

## *CSANGOS* A HUNGARIAN-SPEAKING ETHNIC GROUP IN THE BALKANS

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Living in the overwhelmingly Orthodox eastern part of Romania the Moldavian *Csangos* with their Catholic faith and many of them still able to speak an archaic dialect of Hungarian language are in the special focus of Hungarian cultural and scientific interest. It is also striking how this interest has been invested in the illusions of the ethnocentric historiography of the last 200 hundred years. This article tries to explore the main aspects of narrative constructions on which these illusions rest.

It is obvious that part of the illusions can be connected to the definition of the tasks of Hungarian ethnography which has been enduring since the early stages of Hungarian scientific life right up to the present. Linguists, historians and especially ethnographers from the beginnings of the Romantic Era hoped to find the original essence of nation, from the discovery of the “never-changing” values of peasant culture and way of life and build on them their expectations of the national revival program and the inevitable social reforms.<sup>1</sup> In connection with this general mental framework of the “national sciences” it is little wonder to see that in the Hungarian perception the Moldavian *Csangos* are plainly and simply identified as Hungarians. This perspective fails to address the complexity of the situation of this ethnic group living far beyond the historical borders of the Hungarian state in a dense web of conflicting and complementary local identities. Only if we examine the relation of the *Csango* people to their neighbouring orthodox villages and the religious, economical and personal relations with their inhabitants can we genuinely interpret the “mental map” of local and individual identity strategies. The survival of the Moldavian *Csango* entity is strengthened by the natural dynamics of these relations, therefore even the best intentions of intervention – for example promoting Hungarian schools among the population that welcome them – could easily upset the balance and may further accelerate the disappearance of the complexity of the historically established and linguistically still multiform web of *Csango* communities.

It is also worth noting that the majority of the Moldavian *Csangos* do not fight as heroically for the survival of their language and Hungarian origin as some Hungarian researchers would like to witness,<sup>2</sup> but they regard the extinction of the

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Jerney, János: Keleti utazása a 'Magyarok' őshelyeinek kinyomozása végett 1844 és 1845. I-II. [Journey to the East in order to find the Ancient Settlements of the Magyars ]. Pest, 1851; For a critical analyse see László Kósa A Companion to Hungarian Studies Budapest, Corvina, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Péterbence, Anikó (ed.): „Moldovának szép tájain születtem...” [I was born in the beautiful land of Moldova] Jászberény, 1993, p. 3.

*Csango* language without regret because – with some exceptions – they do not consider their language the symbol of their identity.<sup>3</sup>

The multiple manifestation of publications in the mass media (blogs, social media, online and printed papers, television and radio) and the blossoming output of scientific articles concerning the *Csangos* amply shows the still prevailing symbolical character of the *Csango* “issue”. According to Vilmos Tánčzos three aspects should be taken into account regarding the spectacular magnetism of the *Csango* issue on Hungarian cultural interest. Firstly for many Hungarian intellectuals the destiny of *Csango*’s is a symbol of fate: giving up on the “family members” living beyond the Carpathians is a symbol of disappearance for the Hungarians struggling with demographical low turn and assimilation problems inside and outside Hungary. Secondly, the fact that practically *Csangos* are the only Hungarian ethnic group which is excluded from the process of forming a nation and got stuck as an ethnic minority, is a hardly acceptable and embarrassing attribute for the national consciousness typified in a historicist way. Thirdly, for a lot of people the Moldavian Hungarians’ archaic, medieval-based culture of religion and lifestyle *contrasts* the non-Christian and non-idealistic society of modern age and consequently they easily mythicize the *Csango* “values”.<sup>4</sup>

