

**BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA  
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY**

**CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONISM AT THE  
HUNGARIANS FROM TRANSYLVANIA BETWEEN  
1990 – 2008**

(summary of the thesis)

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## **Key words:**

Associationism; Non-Governmental Organizations; Hungarian Minority; Transylvania; Cultural Associations; Civil Society

## **Thesis summary**

The PhD thesis – *Cultural Associationism at the Hungarians from Transylvanian between 1990-2008* – aims at covering a segment of the research focused on the issue of Hungarian cultural associations from Transylvania, which fits into a broader topic, the civil society in Romania.

The reason which triggered the choice of such an interdisciplinary subject is based on the fact that the associations, as well as the other local or regional organizations founded from civic initiative, became the basic factor of the manifestation of civil society activity in the life of the Hungarian minority of Transylvanian, by shaping the scientific and the cultural life as well. This is amended by the fact that in the life of the European society the independent, non-governmental organizations meet an increasing interest.

Regarding the motivation of the subject choice the fact should be taken into consideration that the information with respect to the function of such organizations are not originated merely from source literature but from inside the largest Hungarian NGO in the country, the Hungarian Scout Association in Romania. Since I am a member and leader of the Association, helping its central leadership as International Commissioner. The 14 years experience in such a field certainly provides a better understanding of the topic in general and of the Hungarian culture asociationism in Transylvania in particular.

The aim of the paper is, on one hand to synthesis the researches on civil society in Romania between the years 1990-2008, seeking to provide an overall view of the civil society in Romania, on the other hand to synthesize the researches on Hungarian civil society in Transylvania, in a way by translating them – they are written in mostly Hungarian – and making them accessible to the Romanian public, introducing them in the scientific network. Beside the application of quantitative method (using national and international statistics and databases), we attempted also a qualitative analysis on a narrower segment of the Hungarian

civil sphere, the Transylvanian Hungarian cultural associations, through case studies and interviews.

The civil society is a concept which gives way to several interpretations, used from the Antiquity until today in different representations, with additional characteristics according to the “time’s fashion”. Summarizing the existing theories, the term civil society in its contemporary use defines “a complex assembly of organizations independent from the government or the state, which express the plurality of the preferences of values and of the cultural identities from a society. The civil society is that part of the society in which the organizing process is volunteer, spontaneous, financially independent and autonomous in relation to the state, its establishment is based on a law or a set of rules unanimously accepted”<sup>1</sup>. In other words, it is a notion which denotes an apolitical type of associative forms that are not part of a fundamental institution of the state or of the business sector. The civil society is formed by the citizens, associated in different forms that have the same interests and dedicate their time, knowledge and experience to promoting and supporting their own rights and interests.

The organizations of the civil society represent a multitude of power centers, a system of powers outside the state. These forms of association established at national or local level, having political, professional, cultural, religious or moral objectives, represent not only a framework for the manifestation of the rights of individuals or minorities, but also a counterpoise to the force of the state or to the different associations of interest of the official political institutions (political society)<sup>2</sup>.

Starting from this clarification of the notion of the civil society, our aim is to follow the major points of the development of the civil society in Romania after the year 1990.

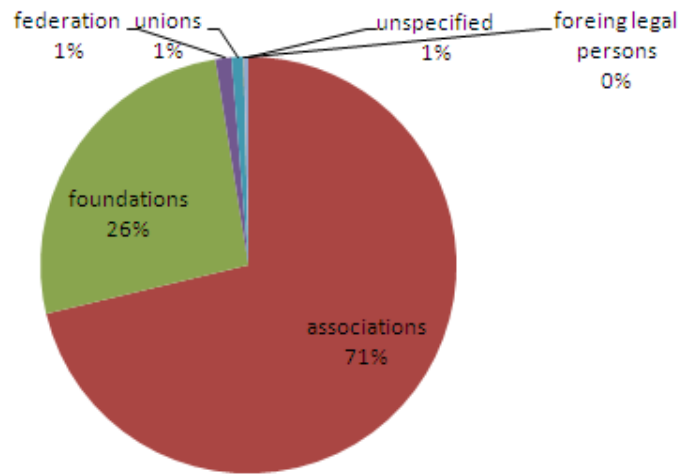
Through the analysis of civil society in Romania in general and of the Hungarian civil society’s cultural associations in particular, one may conclude that they both have their strengths and weaknesses. From 1989 onwards the civil society from the country developed a series of positive characteristics. One of the mainstays of civil society is the formal development of the sector. The constant evolution in the number of organizations (the

