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Identity, Ethnicity, and Religious Changes in Bihor County, Romania.
Reflections on the Changes of Romanian and Hungarian Christian Denominations in Bihor County during the 20th Century. The Case of Érselénd/Şilindru[*]

Abstract.

The purpose of the research is to offer a three-dimensional examination of a chosen population's make-up, examining ethnicity, native language, and religious denomination during the 20th century in the Romanian Bihor County. This paper examines the changing process of how identity in Érselénd/Şilindru was influenced by outside forces coming from different social, political, religious, and even economic directions. The village was chosen, as it was originally a Ruthenian-speaking Greek Catholic settlement that moved to the Hungarian Kingdom centuries ago. They kept their religious identity but became Hungarian-speaking people. Then, during the twentieth century, this homogenous settlement, due to external political, historical, and economic influences, experienced a profound change to a degree that had not been predicted. However, this fragmentation into various Christian denominations, the changes of language and ethnic identity clearly demonstrates the complex history of the geopolitical region of Partium, Romania.

Keywords: Greek Catholics, identity change, Ruthenians, minority, religion, ethnicity, Partium

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Introduction

Both politicians and scholars often do not have an in-depth knowledge of the life, religion, and culture of their neighbors, not to mention commoners (a slightly odd use of this word in this context). Hungarian Reformed people tend to think that they know the neighboring Orthodox Romanian people, yet they never really crossed the boundaries set by the religious, ethnic, and social context in their villages, small towns, or even in big cities. A Reformed parishioner never goes to a Romanian Orthodox church and observes its liturgy. To participate in their religious community is unimaginable. Nonetheless, the same is true for Romanians adhering to their deeply appreciated cultural-religious background. Bridges, if they exist at all, are often very narrow, fragile, and shaky. To be truly multicultural is to seek to obtain an increasingly deeper knowledge of the other. Furthermore, in a modern world, it would be desirable to see how the other's cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious identity and orientation is really appreciated. Today's Romania, like many other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, or even in the Balkans, has a centuries-old history of coexistence of a huge array of religious and ethnic groups. Moreover, it is a well-known yet supressed knowledge by nationalist historiographers that these communities often intermingled or, either partially or profoundly, changed identities, which came to the fore through changes in language (vernacular language), religion, and culture. Owing to romanticism and nationalism, nation-states began to present such a history starting from the 19th century. This tendency has gained more impetus – especially as a result of the impact of the two world wars, the citizens of a given country seem to believe that only their own people, ethnic group, religious denomination, and language existed there. Nationalist historians – Romanians, Hungarians, Slovakians, Czechs, and many others – overtly emphasize the presence of *their nations*, wherefore the histories presented are either exaggerated or one-sided. This cultural, social, and microhistory of a chosen village, Érselénd/Şilindru, in the Partium Region in Romania attempts to draw attention to how fragile the latent argument is in various nationalist historiographies, according to which people in a given country are a direct descendent of a people from the ancient past. It is not to deny any proven or reckoned continuity of a nation. Rather, the aim of the paper is to show that in every century identities did change. Before offering a case study, our intention is to provide a context where linguistic, religious, and cultural changes took place in the chosen Transylvanian, more precisely in the Partium region.

Transylvania or/and Partium? A Known but Unknown Region Even for Locals?

The aforementioned vast region has seen a profoundly intercultural, multicultural, and interethnic existence for the past centuries. Before trying to define what the Partium area means, we turn to the larger geographical entity, Transylvania, which in the popular mind incorporates, although wrongly, what is perceived historically as Partium. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states: "*Transylvania*, Romanian *Transilvania*, Hungarian *Erdély*, German *Siebenbürgen*, historic eastern European region, now in Romania. After forming part of Hungary in the 11th–16th centuries, it was an autonomous principality within the Ottoman Empire (16th–17th century) and then once again became part of Hungary at the end of the 17th century. It was incorporated into Romania in the first half of the 20th century."[3]

First, we deem it instrumental to use a well-known reference work that Google may bring up. It has been selected on purpose, as most people gain information about the other in such a way [alternative suggestion – this is a common source of finding out information]. Another encyclopedia entry states: Transylvania "is a multi-ethnic region located in the present-day state of Romania. Its principal ethnic groups, or nationalities, are Romanians, Hungarians, and Germans; there are also Serbs, Gypsies, and Jews in the Region, as well as small numbers of others (such as Armenians). It is difficult to give basic facts about Transylvania, since members of the different groups – particularly the Romanians and Hungarians – disagree on fundamental points of information."[4] Needless to say, this short summary is useful yet far from being comprehensive even in a concise way. We shall return later to this issue.

Let us address some vital issues that influence our micro-historical-social and religious research. Terminology is crucial since each geographical, political, or historical term carries an element of cohesion and integration regardless of political will, wish, and wit. Geopolitical terms such as Transylvania or Partium need to be elaborated, just as geographical terms such as the Great Hungarian Plain, and within it the Nyírség, which

[3] https://www.britannica.com/place/Transylvania (last accessed: 23 April 2021).

[4] https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/transylvanian-ethnic-groups (last accessed: 23 April 2021).

is a geographical area situated in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and partly in Hajdú-Bihar counties of present-day Hungary and in Szatmár County in Romania.[5] With these in mind, we state first and foremost that the geographical and political boundaries of Transylvania have not been consistent throughout its history, and even today they do not overlap entirely. The geographical parameters of Transylvania are defined by the encyclopedia that Google shows us among the first results as follows: "Transylvania thus defined lies between approximately 45.5° and 48° N and 20.5° and 26° E. It occupies 41.9 percent of the total surface area of Romania. The climate is continental, with relatively dry, warm summers and cold winters."[6] Compare this summary with the political and geographical definition of Transylvania provided by *Encyclopedia Britannica*: "The region, whose name first appeared in written documents in the 12th century, covered a territory bounded by the Carpathian Mountains on the north and east, the Transylvanian Alps on the south, and the Bihor Mountains on the west. The neighboring regions of Maramureș, Crișana, and Bánát have also, on occasion, been considered part of Transylvania."[7] This is a more nuanced description of the complexity of what the term Transylvania means, yet the first of the more meticulous ones in terms of geographical preciseness. However, it is surprising that in the above-mentioned definitions the region called Partium is mentioned nowhere. This suggests that a historical, geographical, and cultural region has perhaps escaped the minds of even the intelligentsia.

Historically, the Partium region was a buffer zone between part of the Hungarian Kingdom that had been occupied by the Ottoman Empire, and its vassal state, the Transylvanian principality ruled almost entirely by Hungarian princes, where its north-eastern part overlapped with the two aforementioned political entities and stretched long into the Austrian-Habsburg-dominated part of the northern region of the Hungarian Kingdom, which had come under the rule of another invading empire. Therefore, each of the three political entities claimed and owned a smaller or a larger part of it.[8]

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[5] This sandy geographical area is clearly visible that is bordered by Bodrogköz and Rétköz on the north, Beregi-sík and Szatmári-sík on the east, and Érmellék, Hajdúság, and Hajdúhát on the south.

