



# THE ROLE OF INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN THE INTERNAL STABILITY OF STATES AND THE AVOIDANCE OF EXTERNAL THREATS. A CASE STUDY ON THE SAXONS OF VALEA VIILOR (WURMLOCH) – SIBIU COUNTY

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**Abstract:** In a context where mastering intercultural communication strategies and competences is a sine qua non of a diplomacy adapted to the current dynamic security environment, the internal stability of states plays a key role in defining and strengthening foreign policies. Most of the time, the cultural conflicts between the majority and the minority populations that co-exist in a country weaken not only the coherence of that country's domestic policies, but also its security, which, internationally, results in a lack of credibility of the respective state. Thus, by analyzing how communication takes place within the Saxon community of Valea Viilor, with a focus on its traditions, this article sets out to emphasize that a first step towards a coherent foreign policy is the knowledge and acceptance of the ethnic minority's culture by the majority population and permanent dialogue.

**Keywords:** security; interethnic communication; internal stability; Saxons; foreign policy.

In recent years, both the German-language newspapers published in Romania: *Allgemeine Deutsche Zeitung*, *Banater Zeitung*, *Karpatenrundschau*, and the TV programs dedicated to the German minority, namely *Akzente* on TVR1<sup>1</sup>, have increasingly spoken about the rich and fascinating culture of the Transylvanian Saxons. A concrete example in this respect is the *Haferland Week*, which has always been organized for five years by Michael Schmidt Foundation as a festival meant to promote the values of the Saxon community of Transylvania: The "*Haferland Week*" not only wants to attract Transylvanian Saxons to come to their homeland every year, but also the tourists who wish to discover the region and hear the story of a community which left an

unforgettable mark on this land. It is one of the largest festivals dedicated to the cultural heritage of the Transylvanian Saxons."<sup>2</sup>

In this context, the question arises more and more often as to how the German minority of Transylvania has managed to survive 850 years, since the earliest written evidence of their existence on the Romanian territory as a linguistic enclave<sup>3</sup>: "The Transylvanian Saxons founded their first settlements in the mid-twelfth century [...]"<sup>4</sup>. Considering that this year we celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Friendship Treaty between Romania and Germany, the existence of the German minority within the Romanian borders is a strong argument of the close cooperation between Romania and the Federal Republic of Germany in recognized domains: "[...] since its signature on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1992, our bilateral relations have known a very dynamic evolution in all the domains, thanks to numerous private and state initiatives, in economy,

<sup>1</sup> The Department for Interethnic Relationship (DIR) within the Romanian Government is a structure at the central level of public administration, through which interethnic dialogue is promoted. At the same time, DIR maintains permanent communication with the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania, which supervises the publications mentioned in the above mentioned TV program, as part of the active support provided to the presence of the German minority in the public life of Romania.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.haferland.ro/saptamana-haferland/> (Consulted on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2017).

<sup>3</sup> It should be mentioned that the German spoken by the Saxons of Transylvania, known as Siebenbürgerisches Deutsch, is different from the Standard German, known as Deutsches Deutsch.

<sup>4</sup> George Guțu, *Abriß der Geschichte der rumäniendeutschen Literatur*, Tipografia Universității din București, București, 1986, p. 2 (the author's own translation from German language).

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culture, education, science, in all the social spheres, with a central role of the German minority as a bridge between Germany and Romania.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the close knowledge and acceptance of the culture of a minority by the majority population is not only the expression of fostering interethnic dialogue as part of intercultural communication, but also a good opportunity to assert a strong domestic policy based on the respect of democratic values, which gives the state stability and security. Internationally, the internal stability confers credibility and facilitates the achievement of the foreign policy, making the respective state a trustworthy partner for the other states. Actually, according to *Government Decision no. 111/2005 on the establishment and functioning of the Department for Interethnic Relations*, the main goal of the department is to develop and implement strategies and policies intended to support the ethnic minorities of Romania: “[...] (it) elaborates and submits strategies and policies for preserving, promoting and developing the ethnic identity of those individuals belonging to national minorities [...]”<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the interethnic dialogue developed at internal level totally reduces the chances of occurrence of ethnic nationalism. As a European Union member state, Romania aligns itself with the states whose scientific and political discourse reflects a Western vision and has to fight more than ever against Euroscepticism, demonstrating its internal stability by the respect of democratic values and the culture of ethnic minorities: “We spoke earlier [...] about the irreducible Manichaeism that both civic liberals and ethnic conservatives have fallen prey to. [...] Elie Kedourie protests against ethnic nationalism, supposedly a privilege of the non-Western world [...]”<sup>7</sup>.