We also have to take into consideration that we cannot talk about a coherent or even less continuous Moldavian-Hungarian culture since the complex heritage of the medieval and early modern Balkan principality of Moldova with an almost entirely Orthodox environment and the modern age Romanian nationalism developed from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century did not allow for the illiterate *Csango* - though they were made up mostly of Hungarian speaking communities - any substantive adaptation to the modern national revival of the Hungarian culture west from the Carpathian Mountains. The effect was isolating, consequently preserving old forms of cultural and linguistic patterns. Thus the much talked-of and appraised archaic feature of the *Csangos* does not mean a genuine development of a supposed autonomous national culture. It is rather the remains of a common archaic culture which once uniformly characterized Central and Eastern Europe and survived only under the pressure of necessity and isolation. Moldavia as geopolitical entity was not – except in the early medieval times – under the reign of the Hungarian monarchy. It is the only territory populated permanently by a substantial number of Hungarian speaking population from medieval times which stands apart from the main determinant of Hungarian history and nationalism, ie. that state and nation cannot stand apart. This also says a lot of the ambiguous attitude of the Hungarian national consciousness towards the *Csangos*. On the other hand the *Csangos* – except for a very early medieval period - had no significant cultural influence on the development of the history of the Principality of Moldova and even less for the history of modern Romania. That is why the existence of the Moldavian Hungarian

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<sup>3</sup> Tánčzos, Vilmos: Keletnek megnyílt kapuja. [The Gate of the East opened], Cluj-Kolozsvár, 1996, KOM-Press, pp. 144-146. See also in German Aufgetan ist das Tor des Ostens. Volkskundliche Essays und Aufsätze. Aus dem Ungarischen von Éva Zádor. Umschlagsgestaltung: Gyula Ádám. Csíkszereda, Pro Print, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp 174-176

population in the Hungarian national consciousness is unique and differs from the relations with the other Hungarian communities living outside the present-day Hungarian state whose minority status is the result of the major geopolitical changes of the end of WWI. In this respect the Moldavian *Csango*'s common self-identification – almost uniquely based on the religious difference i.e they are Catholics in the sea of the Ortodox World – is important mainly how this seemingly marginal “Romanian” Catholicism proved to be so successful and dynamic in the last century and increased its number from 25000 to almost 300000. Unfortunately, the research of modern-age Catholicism in Moldavia is basically a *terra incognita* for most Hungarian scholars, however it would be hard to deny the social-historical significance of an objective comparative study. Consequently, the Hungarian perspective with little or no comparative sense can easily be characterized as teleological, namely to prove that *Csangos* in Romania are the symbol of the old greatness and the long suffering of the Hungarian people. Hereinafter I will try to analyze this teleological approach more closely, with special regard to its *continuous* effect in the last 200 hundred years.

Although the *Csangos* are the “most lonely and forgotten ethnical group of the world”<sup>5</sup> according to Pál Péter Domokos (1901-1992), the most vocal advocate of the *Csango* issue in the interwar years, it seems to be right to state that *Csangos* has been the only Hungarian ethnical group staying permanently in the focus of interest of Hungarian science and the public at large. But the myth of oblivion was the strongest drive to take care of the “separated Hungarian brethren” from very early on.

The representative document of the early times is a great philosophical poem: *Marosvásárhelyi gondolatok* (Thoughts of Marosvásárhely) by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian poet of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz – which is otherwise one of the earliest and most significant definitions of the Hungarian Enlightenment's ideals of progress and society. The poem was written in the eastern part of Hungary in the principality of Transylvania and was inspired and influenced by the contemporary Westener perspective of superiority over the unknown East. Especially in the last lines of the poem we can detect the modern missionary zeal where the poet's attention turns to the Moldavian *Csangos* and benignly hopes for them the “arrival of Enlightenment and Civil Virtues”. The same teleology defines Elek Gegő's book (1838) entitled *A moldvai magyar telepekről* (About the Moldavian Hungarian settlements), too. The work of Gegő – who was a maverick Franciscan monk – was offered to the “Dear Hungarian motherland” with “the deepest love of his heart”, and with the help of his journey he wanted to lift this “estranged Hungarian relative” (i.e. the *Csangos*) from “numbing forgetfulness”.<sup>6</sup> As we can read in his book the study of the Hungarians in Moldavia gained the support of the freshly established Hungarian Academy of Science because the research of the Moldavian Hungarians was congenial in linking the propagation of scientific knowledge and