[6] https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/transylvanian-ethnic-groups (last accessed: 7 May 2021).

[7] https://www.britannica.com/place/Transylvania (last accessed: 23 May 2021).

[8] BARTA, Gábor et al. (1989): *Erdély rövid története*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó.

In 1570, the Treaty of Speyer ended the warfare between the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy and the Hungarian Szapolyai families. It is the very first treaty that mentions Partium as a region, referring to János Zsigmond Szapolyai as *princeps Transsylvaniae et partium regni Hungariae dominus*, that is, Prince of Transylvania and ruler of parts of the Kingdom of Hungary.[9] Unfortunately, Szapolyai agreed in the treaty that upon his or his successors' death Transylvania would come into the possession of the Habsburg ruler, who cunningly obtained the title of King of Hungary. Soon after Szapolyai's death, a powerful local landlord who had vast estates in Partium and Transylvania did not subject the newly created political entity to direct Habsburg rule; rather, he chose and consciously accepted the Ottoman Empire's "protection". This means that throughout its history the Hungarian Principality of Transylvania was a tributary of the Ottoman sultan.

From the beginning of the rule of Prince István Báthory (1571–1586), Transylvania emerged as a semi-independent political entity since neither the Habsburgs were able to control it nor the Ottoman Sultan showed greater interest than allowing it to develop into a vassal state paying annual tributary to the Sultan, thereby recognizing its authority as a controller. Taking a closer look into what constituted the emerging geopolitical area, it can be stated that the Partium region consisted of five countries of the mediaeval Hungarian Kingdom: Bihar (Bihor), Middle Szolnok (Közép Szolnok/Solnocul de Mijloc) Kraszna (Crasna), Máramaros (Maramureş), and Zaránd (Zarand), to which the Kővár region (Kővár vidéke), Karánsebes (Caransebeş), and Lugos (Lugoj) counties were added.[10]

[9] BAKK, Miklós – SÜLI-ZAKAR, István – SZILÁGYI, Ferenc (2020): *Partium Borders, Ethnic Groups and Territorial Development*. Budapest, Károli University. 182.

[10] SZILÁGYI, Ferenc (2004): A Historical and/or a Developmental Region? In: Süli-Zakar, István (ed.): *Cross-Border Co-operations – Schengen Challenges*. Debrecen, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó. 139–143.

A Treasure of the Past or Even the Present? The Ethnic, Religious, and Cultural Diversity of the Larger Region, Transylvania

Transylvania, which has been an integral part of Romania since 1920, has been home to Romanians, Hungarians, Szekler Hungarians, Armenians, and Jews from Sephardim, Askenazi, or Hassidic religious affiliations, whose origins can be traced to different geographical locations. Furthermore, Germans of various backgrounds, such as Saxons (Universitas Saxonum in Hermannstadt/Nagyszeben/Sibiu, Kronstadt/Brassó/Braşov, and the like), the Anabaptist Germans from Moravia founding the settlement in Alvinc, or the Swabians of Bánát and Bácska, and many other German-speaking Austrian Protestant groups, have also lived in the region for centuries. There were also Ruthenians, Serbs, Poles, and Gypsies, all of whom contributed to the rich and colorful historical picture of Transylvania that cherished or tolerated national identities to various degrees under Hungarian rule in Transylvania.

Most of the aforementioned nationalities inhabited the smaller but still large and significant geographical area named Partium, which is often, but wrongly, equated in popular speech and writings with Transylvania. This vast area named Partium was and still is, to some degree, a haven, and it was a welcoming area to many ethnic and religious minorities. Though the histories of the Szekler Hungarians, Hungarians, Romanians from Maramureş, Făgăraş, and Germans are thoroughly documented, the histories of the Jewish people and that of the Armenians are less well researched. Even less is known about the Slovaks who were settled under the Magyar landlords, the Bánffys, in Nová Hutá, Şinteu, Sólyomkővár in Upper Hungary (Sáros, Gömör, and Zemplén counties)[11] in 1817. It is likely that the former settlement that perished in the turmoil of history may well have been a Romanian village. The very existence of Slovaks today in the Partium is one of the more interesting, less known, multicultural realities of the Partium region.[12] To this day, the Romanian government too has a Slovakian consulate for this tiny minority in the Nagyvárad/Oradea Castle, an iconic place of Hungarian Protestant and

[11] Now these historic counties of the Hungarian Kingdom are in Slovakia: some of them are entirely on foreign lands while others only partially.

[12] BAKK, Miklós – SÜLI-ZAKAR, István – SZILÁGYI, Ferenc (2020): *Partium Borders, Ethnic Groups and Territorial Development*. Budapest, Károli University. 181–264.

Roman Catholic history. The very existence of such a great recognition of other people (Slovaks for instance) shows the complexity of multicultural presence in the city of Oradea/Nagyvárad.

The history of the Jewish people is well documented in the regions of Transylvania and Partium. Since the 19th century, they have contributed considerably to the Habsburg Monarchy, which continued even after the name of the state was changed due to the Compromise (1867) between the Hungarian nobility and the Habsburg Kaiser to Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Jewish communities, as we have alluded to, came from different areas. The Temesvár/Timisoara, Arad communities often had a Sephardim background, tracing their origins back to the hubs of Thessaloniki, Istanbul, and many other cities whereto they had escaped from the Spanish inquisition, leaving a beautiful cultural heritage behind together with the Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula.[13] The Askenazi Jews of Nagyvárad/Oradea, for instance, came from various areas of Germany, the northern and southern regions of Historic Hungary, and Galicia and then moved to the inner areas of Hungary,[14] while the Hassidim Jews of Máramaros/Maramureș and Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare had still direct contact to Galicia (Polish and Ukrainian territories), whose boundaries also shifted a lot in the turmoil lasting from the 18th century until the mid-twentieth century. The Jews, regardless of their cultural, religious, and "ethnic" background, have contributed greatly to the economic, cultural, and religious life of the Partium region. The diversity of an "ethnic" group like that of the Jews can be discerned through the beautiful synagogues of various Jewish communities once residing in Nagyvárad/Grosswarden/Oradea, Romania.

The history of the Greek Catholic Romanians and the Orthodox Romanians is also interesting in the Partium region. The Orthodox Romanian and Jewish communities in Maramureș produced a unique culture in Partium and Transylvania. The political interference of the Austrian Habsburgs, the Magyars, the Germans, and various Romanian power players is well documented. Yet, allow us to say, it is a rare occasion where historiographies of various stances may "transcend" their cultural indebtedness to a particular religious, national affiliation or leaning towards a political-historical agenda.

[13] KOMORÓCZY, Géza (2012): *A zsidók története Magyarországon*. Vol. I–II. Bratislava, Kalligram.

[14] PIETSCH, Walter (1988): A zsidók bevándorlása Galiciából és a magyarországi zsidóság. In: *Valóság*. 11, 55. 46–58.

