



## **Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program**

### **Research Report**

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

#### **IARO Research Report 2005-2006**

Emanuela Grama

Ph.D. Candidate

The Doctoral Program in Anthropology and History

U Michigan, Ann Arbor

#### **Europeanizing Labor, Rethinking Belonging: Romanian-German Relations in Postsocialist Romania**

##### **Topic of research**

My dissertation examines how is “Europe” as a cultural and economic site and symbol invoked and redefined in the process through which a postsocialist and historically multi-ethnic city in Transylvania, Romania, is re-constructed and transformed socially and urbanely in a “European cultural capital”.

##### **Approach and methodology**

My research has changed significantly since I have been in the field, as I have become more aware that I could not pursue an ethnographic and historical project of production—that is, an ethnography in a factory-- without taking into consideration how the city itself has become a site of production and consumption as well. That is, I expanded my project by aiming to write a historical ethnography of the city of Sibiu, which also includes as a key research site two clothing factories located in Sibiu.

I have also paid attention to the production of the city as both an urban and social site by focusing on the making of the city into a European cultural capital for 2007. The transformation and legitimization of the city as a European site has mobilized a great deal of local, national, and transnational social and political actors and thereby different forms of capital. One of my research goals has been to investigate how these forms of capital intersect, how they are socially justified and explained by the local actors, as well as what new social forms and ideas of ethnic relations and local histories they have determined. I have done this by: 1. identifying key institutions that are involved in the

project Sibiu 2007—such as the Evangelic Church, the City Council of Sibiu, but also governmental institutions such as the Commission for Sibiu 2007, non-governmental sites such as the Association “2007”, and others; 2. doing interviews with the representatives of these institutions, as well as 3. following the discussions around the key projects for 2007 as they are reflected by the local media. I also used archival material deposited in the Teusch Haus (the archives of the Evangelic Church in Romania), monographies and other secondary sources about Sibiu from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, as well as did research in the archives of one of the clothing factories, SC Euroconf. To obtain a larger perspective on the situation of the German ethnic group in communist Romania, I also did research in the Open Society Archives in Budapest.

## Preliminary conclusions

The imminent transformation of the city of Sibiu into “a European capital” by 2007 has also opened up new discussions about local social hierarchies and interethnic relations. Many voices point out that the intimate historical link between the Saxons and the city played a key role in Sibiu’s election as one of the two cultural capitals. On the basis of shared historical and linguistic origins with the Saxons, the Ducat of Luxembourg agreed to form a partnership with Sibiu to share this role in 2007. In addition, the city’s municipality, with funding from the German state and other private German companies, has initiated a complex project of the restoration of the historic downtown. The project has triggered public and closed-doors debates among various local and national institutions over urban space and implicitly over the social and ethnic geography of the city. The historical downtown represents an architectural symbol of the key role which the Saxons played in the historical development of the city. Therefore, through its restoration, these central buildings and, by extrapolation, Sibiu become legitimized as major *lieux de memoire* of the Saxon’s involvement in crafting Transylvania’s history. On the other hand, there are actors who point out that the city of Sibiu “is” not only the historical downtown, but also includes marginal locations, like the less baroque apartment blocks built during communism; therefore the reconstruction funds should be channeled to such locations as well. Such arguments are implicitly translated into tensions of interethnic nature, as many of the inhabitants of these marginal sites are mostly Romanians who came to Sibiu during the internal migration of the labor force orchestrated by the communist state in the 1960s and 1970s.

The enterprise of making Sibiu an European cultural site has proved to be a challenging one, as various actors involved in the project have engaged in significant struggles over representations of “culture” and “Europe”. Underlying these struggles, we find competing claims for the legitimization of various “pasts” and “presents” as “history”. Such claims, I suggest, question political geographies set under spatial projections of the “nation-state” and lead to the legitimization of novel, transnational forms of mapping history onto space. In this process, ideologies about state and its authority become blurry, as “the state” could appear to be acting simultaneously under different, sometimes even opposing, forms and interests. Such process is reflected by the debates around the renovation of the historical downtown of Sibiu and the social transformations that will accompany this reconstruction.

