

Capitals of Culture as Cultural Capital. Cultural Diplomacy in Sibiu/Hermannstadt, Romania

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Figure 1. A Passageway in Sibiu.

Cultural diversity through intercultural dialogue, thriving creative industries, and successful international relations mediated by cultural know-how are the three objectives of the European Commission's agenda for cultural policy to be enforced between 2007 and 2013. Due to its enormous success among participants and the media, as well as to the positive reviews conducted by independent evaluators,ⁱ the European Capital of Culture, an

initiative introduced by the European Commission in 1985, received a boost in the Commission's latest evaluation of the European Union's (EU) cultural policy.ⁱⁱ

For the Romanian city of Sibiu (also known as Hermannstadt), which shared the role of the 2007 Cultural Capital of Europe with Luxembourg, this cultural initiative constituted an opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of the city's multicultural values and ethnic relations within the history of Transylvania, Romania, and Europe as a whole. Sibiu's very peculiar history and its ethnic composition make it a very interesting example of the ways in which cultural diplomacy contributes to a re-tooling of culture from an exclusionary mechanism fueling nationalist discourses and interethnic strife into an engine for economic development and interethnic dialogue. The European Capital of Culture constituted a great opportunity to explore the potential economic resources inherent in cultural production at the grassroots level, through local non-

governmental organizations, cultural cooperatives, independent theater and music groups, or cinema associations. This was a relatively new phenomenon in post-socialist Romania where cultural initiatives had traditionally been centrally organized, with local organizations acting primarily as implementers.

Historical Background

The traditional center of the German community living on the territory of what is today known as Romania; Sibiu also hosts a considerable number of Hungarians living alongside the Romanian majority. The factors that led to this complex ethnic compositionⁱⁱⁱ are varied and historically rooted in the medieval times. This historical background provides us with an understanding of the context in which the Magyar, German, and Romanian ethnic identities were forged in relation to one another at the local level, a process that was nevertheless also influenced by external political economic forces. Local variants of cultural diplomacy, which will be described here, have always played an important role in the negotiation of ethnic relations in Sibiu. For this reason, the tremendous cultural effervescence that the city has experienced since its very foundation could perhaps be explained with reference to the extent of interethnic cultural exchange. In this sense, Sibiu could also be treated almost like a microcosm for Transylvanian ethnic relations in general.

Sibiu's population in 2007
according to Sibiu's local
council: 155,045

Germans: 2%

Hungarians: 2%

Romanians: 94%

Sibiu's ethnic composition
in 1850 according to the
national census:

Germans: 69%

Hungarians: 7%

Romanians: 16%

Other: 8%

A group of Saxon merchants arrived to Transylvania in the 12th century attracted by the preferential commercial rights granted to them by the Hungarian kingdom in return for which the Saxons had to protect the mountain passes against the Tatar and Ottoman armies. The Saxons built seven fortified cities (the Siebenburgen) that they later united into a single political entity—the University of the Saxon Nation--which maintained its territorial and administrative autonomy until the end of the 18th century.

Trivia and Fun Facts

1292: The first hospital on the territory of what is now known as Romania opens in Sibiu.

1494 : The first pharmacy opens in Hermannstadt.

1528: The first printing house in Transylvania begins its activity in Hermannstadt.

1551: Conrad Haas, a resident of Hermannstadt, is the first to make experiments with dirigible rockets and 'delta wings'

1797: Samuel von Hahnemann opened in Sibiu the world's first homeopathic laboratory.

1846: Johann Strauss and Franz Liszt give performances in Sibiu.

1904: Sibiu is the third city in Austro-Hungarian Empire to have electric power. It is the second city in Europe to have an electric tramway.

Sibiu's strategic location as the crossroads of important commercial channels made the area a prominent point of political contention, and, as a result, was successively under Turkish (16th century), Austro-Hungarian (17th-century), Hungarian (19th century), and then Romanian (20th century) rule. Despite the changing political leadership of Transylvania, the Saxons managed to maintain administrative and political autonomy, thereby safeguarding their commercial privileges as craftsmen and small manufacturers. Alongside their involvement in small-scale

manufacturing, which other ethnic groups had little interest in until the 19th century, German speakers also forged a sense of collectivity through their membership of the Lutheran Church.

Unlike the Saxons, the Magyar community was more politically active, involved as it was in the administrative leadership of Transylvania. In the context of the

feudal economy, the Magyars were for the most part noblemen (owners of large properties) and were marginally involved in commerce and manufacturing. Their political activism manifested itself repeatedly, as in for example their successful contestation of Austrian rule over Hungary in the 1848 Revolution, which resulted in greater political independence for Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This political activism became an important part of the Magyar cultural imagination.

