

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Local identity and rural development in the Felcsík
micro-region of Szeklerland**

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I. The aim and topic of the dissertation

The dissertation analyzes the relationship between rural development and local identity in the case of the Felcsík micro-region in Szeklerland. The main purpose of the research is to draw attention to the opportunities and limitations of the development of local identity.

In the Felcsík micro-region of Szeklerland, in the early 2000s, a larger, spatially based entity, the Felcsík Micro-Regional Association, was formed with the collaboration of eight settlements with a strong local identity. It was a completely bottom-up initiative, based on the cooperation of local elites, without formal encouragement and support. At that time, the concept of 'micro-regional association' was not yet known in Romania.

The establishment of the association was not only an administrative but also a local identity-building process (for example naming, events, separation from other spatial entities, narrative creation). The initiators and leaders were local elites. An important research question is what tools and procedures are used by elites with strong local identities and associated with local frameworks to build the new local identity structure? Due to the deeply embedded roles and statuses in the dual, local and regional space, the construction of the identity structure obviously could not have been seamless. Therefore, my research also focuses on the role of elites. Taking into account the summary of conceptual and sampling approaches applied in elite researches in Hungary, in my dissertation, I consider elite actors, who enjoy a reputation, as key to their institutional, public, political and cultural functions (Csurgó - Megyesi, 2011).

Three changes indicate the importance of the research topic. (1) The process of appreciation of rural areas (new paradigm of rural development, Ploeg et al., 2000; Shucksmith, 2000; Ward, 2002; Murdoch, 2000), which has an impact on the examined area: in the narratives of local actors „countryside is a valuable place" where „something can and must be done". This is a significant change both in Romania and in Szeklerland compared to the pre-1989 system, when rurality was completely overshadowed by urbanization.

(2) Reorganization of the Romanian institutional system (establishment of regional development systems) in 1996, which provided legal opportunities for local initiatives. This new institutional environment encouraged local development actors to take the initiative.

(3) From the pre-accession period on the EU, the mobilization of resources and the preparation for accession, in which territorial units larger than the localities, had better opportunities for the mobilization of resources.

These reasons (to which can be attributed the influence of the Hungarian micro-region movement in the second half of the 1990s) led to the establishment of larger organizational and identity structures in Harghita County in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This process continues today with more or less success.

In recent years, aspects of integrated rural development, such as area-based development, participatory planning, and endogenous strategies, have become the subject of development discourse in the Felcsík micro-region of Szeklerland (Ploeg et al., 2000; Shucksmith, 2000; 2002; Murdoch, 2000). The funding sources available through the accession to the European Union have given dynamism to the implementation of projects aimed at reviving traditions, restoring and reconstructing the material and spatial elements of the historical past. The professional discourse of social scientists and cultural practitioners on the topic emphasizes the applicability of common historical and cultural elements in development policy, such as traditions, historical places, monuments, feasts, folklore (Ray, 1998). In the Felcsík micro-region these are the defining elements of the local identity, which have been manifested in different ways and to different degrees due to the major social and economic changes taking place in the micro-region. In the first years after the change of regime, the reinterpretation of the local identity of the community occurred. This meant minority aspirations in which certain parts of the spaces were symbolically appreciated, and common ideas and symbols emerged, which are playing an increasingly important role in development policy. The social organization determined by the local identity and the related local history and local values represent an endogenous resource not only at the level of the Felcsík micro-region but also in the Szeklerland.

In the Felcsík micro-region, the role of regional elites is crucial in establishing and operating a spatial identity structure larger than the local one. One of the agents of the relationship between local identity and rural development is the group of actors belonging to the rural elite, who determine the directions of development, make decisions and implement local initiatives, thus influencing the functioning of the local society. In order to understand the development policy processes of the micro-region, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of the rural elite, as well as the local elite roles, in addition to social history, development opportunities, projects and local initiatives. An analysis of how local identity, knowledge use and cooperation, which are closely linked to the activities of rural elites, strengthen social capital and how it is related to the development processes of the micro-region.

In my dissertation I try to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the antecedents of the reinterpretation of local identity in the Felcsík micro-region? Does local identity have a symbolic, national socialization or economic role?
2. What actors and groups of participants belong to the project class? What institutions and other actors play a central role in rural development processes?
3. What is the knowledge use and knowledge management of key players in development processes?
4. Do the key players in the rural development processes of the examined area have unified development policy ideas? Is there a general development policy modeling opportunity for the region?
5. What is the impact of the characteristics of cooperation between institutions and actors on the state of micro-regional identity and the chances of its strengthening?

