Leadership and regeneration of the Transylvanian villages in the region of Rupea

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1. *Research questions*

Place still matters in a world affected by globalisation, demographic changes, and ICT (Information and Communications Technology) revolution because people have never given up their strong and deep relationship with the places where they live and work, and they are still related to them in economic, social, cultural, and emotional terms (Collinge, Gibney, Mabey, 2013, p. 367). In the European Union, enhancing territorial identity is not only a compulsory condition for territorial cohesion and well-being (Benedek, 2009), but also a resource for economic development.

The Romanian social and economic transition after 1989 has left a strong imprint on the cultural heritage of traditional communities as reservoirs for territorial identity. The identity of settlements and of regions has been built during centuries, but they may lose it during one generation if people do not preserve the 'memory' of their places and if they do not capitalise that resource for sustainable development, for answering their inhabitants' present and future needs.

In Romania, rural areas of Transylvania host highly valuable cultural heritage in the form of both built heritage and immaterial local and regional identities (i.e. collective identities). Within Transylvania, we researched the region of Rupea town, well-known for its cultural and natural landscapes. Data collection for our case study included researching the literature on the area and field work (interviews with local public authorities, discussions with locals, observation) during 2012 and 2013. We focused on the relationship between emergent leadership, local and regional identity and development.

First, the main issues we considered during our research and we answered were the following (Collinge, Gibney, Mabey, 2013, pp. 373-376): 1) From where do leaders derive authority?; 2) How is leadership received?; 3) How is leadership demonstrated?; 4) Assessment of outcomes; 5) Implications and

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learning. Other two questions that guided us were: what are leaders in this region doing? and why are they doing it? (*ibidem*, p. 370).

Secondly, we looked for a sense of urgency in the region. We took into account the idea that in order to minimize distress and initiate and support development it is important that people realise the urgent need for leadership approaches or for initiatives favouring the development for the many and for the common good (Gibney, 2012, p. 26-31). In addition to this sense of urgency which results in aligning people around a shared agenda, we also wanted to test the hypothesis that for leadership to be effective it is important to have strong roots in the local and regional culture as well as benefit from social and economic networks.

Finally, we focused on 'the geographical personality' of a region created during historical time (Blache, 1903, quoted in Claval, n.d., p. 5) and the fact that it was expressed through tangible goods (natural and cultural resources) and intangible ones (Camagni, Capello, 2013, pp. 1388-1389) considered that the latter goods included human capital (entrepreneurship, creativity, and private know-how), relational capital (cooperation capability, collective action capability, collective competences), and social capital (institutions, behavioural models, values, trust, and reputation).

2. *Leadership in action in the region of Rupea*

From a geographical and historic perspective, the present territory of south-eastern Transylvania has undergone considerable changes starting during the 12th century, when the new Kingdom of Hungary started a policy of defending its new borders extending to the Carpathians. Starting then, there were significant populations' movements, both Szekler (speaking Hungarian) and Saxon (speaking German), who were attracted by Medieval rights, large pieces of land, and freedom guarantees and all these in exchange of defending the new borders (Pop, Bolovan, 2013, p. 52).

Thus, together with the new colonising population, they introduced new ways of territorial and military organisation, and the harsh life conditions and the numerous sieges led to the building of original and unique edifices such as fortified churches, as the ultimate refuge, as well as fortresses, castles, and manor houses.

One of the administrative units that the Saxons established on 'The Land of the King' was the 'Scaunul Rupea' (Rupea was the name of an old administrative area) also known as the 'Repser Stuhl' (in German) and the 'Kőhalom szék' (in Hungarian), characterised by cultural mosaic (linguistic, ethnographical and religious) and having its administrative centre in the Bourg of Rupea, today a small town (about 5,000 inhabitants) in Braşov County (Borcoman, 2010, p. 18).

Nevertheless, after 1989, the change of the political system in Romania triggered the Saxon population's considerable emigration and many of their villages underwent complete ethnic restructuring. The Saxons left behind all their belongings and their centuries-old built heritage. Evangelical churches

were neglected and a high number of buildings that lost their initial function (e.g. schools, hospitals, manor houses, castles, and fortresses) were in a poor state because nobody took care of them as a completely different population immigrated in the area (from being the majority, nowadays the Evangelical and Lutheran inhabitants represent less than 2%). As a result, the main problem today is that the territorial identity of this region and its cultural richness and heritage created by these ethnic groups' cohabitation is under jeopardy to disappear (Maroşi, 2013, p. 77, p. 109).