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<sup>5</sup> Domokos, Pál Péter: *A moldvai magyarság*, [The Hungarians of Moldova], Csíkszereda, [Miercurea Ciuc], 1931. Preface

<sup>6</sup> Gegő, Elek: *A moldvai magyar telepekről*. [The Hungarian Colonies in Moldavia], Magyar Királyi Egyetem, Budán., 1838, pp.1- 2., see online the digitalised copy of the Östereichisches Nationalbibliothek: [http://real-eod.mtak.hu/1372/1/ABO\\_%2BZ169757804.pdf](http://real-eod.mtak.hu/1372/1/ABO_%2BZ169757804.pdf)

the enthusiasm towards national issues. The “invention” of the national traditions and the movement of creating culture and institutions were especially appropriate topics for the enthusiasm of the pre-1848 *Vormärz* era.<sup>7</sup> But it is also significant that the scholarly interest for the *Csangos* generated by the Hungarian national sentiment began when the developers of the national traditions discovered that the *Csangos* became estranged from the mainstream of Hungarian national life. In order to make the Hungarian intelligentsia recognize “the relative”, the Moldavian *Csangos* had to define them as separated from the main body of the Nation. The enthusiasm that sought for and created ancestors for the nationalistic upheaval needed the sentiment of remorse against the oblivion of pristine origins of the national past as they were supposed in the blossoming publications of the various national mythologies. The question of origin, the quest for the primeval Hungarian nation became the long and extending national program of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in the wake of the challenge of Johann Gottlieb Herder the pivotal figure of the German Enlightenment whose pessimistic prognosis concerning the future of the Magyars haunted many of his Hungarian readers ever since he published his groundbreaking studies on *Kultur* and *Volk*.<sup>8</sup> From the beginning all the different ancestry theories of the *Csangos*<sup>9</sup>, were connected to the thought of historical precedence. Surely the Moldavian catholic settlements which became Rumanized also became orthodox, but the theorem: Romanian nationalism = orthodoxy is not proved to be true in Moldavia in the light of the history of the past 150 years, though we do not have full-fledged conceptions about the exact nature of the relationship of the demographically virulent Moldavian Catholicism<sup>10</sup> and the Romanian nationalism and their structural and ad hoc components. In respect of our topic the explanation of the evidence of the priority of the national feeling over denominational loyalty is more important. Most Hungarian scholars of the *Csangos* (many of them with strong protestant background) hold the “cosmopolitan” Roman Catholic Church as the main agency responsible for the “Rumanisation” of the *Csango* population. But this explanation seems to forget the very foundation of its own ideological construction. Generations of Hungarian intelligentsia from the Romantic Age till the 21<sup>st</sup> century wrapped their national credos and included the *Csangos* in them in a form of supra-denominational religious investment and could not see why the majority of the *Csangos* with their traditional Catholicism - except for some notable clerics with Hungarian education - did not follow them. The “enchantment of origin” means the melancholic appraisal of the fact that the original start is unattainable in time and the very impossibility of turning back to those benign

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<sup>7</sup> See the famous and much cited Preface of Eric Hobsbawn – Terrance Ranger: *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Hann: *Forging the Volksgeist: Herder in Hungary, then and now*, see <http://www.uio.no/forskning/tverrfak/culcom/nyheter/2006/docs/Hann-Herder.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Benkő, Lóránd: *A Csangok eredete és települése a nyelvtudomány szemszögéből. /Magyar Nyelvtudományi Társaság Kiadványai 186./*, [The origin of the Csangos and their settlements from a linguistic point of view.], Budapest, 1990, pp. 19-22.

