

NATIONAL AND LOCAL IDENTITY BUILDING IN THE PUBLIC SPACE¹

JULIANNA BODÓ

WAC – Center for Regional and Anthropological Research

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania

bodojulianna@uni.sapientia.ro

Abstract

The paper to be presented below contains the brief summary of research results that analyse the events related to the symbolic occupation of space taking place in the Szeklerland area following the regime change. The analysis looks into the phenomenon in the process sense, paying particular attention to the trend-like changes occurred in the events of symbolic use of space in the period spanning nearly three decades. The individual periods of this phenomenon are outlined along the changes, also showing the peculiar features of how society functions in the region of Szeklerland following the regime change.

Keywords: ceremony, public space, identity building, Szeklerland

Introduction

The present study aims to examine the symbolic, ceremonial use of the society's public spaces in the social context of the Szeklerland area with respect to the past nearly three decades. The analysis forms part of a more extensive work that investigates ceremonial use of space in the context of national and local identity building (Bodó–Biró 2017). A major objective of the study is to treat the phenomenon of the symbolic use of space as a process, describing it as one that was present throughout the period in question. At the same time, a key priority was to observe the changing trends tracing out the separately identifiable periods within the process. These periods not only indicated the changes in the world of

¹ The Hungarian version of the study: Bodó J., Nemzeti és lokális identitásépítés nyilvános térben. In: Bodó J. (szerk.) Tér és tudomány. T3 Kiadó, Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, Sepsiszentgyörgy-Kolozsvár, 187–195.

celebrations but have shined the spotlight on such broad social changes that emerge in the evolution of the ways public sphere is used, of the means and phases of identity building, and of the patterns of community and individual attitudes alike. Analysing the identity building functions of the ceremonial use of space also allows for the examination of the different levels of community identities as well as the transformation thereof in relation to the trends of each time period. The national, regional, and local identity building tendencies appear as the peculiar features of the individual periods, and, through becoming related to other phenomena of the given social medium, this phenomenon outlines the interaction of the characteristics and tendencies with regard to the period under study.

Symbolic Use of Space in the Period Preceding the Regime Change

With a view to understanding the symbolic use of space throughout the nearly three decades of time span, the analysis included a review of the practice of symbolic space usage in the Hungarian society in Romania during the period before the regime change on the one hand and of some conclusions drawn from the analyses of these practices on the other. This was primarily necessary in order to put into perspective the various modes of use applied by the society's public and private sphere: the public sphere functioned differently in the period before and after the regime change, the two periods allowing for different identity building practices (Bodó 1999). Similarly, the pre-1989 era also had its own periods that, again, developed along the social changes, in line with the relationship between the current power and everyday life, showing the specific modes of minority identity building (Bodó–Biró 1997). Studying the phenomenon in this context must consider that segment of the era's prevailing ideology which was functioning in opposition to the ethnic minorities in the country. Homogenization efforts intensifying in the 1980s propagated not only ideological but also ethnic convergence. This implied that the symbolic, identity-building-oriented use of public space in this period was possible for the majority population almost on an exclusive basis. The period before the 80s – in accordance with the peculiar socio-historical situation (the deal made by those in power with the minorities) – saw a wider range of opportunities opening up for the use of public space by the minorities, including the Hungarians in Romania. This is the time when those practices of symbolic space usage developed that made possible the creation of *alternative Hungarian microworlds*. These include the ritual

practices heavily present from the late 60s till the early 80s, which were connected to the native places of prominent figures of the ethnic Hungarian minority (Áron Tamási, Elek Benedek, Sándor Kőrösi Csoma). These ritualized occasions (organized group visits of memorial sites; the elaborated scenarios of such occasions) aimed to make a certain personality who can be connected to the symbolic place the embodiment of a moral principle, of a noble idea. Public spaces used in this manner functioned as sites of memory 'lieux de memoire' (Nora 1999), but a perhaps even more important factor was the effort of the community to also express its connection, its belonging to the wider physical-geographical space through the ritual use. Statues could also be erected in the 60s and 70s (e.g. Petőfi statues), serving as further occasions of Hungarian identity building (inauguration and commemorative ceremonies, visits). The above-listed were the localized, ceremonial, festive occasions of the operation of identity, and in the context of the very same events were those discursive linguistic forms developed that also became the elements and means of public expression of national (Hungarian minority) identity.

