

Zsolt Árus

Szeklerland is a historical region of about 13.000 km², actually part of Romania, populated in a clear majority by people declaring themselves Hungarians, speaking Hungarian, but keeping their specific Szekler identity and traditions. The population of Szeklerland (according the last census, held in 2002) is 809.000, 612.043 of them Szekler-Hungarians, namely 75,65%.

There are many theories about the origins of the Szekler people. This isn't the right place to decide which one is true. Anyway, it is sure, that the Szeklers are living in Transylvania from centuries, and from the end of the ninth century, when the Hungarian kingdom was founded, they were always defending its borders, mostly the eastern one. In older times they were called Siculi (in latin, the official language of those times). For sure they were in a way relatives of the Hungarian tribes, this is demonstrated by the common language and the common alphabet used by that time, called these days the "székely-magyar rovás" writing. Long time ago these signs were made by knife on sticks, the „pencil” and „paper” of that time. These days we are the witness of a true revival of this writing, many young people begun to use it like a secret writing, but as time goes forward more and more people is learning and using it, as a sign of being part of this community.

As a fighting nation, Szeklers were very well organized people even centuries ago. The villages (and later also towns) were grouped in units called (in latin) sedes, in Hungarian szék, chair in English. Each settlement had his own rules, regarding every aspect of common life. Anyone breaking these rules had to answer for this before a local jury. There were also regional juries organized in each szék.

As a reward for defending the borders, the Szeklers were all free people, nobles all the time. They didn't pay any taxes to the king, except a cow (each family) when he was crowned, and when his elder son was borned. These rights, and other rules regarding the whole Szeklerland, existed in written form, named the Szekler Constitution.

The situation was changed after the dualist Austrian-Hungarian monarchy was formed, after 1867. That time the administrative order of the whole monarchy was unified, and the most of the Szekler privileges were abolished.

After the first world war Transylvania, and as a part of it Szeklerland also, became part of Romania, and a process of de-nationalization begun immediately. The Szeklers are mostly roman catholics, calvinists and unitarians. After 1920 a great number of orthodox churches were raised, the schools and other buildings of the Hungarian churches were taken away, etc, etc. Things went even worse after the second world war, in the communist era. But the Szeklers resisted! 1989, and the so called revolution found us on our land forming a compact community. After 70 years of oppression this is a real miracle.

Szelerland after 1989, the fight for autonomy

In December 1989, with only days after the “revolution” was formed the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, aimed to represent all the Hungarian people of the country. Looking backwards after 20 years, we can presume, that state authorities (more precisely the secret services) had some role in this process. Otherwise it is a bit hard to understand what happened in the next 14 years. Although in 1993, the congress of the DAHR decided that Hungarian people in Romania wants autonomy (territorial autonomy for Szeklerland and personal for the rest of Hungarians living in Transylvania), the leaders of the organization did actually nothing in this direction. They behave like any political party, take part in elections, even in the central government, what makes practically impossible to speak about the oppression of the Hungarian people in Romania, while the orthodox expansion is even stronger, getting for this large amounts of money from the government, our children are forced to learn history and geography in Romanian language even in Hungarian elementary schools, there is no state university in Hungarian language for a community of approx. 1,5 million people, paying taxes just like the Romanians, the army and police is almost 100% Romanian, even here, in Szeklerland, etc, etc.

After losing 10 precious years, the Szekler community decided to step forward, and in November 2003 formed the Szekler National Council. This is an elected body, like a parliament. There were organized local meetings of the citizens in most of the settlements in Szeklerland, where the people elected the delegates of that community, at least one for every settlement having less than 1500 inhabitants, and one more for each 3000 above 1500. In the second step, these delegates formed the councils of the eight Szék, the eight administrative unit, inhabited these days mostly by Szeklers, and after that these eight councils gathered in Sepsiszentgyörgy, the capital of the actual Kovászna County, and also of Sepsiszék, and formed the Szekler National Council. The only goal of the SzNC is the autonomy of Szeklerland, to do whatever is needed to do for this. Almost 6 years after that we can say, that – even if a bit late – we took at last the good way. Just some examples:

- Between 1993 and 2003, the word “autonomy” was buried in the program of the DAHR, they didn’t even speak about it. When asked, they told, that first the democratization of Romania, and the economical rise of Szeklerland should happen. (This is absurd, as long as the Romanian government is doing everything to keep Szeklerland economically behind other regions, the infrastructure is the worst, etc, etc. It is well known, that in all autonomous regions economical rise came after gaining the autonomous status.) After 2003 all Hungarian politicians are talking about autonomy, and the Romanian community is beginning to know what this is. Before 2003 who was talking about autonomy was considered at least like an heretic, by now it is a common term, and the Romanian people is beginning to get used with it. They don’t like, that Szeklers want it, but they know, that this is our real, strong and legitim wish. This is the most important thing, happened since 1989: By now everybody knows, that gaining autonomy is only a question of time.