Analysing the quality of the local community in close connection with local resources as proposed by Flora Butler and Flora (2013, p. 24), for the region of Rupea the most representative capital is the cultural one (seen as a resource) and the characteristic rural landscape (Fig. 1).
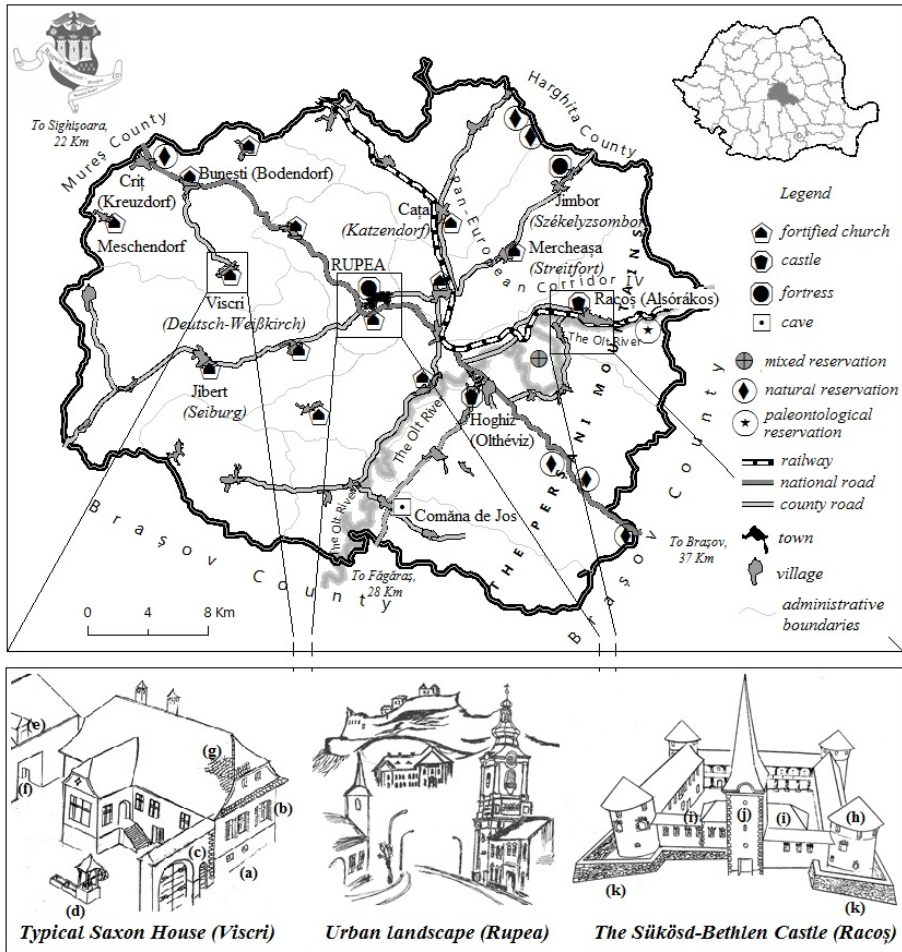
The main elements of the Saxon rural landscape are the big stone or brick houses, built close together, usually along wide roads that allowed easy access to carts and animals. In addition, the central element because of its height and of its dimension in general is the fortified church that they usually built on a hill (for strategic reasons) or even in the built-up area of villages (where the land was quasi-horizontal).

The main threat to this typical landscape is the new settlers' (most of them are Orthodox) lack of a feeling that they belong to the rural Saxon area and many patrimony buildings remain abandoned because they are no longer in use and mainly because they are lacking financial support for maintenance (in the past the Saxons' contributions were the source).

The region of Rupea town groups many rural settlements whose architectural features are still visible not due to any maintenance activities, but because of their new settlers' poverty that prevented them from modifying the old houses. The most representative settlements in the Scaunul Rupea (or in the region of Rupea) are: Caţa (Katzendorf), Dacia/Ştena (Stein), Drăuşeni (Draas/Drauß), Homorod (Hamruden), Jibert (Seiburg), Lovnic (Leblang), Mercheaşa (Streitfort), Ticuşu Vechi (Deutsch-Tekes), Ungra (Galt), and Viscri (Deutsch-Weißkirch) (Maroşi, 2013, p. 48).

Beside the Saxon villages, in the northern and north-eastern part of this region, nearby the Perşani Mountains and the Olt Gorges at Racoş, there are villages inhabited by Szeklers, the only settlements that still maintain their ethnic structure being Jimbor (*Székelyzsombor*, in Hungarian), Racoş (*Alsórákos*), and Hoghiz (*Olthévíz*), and all these have at least one fortress or an abandoned nobleman's castle with original architectural elements dating back to the period of the 16th-18th centuries.

For these villages that underwent total restructuring of their ethnic structure as well as demographic ageing, the solution in order to keep the rural landscape unaltered is «imposing small restrictions together with an *intensive campaign that would lead to their eventual assimilation and acceptance*» (Zachi, 2009, p. 55).