We believe it is important that scholars from different backgrounds come together and write a common history together, appreciating each other's culture, religion, personal worldviews, and nationality.

Some Aspects of Religious, Ethnic, and National Identity

Ethnicity and religious affiliation often went hand in hand in the former Hungarian Kingdom.[15] In other words, if you were a Reformed Calvinist in Transylvania, you were most likely Hungarian. There were no Ruthenian, Polish, or Romanian Calvinists to the popular mind.[16] If you are an Orthodox, today's people of Romania assume you must be Romanian. This assumption stands, although the most educated people know that Serbian Orthodox also reside in Romania. However small the community may be, they are Orthodox but not Romanians. The picture is even more colorful since we have not mentioned other ethnic groups practicing the eastern Orthodox faith in Transylvania or in Romania at large such as Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and the like. To be a Unitarian meant that a person was usually a Hungarian or Szekler Hungarian. Greek Catholics were usually Romanians or Ruthenians. Notably, there were and still are Greek Catholics whose mother tongue was and is Hungarian. Last but not least, to be a Lutheran meant that a person probably belonged to a German Saxon ethnic group whose ancestors had migrated to places like Szászkézd, Szászórbó, or Szászsepsi. They were settled by Hungarian King Géza in the 1100s. This is attested by *Andreanum*.[17]

[15] BENKŐ, József (1999): *Transsilvania specialis: Erdély földje és népe II.* Transl. and ed. by György Szabó. Bucharest–Cluj-Napoca, Kriterion.

[16] Historical data is different since it is known there were some small but existing Romanian-speaking Reformed groups during and after the Reformation, but their significance is rather a historical curiosity and an interesting development, and not a living reality for a vast number of people from a given ethnic group. Also, Slovaks were affected by the Reformation, and even today there are Slovakian-speaking Reformed communities. Despite these facts, the general perception of the aforementioned statement is in the public mind.

[17] Privilege, a letter of donation of special rights issued by András II in 1224. He referred to the already given privileges of the Saxons by a former Hungarian King, Géza II.

Later, other Hungarian kings also gave special privileges to German Saxons,[18] who built the beautiful German Saxon heritage seen, for instance, in Hermannstadt/Nagyszeben/Sibiu, which was the cultural capital of Europe and is situated in Transylvania, part of today's Romania. Yet, for people in Central Europe, not to mention the West, it is little known that Hermannstadt is, *in fact*, a treasure of neither Hungarian nor Romanian but of Saxon cultural heritage, far away from current Germany's present territory.

The (hi)story of Armenians, who were relocated to Transylvania from the distant region of Caucasus, is also fascinating. "The Armenian population, which settled in the Carpathian Basin in the Middle Ages, mainly consisted of merchant families. Later, in the 17th century, the region saw another significant influx of Armenians, and thereafter a handful of relatively large Armenian communities flourished."[19] Their cultural heritage is seen in *Hayakaghak*/Հայաքաղաք/Szamosújvár/Gherla, Erzsébetváros/Elisabethstadt/ Dumbrăveni, and many other towns across Transylvania. Nonetheless, they also lived in Moldova, Bessarabia, and Wallachia.[20] In Transylvania, they became Roman Catholics but, again, religious identity came with a cost.[21]

The history of the Greek Catholic Church deserves attention as we get closer to our research subject, the village of Érselénd/Şilindru, which was originally a Ruthenian settlement. By Habsburg royal interference as well as home-grown movements in certain areas, a new Christian denomination came into being out of the national Orthodox churches in the region: in Transylvania, Partium, Bánát, and the Subcarpathians alike.[22] Romanians, Ruthenians, Serbs, and Hungarians came under the various forms of mostly

[18] BLAZOVICH, László (2005): Az Andreanum és az erdélyi szászok az etnikai autonómiák rendszerében a középkori Magyarországon. In: *Erdélyi Múzeum*. 67, 3–4. 5–14.

[19] KOVÁCS, Bálint (2016): *Az irodalom és vallás kulturális közvetítő szerepe az erdélyi örmények integrációja során a 18. században*. PhD dissertation, Pázmány Péter University.

[20] DJUVARA, Neagu (1995): *Între Orient şi Occident. Ţările Române la începutul epocii moderne* (Between East and West. The Romanian Principalities at the Beginning of the Modern Era). Bucharest, Editura Humanitas. See also: GRIGORIAN, Tigran (1993): *Istoria şi cultura poporului Armean* (The History and Culture of the Armenian People). Bucharest, Editura Ştiinţifică.

[21] NAGY, Kornél (2011): The Catholicization of Transylvanian Armenians (1685–1715): Integrative or Disintegrative Model? In: Barszczewska, Agnieszka – Peti Lehel (eds.): *Integrating Minorities: Traditional Communities and Modernization*. Cluj-Napoca, ISPMN. 33–56.

[22] PIRIGYI, István (1991): *A görögkatolikus magyarság története*. Vol. 2. Budapest, Ikva.

but not exclusively ethnic Greek Catholic churches.[23] It is our intention to demonstrate how identity shaped and formed a people during the turmoil of the 20th century, which resulted in changes (social, religious, language, and economic) that presumably had existed in the region.

The Case Study of Érselénd/Şilindru Village in Bihor County

Having described the complexity of the multicultural ethnic, religious, and cultural aspects of the Partium and Transylvanian region, now we shall turn to the microhistory of a village of Ruthenian origins, named Érselénd/Şilindru, in Bihor County, which is located in the Partium region of today's Romania. The purpose of this microhistorical research that relies on social, religious, and statistical data is to offer a three-dimensional examination of the population's composition of the chosen village. The three aspects that the paper seeks to explore are ethnicity, native language, and denomination. It is argued that these three aspects were exposed to vast changes during the 20th century in the Romanian Bihor County within the Partium region.

To set the immediate context, it must be underlined that the religious, linguistic, and ethnic change in the village were caused mainly by global and European social-political changes – for instance, World War I and II, followed by the multiple border modifications and territory reattachments, as well as the changes in the ideological, political structures and in the system of government. Up until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Bihor County was part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Soon, the larger, eastern part of the county was attached to Romania, and the smaller part remained in Hungary. In 1940, the Second Vienna Award reattached the formerly separated greater part to Hungary due to the intervention of German hegemony. However, five years later, in 1945, Romania once again had authority over the newly gained territories. Thus, there was a strong conflict between Hungarians and Romanians over the Transylvanian and Partium region, which was settled internationally by superpowers favoring the Romanians.

[23] PIRIGYI, István (2001): *Görög katolikusok Erdélyben és Kárpátalján*. Debrecen, Debreceni Görögkatolikus Egyházközség.