- We elaborated a draft law about Szeklerland’s autonomy, in which is written clear what should it be and how should it work. Unfortunately the parliament in Bucharest rejected the law without discussing it.

- We asked the local authorities to organize referendum, because first of all the people must be asked, what they want. Many of the local councils did so, but the state authorities

were contrary. Seeing this, we organized an unofficial referendum in Szeklerland, and 99% of the people asked, said YES to autonomy.

- We made the first steps to the presence of Szeklerland in the virtual space. We hope, that next year the top level domain name .sic will be available, so authorities, organizations, firms and people in Szeklerland will be able to have domain names and email addresses ending with .sic, instead of .ro, just the way in Catalonia (having the top level domain name .cat).

- We organized a meeting of local elected people (mayors and local council members), where they adopted document regarding the autonomy of Szeklerland.

It is beginning to be clear for more and more people, that in order to reach our goal, we have to put not only local, but also international pressure on the Romanian government. We have to show clear to everybody, that Romania made some commitments in order to be a member of the Council of Europe, and the EU, but after entering these organizations, the government in Bucharest forgot all of these commitments.

What do we exactly want?

Shortly: Autonomy for Szeklerland! Our situation (the land, territory, the population) is very similar to South Tirol, so it is logical to aim for the status that South Tirol has.

We know, that there are many territorial autonomies across Europe, and we know, that there are many international documents we can base on our will. Let us mention only three of them:

1. Recommendation 1201/1993 (on an additional protocol on the rights of national minorities to the European Convention on Human Rights),
2. Resolution 1334/2003 (Positive experiences of autonomous regions as a source of inspiration for conflict resolution in Europe), and
3. Recommendation 1811/2007 (Regionalization in Europe),

all documents of the Council of Europe.

What do these documents say:

- Recommendation 1201, in article 11 says, that: *In the regions where they are in a majority the persons belonging to a national minority shall have the right to have at their disposal appropriate local or autonomous authorities or to have a special status, matching the specific historical and territorial situation and in accordance with the domestic legislation of the state.* Perfectly matching our situation! Romania signed this document, and in addition, when accepted in the COE, it took an unilateral obligation to respect it. We think it's time to respect this obligation!

- Resolution 1334 is in fact an overview of the autonomous regions in Europe, and the conclusion is shortly what the title says: all these regions are lands of peace, economical growth and prosperity. All what we want is to reach this situation.

- Recommendation 1811/2007 is about Regionalization in Europe. Relevant for our situation are articles 15-17 and 29:

15. The Assembly recalls the existence of conflicts based on ethnicity or the existence of national, cultural/linguistic, religious or border-region minorities, and the need to arrive at a resolution of these issues that is peaceful, lasting and satisfies all parties.

16. It is aware of the problems that the process of establishing new states can involve, including conflicts of all kinds, division within societies, struggles between minorities and the majority, between different minorities, between neighbouring countries and the risk of profound destabilizations of the European project.

17. The Assembly insists on the democratic condition of European states, which requires that these situations always be resolved through democratic processes, such as elections, referendums, constitutional and institutional reform, and the establishment of new entities; these processes must be dependent on the participation of citizens, who are ultimately entitled to decide.

29. The Assembly also calls on the Committee of Ministers to:

29.1. insist on scrupulous respect for human rights, in particular the rights of minorities, which may find a model in regionalism to achieve full democratic recognition and application of these rights, in accordance with Council of Europe principles;

In conclusion:

In 2003 we took the right way, but we are still far from the goal. First of all we are lack of funds, which leads to a lack of qualified people, possibilities to communicate, etc, etc. The Romanian government is making great efforts to minimize the results of our struggle in all the possible ways. But we know, that we are right, we know, that autonomy is a good solution for a people in our situation, and we know, that time is working for us.

It is very important to note, that our fight for the rights mentioned in these documents it was, and it is peaceful. We are aware, that for instance Kosovo gained independence using violence, and there are people nearby us, who are beginning to loose their patience. This is understandable, as long as almost every border in the region was changed in the last 20 years, only our wish for **not** an independent state, but only for an autonomous region is still pending, the state authorities don't even want to discuss about it. We are afraid, that this will lead to the appearance of other organizations, with more radical goals, and more radical way of act. We strongly want to avoid any violence, and we hope, that Romanian politicians will wake up to reality before something wrong happens.

For more and fresh information please visit regularly our website (www.sznt.ro).