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Typical Saxon House (Viscri)   **Urban landscape (Rupea)**   **The Sükösd-Bethlen Castle (Racoş)**

Each house has an elevated ground floor, often with a stock cellar (a), windows are always raised and provided with lively painted shutters (b), the masonry gates (c) are stately, arched and united both to the main body of the house and to its extensions. The most frequent extensions are the summer kitchen and the summer rooms, the bakestone for baking bread (the number of chimney stacks is quite high), the water wheel fountain (d), watering place for animals, the tool house, and on the opposite part of the main gate there is a shelter for animals and its ridged roof is massive and it has the function of storing fodder during winter (e). The shelter has a second gate ensuring access to the backyard garden (f), where they grew vegetables and cereal crops. Other characteristic elements are the masonry and the floral ornaments, the fish scales-shaped burnt shingles (g), the river rock stone paved yards, the arched grape vine supports, the flower garden and the wooden bench in front of the house (where women used to socialise after a day's work).

The architecture of the nobiliary houses in Racoş and Hoghiz has as a common element the symmetry of the main facade, as almost always there are two hexagonal, pentagonal or circular towers (h) united by the main building (i). Most of the times, the final form of the castle is the result of several building, consolidation and extension stages, including a series of local architectural styles or of foreign ones that architects from abroad brought when the noble families invited them to restore their buildings. This is the explanation for a mixture between the Renaissance architectural style of the 16th and 17th centuries (j) mixed with the fortification elements characteristic of the 18th c. (a rather politically unstable century and this led to fortifying the castle). On the nobiliary domains of these castles settlements with characteristic architectural styles developed influenced by the imposed organisation modality. The rampart of the castle, the rectangular bulwarks (k) that defended the circular towers and the double walls had a secondary role, of defending the noble families from the Turks' incursions and from the dominant local peasantry's possible revolts. As their owners placed these castles in strategic positions, they have become a symbol of the respective settlements and that is why their conservation is very important.

Fig. 1 – Scaunul Rupea: cultural landscape markers.

Source: Map and drawings by Maroşi Zoltan.

Such a solution has been implemented for Viscri village (*Deutsch-Weißkirch*), and this settlement has become an international brand, part of the UNESCO heritage, very popular especially in Western Europe due to advertising supported by the image of Prince Charles of Wales and by the Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET), the foundation that he sponsors. This is a non-profit organisation that started in 1998 to advocate for preserving the cultural and natural landscape of the Transylvanian Saxon villages hosting fortified churches, as its main purpose is to raise peopls awareness about the Saxon cultural heritage. According to the data from MET, between 2000 and 2011, they developed and implemented 1,041 projects, in 27 villages and 5 towns, with direct investment of 4.42 million Euros. One of the projects initiated in 2000 is "The Self-sustained Village" with the aim to revitalise rural communities and improve inhabitants' life quality on the basis of a responsible use of cultural and natural heritage. In Viscri, there were local initiatives belonging to the Saxons who returned to their native village, such as the Wool Socks Project (starting with 2002) which was an economic success with over 100 women involved into knitting over 10,000 pairs of socks that they sold abroad (http://www.mihaieminescutrust.org).

Starting with 2012, people began to do minor restoration work for many fortified churches (especially the Buneşti, the Dacia, and the Homorod ones) supported by fund raising from Saxon communities abroad, often foundations belonging to these people and having the aim of restoring this heritage.

The town of Rupea, as a cultural centre of this region, was the beneficiary of a project called 'Scaunul Rupea – promoting its touristic potential' financed by the 2007-2013 Regional Operational Programme (ROP) and whose main aim was to restore the Citadel of Rupea and to develop a considerable advertising program. Thus, on the 15th of July 2013, after approximately 30 months of restoration, the Citadel of Rupea opened again its gates to visitors. The project also aims to introduce Rupea in the touristic circuit, including 29 built touristic attractions (e.g. fortified churches, fortresses, and castles) and natural ones (the Perşani Mountains) using the non-refundable financial support of the ROP.

Beside the above-mentioned major successful projects, in the region of Rupea there was a series of less known but equally important projects initiated by the locals and coordinated by Reformed priests (in the case of the Szeklers) and by the Evangelical ones (in the case of the Saxons). Such projects were the (partial) restoration of Sükösd – Bethlen Castle in Racoş (*Alsórákos*), with the support of the Bethlen Foundation established in 1992 by the Reformed priest in the respective village. An unfortunate evolution had the peasant fortress built in the 14th c. in the Szekler village Jimbor (*Székelyzsombor*) and the three castles in Hoghiz (*Olthévíz*) and they need urgent intervention.