The reconstruction of Sibiu’s “old city” has been approached and promoted as one of the major means of legitimizing Sibiu as a European cultural capital. The historical downtown of Sibiu represents an architectural symbol of the Saxons, being one of the first cities to be built by this group that came to Transylvania in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Saxons had played a major role in the economic and cultural development of the region and of Transylvania as a whole. Now, the Saxons in Sibiu make only 1.6% of the inhabitants. However, their presence on the map of the city is far greater, as the various institutions opened in Sibiu, ranging from tourist offices to the party of Romania’s Germans (FGDR), have systematically tried to highlight the intimate relation between the Saxon community and the city. This link became even more politically visible since the

FDGR representative, the Saxon Klaus Johannis, was elected the mayor of Sibiu for two consecutive terms (2000-2004 and 2004-2008).

The mayor and his team have treated the renovation of the historical town as a key project of their mandate. As the mayor put it, “the historical downtown is an asset of universal value, therefore we must preserve it.” The mayor and other FGDR representatives have engaged in intensive lobbying for Sibiu by establishing connections with external organizations, especially with those in Germany and Luxemburg. Funding started coming in from various sources (the German government through its Development Bank (KfW), the European commission, World Bank, etc.) With this funding and under the supervision of the GTZ office, opened soon after in Sibiu, the project of renovation started. (GTZ stands for *Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeiten*, a company of architecture and planning sponsored by the German Ministry of External Affairs.) Also, German specialists and architects collaborated with Sibiu’s professionals to apply to UNESCO patrimonial protection for Sibiu’s historical downtown. Like Germany, Luxemburg lobbied for Sibiu in Europe as well as funded various projects in Sibiu; moreover, invoking a common historical past as well as a shared linguistic present with the Saxon community of Transylvania, Luxemburg invited Sibiu to apply together for the title of European cultural capital in 2007.

Due to his immediate and concrete results, Johannis became, in Romania but especially abroad (i.e., Germany and Luxemburg), an epitome of local initiative and managerial spirit, which proved to be successful with no help from the “state”, here translated as Romania’s government. Moreover, until 2005, the funding coming to Sibiu from the government was scarce, and the mayor was very vocal about it, openly accusing the ministry of culture of making only empty promises. With most of the money coming from abroad, this criticism deepened the already weak image of “the state”, physically and politically far away from the interests of the region of Sibiu. Thus, I would suggest that the funding that the mayor’s team tried to bring into the city prompted a shift in how many of Sibiu’s urbanites viewed the relationship between local officials and the state. Somehow, these officials were not “the state” anymore.

Currently (that is, since the middle of 2005), the project has received much more visibility at the national level: the minister of culture visited Sibiu several times in 2005, stressing that “Sibiu represents Romania. Through culture we will enter Europe!”; also, a special governmental commission Sibiu 2007 was formed. Also, all the governmental funds for the 2006 for the renovation of historical monuments will be exclusively channeled to Sibiu. Obviously, the project has become of such sudden interest for various political actors because 2007 is also the year when Romania hopes to enter the EU. If up to 2004, the reconstruction of the historical downtown of Sibiu was relegated only to discussions of culture and patrimony, without much political leverage, now it has come to represent a key investment for politicians’ public image, as their involvement in the project becomes proof of their European civic attitude and openness to multicultural values. So, in a way we can say that the government tries now hard to restore the geopolitical balance of the project—symbolically and financially—and claim (back) Sibiu as the link between Romania and Europe. Nevertheless, the shift has already produced: the image of “state” and its centralized authority have become blurry, as the project Sibiu 2007 seems to be in fact mainly supported by local and transnational forms of power.

The public and closed-doors debates among various institutions over the arrangement of Sibiu’s urban space have implicitly become debates over the social and ethnic geography of the city. They bring to fore other key topics, such as: local ethnic politics and interethnic relations, the relation between the state, the individual, and the public space, the politics of urban aesthetics, ideas of “past” and “present”, and the political production of “history”. These debates are reflected by various visions as to how the historical downtown should be rebuilt (which of course triggered further debates). As one of the coordinators of the renovation project pointed out to me, commenting on the project’s title—“Sibiu’s Past Becomes Its Future”—one of the questions underlying these debates is “how far into the past do we want to go.” Such questions over the city’s symbolic and social geography become debates over the writing of history and the

(re)making of local interethnic relations, thus pointing to the political dimension of calls for “history” and “memory”.