As a result, a more than a thousand-year-old entity, the Kingdom of Hungary was undermined, and its formerly integral territories were given as a reward to the newly emerging nation-states, formations that had never existed in history before. The new Romanian nationalist administration was swift to control the area by all means between the two world wars. Then, the Romanian communist takeover brought significant changes for all ethnic groups, the most well-known being the issues related to Romanian, Hungarian, and German people. Finally, the last significant turning point in the history of Transylvanian and Partium region was the change in politics, that is, the official collapse of the communist Ceaușescu regime in 1989.[24]

From an ethnic point of view, two populous communities live together in the county of Bihor: Romanians and Hungarians. However, smaller indigenous nationalities – as we had already mentioned – can also be found here, as Swabians and Slovakians still exist in the region although their numbers are reduced or remained small like that of the Slovaks. However, there is a growing population, the Gypsies, who use Romanian, Hungarian, and/or their own Romani languages. Their identity, a nation that speaks various languages as their mother tongue, also merits further research. From a denominational view, the multi-layered social-religious component is more significant. For instance, Nagyvárad/Oradea, which is located in the middle of the Partium region, is a good example. It is a beautiful episcopal county town of four historical churches: it was a Roman Catholic episcopate for 900 years, a Greek Catholic one for 250 years, and an Orthodox and a Calvinistic episcopate were also present for 100 years. Although an episcopate was organized fairly recently in Nagyvárad/Oradea, Reformed religious communities have existed in the town since the Reformation, i.e. earlier than many other denominations. Our point is not to argue who were here first. Rather, it is to state that various nations and ethnicities related to the Christian religion have coexisted in the same city for a long time. It is vital to highlight that nowadays neo-Protestant churches, such as the Baptist, Adventist, and Pentecostal, have also a very strong presence in the region and in Bihor County.[25]

[24] SZILÁGYI, Ferenc (2019): *Partium – Reintegráció a magyar–román határvidéken*. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, Állam- és Jogtudományi Kar. 282.

[25] SZILÁGYI, Ferenc (2005): *Bihar megye felekezeti földrajza*. Debrecen, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó. 101.

In this paper, we would like to present a case study about a settlement called Érselénd/Șilindru as a representative case study of the county's ethnographic complexities. Érselénd/Șilindru is a small village of 1,000 inhabitants. It lies along the Hungarian–Romanian borderline, but it is situated on the Romanian side. In the twentieth century, the changes that occurred in the population's structure completely modified and restructured the local community's religious, ethnic, and linguistic landscape. This change made the formerly homogeneous community heterogeneous. The remaining sections of this paper examine the process of how identity in Érselénd/Șilindru was influenced by external forces coming from different social, political, religious, and even economic directions. We are in the initial phase of our research, yet we intend to share the research findings so far.

The Ruthenians Who Became Hungarians

Érselénd/Șilindru was originally inhabited by neither Romanians nor Hungarians. Thus, the contested and futile question about who was here first, raised by nationalist historians (on all sides), is irrelevant when a scholar conducts micro-historical research. The earlier devastated land was populated by the Greek Catholic Ruthenians, who arrived from the actual territory of Zakarpattia Oblast (former Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa, and Máramaros counties of the Hungarian Kingdom) in the 18th century.[26] The highlanders of the Carpathian Mountains moved into 70–80 settlements on the north-eastern flatlands situated along the banks of the River Tisza in the 18th century. They usually formed smaller or bigger heterogeneous, sometimes homogeneous communities next to the Hungarian population, mostly east of the River Tisza on the lowland named Nagy Alföld (Great Plain) of Hungary. In some places, they settled in such large groups that they soon spread out, and new settlements arose due to overpopulation. As a result, some of the local Ruthenians had begun to see themselves as "indigenous" to the Nagy Alföld, that is, the lowland of the river Tisza area, and spread further into the southeastern areas. They founded new villages on the territory retrieved from the Ottoman

[26] UDVARDI, István (1992): Ruszinok a 18. században. Történelmi és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok. In: *Vasvári Pál Társaság füzetei* 9. Nyíregyháza, Bessenyei György Könyvkiadó.

Empire in the 18th century. This southern region, where the second and further waves of Ruthenians moved to, was called the very fertile land of the Banat region of Historic Hungary, which is also east of the river Tisza. The geographical area today belongs to Romania and partially to Serbia.[27]

It is an intriguing question why there were Ruthenians on the lowland, since they had been a mountain people from the north-eastern area of the Great Plain (Nagy Alföld) and the Carpathian Mountains.[28] There is a historical-political reason behind it. This territory was the center of Ferenc Rákóczi's War of Independence (1703–1711), which sought to gain independence for the Hungarian Kingdom against the Austrian Habsburg conquest. Because of the long civil war, a significant number of people died or fled the scene of the war zone, which was on both sides of the banks of the river Tisza. Owing to the fertility of the formerly devastated land, the landlords of the region began to invite various ethnic groups to harvest the fields and cultivate the lands. In actual fact, the so-called Hungarian aristocracy in the region consisted of ethnic Hungarian, German, Romanian, and Slavic magnates whose main interest was to capitalize on their lands and make the best economic gain out of their properties in the eighteenth century. They were not primarily concerned with nationalist feelings that appeared a century later in the region as a result of romanticism and nationalism.[29] Having said that, it must be emphasized that one of the first new ethnic groups of the former Hungarian Lowland were the Ruthenians arriving in the geographical region of Nyírség, including Érselénd/Şilindru, which is situated further in the south-eastern part of the area. However, the Hajdú region of Hungary had seen the settling of the Rác, southern Slavic people, to the middle of the Tisza River Lowland in the 17th century.[30] The 18th-century Ruthenian movement is due to the re-conquest of the Hungarian land from the Ottoman Empire. After this territorial gain, newly invited ethnic groups established settlements in other places in the Partium region. In fact, new villages mushroomed on the Great

[27] Ibid.

[28] Kárpátalja in Hungarian, Zakarpattia Oblast in Ukrainian, whereto the area now belongs.

[29] This is not to say that national feelings did not arise in the bosom of Saxon Germans, Hungarians, or Romanians in the 18th century. However, the feudalist chain on people was the first and foremost concern of the people who, of course, often found a ready ally in nationalist aspirations.

[30] DUDÁS, Gyula (2011): *A szabad hajdúk története a XVI. és XVII. században*. Budapest, Historia Antik könyvház.

Plain. The Swabians, a German sub-ethnic group, who were invited by the Károli aristocratic family to settle around Nagykároly/Carei, are a good illustration of the introduction of a new ethnic group into the multicultural face of the region.[31] Romanians were also seen as cheap labor forces to be invited into the villages of the plain of Szatmár and Bihar counties that had perished during the long decades of war. Here we refer to the fact that the First War of Independence (1703–1711) was preceded by 30 or even 40 years of wars of freedom fight of Imre Thököly. These powerful magnates tried to push out the Turks on the one hand and the Habsburgs on the other. In Szabolcs County, the Ruthenians – who initially came to work there as seasonal workers during the grain harvest – had local knowledge, and the noblemen who owned vast or smaller properties were glad to welcome such a workforce, so they settled them with their families.