Based on interviews with key players in the development process, I interpret the characteristics, knowledge usage, willingness to cooperate and local identity of the actors and action groups operating within or closely related to local governments. These factors may also represent opportunities and constraints for the regional development of the larger region, the Szeklerland.

In order to answer the research questions and to examine the validity of the assumptions, after the presentation of the relevant literary approaches, in the dissertation I analyze the social-historical features of the Felcsík micro-region, the elite types defined by knowledge and development policy narratives, the ideal types of inter-settlement cooperation, and the structure of the elite's local identity.

II. Outline of the methods

A key method of my research is the conduct semi-structured interviews with key players in rural development processes. Depending on the field of activity of the interviewees, some aspects of the interview questions had to be personalized, but overall, in each case, four groups of questions organized the discussions:

1. **General questions about the interviewee and the settlement**, during which activities, cooperation, places, events, characteristics, difficulties and changes important in the life of the settlement/region were recorded, besides the work and public functions.

2. **Expressing opinions on organizations, partnerships and developments**, asking questions about the organization-level cooperation, the active and less active settlements in the region, and the significant developments.
3. In the case of the **opportunity for action** dimension, positions regarding the influence of the individual or his/her organization on developments, as well as difficulties and problems related to the implemented activities and projects were recorded.
4. The recording of **ideas and desires** was made possible by the formulation of ideas and concrete plans related to the development of the settlement/region.

The average length of interviews is 40 minutes.

In my dissertation I use the method of analysis of **control group interviews**. Target group: key players in the Szeklerland region's rural development processes, especially local government leaders and employees, young people who are competent in writing tenders, intellectuals moving from town to country, representatives of NGOs, and opinion leaders (20 interviews). The interviews were conducted within the framework of the WAC – Center for Regional and Anthropological Research, and their secondary analysis related to the doctoral research topic and questions contributed significantly to the interpretation of the results.

Another method of my research is **participatory observation**, which I used during interviewing, when visiting the locations mentioned by the interviewees, and when attending events and major events in the area. The aim of the method is to facilitate the interpretation of the results obtained during the discussions. In addition to interviews, I had the opportunity to talk to local people several times during the interview period. Although the discussions did not follow a pre-planned structure, they provided useful information for planning the data collection and interpreting the results.

Through **document analysis**, I studied the issues of the „Hargita Népe” newspaper between 1990 and 1995: with the help of a pre-structured datasheet, I searched for articles referring to the symbolic occupation of space. Using the datasheet, I noted down the name of the author of the article and sought information about the settlement, the type, title, subject, and keywords of the article. During the research I summarized the newspaper articles in a data table, which is accompanied by a series of photos. With the method it was possible to identify the strengthening of the local/regional character of the symbolic space occupation process and its unique features. The quantification provides insight into the dimensions of the phenomenon. By symbolic space occupation I mean the events in Harghita County which

directly or indirectly determined the mood, celebration, commemoration and space-holding practice of the community of the Felcsík micro-region after the change of regime. These include school naming ceremonies, monument constructions, signposting, church building and restoration work, the use of national emblems, symbolic public speaking, celebrations of historic past, public buildings, and minority initiatives of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania aimed at influencing the Hungarian-language education policy.

I also analyzed the following through document analysis:

- Statistical data available on the Internet.
- County and regional development documents: the Development Strategy of Felcsík micro-region (2007-2014), General Development Strategy of Harghita County (2015-2020), Youth Strategy of Harghita County (2015-2020), Cultural Strategy (2013-2020), Petőfi Sándor General School's development and repositioning plan (2016).
- Previous scientific research, databases and development policy analyzes of the WAC – Center for Regional and Anthropological Research.