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<sup>1</sup> *Vocabularul pentru societăți plurale (A plurális társadalmak szótára)*, coord. Gabriel Colțescu, bilingual edition, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2005, p. 228.

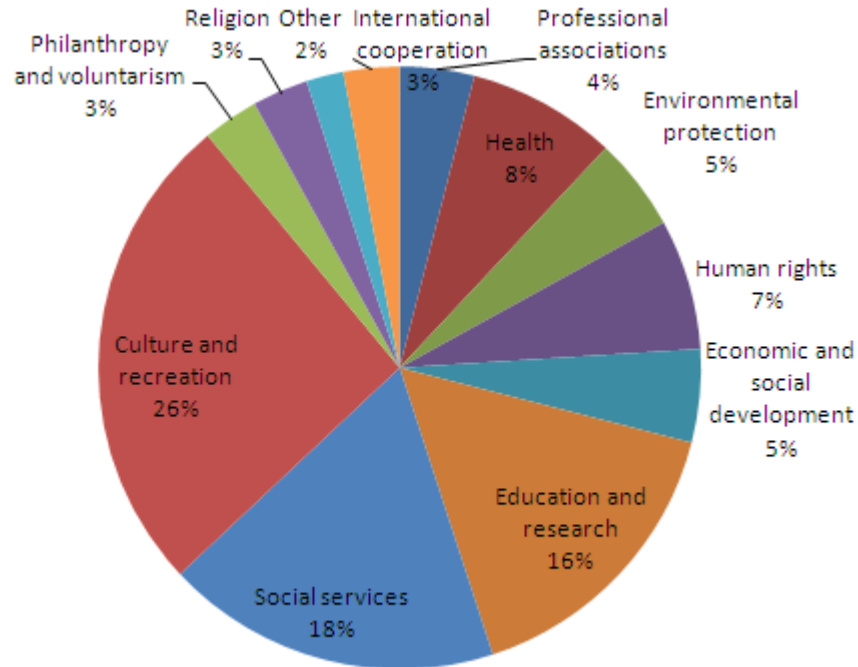
<sup>2</sup> Sergiu Tamas, *Dicționar politic. Instituțiile democratice și cultura civică*, Ed. Academiei Române, Bucharest, 1993, p. 42.

number of registered associations increased from 36,997 in 2008 to 46,112 in April 2010 and the number of foundations from 16,181 in 2008 to 16956 in April 2010) in all fields, even if a considerable percentage are not active or have a sporadic activity, it indicates that there are significant resources that can be mobilized by the sector.



**Fig. 1 – Types of organizations based on the National NGO Register (2008)**

Manny international researches support the view that the civil society in Romania reached a visible level of maturity. It is divers and in many domains it exist a good level of specialization and professionalism among the organizations.