The other reason why the Greek Catholic Ruthenian people were preferred over other ethnic groups to settle in the region of the north-eastern areas of the Great Plain was their skillset as mountain people. The sandy soil of the geographic region named Nyírség is of poor quality and is infertile. The earlier shifting sand was planted with an American tree species, acacia, in the 18th century, just as Sámuel Tessedik suggested.[32] This seemed to be more economic and beneficial for the estate owners, the upper- and middle-class nobility. This economic "programme" of the aristocracy resulted in the establishment of enormous acacia forests. The Ruthenians, who came from the Carpathian Mountains, knew more about forest agriculture than the land cultivating Hungarians – who concentrated on territories of better quality.[33] Érselénd/Șilindru is located on the southernmost part of the sandy Nyírség. It is known as one of the poorest villages in the area. Owing to this development, in the 18th century, out of the homogeneous Ruthenian communities settled on the north-eastern part of the Great Hungarian Plain, Șilindru is the southernmost one and the only homogeneous Ruthenian community of the former Historic Hungary to be attached to Romania at the time of the Treaty of

[31] HAULER, Ernst (2004): *Die Abgetrenten Sathmarscwaben*. Passau, E. Hauler. See also: KARDOS, Dezső (2014): *A szatmári német /sváb/ nemzetiségű falvak Vállaj–Mérk–Zajta néprajza*.

[32] http://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02115/html/1-113.html (last accessed: 24 May 2021).

[33] https://www.sulinet.hu/oroksegtar/data/magyarorszagi_nemzetisegek/altalanos/nemzeti_es_etnikai_kisebbsegek_magyarorszagon/pages/011_ruszinok.htm (last accessed: 24 May 2021).

Trianon.[34] Until the 20th century, the village belonged to the Munkács/Munkachevo Greek Catholic Episcopate, which had been using Slavic as a liturgical language.

Besides the populous Ruthenian communities that moved to the plain and who now started to take after Hungarian communities, some Hungarian-speaking hajdú municipalities[35] were Greek Catholics too. These religious communities with different historical and ethnic backgrounds joined forces to start a movement for the foundation of an episcopate of Hungarian language in the 19th century. The goal was only partially reached – the independent episcopate with its seat in Hajdúdorog was founded in 1911; however, the Hungarian language was not canonized, and thus Greek became the official language of the liturgy of the church.[36] From this moment on, the village of Érselénd/Șilindru belonged to this ecclesiastical district too.

During the course of the 19th century, the originally Ruthenian population of Érselénd/Șilindru linguistically became fully Hungarian, but they kept their Greek Catholic religion. This is a remarkable transition of identity, where the process needs further research if materials are available. Yet, we argue that such a spontaneous assimilation was typical in the Partium region for centuries, and it is believed that while some villages maintained their cultural, religious, and linguistic identity, others underwent profound changes. Érselénd/Șilindru is a prime example of such a process. The village stayed quasi-homogeneous. In 1890, the village had 893 inhabitants. 888 spoke Hungarian, 3 spoke Romanian, 1 spoke Ruthenian, and 1 spoke Slovakian. Regarding the religious affiliation of the people, the population was not as homogeneous: 663 Greek Catholics, 97 Calvinists, 80 Jews, 50 Roman Catholics, 2 Orthodox, and 1 Unitarian made up the community.[37]

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[34] FÉNYES, Elek: Magyarország geographiai szótára. https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/ValyiFenyes-orszagleirasok-81A15/fenyes-elek-magyarorszag-geographiai-szotara-84F88/s-8725F/er-selind-8732C/ (last accessed: 5 July 2021).

[35] RÁCZ, István (2000): *Parasztok, hajdúk, cívisek: társadalomtörténeti tanulmányok*. Debrecen, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó. See also: FEKETE, Péter (1939): *A hajdúk és a hajdúkerület történet*. Hajdúböszörmény, Nagy Károly műhelye.

[36] https://byzantinohungarica.com/index.php/az-1918-as-hajdudorogi-schematizmus (last accessed: 5 July 2021).

[37] VARGA, E. Árpád: *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája 1850–2002*. http://www.kia.hu/konyvtar/erdely/erd2002/bhfel02.pdf (last accessed: 5 July 2021).

Changes in the 20th Century

At the beginning of the 20th century, Érselénd/Șilindru was a quickly evolving municipality with populous families. The population in 1910 was only 990. However, only twenty years later, by 1930, it was 1 435, and by 1941 it had grown to 1 610. This was a significant increase in the population. From the middle of the century, a contrary, decreasing, emigrating population characterized the village demographics.

Noticeable changes in the population can be spotted with the arrival of the Romanian state administration from 1920 onwards. There had been a significant change in the legal-ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the parish. It used to belong to the Hajdúdorog Episcopate, which remained after the change of the borders (1920) within Hungary, whereas the settlement itself came under the legal system of Romania, the new country. That had an impact on the ecclesiastical governance. As a result, the Hungarian-speaking Greek Catholic community was transferred to the Romanian Greek Catholic Episcopate in Oradea. Therefore, the liturgical language used in the church was changed to Romanian, thus replacing the former Hungarian liturgy. This in turn contributed to identity change in a peculiar way.

Changes are much more significant in terms of native language and nationality. The Romanian census was executed in 1920. After the Treaty of Trianon, when Transylvania and Partium were annexed to the newly emerging state, the statistics of the new Romania showed a very different picture of the village of Érselénd/Șilindru when compared to the former Hungarian statistics. These Romanian statistics contained the following information: 839 Romanian (!) and only 164 Hungarian inhabitants in the village in 1920, which was known formally as an entirely Hungarian-speaking settlement. If one looks at the statistics between 1880 and 1910, what can be spotted is that in all cases the villager's language was mostly Hungarian. It comes as a surprise that all of a sudden, under the new administration of the new Romanian country (1920), the entire Greek Catholic community of Érselénd/Șilindru exhibits itself as an entirely Romanian-speaking community. In other words, the Romanian state tended to see all Hungarian-speaking individuals as Romanians because their denominational stance, that is, religious affiliation was Greek Catholic. Ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties become simplified when nationalism plays into the picture. This reading does not wish to acknowledge – or is, perhaps, for whatever reason, ignorant of – the fact that in the contemporaneous

Romania, people adhering to Greek Catholicism may have been members of ethnic groups other than the Romanian one. Therefore, entire Ruthenian and Hungarian Greek Catholic communities were "counted" as Romanian Greek Catholics. This matter calls for attention and demands further research in the region.

It is rather interesting that by 1930, this had been somewhat toned down, as 625 people appear as Romanians, 438 as Hungarians, and 268 as Ukrainians;[38] at the same time, one can see 58 Germans, 26 Jews, and, for the first time, 20 Gypsies. From a linguistic point of view, the ratio/total percentage is shifted again since the majority of the people are Hungarians (885), Romanians (456), Germans (42), and Ukrainians are only 15.[39]

The denominational division did not change drastically, but the smaller Christian denominations grew. In 1930, the Greek Catholics were still the strongest, but there was a faster growth in the number of Calvinists (169) and Roman Catholics (186) than it might have been anticipated from the demographic data. In 1930, 33 Orthodox believers were present in the settlement. This is due to the fact that Romanian border guarding soldiers and administration arrived at the village as new, migrant settlers.