The Romanian population formed the peasant/serf majority and was attached to the Eastern Orthodox Church. The rise of Enlightenment values in the 18th century and the growing number of educated Romanians spurred the formation of a Romanian national movement claiming rights to self-determination.

Even though it would be safe to say that ethnicity, as we now know it, was a phenomenon that emerged with the nationalist movements of the late 18th century,^{iv} before the 19th century there nevertheless were still certain clusters of economic, cultural, and political orientations that defined the three communities living in and around Sibiu as different from one another. A worsening of inter-ethnic relations among the Magyar, Saxon, and Romanian communities occurred after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a major turning point in the history of local ethnic relations. This event gave further boost to the political ideals of the movements for national self-determination, which in turn resulted in more rigid boundaries separating the communities, and the crystallization of ethnic differences as somehow insuperable.



Figure 2 Sibiu

Here is a snapshot of the general political climate marking the relations among the three groups toward the end of the 18th century. Cultural cooperation and

exchange frequently occurred through the sharing of information and resources for cultural production. For instance, the tremendous importance of Reformation for the Saxon community, which had an interest in accessing religious texts without considerable mediation, established Hermannstadt as the center of the Transylvanian print culture. The Romanian intellectual community also accessed this important resource that it would later put to use to mobilize a Romanian national movement. In fact, the first text ever written in Romania dates back to the 16th century and was written and published in Hermannstadt. Knowledge of the German language also allowed Romanians and Magyars to gain access to universities in Wien. There they studied liberal philosophy and the Enlightenment, models that they then tried to implement through local cultural organizations working in villages, through newspapers, theaters, museums, and so on. The current good relations between the Romanian Transylvanian, Magyar, and German-speaking academic worlds could perhaps be attributed to the traditional exchange of knowledge and circulation of people among them.

Even though the three communities benefited tremendously from cultural exchange initiatives, their relations became increasingly tense, a phenomenon that has to do with the changing political, economic, and social climate of the 18th century. After all, cultural diversity and multiculturalism are values that are peculiar to the post-1970s era of globalization, and all attempts to treat certain cultural initiatives that pre-date this period as cultural diplomacy should be done with a certain degree of caution. Such cultural initiatives lacked the self-reflexive approach to cultural diversity and multiculturalism that we currently espouse and that accompanied the use of new media technologies.

Despite a minimal degree of cultural exchange, the relations among the communities became for the most part stagnant. For instance, in the 18th century the Magyars tried to get more involved in commerce and small manufacturing, thereby



prompting the German community, eager to retain its economic privileges, towards greater closure of their community boundaries (by for instance reducing the number of interethnic marriages which would have resulted into a proliferation of family ties and of networks of support across ethnic divisions). The Germans' appealed to the Austrian crown for support against the Magyars on grounds of the Saxons' and Austrians' shared 'Germanness' further added to the climate of ethnic tension. Finally, the Romanian community began pursuing greater political and economic recognition. The relations further worsened with the First World War, when Transylvania became part of Romania. This change resulted in a dramatic reorganization of the social structure, a process that was guided by ethnic considerations. The Magyars suffered a particularly strong blow, losing their positions in the political administration: as a consequence, many of them preferred to move to the newly independent state of Hungary. The Germans' economic privileges were not as severely reduced, though, since the policies of modernization initiated by the Romanian government were thought to be able to benefit from the Germans' technical expertise (held in high regard). But the inter-war period was just a brief honeymoon for the German community living in Hermannstadt and Transylvania.

The rise to power of a communist government in the aftermath of the Second World War resulted in greater worsening of inter-ethnic relations. The government was Marxist-Leninist in its orientation, and its ideological stance on ethnicity treated ethnic relations as a form of false consciousness that was determined by the economics of class relations. As such, ethnic feeling was expected to disappear shortly after the nationalization of the means of production, since, with an equal distribution of resources, ethnic conflict was believed to be erased. Manifestations of ethnic identity were tolerated so long as they did not contain any political overtones. In practice, however, the government's policies were very often an extreme form of assimilation. The German community was held responsible *in corpore* for the crimes of the Third Reich and many of its leaders deported to the Soviet Union. The number of

schools where teaching took place in languages other than Romanian was considerably reduced. Spelling of non-Romanian names had to be changed according to the rules of Romanian orthography. Moreover, religious gatherings were strongly discouraged, a measure that affected the German community very considerably given that the Lutheran Church was the community's cultural and political backbone. The government's policies of assimilation became particularly visible with the nationalist discourse promoted by Nicolae Ceausescu beginning with the late 1960s. But the ethnic minorities' responses to these government policies were far from passive.