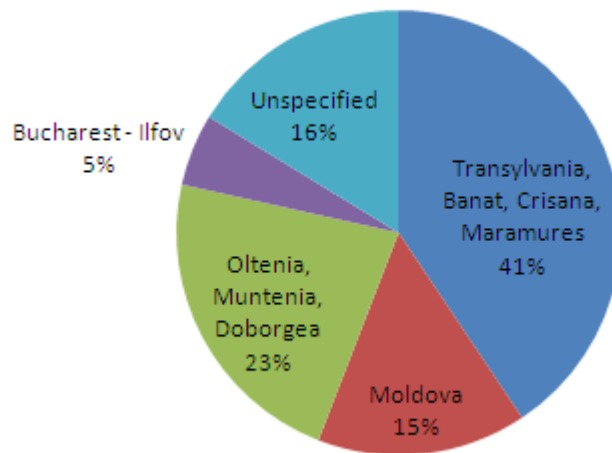
**Fig. 2 - The distribution of NGOs in Romania by activity area <sup>3</sup> (1999)**

There is a high level of awareness among the representatives of the civil society regarding the special needs of the local communities and certain social groups. Civil society is considered to be in a better position to understand and respond to the social needs of the country, as other actors, like the state, private companies or foreign institutions. In the case of the formation of real partnerships and of an intense cooperation among organizations, they proved to be efficient and successful. The Romanian civil society has managed to become a credible partner for foreign donors and therefore benefited from their support, vital for its existence and development.

The legislation in force for the nongovernmental organizations, the taxation law and the law regarding the possibility of donating 2% of the annual tax to NGOs are considered one of the factors that favor the development of the civil society organizations in Romania. These regulations can create the base of a sustainable financing for an important number of organizations. The ability to influence the legislative process, although in a more limited way than in other countries, can be considered a strength of NGOs in Romania.

<sup>3</sup> Graph made by the author based on data from : Todor Arpad, *op. cit.*, p. 18; the percentages refer to 1999.

At the same time, many deficiencies can be noticed in this area, especially the low level of civic participation and associational life in Romania in general, emphasized also by international and national reports. NGOs, as shown in the statistics, are concentrated in Bucharest and Transylvania, areas that traditionally have benefited of higher civic participation. In general civil society in Romania still suffers from a lack of financial resources, this shortage is due to the poor collaboration between civil society and business sector, to the limited support of the state and the dependence on foreign donors that gradually leave the region. The result of the competition for limited resources and the mutual distrust is the fact that the cooperation between organizations remains weak, and the role of civil society organizations is mainly, ignored by the public.



**Fig. 3 – The percent of the associations on regions based on the National NGO Register (2008)**

Regarding the sphere of the Hungarian cultural associations in Transylvania, they also fall in the main trend of increasing numbers of the established and registered organizations, facing the same problems mentioned above (with the observation that civic participation among the Hungarian minority is higher, 7.7% of the ethnic Romanian from Transylvania are members of an organization, while the ethnic Hungarians NGO members from Transylvania exhibit the percentage of 26%).

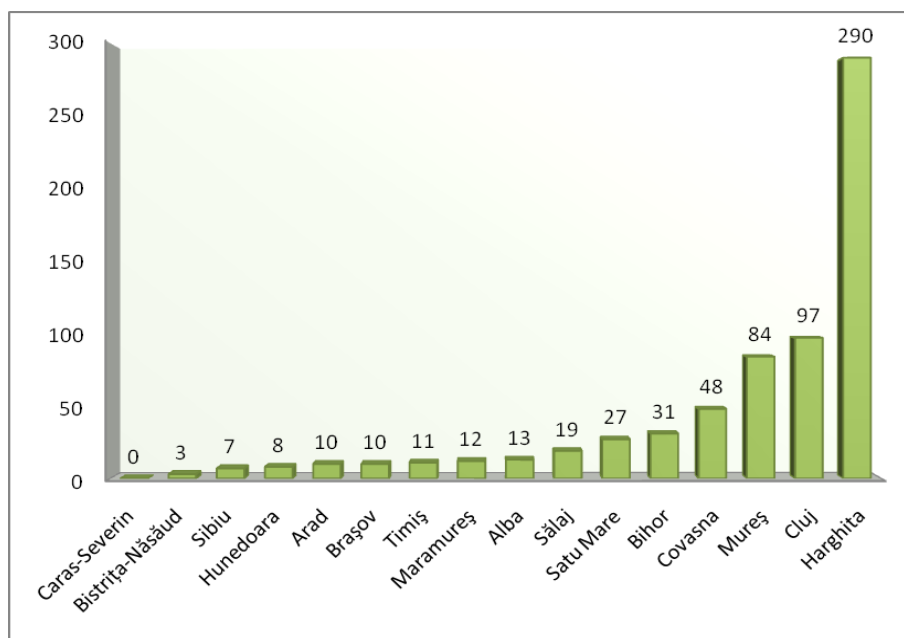
By analyzing the National NGO Register of the Ministry of Justice we have identified 670 Hungarian cultural associations from Transylvania, which were registered between the years 1990-2008. The thesis also contains the catalog of these organizations, with the