Symbolic Occupation of Space in the Period after the Regime Change

Following the 1989 social changes in Romania, possibilities opened up for the public space to provide a platform for the expression of Hungarian minority identity. Elements of identity retreated into the private or quasi-public sphere in the previous era stepped into the spotlight in the context of ceremonial occasions suitable for symbolically marking the space and expressing the cohesion between the community and the place. The phenomenon of the symbolic occupation of space has been an ongoing process since 1990, taking place with an unrelenting intensity, while in the process certain trend-like changes can be traced, along which we can identify three distinct stages that we have named as follows:

- 1. Breakout and rehabilitation*
- 2. Expansion – New symbolic places and events*
- 3. Integration and individualization*

In the following, a presentation of the first two periods will be made.

1. Breakout and Rehabilitation

The characteristic features of the first period – from 1990 to 1995/96 – are breakout and rehabilitation. We are speaking of a breakout because national

identity, having been lying low in the shadows of invisibility, 'went public' quite suddenly and with extreme intensity, producing those emblematic objects, symbols, and elements of the nation building narrative that enable the creation of an identity construction that is acting both inwards and outwards. The primary mission of this dynamic period was the occupation of public spaces that had already existed but could not be used (prohibited, restricted, supervised modes of use) for identity building in the eighties. Practically, these years witnessed the recapturing (or, as the case may be, the capturing) of public places – recapturing from an oppressive regime in order for the community to adapt them for their own use. These public spaces had to be made suitable for organizing demonstrations and celebrating outstanding events of the national community. The most common example of this is the occupation of the central spaces (main squares) of the settlements and operating them as ceremonial-symbolic places. Prior to the regime change, it was not possible for the community, e.g., to publicly celebrate the 15th of March. After 1989, this has become the very first national identity-building public festive occasion for the Hungarian minority where the community as a whole can express their connection to the place by the use of national – physical as well as verbal – symbols (Bodó 1995). The Hungarian population in the settlements of the region has chosen and consistently 'built up' a space for itself where these celebrations took place. Already existing public spaces with a special character but impossible to be used for such purposes so far have become the places of celebration: places marked by statues, monuments or that can be linked to outstanding community events preserved in the communal memory. The function of national identity building was also performed by spaces that had no symbolic character, but the festive occasion granted them an elevated status through the use of symbols, and the ceremonial use rendered them suitable for community self-presentation. The stress here is on stepping/breaking out, while the rehabilitation of the places as well as of the community identity connected to them within the context of the same occasion also involved the rehabilitation of the cohesion between the place and the community.

2. Expansion – The Creation of New Symbolic Places and Events

The second phase of the period following the regime change is marked by the ever more frequent occasions of creating new symbolic places, while at the same time the number of formal events organized in these newly created symbolic places

is also on the rise. This time period started in the mid-90s and lasted into the early 2010s. It was during this timeline that a multitude of statues, monuments, (wooden) headboards, and Szekler gates were erected, commemorative plaques were placed, names were given to institutions (first of all to schools), and street names were changed across the region. As yet another feature of this period the rehabilitation of older monuments and symbolic places in some settlements gains momentum. The creation and rehabilitation of new spaces are always associated with ceremonies and festivities. In the meantime, a new phenomenon emerges: besides the presentation of Hungarian identity, these ceremonial occasions are also taking on a new role, which is local identity building and its accentuated representation in addition to national identity.

This period sees the efforts of towns and villages in the region to create impressive spaces so as to serve as venues for community (national) celebrations. These places with an elevated status are not necessarily spaces ‘equipped’ with the specific set of symbols of a certain ceremonial event, but the linkage between their local and national characteristics qualifies them for the organization of any kind of – national or local – formal occasion. Almost every settlement in the region has, for instance, world war memorials, whose renovation and expansion makes the physical space suitable for the hosting of any kind of festivities, whether it is the 15th of March, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, or some sort of local celebration. The intention to build local identities is also illustrated by the effort aimed at searching for local personalities and events. The prominent figures and outstanding events connected to the past of the settlement come from the locality’s own repository of symbolic values, and these are commemorated in the public space. In the context of this endeavour, Nora’s term ‘sites of memory’ seems to prevail: these memory sites seek to prevent oblivion (Nora 1999). In our case, not only evocation takes place against oblivion but also the strengthening of local identity that could not be set in motion before the regime change. Consequently, spaces created this way and the festive events organized there will gain a high profile: introducing into the collective consciousness of communities the local values that people living in the respective area were unaware of (personalities and events that have faded from prominence or have not even made it to communal memory) or that could not be propagated prior to the regime change, thus in fact strengthening local identity.