The interethnic dialogue developed domestically between the majority population and the ethnic minority, first manifested by the knowledge of the minority’s culture, then by

communication, is the main “weapon” to fight external rivals whose aim is to destabilize the state and weaken its security: internal stability, coherent internal policies and strong democratic values annihilate external threats. In order to have a strong domestic policy concerning ethnic minorities, the first important thing is to study and know how communication takes place within the respective ethnic community, that is, the most significant traditions and customs or, in other words, cultural knowledge. It is not only the study of the language, of the purely linguistic dimension of an ethnic minority that decodes communication, but also the attention given to the cultural dimension of that minority: traditions, customs, monuments, institutions.

It should be stressed that communication within the Saxon community of Transylvania, in this particular case the Saxons of Valea Viilor, is closely linked to the aspects of daily life and, especially, to those traditions and customs that have been passed from one generation to another and scrupulously respected. In order to understand the culture of the Saxons of Valea Viilor and, implicitly, the culture of Transylvanian Saxons, it is essential to study some of their most characteristic traditions and customs, their representative monuments and institutions which allow capturing communication in daily-life circumstances.

Between orality and scriptuality, communication within the Saxon community of Valea Viilor occurs between emitters and receivers who share the awareness of their solid moral values and ancient customs, reflected in the survival strategies they have developed over the centuries. The following paragraphs seek to emphasize, starting from Wolfgang Knappe’s research, the most significant aspects of the daily life of the Saxons of Valea Viilor, thus perceiving the interdependence between communication and customs. On the other hand, the intercultural spirit developed by the Saxons can be seen in the friendship relations they have established with the Szeklers, another minority of Romania. The cooperation between the Saxons and the Romanian majority is very good. This is proved by the excellent integration of the Saxons even in the towns and villages inhabited mostly by Romanians; most often, cultural conflicts have opposed the Hungarian minority and the Romanian majority precisely because both sides lack the

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.bukarest.diplo.de/Vertretung/bukarest/ro/seiten/00-Startseite/seite\\_25Jahre\\_freundschaftsvertrag2017.html](http://www.bukarest.diplo.de/Vertretung/bukarest/ro/seiten/00-Startseite/seite_25Jahre_freundschaftsvertrag2017.html) (Consulted on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2017).

<sup>6</sup> *Hotărârea de Guvern nr. 111/ 2005 privind organizarea și funcționarea Departamentului pentru Relații Interetnice*, Art. 2 (1) b.

<sup>7</sup> Bogdan Ștefănescu, *Patrii din cuvinte. O tropologie a discursurilor identității naționale*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2015, p. 14.



control of intercultural dialogue and the knowledge of the other's culture and daily habits.

The description of several elements of the Saxon folk costume of Valea Viilor is the object of vast research conducted by Knappe and reflects the mentality of the local community. The traditional costume works as a cultural label and a self-image of the Saxons. Speaking about the history of the Saxon sheepskin coat, the man's in particular, the author emphasizes the Saxons' pragmatism and inventive spirit: after long consultations and through effective communication and understanding, they concluded that in order to obtain a woman's sheepskin coat it would be financially profitable to simply transform the man's coat; thus, they modified "[...] the width of the coat piece by piece".<sup>8</sup>