information from the Register (name of the association, registration number, county), completed with the data on the place where it functions and the website of the association.

From the information provided by the analysis we can observe that complex cultural associations were formed with a wide range of activities, each dealing with areas such as education of children and youth, tourism, community development, hence, not only the actual cultural activities. It also occurs the a tendency of professionalization and specialization of actions within the Hungarian community, with association dedicated to a specific segment of culture such as folk dance, various traditional crafts, choirs etc. They organize many cultural events, and often more associations work together to organize the village or city days, festivals, fairs or so-called NGO Cultural Days through which it increases the visibility of the associations, they present themselves to a wider public. Increased visibility and evidence associations' activity constitutes their presence in databases and online catalogs (international, national or devoted mainly to Hungarian organizations) and their websites, a true "archive" of the civil society. Of the 670 associations studied 109 of associations have a website, representing 16.2%.

Taking into consideration the figures which stand for NGOs the county with the largest number of Hungarian cultural associations is Harghita, and due to the high percentage of Hungarian population, but also to the involvement of people in civic work. This is followed by the county of Cluj, where the percentage of organizations present is due primarily to the attraction of Cluj-Napoca, a traditional cultural center for the Hungarian community, many national associations have their headquarters here, in addition to this the city's status of an Academic Centre with a wide choice of specializations and departments with teaching in Hungarian, attracts a large number of Hungarian students from across the country, thus providing the city with a wide age and social group open to the work in nongovernmental organizations.



**Fig. 4 – The number of Hungarian cultural associations in Transylvania registered between the years 1990-2008**

Associations are present mainly in the larger cities, but many villages have also formed associations to culturally support the community, to promote crafts and the craftsmen’s interests, provide activities for youth and children. An interesting aspect is the analysis of the proportion between cultural associations in urban and rural areas. As reflected in the overall statistics for civil society, NGOs in Romania are predominantly urban forms of organization, 87% of organizations are registered and operate in urban areas. In the case of the Hungarian cultural associations, 58% of associations function in urban areas and 35% in rural areas, which means that there are more organizations in rural areas in this case than the national average.

The city with the largest number of Hungarian cultural associations is Cluj-Napoca - 80 associations - followed by Miercurea Ciuc (54 associations) and Odorheiul Secuiesc (46 associations). According to the statistics the rural area with the largest number of associations is Sândominic (Csíkszentdomokos), situated in the northern part of Harghita county, birthplace of Bishop Áron Márton.

In addition to these categories, we can identify two more type of Hungarian associations in Transylvania We can distinguish between associations operating in the diaspora (small Hungarian community, such as that of Deva) and those operating in areas

with a population containing Hungarian majority (compact Hungarian communities such as Odorheiul Secuiesc, city with the highest percentage of Hungarian population, over 95%). In small communities the attention of the civil associations focuses more on preserving Hungarian identity, the use of minority language, as evident from the case study dedicated to the Association "Szülőföldünkért".

Analyzing the aims of the Hungarian cultural Association based on the data from the National NGO Registry of the Ministry of Justice, one might visualize a relatively clear picture of this segment of the civil sphere, the role of the organization, what is important for them and what activities they organize for the benefit of the community.