Plenty of memorial sites have been created and ceremonial events organized in the course of this era. This was the period when the locations of (both national and local) identity building were seeking to involve the entire region of Szeklerland into a sort of symbolic network by marking the key locations of space-based identity building. Since these practices were extremely colourful, while the marking of spaces as well as the character, frequency, and successfulness of the ceremonies organized around them also showed a highly diverse picture, we can define four categories in this rich line-up:

2a. Old sites of memory with increased importance

2b. New memorials/monuments, sites of memory

2c. Old and new places with declining significance

2d. Places in search of a name

In the following, I will give a brief outline of these four types and provide a few examples of each one.

2a. Old Sites of Memory with Increased Importance

This category includes memorials/monuments and ceremonial events that commemorate outstanding historical events of the Hungarian people and have a strong local relevance at the same time. These monuments were not erected during the former regime but in much older times; however, before the regime change, during the communist dictatorship, there was no possibility to organize commemorative events, wherefore the function of memorials/monuments was limited to certain forms of ‘concealed commemoration’. In the post-1989 period, these sites of memory would become quite soon – already on the occasion of the very first anniversaries – the locations of grand celebrations, acting as events of the Hungarian minority identity building following the regime change.

A fine example of this type is the *Siculicidium Monument* erected in the memory of the 1764 Massacre at Madéfalva [Ro: Siculeni]. The monument erected in the year 1899 became one of the key points of national identity building going out of hiding following the regime change – the anniversary of the event has been celebrated around the monument each year ever since. In addition to the local people, political actors representing ethnic Hungarians attended the event in increasing numbers each year, while several political personalities of Hungary also

found the occasion and the venue suitable for making their appearance from time to time. The 250th anniversary of the Massacre at Madéfalva was a timely opportunity for the locals to organize an extensive series of events to commemorate this milestone anniversary. On this occasion, the physical space that would be soon home to the monument was further expanded, and more relevant ritual spaces were created in other locations. This endeavour is now driven by a strong intention of local identity building.

Another site of memory fulfilling a similar role is the *Nyergestető Monument* commemorating the local events with tragic consequences that took place in the context of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. The monument was completed in the year 1897: after the regime change, large-scale celebrations have been held every year, where all those public and political figures are represented – similarly to the commemoration of the Massacre at Madéfalva – who seek to gain the legitimacy of the community. Again, the site of memory and the celebration perform a dual role: the bonding of both the entire and the local Hungarian community is achieved through them. The further expansion of the place serves a somewhat different purpose: following the regime change, various organizations, associations, and private individuals erected a multitude of (wooden) headboards on the elevated area situated opposite the monument, this way rather looking for opportunities to strengthen their position by connecting to a sacralized place.

2b. New Memorials/Monuments, Sites of Memory

In the course of the indicated period, a large number of symbolic spaces were created (statues, monuments/memorials, commemorative plaques, headboards, naming events), which then implicitly generated a growing number of ceremonial events. This is the context where the effort to create a tightly-woven symbolic net encompassing the entire Szeklerland becomes most conspicuous, showing how the region is related to its places and pointing out its right to them. A typical example in this respect is the building up of places and events related to Bishop Áron Márton as several sites of memory bear his name, a number of towns have statues erected as a tribute to him, a memorial complex has been built in his native place, Sândominic, schools have been named after him, and commemorative ceremonies as well as conferences have been held in his honour. In the present case, the symbolic occupation of space takes place in a diverse continuum since this prominent figure

of the past, whose name the above-listed places are associated with, bears relevance not only for his native village or Szeklerland but for the whole of Transylvania.

The statue called *Gloria Victis* in Miercurea Ciuc also falls into this category, commemorating the local victims of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The monument was erected in the year 2007 with an eye for the town to have a space with an elevated status and endowed with symbolic content where the annual events commemorating the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 can be organized. Although since the symbolic occupation of this place and its conversion into a site of memory the series of events associated with the Revolution of '56 have become even more grandiose, they seem to have taken on a somewhat more restrained character in the past couple of years.