<sup>10</sup> Tánzos, Vilmos: *A moldvai csángok lélekszámáról. [How many Moldvian Csango live today?]* In: *Csangosors* op. cit, p. 12.

origins is being thought to be overcome by the nostalgia of conquering distance both in time and space.<sup>11</sup> That is the narrative of almost every national mythology. Of course the gesture of ‘rescue’ (in our case that the assimilation of *Csangos* should be overturned) is the secularized metaphor of the divine act of deliverance in which the purification is the reward of the national community and it demonstrates the eternal “goodness” of the nation<sup>12</sup>. The rescue was made tangible especially in the continuous attempts to “repatriate” the *Csangos* to the Hungarians throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries until the communist take-over.

The other dominant form of this religious investment of the *Csangos* was the use of their fate as occasion for a national examination of conscience which practice in the Catholic liturgy precedes the delivery of the Sacrament of Penance. In 1931 *The Hungarians in Moldavia* by Pál Péter Domokos (1901-1992) was published reviving the myth of oblivion and calling for an examination of the conscience in order to achieve a greater degree of national unity. The aim of Domokos was – as he presented in the preamble of his book – “I would like to inform the reading Hungarians of the sad fate of our forgotten *Csango*-Hungarian relatives. I try to show the future of Székelys in their present situation. I forewarn everybody that our destiny will be the same horrible *Csango* predestination if the lovelessness, the incomprehension of each other and the denominational conflicts increase among us.” In this appeal the symbol of the *Csango* destiny changed, it is not the metaphor of generosity and salvation of the other relative any more but the anticipation of our own destiny. Although the “*Csango*-saving operations” were never really successful during the time of dualism, the gradual symbolism of the *Csango* destiny strengthened – not accidentally perhaps – after the lost WWI and the humiliating treaty of peace of Trianon which truncated the historical Hungary and put millions of Hungarians in minority status. The attitude of Domokos declares a new role for the national consciousness that is ripe for re-definition.

One of the representatives of re-definition who emphasized the teleology of the moral precedent was Gábor Lükő (1909-2001). Lükő, who got to his researches about the Moldavian Hungarians through the famous school of the Romanian sociologist Gusti in Bucarest, fundamentally modified the result of the origin of Moldavian *Csangos* of his time demonstrating that the culture and ethnography of the Moldavian *Csangos* who settled down in Moldavia in 14<sup>th</sup> century was not connected to the Székelys but to the Hungarians of Szamos-Tiszavölgy. In the first publication of his book in 1936 he considered the problems of “obscure origin” and the „mystical prospect” of the genesis to be less significant than the cultural-historic importance of the issue which could be enlightening in studying the common features of the Hungarian and Romanian ethnic groups.<sup>13</sup> In an important but only

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<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade: *Az eredet bűvöletében*, Budapest, 2002, Carthaphilus, pp. 93-94.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson: *The goodness of nations*, in Peter Van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (eds), *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp. 198-199.

<sup>13</sup> Lükő, Gábor: *A moldvai csángók. A csángók kapcsolata a magyarsággal* [The Moldvaian *Csangos* and their relation to the Hungarian people] (eds: Pozsgai Péter és Heilig Balázs) Budapest, 2002, pp. 134-135.