Again, political changes influenced the statistical data. Owing to the Second Vienna Award (Vienna Diktat), Transylvania was divided into two on 30 August 1940. Grossly speaking, the northern part was "given" to Hungarians by Hitler's Germany and the southern part to another ally, the Romanian state, who also fought along with the Nazi Germany. Clearly enough, Hitler as an Austrian learned the Roman and Austrian lesson very well: *divide et impera*. The aspirations of both nations were tied to greater European powers. When Érselénd/Șilindru was returned to Hungary 11 years later, in 1941, the Hungarian census showed a radically different picture of the very same village. Most of the inhabitants were Hungarians (1 489), Ruthenians (65), and Romanians (12). At the same time, not only the ethnic but also the religious affiliation was recorded. What can be seen is that besides the stagnant Greek Catholic denomination

[38] By Ukrainians, we mean Ruthenians. They are, in the eye of Romanians, named as such after their origin. Therefore, they are presented as Ukrainians. To be fair, historical sources of Hungary also often speak of Russians from the 18th century, referring to either Ruthenians living in the Subcarpathian mountainous regions or Ukrainians who resided in the former Principality of Halics, which came under Polish rule but often escaped and moved to the Kingdom of Hungary for more favorable economic gains.

[39] Ibid.

(1 090), the dynamic growth of the two Hungarian denominations continued, which resulted in the following religious composition by 1941: Roman Catholics (264), Calvinists (215). This is explained by the further conversions that took place.

After World War II, the Romanian administration returned, and the communists took over. The censuses leading up to the regime change did not record denominational structures and people's religious affiliation. Therefore, we can only rely on linguistic and ethnic data given in the statistical books of the Romanian and Hungarian states. Before turning our attention to this data, it is vital to mention that it is widely known that the Greek Catholic Church was banned in Romania in 1948 by the Communist Party. Its assets and the majority of the worshippers joined the Romanian Orthodox Church.[40] This was the reason why Orthodoxy quickly became dominant in Érselénd/Şilindru during the 1940s. It happened despite the fact that the Romanian Orthodox denomination was not even officially present in the village until 1948. This had a profound influence on the identity of people who had to convert against their will. The secularization and confiscation of the lands and the foundation of agricultural cooperatives was also enacted by the communist state. The inhabitants of Érselénd/Şilindru lost their opportunity to earn a living. This had a decisive impact on the ethnic and religious composition of the village. Hundreds of people were forced to commute regularly to the towns or to permanently leave the settlement. Nonetheless, the village did not remain without a population, as the devalued real estate came to be used by Gypsies, who were previously employed as workers. The village's overall population significantly decreased as follows: 1956: 1 650; 1966: 1 545; 1977: 1 283; 1992: 1 019; 2002: 995; 2011: 943 (see *Diagram 1*). In the second half of the 20th century, the Romanian population censuses talked about bipolar linguistic structure (Hungarian majority, Romanian minority) and tripolar ethnic structure (1966: Romanian majority, Hungarian and Gypsy minority). It is interesting to note that the Gypsy population in the village speaks Hungarian.[41] Until 1992, the two Romanian statistics were visibly different. For example, in 1966, the number of Romanians was 798, while the number of people who claimed their native language Romanian

[40] SZILÁGYI, Ferenc (2003): Görög-katolikusok Bihar megyében. In: Süli-Zakar, István (ed.) *Társadalomföldrajz-területfejlesztés*. Debrecen, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó. 69–80.

[41] SZILÁGYI, Ferenc (2016): Roma népesség a partiumi határmegyékben (Bihar, Szatmár). In: Szilágyi, Ferenc – Pénzes, János (eds.): *Roma népesség Magyarország északkeleti határtérségében*. Oradea, Partium Kiadó. 49–90., 258.

was only 341; a completely opposite picture could be seen in the case of Hungarians: 698 Hungarians and 1 166 people with Hungarian as their native language. After the fall of communism, the contrast between the various data showed a somewhat moderate picture. It is discernible when the two pieces of information shifted closer to each other in number regarding the case of Romanians: in 2002, there were 233 people with Romanian nationality and 211 with Romanian native language. Hungarians were in dominance again statistically: 487 ethnic Hungarians and 773 having Hungarian as their native language (see *Diagram 2*). By the end of the century, the number of Gypsies grew drastically, mostly strengthening the Hungarian native language group (2002: ethnic Gypsies – 263; having Gypsy as their native language – only 11).[42] It may be presumed that some former Ruthenian families who had naturally assimilated into Hungarian nationality over a century due to their religious affiliation, i.e. Greek Catholicism, were perceived as a social-religious ethnic group, which may well have been the most open and vulnerable to assimilation *through the change of religious affiliation* to Romanian Orthodoxy. Either a linguistic-ethnic assimilation began first, which was followed by a religious identity change, or vice versa, the result is what matters. Because of its denominational orientation, the Hungarian village of Érselénd/Șilindru was more susceptible to identity change in a change of imperial statehood. When the settlement came under Romanian control from 1920, the religious and ethnic identity shifted to become heterogeneous. Furthermore, while Greek Catholicism is in fact a branch of Orthodoxy shifting from its Byzantine origins to the welcoming hands of Latin Christianity, Roman Catholicism will always be vulnerable to any religious or ethnic encounter in the region. As we have alluded to the "popular mind's" perception in Romania, Orthodoxy is seen by many as an identity marker, and it is assumed – often even by the everyday people of the country – that all Orthodox people are Romanian, forgetting about reality, the presence of Serbian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Hungarian Orthodoxy, and the extremely complex yet beautiful cultural heritage of Greek Catholics who were originally often Ruthenians or ethnic Hungarians.

Within Romanian communism, two main driving forces can be detected. First, there is the agenda of one ideology, one religion, and one nation, on which all nationalist parties insisted in the Eastern and Central European region. Secondly, vernacular Orthodoxy was seen as a vehicle, a cohesive force of confirming true Romanian identity.

[42] VARGA, E. Árpád: *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája 1850–2002*.

Ironically, the Romanian Greek Catholic Church fell victim to former and even current nationalist ideas ignoring the very fact that the origin of modern Romanian state owes a lot to the ideology of ancient Romanian past, which was discovered, promoted, and maintained by the Uniate Church in Transylvania.[43]

To return to the non-Romanian Uniate Greek Catholic Church, that is, the Hungarian Greek Catholics in the village of Érselénd/Șilindru, it becomes clear that they are indeed vulnerable to identity change in a buffer zone of many intermingling ethnic, national, and religious interests. What can be said with certainty is that people in the Partium region did experience multiculturalism living together for centuries, but the turmoil of the 20th century created a different landscape and feelings.