2c. Old and New Places with Declining Significance

This type of practices includes places whose key aspect is that their creation is also characterized by the dual intention of national and local identity building but they have somehow failed to fulfil this function. The reasons are manifold: it may be due to the insufficiently clarified meaning of the symbolic element placed on the site, the multifunctional nature of the selected space, or changes made to some of the functions. Such circumstances inevitably had a negative effect on the visualization of a new role.

An example of this type is the Petőfi–Bălcescu pair of statues in Miercurea Ciuc. The two figures were installed in one of the city's parks back in the seventies but without any possibility of organizing commemorative or ceremonial events in these parts at the time. It was not until 15 March 1990 that the event in commemoration of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 could be held in the space marked by the statues. In addition to the officially organized commemoration, the ceremony was also an example of the symbolic occupation of space taking place in a spontaneous manner, which is a good illustration of how identity building works in a public setting. The following period witnessed many changes in the locations for celebrating the 15th of March around the town. The position of the group of statues has also been changed: the square in front of the castle, converted into a park, underwent extensive renovation some years ago, one of the consequences of which was the displacement of the group and changes made to their spatial positioning. By doing so, however, they have lost their symbolic, dominant position occupied in the respective

space. Today, this public space acts as only one of the many locations home to the 15th of March celebrations, its prominent symbolic role having been watered down.

A further example that can be classified in this group involves a case when the site of memory was created with the primary intended function of building and operating local identity, being also connected to the visualization of national identity. This is the statue of ethnographer Pál Péter Domokos, an emblematic personality born in Șumuleu Ciuc [Hu: Csíksomlyó]. The figure was installed in the year 1998 opposite the Pilgrimage Church in Șumuleu Ciuc, on a square expanded precisely in order to accommodate the statue. However, a crucial aspect the designers of the statue and the square did not reckon with was the fact that this spot of public space had already been heavily loaded with symbolic meaning. Both the church building and the square situated in front of it form an integral part of the sacral composition of the Csíksomlyó Pilgrimage, this way the statue of the prominent figure being unable to fulfil its intended function in this space since the meaning conveyed by the much more powerful ritual complex has cast a 'detrimental shadow' on it. Being assigned a background role could also happen because Pál Péter Domokos did not have a sufficiently high reputation among the local population (he lived most of his life far away from his native place), and his personality, people's knowledge of him did not find its way into the local memory. The statue was quite soon moved to a new place, a semi-enclosed and definitely less significant space. Its significance always fell short of the original expectations, and its symbolic, meaning-generating role could never be established.

2d. Places in Search of a Name

Among the phenomena associated with the symbolic occupation of space, it is not uncommon to come across a type when localities seek to create a site of memory and search for an event or personality – that can be raised to a symbolic level and can be recalled from the past of the settlement – around which/whom a ritualized series of events can be built. The naming of schools is the most typical example of this phenomenon. Choosing a name would usually take place by following two ideas, one of them being the case when the school adopted the name of a well-known figure in the Hungarian culture and the other one involving a renowned personality of the given settlement featuring as the selected eponym. The first wave of the naming events involved the first version most of the time. This was the period when

national identity building received the greater emphasis, a phenomenon also reflected in the selection of names for the schools. After a few years, however, the second variant began to gain more ground in line with efforts aimed at strengthening local identities. Nevertheless, it was not straightforward for all settlements which prominent figure would be suitable to take on the role of the eponym, while on the other hand there was not always a clear satisfaction on the part of the local people either with regard to the name choice due to which these naming events often failed to fulfil the role they were meant to play in local identity building.

Closing Remarks

The post-regime change process of symbolic occupation of spaces in Szeklerland has been taking place under specific circumstances. This process has gained a peculiar aspect through the praxes of identity building, its key determinant being the changed usage of public spaces following the transition. The phenomenon of spatial identity emerges in practices of symbolic space usage when through symbols and ceremonial events the marking of the space that is lived and known/felt as their own becomes one of the forms of a community's self-determination – perhaps the most powerful one. This community self-presentation builds up separately, but most often simultaneously, the symbolic, ritualized practice of integration into the national and local space. The period under study is particularly suitable for resorting to the changed use of social space after the regime change on the one hand and for taking advantage of the new reality brought about by the relationship between the private and public sphere on the other in order to create new identity constructions that are able to transpose the elements of identity kept hidden in the private sphere into the public space. Hence – national, regional, and local – community identity building will have new symbolic spaces developed and new ceremonial scenarios produced.

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