posthumously edited paper of 1940<sup>14</sup> and in *The Forms of the Hungarian Soul* published in 1942 he gave an exposition of the Moldavian Hungarians' history of settlements. According to Lükő the ancestors of the Moldavian *Csangos* did not move to Moldavia because of or in spite of official, central arrangements. Thus the Moldavian Hungarians were not the representatives of the Hungarian "empire-building" policy of the times of King Nagy Lajos, as Mikecs László drafted a year later – relying on the data of Lükő in a great extent – in another theoretical construction (as discussed later on). The ancestors of the Moldavian *Csangos* went to Moldavia in order to defend the Hungarians' special lifestyle oppressed by the European civilizations, because "they could not counterfeit the Hungarian laws of their own soul"<sup>15</sup>. The fact that their assimilation is advanced shows that the *Csangos* do not recognize the sense or goal of their being Hungarian, that is why they serve other extraneous aims (e.g. they have a mission in achieving the union between orthodoxy and Catholicism). "The same thing happened to them in small as to us here", said Lükő<sup>16</sup> who – using the social-psychological utopian theory of Sándor Karácsony<sup>17</sup> and the conception of István Győrffy that puts the eastern features of the Hungarian folklore in the center of Hungarian ethnographic research<sup>18</sup> – expressed his opinion about the "Hungarian soul" of which the unity is created by "the logic functioning among the people with identical cultural backgrounds (living in the same social, linguistic and art community)"<sup>19</sup>. The attitude that gave way to the so called extraneous (Western European) civilization effects resulted in the disintegration of the "unity of the Hungarian soul" rooted in our Asian origin. Lükő warns that the "civilized middle class "has to examine its conscience because of the *Csangos*: "...if the Hungarian middle class decides to learn to speak the pure Hungarian language, among others it borrows ancient Hungarian forms from the dialect of the Moldavian *Csangos*, and it frees the *Csangos* from the evil spell showing them that there is a sense of their being Hungarians."<sup>20</sup> Lükő criticizes the "modern national culture" (production of the materialistic "sciencism" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) which ruined the peasantry that was the last trustee of the once unite and special Hungarian culture and civilization. In this respect for Lükő the example of the *Csangos* symbolizes the desired big revolution in which "relation of the upper and lower classes ... are clarified, and the Hungarian civilization and the Hungarian future is born from the integration of them."<sup>21</sup>

The need to redefine nationalism was the most common feature of interwar intellectual life of Hungary. One of the most documented case was a kind of

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<sup>14</sup> Lükő wrote a study on the Hungarian origin of the *Csangos* for the request of the then Minister of Culture Hóman Bálint in 1940, but because Hóman made it reworked Lükő did not let it published.

<sup>15</sup> Lükő: *A moldvai Csángok*, op. cit. pp. 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> Uo: 22-23.

<sup>17</sup> See the Postface of László Selmeczi László for Lükő's *The Forms of the Hungarian Soul*.

<sup>18</sup> See Győrffy, István: *A néphagyomány és a nemzeti művelődés*, [Folk-tradition and national education] Budapest, 1939. Telling a title...

<sup>19</sup> See Lükő op.cit, p. 302.

<sup>20</sup> Lükő: op cit, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Lükő: op. cit. p. 138.

Hungarian *Historikerstreit* along with the Catholic Protestant division between two historians the Catholic and conservative of the old fashion Gyula Szekfű (1883-1955) and the Protestant and radical rightist Elemér Mályusz had an immediate effect on the Csango research through the work of the young ethno-historian László Mikecs (1910-1944).<sup>22</sup> In the preamble of his work published in 1940 and entitled simply as *Csangos* he writes: "...the extermination of the old liberalism and the generalization of the idea of popularism leads to a change of period - like Reformation or Enlightenment - ... creating the new life, new civilization, working out the popular life of Hungarians"<sup>23</sup>. Mikecs also puts down how he distances himself from the old phrasing of the *Csango* issues. He gives the description of the different history of settlement of the two basic strata of the Moldavian Csangos: on one hand the ancestors of the Hungarians near the river Szamos settled in the Middle Ages, and on the other hand the group created by the Sekler exodus from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This explanation gave an impulse to the linguistic geographic researches of the 1940-50s and it strengthened the scientific findings about the issue of origin of the Moldavian Hungarians.<sup>24</sup> Of course no one was eager to remember how much Mikecs's approach was informed by contemporary German *Volkstum* theory. Especially Mikecs's political zeal was forgotten however unambiguously it culminated in a very nationalistic utopia of the lost greatness of the mediaval Hungarian Kingdom: "the Csangos are the living, real testimony of our greatness once in the Middle Ages, and this gives enormous self-confidence in this issue."<sup>25</sup> Dealing with Csangos accordingly is a symbol of the political and spiritual orientations of the future: "as a model to be followed in our present life we may choose none but the young Hungarian nation of the Middle Ages." Contrary to Lükő, Mikecs's Csangos are not metaphors of an ideal of communitarian civilization from the prehistoric times but one of "the artlessness of national settling".<sup>26</sup> Mikecs intends to give a perspective uniting the Middle Age and our future popular life, he reinterprets the development of the scientific research of the Csango issue. The "moral" is that from the mythical faith of the chronicles and the hazy notions of origin "we have to arrive at the nation". His book wants to be a contribution to the studies of the history of habitation, dialect, folk-music, ethnography and other popular sciences in which "the life of the future popular Hungary is made".<sup>27</sup> Thus the Csango-program of Mikecs does not suggest the turning back to the Middle Ages, it is not nostalgic, does not propagate the return to the roots of the ancient Eastern civilization, but referring to enlightenment it announces the related program of science and society development. In 1928 Mályusz warned "the middle classes to hurry with their work to finish before the working class will take the lead as a result of a newly started progress (...) the