There are three main bodies that coordinate various parts of the project: the GTZ office, the Center for Urbanism in the mayor’s office (henceforth, CU) and the Center of Culture and Patrimony (CCP), which is the local bureau/representation of the Ministry of Culture. Despite their sometimes tense relationship, these organizations agree upon the importance of preserving the “natural”, “organic” character of the downtown’s old buildings, by keeping or rescuing their initial architectural design. By presenting the old houses as historical monuments, they ask that no alterations be done to the structure of houses, while all the materials and technologies used should be as close to the “traditional” techniques as possible (even if they are more expensive, one must use wood window frames wrought iron and not plastic frames). The renovation of the downtown appears therefore as an attempt of bringing the past into the present or in fact returning the city to its past, as one of the managers of the project suggested, by claiming that the historical downtown of Sibiu should look as it did in the Middle Ages. The three institutions have initiated a systematic campaign, which aims at making Sibiu’s inhabitants aware of the value of the houses as well as interested in preserving this value. The campaign has involved yearly competitions for the best renovated houses, publishing guides outlining the legal as well as architectural regulations, extensive coverage of these regulations in the local mass media, together with presentations of most famous houses and their history, as well as events such as “the days of the patrimony”.

This stress on the aesthetical dimension of the reconstruction, which must reflect and reify a specific depiction of history and historical time, is accompanied by a specific vision of reconstructing the downtown as a novel social space. The physical marking of the space becomes thus a project of transforming its inhabitants as well. The local officials have characterized the renovation of the downtown to be also a collective social project. Thus, by using tropes invoking both historical specificity and a cultural universalism—such as the discourse of patrimony-- the local officials ask Sibiu’s urbanites to start identifying with their city, which city is very often essentialized to the historical downtown. At the same time, however, the same officials consider that the remodeling of the downtown into a historical site must be accompanied by a radical change in the social mapping of the downtown—that is, the number of the inhabitants in the “old city” must be drastically reduced (from 25,000 to 10,000). The director of the center for patrimony said that this is the optimal number, as one building should have only one owner, who takes care of it as a whole, as it used to be several centuries ago. Now, due to the communist urban policies, most of the buildings have around five owners. Moreover, the institutions supporting the project have strongly criticized the current inhabitants who do not take care of the buildings, by accusing them of lacking civic responsibility and respect for history, here signified by the houses. The reconstruction of Sibiu’s downtown takes the old buildings as signs of a specific historical time (a specific “past”) marked by a specific aesthetic approach. This aesthetics is however not at all abstract, since it functions as a device of social exclusion as well. The current inhabitants of those old houses, whose presence indexes another historical time—that is, the communist period, when many of them came to live as tenants in the nationalized buildings—are excluded from this past of Sibiu—treated here as the past which should become the city’s future. I suggest therefore that the tense negotiations between local, national, and external actors over Sibiu as a novel form of geopolitical capital might have led to a weaker image of the “state” and its authority.

Moreover, ideas of capital and labor have been transforming as well. Relying on conversations and interviews with the employees of the clothing factory Euroconf, as well with other inhabitants of Sibiu, I suggest that the national phenomenon of temporary migration to western labor markets takes particular forms for Sibiu’s inhabitants. That is, internal migration (from one job to another) co-exists with transnational migration, in which many workers take unpaid leave from the factory to go and work abroad. This is

especially because of the propensity of foreign investments in the Sibiu region, which has particularly developed in the last two years because of the project Sibiu 2007.

### **Relevance and contribution to field**

By adopting a historical perspective to analyze the current transformations in a postsocialist city that is preparing to become a symbol of Europe in 2007, my research investigates how historical arguments are politically employed to redefine culturally and economically an urban site. It will also stand as a study of the politics of place, as it examines the relationship between the urban transformations and social processes in the city, as well as the relationship between a more symbolic production of the city and the regional industrial development.

### **Suggestions for future research**

One topic worth to be investigated is the institutional and non-institutional attempts of reconstructing a "German culture" in Sibiu, as well as a critical examination of the role played in these processes by "memory" and "nostalgia".

### **Recommendations for the US policy community**

I think a key aspect in managing to obtain (easier) access to sources and people in Romania is the word "contacts". It is very important that at the beginning of research one try to attend as many public events, conferences, etc., as possible, as well as not refuse any opportunity to socialize (this includes more informal gatherings, such as parties, but also more formal settings such as local events) and follow up with the relations he/she establishes in the field. Also, bringing journals, books and especially publications of one's own if there are any will help the researcher establish credibility among the local scholars.