strategies of family lifestyle come back to life against the imposed rapid change of lifestyle (Biró et al. 1994).

Interrupted or unevenly successful processes of change aimed at modernization eventuated such an accumulation of modernization deficit in the region during the pre-1989 period that is still clearly visible to the knowledgeable eye or to anyone coming from outside the region. Nonetheless, people living in the region do not perceive this lagging behind as a deficit at all times and in all areas of life. This modernization deficit – besides infrastructural conditions – can be traced in a high variety of areas from plans of further education to the family farming model, from relationship culture to the perception of the future.

Divergent Development Processes of Regional and Settlement Scale

A unified development concept including the entire region has not been formed most importantly because the region does not constitute an administrative unit and there is no institutional actor that would have the authority to perform such an activity. The development paths of the individual sub-regions or settlements show a considerably diverging pattern.

From the outside, it appears that rehabilitation developments (roadbuilding, construction of water and gas networks, etc.) funded through the central development resources put some settlements and regions in a favourable position but exclude others from these opportunities. The fragmenting power of overdue or delayed infrastructural developments inevitably induces a 'divergent development' as it places a region or settlement in a favourable position several years earlier than another one. All of this is compounded by the fact that the suitability for the adoption of market economy and globalization processes is substantially different on a regional and settlement scale. This is the second factor that brings about powerful processes of 'divergent development' revealed between some of the regions or settlements.

Discrepancies between Regional Narratives and Social Practices

As part of the regional-scale identity-building process, various longer- or shorter-lived narratives have been formed in relation to Szeklerland, typically described by attributes such as: 'poor', 'underdeveloped', 'ancient', 'popular', 'wonderful', 'Hungarian', etc. These narratives are generated by external and internal actors alike, and whichever narrative is currently on the agenda will be also the one shown in the regional media. Occasionally, they can also function as a social organizing force, motivation for support schemes, or political mobilizer. Social research experience shows that models of the everyday way of life function mostly independently from or in parallel with the narratives. There is a certain distance between the dominant narratives and social practice.

Change and permanence? What kind of countryside is Szeklerland? The role of socio-historically developed operational patterns appears as a determining element on the one hand, while opportunities and constraints for change produce initiatives, organizations, and programmes on a day-to-day basis that can be associated with the new rural development paradigm on the other hand. Both processes involve various actors, and there are facilitating as well as limiting factors behind each one.

Looking from the perspective of a development policy expert, the two processes exclude each other, while traditional patterns appear as a developmental barrier and the attempts of the new rural development paradigm as a desirable progress.

Nevertheless, everyday practice reveals a different picture. The two processes can also be opposing, but most of the time they take place in parallel or complementarily. Based on research results, the conclusion can be drawn that the modernization model of earlier periods appears to be repeating itself in our days. From the last third of the 19th century up to the present day, a characteristic feature of the modernization periods has been that the waves of transformation coming from the outside are always considerably more advanced than the social structure of the recipient region, and the outcome of the contact is always some sort of 'compromise': the regional family models and the local-scale social structures will invariably take a significant edge off the effects of the modernization endeavours while they also undergo slight changes. Is it safe to term this process a change, a development, or is it in fact peripherality that implicitly reproduces itself? Rural research can stand as a major contribution to providing conceptual and methodological tools for understanding these ambivalent processes.

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