The fortified church as the *axis mundi* of the Transylvanian Saxon community, analyzed in detail by Knappe, is a leitmotiv of the daily life. For the Saxons of Valea Viilor, this is not only a religious symbol but also a historically meaningful place, owing to its strategic position and its role of defense against the Turkish threats. Both the central position of the fortified church and the scrupulous attention with which the Saxons of Valea Viilor occupy the right place in the church as prescribed by the ancient rules demonstrate their respect for the church service and the existence of a very well consolidated oral communication within the community, which continues a centuries-old religious scripturality: "... (people) entered the church according to ancient traditions: first the children, then the young girls wearing headscarves, followed by the young women [...]. The men were the last to enter – as prescribed by the ancient order – full of dignity [...]"<sup>9</sup>. The fortified church plays a double role: it is both a religious and a cultural institution. The sheepskin coat worn by men at church and the priest's garment emphasize the Saxons' belonging to a community, to a "regional awareness"<sup>10</sup> made up of ancient rules. The strong point of the fortified church would be the fact that it is perceived as "the most visible symbol of the

Saxons' existence in Transylvania"<sup>11</sup>. Speaking about the survival of the fortified church over the centuries, Roth states that the Evangelical Churches of Transylvania constitute a genuine cultural heritage.

The father of the neighbourhood – another tradition of the Saxon community of Valea Viilor – best reflects the importance of internal communication within a minority population, in this case the Transylvanian Saxons. It is at this level that the Saxons' social organization is best perceived. The father of the neighbourhood has clearly defined tasks in the community he manages and he uses his communication skills in mobilizing the Saxons to fulfill their civic duties: "Within one or two years, the community elects its representative, the father of the neighbourhood. He is helped by eight advisors, he praises but he also criticizes, [...] he is the person everybody refers to for questions and urgent situations"<sup>12</sup>. He also sees to it that all the members of the community maintains cleanliness both inside and outside their property. Taxes also fell within his remit.

So far, emphasis has been laid on the way the Saxons of Valea Viilor communicate within their community, in close relation with ancient customs and daily aspects, but also with significant monuments. However, we should point out that the Saxons master not only the cultural dimension of communication, but also the pragmatic one. The moment the urban influence penetrated into the Saxon community of Valea Viilor is key in stressing how quickly the Saxons adapt to the evolution of the society, their pragmatism being a proof of both their mutual communicability and their mastery of well defined tactics of survival, even when the ancient traditions are threatened by modernity: "A lot of fashion pieces were brought from the fair held in the neighbouring town and integrated into the local costume"<sup>13</sup>. This is why a lot of Saxons decided to "dress fashionably"<sup>14</sup> and, thanks to the Saxon inventive spirit and the "various personal creations"<sup>15</sup> they succeeded in lending the ancient

<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Knappe, *In Siebenbürgen. Speck im Turm oder Geschichten aus der Geschichte der Siebenbürger Sachsen*, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1982, p. 113 (the author's own translation from German language).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Harald Roth, *Kleine Geschichte Siebenbürgens*, Köln, Editura Böhlau, 2012, p. 152 (the author's own translation from German language).

<sup>11</sup> Konrad Gündisch, *Siebenbürgen und die Siebenbürger Sachsen*, München, Editura Langen Müller, 1998, p. 260 (the author's own translation from German language).

<sup>12</sup> W. Knappe, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> K. Gündisch, *op. cit.*, p. 266.



traditional costume an urban appearance: "In Valea Viilor (Wurmloch), authenticity is still there, even today, when men wear their urban shirt under their sheepskin coat, tucked in according to the urban fashion [...]"<sup>16</sup>.

Step by step, these urban influences have become a "mark of modernity and progress"<sup>17</sup>. This coexistence of ancient customs and urban influences in the traditional costume actually reflects a kind of "strategies of coexistence"<sup>18</sup> which the Saxons of Valea Viilor master without any doubt: their pragmatism is a proof that, within this community, communication is highly applied and internal cohesion is crucial in coping with external challenges and imposing credibility on potential enemies.