According to Katherine Verdery, Julien J. Studley Faculty Scholar and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at City University of New York, the different reactions that the Hungarian and German communities had to the Romanian government's policies towards minorities were in line with some of the political and economic values and social networks that the two groups had developed in the past. For instance, the "Hungarian ethnic reaction in Romania actualizes in the present a set of conceptions that have had meaning for particular groups of Hungarians in the past and continue to have meaning for notions of self among at least some of them today,"^v among them being an active and very vociferous pursuit of political rights. This endeavor was



Figure 4 The Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu

particularly prominent both because of the Hungarian traditional social networks of political organization that were put to work, but also because of the political economic conditions of the 1970s and 1980s, when Hungarian dissidents could make the news of *The New York Times* by invoking the Romanian communist government's breach of human rights (see for instance the open letter accusing the Romanian government of oppressive ethnic policies published by Karoly

Kiraly in *The New York Times* on February 1, 1978^{vi}). According to Verdery, the German community had a more difficult time voicing political demands because of the disappearance of the traditional networks of support organized through the Lutheran Church and because of the deportation of so many members of the community to the Soviet Union. When the opportunity to emigrate from Romania to West Germany was opened through the signing of a bilateral trade agreement between Romania and West Germany, the large majority of Sibiu's Germans decided to take advantage of the new agreement. In many respects, this strategy appeared to be more successful than the Hungarians', since the Hungarian community's pursuit for the government's compliance with human rights, even though widely publicized, nevertheless fell on deaf ears. Western human rights organizations treated human rights as pertaining to the individual and not to communities. By contrast, given the weakness of the community ties within the German community,^{vii} its members were more eager to take up the notion of individual rights to negotiate their position vis-à-vis the West German and the Romanian governments and to claim the right to emigrate. In this context, the individual right to re-establish a connection with a family member living in West Germany came in was an oft used argument for seeking residency in West Germany.

Cultural Industries, Cultural Politics, and the European Union

The political and social transformations that occurred in Sibiu have always borne the imprint of transnational political economic forces that the local residents had to negotiate carefully, especially given the multiple transnational political allegiances that they all held. Romania's accession to the EU simply reiterated Sibiu's complex historical interactions with international powers. Whether defined as organized cultural exchange or, in more politically oriented terms, as a form of soft power (Joseph Nye 2007), an instrument through which one can achieve a goal through persuasion instead of coercion,^{viii} cultural diplomacy offers an

alternative bottom-up model of social interaction and of managing ethnic relations to the top-down centralized and state-run model of diplomatic relations. As the historical outline suggests, culture had traditionally established itself as a mechanism for division and exclusion among the three main ethnic groups residing in Sibiu and in Transylvania: one acquired membership of particular occupational groups and access to particular resources based on one's cultural background; in turn, this also translated in having one's rights of access to particular resources denied based on one's ethnic background.

Accession to the European Union introduced an alternative model of socio-political governance, and with it, a new model of multiculturalism in Romania. As a supranational political entity, the EU served as a body to which ethnic minorities could appeal in case of abuses of power by the national government. But the EU also brought to Romania a greater emphasis on decentralization of government functions and injected resources into the civil society as an alternative platform through which the Romanian institutional landscape could be transformed and a more entrepreneurial approach to socio-cultural involvement introduced. Consequently, the policies toward a greater political and cultural inclusion of ethnic minorities introduced by the government (such as, for instance, the creation of the Council for European Minorities following the signing of the European Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the early 1990s) were complemented by projects managed at the grassroots level through civil society organizations. The 72 NGOs that conduct their activity in the Sibiu county of which 42 run in the city of Sibiu alone make this area a hotspot of nongovernmental activity. According to the 2007 Sibiu County Strategy for Social Assistance, 89% of the funding managed by these NGOs comes from foreign organizations (a majority of which are German), with the rest supplied by the state.^{ix}

One of the main catalysts for such an outburst of NGO activity has been the accession to the status of European Capital of Culture. Accession to the status of