After the collapse of communism in Romania, from 1990, the Greek Catholic Church was allowed to function by the new state government. Owing to this development, the Greek Catholic Church is now the most populous congregation again in the village. Nonetheless, a small part of it (one fifth) remained Orthodox. The Roman Catholics and Calvinists also have significant communities and smaller churches in the village of Érselénd/Șilindru (see *Diagram 3*). Exploring the reason why villagers were inclined to "convert", or, to be more precise, to shift their religious allegiance from the Greek Catholicism of their ancestors' faith to the Roman Catholic or Calvinist denomination calls for further research.

At this stage of our research, it could be stated that in the course of only 100 years the homogeneous settlement became bilingual, trinational/tri-ethnic, and by now it has four denominations. When looking at the religious-ethnic composition, the following can be observed: the combination of these can be divided into at least eight fractions (Hungarian – Calvinist, Hungarian – Roman Catholic, Hungarian – Greek Catholic, Romanian – Orthodox, Romanian – Greek Catholic, Hungarian native language – Romanian nationality Greek Catholic, Gypsy – Calvinist, Gypsy – Roman Catholic, etc.).

We would like to present the evolution of this heterogeneity mathematically and statistically using index fragmentation.[44] Index fragmentation became known in Hungary under the name of ethnic diversity index. The indicator based on probability calculation

[43] BOIA, Lucian (2016): *Cum s-a românizat România?* Cluj-Napoca, Koinónia.

[44] NÉMETH, Ádám (2019): Diversity Indices and Their Potential Application in Ethnic Studies. In: *Tér és Társadalom*. 33, 2. 130–148. https://doi.org/10.17649/TET.33.2.3123.

shows the chances that on a certain territory two randomly chosen inhabitants belong to two different groups. The values are between 0 and 1, 0 being of perfectly homogeneous structure and 1 perfectly heterogeneous (every single person belongs to a different group).

$$FI = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{n} s_i^2,$$

where S_i is the i group's proportion compared to the full population, and n is the number of groups. The denominational fragmentation in 1900 was 0.36, while in 2011 0.73 (2002: 0.68). The ethnic fragmentation in 1900 was 0.13, while in 2011 0.47 (2002: 0.35).

The fragmentation indices (both ethnic and denominational) show a steep rise in the 20th century. Moreover, since the turn of the century, a rapid growth can be observed (see *Diagram 4*). The fragmentation measured in the combinations of ethnic-linguistic and denominational structure goes beyond these values; in order to map it precisely, complex sociological research is required.[45]

Concluding Thoughts

The aim of our research was to analyze how the social, political, and historical events such as the two world wars, the ever-changing borderline between Hungary and Romania, and the ideologies promoted by both nations affect the life of a local community, which happened to live literally on the borderline. As we have demonstrated, Érselénd/Șilindru was originally a Ruthenian settlement where Greek Catholic faith was respected, the villagers inheriting the religious-cultural and social practices of their ancestors. It has been pointed out that the village, being surrounded by a larger, dominantly Hungarian environment, had experienced a linguistic assimilation by becoming Hungarians. This means that although the village has remained Greek Catholic, wherefore its religion remained homogeneous, it experienced a profound change in terms of language. When the village was incorporated into Romania, it experienced strong impacts from the outside, when the formerly homogenous community became entirely heterogeneous in ethnic, linguistic, and religious terms. We have demonstrated statistically how the changes took place.

[45] Resource: http://real.mtak.hu/93945/1/3123.pdf (last accessed: 28 May 2021).

As can be seen from *Diagram 1*, the settlement was strongly growing until the middle of the 100-year time interval studied. During the decades of communism, a radical turn took place in the socio-economic life of the settlement. In the course of communism, the process of collectivization (*colectivizare*) tore the land away from the community and uprooted private ownership. The agricultural cooperatives, which were created by force by Communist dictatorship, were unable to absorb the freed-up labor force previously tied up by backyard agriculture. The male population of the settlement was forced to commute to the towns of the county. Anyone who was able to make a change, later moved to the industrial centers. Owing to such an "urbanization" process, the population of the rural settlement declined rapidly in these decades. The slowdown of the population occurred after the 1989 regime change, and population numbers became somewhat stagnant.

In addition to the dynamics of the population, the composition of the ethnic group has also developed interestingly, as can be seen from *Figure 2*. Before World War I, the originally Ruthenian community was completely assimilated into Hungarian, but it remained Greek Catholic. After the change of the border, the local Greek Catholic congregation became part of the Romanian-speaking Greek Catholic Diocese of Oradea. The proportion of the Hungarian and Romanian ethnic groups shows significant differences in the individual censuses; however, the dominance of the Hungarian language has remained. By the end of the 20th century, a third ethnic group, the Gypsies, had become a significant proportion, so today we can talk about three ethnicities in the settlement.

In the case of ethnic transformation, the denomination was even greater, which is partly the result of the ban levelled against the Greek Catholic Church in 1948 by the Romanian nationalist communism. The congregation, which was Hungarian-speaking and identified themselves with Hungarian ethnicity, was forced to merge with the Romanian Orthodox Church, which was the prime church for ethnic Romanian people. Therefore, many Hungarian families preferred the historical Hungarian churches (Reformed, Roman Catholic) to becoming Romanian Orthodox, which was a vehicle of assimilation into Romanian. After the change of regime in 1990, most members of the Romanian Orthodox denomination returned to the Greek Catholic denomination, and only a smaller portion remained Orthodox, people who had likely undergone identity

change in terms of religion and ethnicity. Meanwhile, some neo-Protestant denominations also appeared in the settlement. Both the denominational and ethnic fragmentation indices show a steep increase during the period under review (*Diagram 4*).

The micro-historical research focused on how the composition of the religious, linguistic, and ethnic make-up of a community kept changing due to outside influences. It is argued that the borderline artificially cut across communities that have been in close contact with one another in a compact geographical (e.g. the Nyírség, Érmellék) or geopolitical region (e.g. the Partium), where they had a natural chance to connect to the settlements of a wider region. Then, after the newly set political borders, such natural links were completely cut off. It is estimated that approximately 60 such settlements can be identified on the Romanian side of the Romanian–Hungarian border. Érselénd/Șilindru was chosen as a case study, having a highly significant culture that has been and still is most vulnerable to any interference, be it social, political, religious, or economic.