The folk costume of the Saxons in Valea Viilor, their fortified church and the way in which they relate to it, as both a religious and a cultural institution, the father of the neighbourhood as the Saxons' representative, the urban influences on the Saxon community are a few of the most characteristic elements, not only of the Saxons of Valea Viilor, but of all Transylvanian Saxons. One can thus remark a strong internal communication within the community, which relies on the respect toward each other, toward the father of the neighbourhood and toward the ancient traditions and customs. The Saxons' pragmatism and inventiveness, which made them adapt their traditional costume to the urban influences, their integration, even in villages inhabited mostly by Romanians, all this shows the Saxons' openness to interethnic dialogue.

Since interethnic dialogue is an important component of intercultural communication, being based, in its turn, on intercultural strategies and techniques, this article, drawing on the observations made by Viorica-Aura Păuș in *Comunicare interetnică și interculturală*, considers that the mastery of the operational concepts in the field ensures a deeper understanding of the role of interethnic dialogue in strengthening internal stability and fighting external threats. Therefore, we will provide below the definitions of the relevant concepts, mentioning that, in some cases, we omitted the details provided by the author, precisely in order to have a direct view of the respective notion.

<sup>16</sup> W. Knappe, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> K. Gündisch, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

**1. Civilization:** a set of features that characterize the intellectual, artistic, moral and material life of a country or society (*Petit Larousse Encyclopedic Dictionary*).

**2. Culture:** the set of social, religious, etc. structures, of the intellectual, artistic, etc. manifestations that characterize a society (*Petit Larousse Encyclopedic Dictionary*).

It should be stressed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century German, Kultur was a synonym of Zivilisation.

We should also emphasize that, according to Păuș, intercultural communication is not established among cultures but among individuals who participate in different significant cultural systems.

**3. Value(s):** what a person or a thing is worth (*Petit Larousse Dictionary*).

**4. Collective identity:** the capacity of a collectivity to recognize itself as a group; an attribute of the cohesion principle (ethnic, local, professional identity); a resource of life in a society, and a resource of collective action (*Larousse Dictionary of Sociology*).

**5. Nation:** a human community, most often living on the same territory, with a more or less strong historical, linguistic, religious, economic unity (*Petit Larousse Dictionary*). Tămaș's *Political Dictionary*, to which Păuș makes reference, stresses that nationality is sometimes obtained by the granting of citizenship, not as a result of one's national origin.

**6. Ethnic group:** a population that demarcates itself by a common origin, common physical and cultural features (race, language, culture, religion, history, economy) within geographical limits (Tămaș S., *Dicționarul Politic*, pp. 108-109).

**7. Identity:** the central dimension of an individual's self-concept, representing his/her generalized position in society and deriving from his/her belonging to social groups and categories.

**8. Minority:** a subgroup which forms less than half of the population and, as a rule, is outnumbered by at least another subgroup, not necessarily of the majority (Tămaș Sergiu, *Dicționarul Politic*, 1993). The concept of **minority rights** refers to the set of legal standards (international public law or international humanitarian law) concerning the rights of people who belong to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities.



**9. Multicultural society:** different cultures and national, ethnic and religious groups who live on the same territory but do not necessarily have mutual contacts.

**10. Intercultural society:** different cultures and national, ethnic and religious groups who live on the same territory and have open relationships of interaction, with exchanges and the mutual recognition of their respective life-styles and values.

**11. Intercultural education:** involves a positive approach of differences.

To conclude, it should be said that, from this level of understanding and accepting the manner in which communication within the Saxon community – as representatives of the German minority of Romania – is organized and works, the majority Romanians having attributions in developing and applying strategies for the protection of ethnic minorities should find the most appropriate formula to strengthen the interethnic dialogue, stability and cooperation at domestic level, and, internationally, to support Romania's status as a credible dialogue partner. Internal stability, also conferred by the interethnic dialogue, by the avoidance of cultural conflicts among the ethnic minority and the majority population, reduces the risk of external threats and annihilates the possibility of weakening the state security. All this facilitates the achievement of the foreign policy and fights Euroscepticism. Thus, the state is prepared to establish its own strategies

in an increasingly dynamic security environment, promoting its national interests abroad.

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