3. *Discussions and conclusion*

Scaunul Rupea is a smaller scale representation of Transylvania as a multicultural region. Similarly to Transylvania, there are Romanians, Hungarians (Szeklers), Saxons and Roma and it has lost most of its Saxons while their place was taken mainly by the Roma (like in the case of Viscri village) and by Romanians. Also some of the Szekler villages had their former inhabitants replaced by Roma (e.g. Racoş). Thus, at present, in the region of Rupea, its north-eastern part has been the home of a Szekler identity, the north-western part was inhabited by Saxons and thus it has a Saxon imprint at least in the landscape, and the south-eastern part is inhabited by Romanians. Still, the ethnic structure of many of these rural communities is a mixed one or at least one ethnic minority is present.

Taking all these into account, one may easily understand that there are two parallel collective identities at work in this region, except for the ethnic identities: the former inhabitants' identity and the new settlers' identity (this is true especially for the former Saxon villages). But, the presence of these identities does not suppose the appearance of contested places and power issues because these people are united by a common goal: present and future development starting from local resources (for instance, former Saxon inhabitants realised that the only way to preserve their cultural heritage is to capitalise it for the benefit of the new settlers). Thus, Saxon and Szekler cultural landscape markers in the form of built heritage have become equally important for diverse ethnic groups (Saxon, Szeklers, Romanians, and Roma). This is why they all support development initiatives irrespective if they come from within or from outside their ethnic group or village community. An example of how people adapted to new conditions and exploited an opportunity is that of the community in Viscri and through their activities (based on tourism and manufacturing and selling of local products) they minimised the disruption that a changed and changing society brings. The example of Viscri village is relevant for the leadership phenomenon: a Saxon local leader (one of the few Saxons left) initiated projects offering jobs for the present Roma inhabitants which are the majority there. The projects in Viscri focus on maintaining the Saxons' built heritage while ensuring sustainable growth trajectories for the locals. This is a best practice case which works due to the implication of the public and private sectors, of the voluntary sector and of the local community, proving that *leadership is a relational phenomenon* (see Collinge, Gibney, Mabey, 2013, p. 371).

In search for answers to the questions we mentioned at the beginning of our research, we realised that in this region leaders are persons with strong community roots who attempt to restore community pride for both a former community (in the case of the Saxon villages, this community is now somewhere else) and for the present one. As leadership depends on mutual trust, it is welcomed by these communities. Local economy benefits are

present in the case of Viscri and Rupea, but for most of the rural communities it is too early to fully judge if it was a successful renewal or not, or even to assess the outcomes because their development is still in an early stage.

The social and cultural capitals are the best assets of this region, while the biggest problem is the lack of sufficient financial capital. The leadership in the region of Rupea is based on thick regional identities (shared past and characteristic cultural features) as opposed to thin regional identity – image of future-oriented regions that regional administrations try to communicate (Terlouw, 2009 quoted in Paasi, 2013, p. 1217). We also recommend the involvement of research institutions and of the academia in order to identify and promote best practice solutions.

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Leadership e rigenerazione dei villaggi della Transilvania nella regione di Rupea

Tra le recenti tendenze della ricerca geografica vi è lo studio del ruolo delle leadership formali o informali nella rigenerazione dei territori marginali o in declino. In questo contributo, presentiamo una ricerca su una regione rurale della Romania (quella della città di Rupea), che è stata fortemente colpita dalla transizione sociale ed economica del Paese avvenuta vent'anni fa, e che è situata in un'area economicamente depressa. L'analisi della situazione attuale dimostra la necessità di continuare le iniziative di leadership in questo territorio. Esse, infatti, svolgono un ruolo significativo sia nella salvaguardia delle caratteristiche del paesaggio culturale (soprattutto del patrimonio edificato) sia nei processi di rigenerazione economica e sociale, in senso sostenibile, delle comunità locali.

Leadership et régénération des villages de Transylvanie dans la région de Rupea

Parmi les tendances récentes de la recherche géographique il y a l'étude du rôle du leadership formel et informel dans la régénération des zones marginales ou en déclin. Dans cet article, nous présentons une étude sur une région rurale de la Roumanie (quelle de la ville de Rupea), qui a été fortement affectée par la transition sociale et économique de le Pays, qui a eu lieu dans des années '90, et qui est situé dans une zone économiquement déprimée. L'analyse de la situation actuelle démontre la nécessité de poursuivre les initiatives de leadership dans ce territoire; en fait, ils jouent un rôle important dans la conservation des caractéristiques du paysage culturel (en particulier le patrimoine bâti) et pour la régénération économique et sociale durable des les contextes locaux.