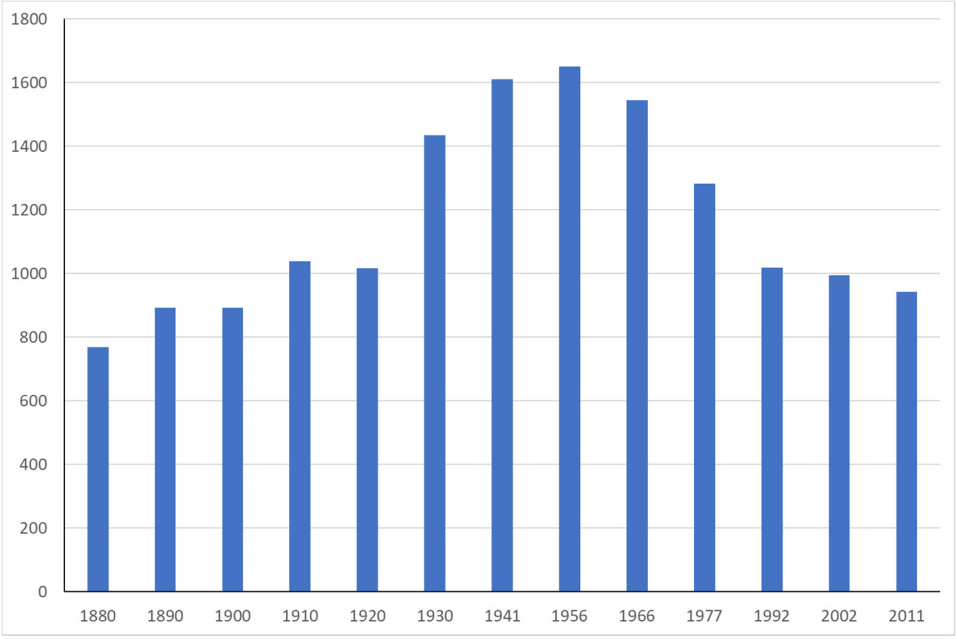

Diagram 1. *The number of inhabitants in Șilindru (1880–2011)*

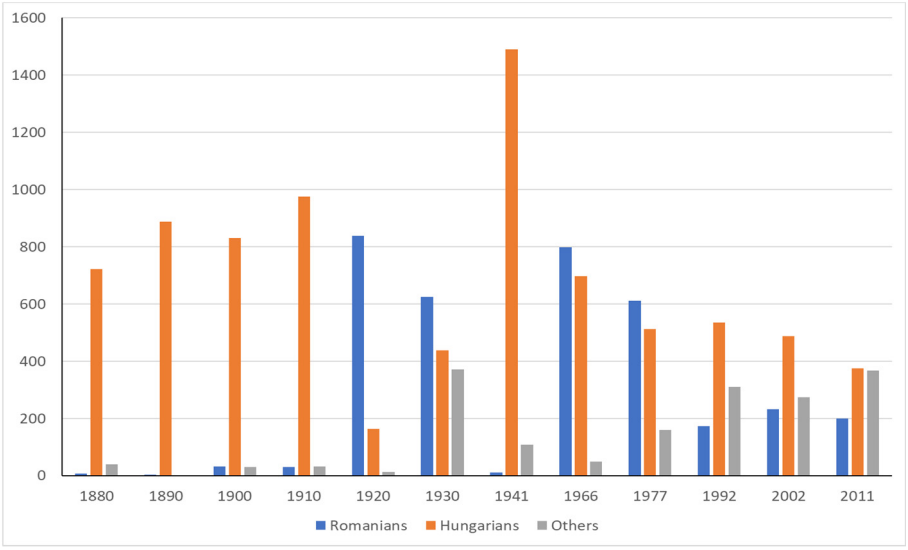

Diagram 2. *The linguistic/ethnic composition of Érselénd/Șilindru (1880–2011)*

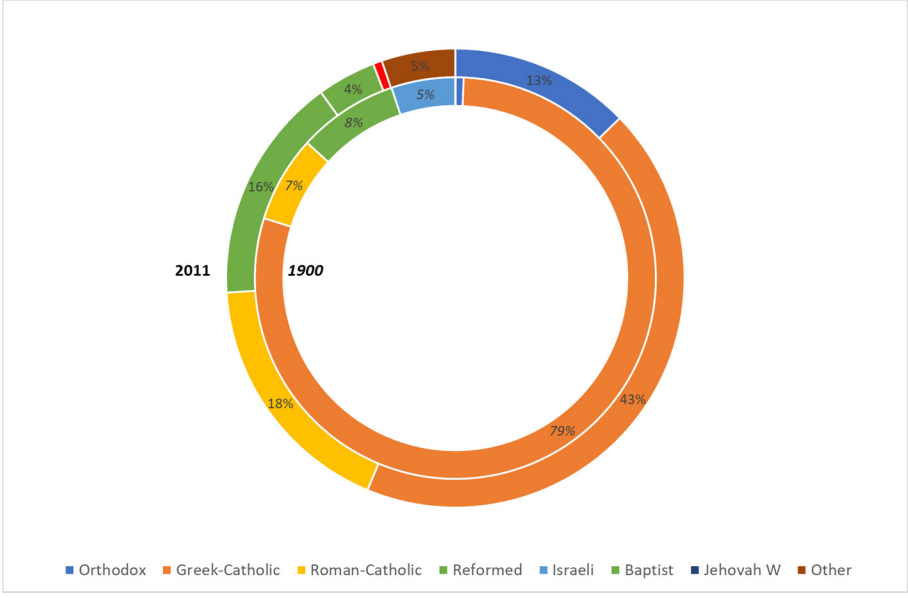

Diagram 3. *The religious composition of Érselénd/Șilindru in 1900 and 2011*

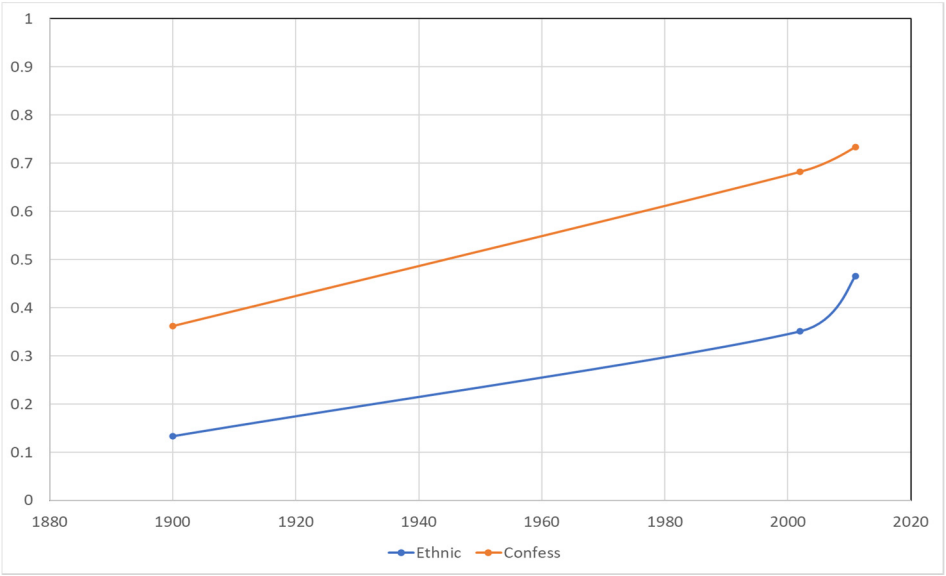

Diagram 4. *The denominational and ethnic fragmentation index changes in Érselénd/Șilindru in 1900–2011*

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*** https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/transylvanian-ethnic-groups (last accessed: 7 May 2021).

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