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<sup>22</sup> Steven Bela Vardy: *Modern Hungarian Historiography*. New York, 1976.

<sup>23</sup> Mikecs: op. cit., 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Szabó, T. Attila – Gálffy, Mózes – Márton, Gyula (eds): *A moldvai csángó nyelvjárás atlasza*. [The Atlas of the Moldavian Csango Dialect] Budapest, 1991, ELTE.

<sup>25</sup> Mikecs: op. cit. 318-319.

<sup>26</sup> Mikecs: op. cit. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Uo. 325.

intelligentsia have to be ready that the leadership will not be in their hands forever, though the thought that they were only an intermediary link who should strengthen their will to claim the leadership at the moment.”<sup>28</sup>

The ideas of Mikecs were gone by the end of WWII and the coming internationalism of the Communist utopia forced on the scientific life of the countries east of the Iron Curtain, still his method was implicitly used by the successive generations of Hungarian scholars. For a short time in 1940-50s as a showcase of the Communist ethnic policies of Romania Hungarian elementary schools were established in a dozen of Csango villages and ethnic Hungarian researchers of folklore and linguistics were allowed to visit these far away and hardly accessible communities. Some were enthusiastic by this turn of the events: “It is sure”, wrote József Faragó in 1954, “that the cultural situation of Csangos is improving, since the new socialist Romania does away with illiteracy and with the ever growing role of books, with the establishment of the instruction in the mother-tongue, brings up the first generation of *Csango* intellectuals who will revolutionize the cultural situation of the Moldavian Hungarians.”<sup>29</sup>

It is very well known that the Communist utopia utterly failed in the field of interethnic relations. What came in its stead are the old-new conflicting narratives of the nation building on both sides. Romanian nationalism continues to explore retrospectively the outcome of a century of exclusive nationalist policies projecting in the *Csango* past some pages of the glorious Romanian history. In contrast to this the rising tide of anguished nationalism in Hungary gives a new momentum to the magnetism of the *Csango* issue where the wounds of the victimised Hungarian nation shines even more brightly. “The gate of East has opened” in our digital age and the longing for the twinkling lights of archaic culture brings closer the lost sense of the unity of community and personal identity.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mályusz, Elemér: Értelmiségünk és a neonacionalizmus. [Our intellectuals and neonationalism], Napkelet, 1928, t. 5 pp., 294-295.

<sup>29</sup> Faragó, József – Jagamas János: Moldvai csángó népdalok és népballadák. [Moldavian Csango Folk songs and ballades], Bukarest, 1954, 15-16. With similar rhetoric: Kovács György: A szabadság útján. Bukarest, 1951.

<sup>30</sup> Peti, Lehel - Vilmos Tánzos: Language Shift at the Moldavian Csángós. The Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities. Cluj-Napoca, 2012.