European Capital of Culture corresponded to Romania's accession to the EU in 2007. As such, the events taking place in Sibiu were given tremendous symbolic and political importance in Romania. By 2007, most of the preliminary work had been conducted through local organizations. The mayor, Klaus Johannis, and the local political organization of the Saxon community (FDGR) lobbied foreign organizations in Luxembourg and Germany to obtain funding and technical expertise for the restoration of Sibiu's Saxon town center. Support came from the German government through the Development Bank, the European Commission, the World Bank, and GTZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit), an architectural firm subsidized by the German government. Luxembourg also supported some of the initiatives that took place in Sibiu on grounds of a shared past and shared language, support which then resulted in a sharing of the title of the European Capital of Culture by the two cities. The effervescence of the local initiatives and the ability of the different ethnic groups to collaborate in order to navigate the different possibilities for spurring local development made the town into an example of entrepreneurship, a can-do attitude that received enormous praise especially since the central government had traditionally been very slow in funding Sibiu's cultural patrimony. The power of the local cultural patrimony to attract so much support and attention surprised everyone, including members of the Romanian government. When the Romanian minister of culture visited Sibiu in 2005 and was impressed by the outcomes of work of restoration, he allegedly exclaimed: "Through culture we will enter Europe!"

But cultural diplomacy should not be approached simply as the effect of the introduction of a regime of soft power at the local level through measures decided in Brussels. The influences of the European Union's policies have been far from unidirectional. According to Article 151(4) of the EC Treaty, the EU must ensure that all decisions that are taken must be "culturally compatible." The Article therefore creates some room for the expression of local cultural idiosyncrasies in decision-making processes, making cultural diplomacy into a measure that permeates political decision-making processes through and

through. Initiatives such as the European Capital of Culture create a greater exposure of specific political and cultural values, thereby creating the potential for the rise of a new generation of local political leaders with a cosmopolitan outlook and with a reflexive approach toward the cultural dimensions of politics.

The economic impact of the European Capital of Culture was closely tied to the political dimensions of the initiative, since the emphasis on grassroots involvement through policies enabling the development of civil society also spilled over into a more entrepreneurial approach to business management. Much of the business development occurred as a satellite of the cultural initiatives proposed by the government. According to *Sibiu, Capitala Europeana*,^x a report authored by Sergiu Nistor, the Commissioner for the program *Sibiu, European Capital of Culture*, the hotel industry reported a 10.7% increase, while tourist operators a 13.7% growth relative to 2006. According to the same report, local business experienced a 10.2% overall growth.

All these successes suggest that in Sibiu cultural diplomacy initiatives have contributed to the local political and economic development through a transformation of culture from a tool for exclusion and separation into a medium for interethnic dialogue and sharing.

ⁱ See http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc413_en.htm. Independent studies suggest that the program has improved the residents' perception of their cities and has contributed to local cultural development and tourism.

ⁱⁱ Consequently, as of 2011, two cities from two different countries will hold the title jointly. For further information, see http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc413_en.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Census data has been obtained from: *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája (1850-1992)* authored by Varga e. Árpád. For more recent census data on Romania as a whole, see <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ro.html#People>. For recent census data collected in Sibiu, see www.sibiu2007.ro, a website maintained by the local government authorities.

^{iv} There is a vast body of historical and anthropological scholarship on this topic. In relation to Eastern and Central Europe, see e.g., Rogers Brubaker (2004). *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University press. Istvan Deak (1990). *Beyond Nationalism: A*

Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Norman Naimark (1997). *The Problem of Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*. Greenville: East Carolina University Press. Katherine Verdery (1991). *National Ideology under Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

^v Katherine Verdery (1985). *The Unmaking of an Ethnic Collectivity: Transylvania's Germans*. *American Ethnologist* 12(1):62-83. For a more comprehensive historical overview of the relationship among the German, Hungarian, and Romanian communities in Transylvania, see also *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press

^{vi} The article can be accessed at the following link:

<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30810FC3C5413728DDDA80894DA405B888BF1D3&scp=1&sq=karoly+kiraly&st=p>

^{vii} On the topic of the weakness of the ties within the German community during the communist leadership of Romania, also see Marilyn McArthur (1976). *The 'Saxon' Germans: The Political Fate of an Ethnic Identity*. *Dialectical Anthropology* 1: 349-364.

^{viii} See Joseph Nye (2007). "The Place of Soft Power in State-Based Conflict Management." *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*. Ed. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela R. Aall. U.S. Institute of Peace Press.

^{ix} Data obtained from <http://www.sibiul.ro/stiri-sibiu.html>

^x The report can be accessed at: www.cultura.ro