III. The outline of the results

The correlation of local identity, knowledge usage and cooperation related to elite roles and the activities of rural elites in the Felcsík micro-region with the strengthening of social capital and the development processes is illustrated by the following summary:

- Local identity has a symbolic reinterpretation antecedent in the studied area, which can be interpreted from the point of view of social representation theory and identity creation, social identity theory. In this sense, local identity is determined by the characteristics of the symbolic space-building process that intensified after the change of regime: the display of the group's common knowledge and traditions in space through monuments, symbols and national symbols. Today, this symbolic practice of space occupation has a decisive role in the community's self-definition, in the discourse on development, and in that sense in the development process.
- The knowledge of development policy is not uniform among the key players in the rural development processes of the studied area, and elite types can be identified by the nature of general knowledge, knowledge and influence of

development processes, project implementation, decisions, development capacity and openness to new knowledge. Analysis of the target group's knowledge use, collaborations and local identity components highlighted the complexity of the group. It is important to note that although due to the diversity of actors and development policy narratives, we cannot speak of a development policy model that is common to the region, the interview analysis did not justify the complete lack of strategic ideas and openness to inter-settlement cooperation. In this sense, knowledge interaction between actors can be interpreted as a development policy option. Currently, in the micro-region of Felcsík, the misapplication of micro-regional cooperation frameworks, the conditionality of inter-settlement cooperation and consequent point-based developments characterize development policy practice.

- Another important result of the research is that in rural development activities defined by elite types there is no distinction between workplace and private life, so the opinion on development is largely determined by the workplace role and the language environment. The results of the research confirmed this on several points: the workplace role and private life are closely intertwined, and this determines the narratives about developments, characteristics of the settlement, and conflicts. As a result, personal interests, the strengthening of personal position and quantitative aspects (the number of projects implemented and the amount of money awarded) play an important role in development decisions. In addition to the narratives of the interviewees, the importance of quantitative aspects is also confirmed by the discourses in the regional public sphere (electronic and print media).
- The ideal types of narratives on inter-settlement cooperation represent opportunities for cooperation and constraints on the planned development of the micro-region. In the practice of development policy, these ideal types are much more important than the subregional forms of association that are the framework of inter-settlement cooperation. In this sense, therefore, ideal types of narratives on inter-settlement cooperation should be a part of development strategies.
- The analysis of the local identity and the social-historical features of the operation of the settlements, as well as the identity components of the development actors proved that the identity is very strong at the settlement

level and on a larger scale (county, Csík, Szeklerland). Micro-regional identity structures are in few cases associated with development policy ideas and concrete projects. As the literature related to the topic justifies the shaping of local identities, the rudimentary form of common identity also represents an opportunity for development in the studied micro-region.

- The results of the research point out that the local identity of a micro-region community is related to the attitudes, relationships and activities of local actors, and in this sense to the development directions and results. The impact of the rural elite on society is significant in the studied area. Therefore, the analysis of elite narratives, and in particular the use of knowledge, attitudes towards inter-settlement cooperation, and local identity, is a starting point for understanding elite roles and local development processes defined by elite roles. The global appreciation process of rural areas also affects the studied area. This manifests itself primarily in the narratives and development ideas of the key players in the management of development processes. The local identity built within the framework of the micro-region analyzed in the research, although linked to the initiative of the rural elite, cannot be interpreted without the decisive role of global influences, the reorganization of the Romanian institutional system and the EU pre-accession fundraising practice.

The research results point out that local identity is defined by environmental, economic and cultural characteristics, which can be very different from one area to another. If local identity is interpreted in the context of development policy, the characteristics and activities of the key players in the development process - the rural elite in the studied area - cannot be ignored. Legal and administrative organizations such as the Felcsík Micro-Regional Association can only function properly if they are aware of the local identity structures, the specificities of the rural elite, and take into account development strategies. As the development of cooperation and cooperation frameworks is crucial for settlements in disadvantaged rural areas, it is important to develop strategies to manage the integration processes slowed down by strong local structures. To do this, analyzing the functioning of elite roles and the characteristics of local identity structures can be an effective tool. From the rural development perspective, for closed communities like the Felcsík micro-region of Szeklerland, this approach is of paramount importance and indicates that besides the

necessary financial resources, the characteristics of local actors and endogenous resources are equally (or even more) important. Thus, key players in the development process determine, through their way of thinking, knowledge, attitude to space, the strengthening of social capital, the limiting and stimulating factors in the development process, and, in this sense, the applicable development policy strategies at different levels of locality. Through the analysis of the literature in the dissertation and the presentation of the research results I contributed to the confirmation of this line of thought.

The analysis and importance of local identity and rural elite roles in Szeklerland have not yet come to the fore, which represents an untapped opportunity for development. A further direction of research could be to test the applied method of analysis in other regions of Szeklerland, or even at the level of Szeklerland.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

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