Among the general goals defined, the following purposes repeatedly appear: promoting authentic values, the foresight of cultural heritage, supporting the preservation, cultivation and development of historical, religious, cultural, social traditions etc. We may also observe that between the Hungarian cultural associations there are complex cultural organizations, while others have specialized on a particular segment. Classifying them according to the activities and purposes formulated in the documents are:

- *associations for the preservation of traditions and culture in general:* Ósi Értékek Egyesülete ( Primordial Traditional Values Association) – Harghita county, Dévai Petőfi Sándor Magyar Művelődési Egylet (Petőfi Sándor Hungarian Cultural Association of Deva) – Hunedoara county, Földvály Károly Hagyományörző Egyesület (Földvály Károly Association for the Preservation of Traditions) - Harghita county,
- *associations aiming to promote and teach folk dance and music:* Perkő Néptánc Egyesület (Perkő Folk Dance Association) – Covasna county, Pipacsok Néptáncgyűttes Művelődési Egyesület (Pipacsok Cultural Dance Troupe) - Harghita county, Bogánacs-Zurboló Egyesület (Bogánacs-Zurboló Association) – Cluj county,
- *associations promoting and teaching traditional handicrafts:* Udvarhelyszéki Fafaragók Szövetsége (Odorhei Union of Wood Carvers), Artisan Székelyföldi Kézművesek Egyesület (Association of Artisans from the Szekler Land) – Harghita county,
- *association aiming to preserve Szekler culture:* Székely Szellemi Egyesület (Szekler Spiritual Association), Székelyudvar Egyesület (Szekler Yard Association),

- Hagyományörző Székely Huszárezred (Traditional Szekler Hussar Unit) – all in Harghita county,
- *cultural associations organized around an institution:* Apáczai Csere János Kollegiális Egyesület (Apáczai Csere János Collegial Association) – Cluj county, Bethlen Gábor Kollégium Baráti Társasága (Bethlen Gábor College Fellowship) – Alba county, Haáz Rezső Múzeum Egyesülete (Haáz Rezső Museum Association) – Harghita.
  - *cultural associations organized to promote the culture of a city:* Udvarhely Kulturájáért Egyesület (Association for the Culture of Odorhei) – Harghita county, Csíkszeredáért Egyesület (Association for Miercurea Ciuc) – Harghita county.
  - *cultural associations organized in villages:* Magyarlona Kulturális Egyesület (Magyarlona/Luna de Sus Cultural Association), Pro Kalotaszeg Egyesület (For Kalotaszeg/Călata Association) – Cluj county, Pro-Torockó Egyesület (For Torockó/Rimetea Association) – Alba county, Pro Lövete Egyesület (For Lövete/Lueta Association) – Harghita county, Pro Doba Egyesület (For Doba Association) – Sălaj county, Backamadarasért Egyesület (For Backamadaras/Păsăreni Association) – Mureş county, Pro Majlath Egyesület (For Majlath Association) – Arad county,
  - *youth associations:* Csíkszentmiklósi Ifjúsági Szervezet (Youth Organization of Csíkszentmiklós/Nicolesti) – Harghita county, Zsogisz Ifjúsági és Kulturális Egyesület (Youth and Cultural Association of Zsogisz/Jigodin) – Harghita county, Nagykárolyi Magyar Ifjúsági Kezdeményezés (Hungarian Youth Initiative of Nagykároly/Carei) - Satu Mare county,
  - *theatrical associations:* Csiki Színpad Egylet – Harghita county, Grund Színházi Egyesület (Grund Theatrical Association) – Mureş county, Don Quijote Színházi Egyesület (Don Quijote Theatrical Association) - Covasna county, Kenderkoc Gyermekszínház Egyesület (Kenderkoc Theatrical Association for Children) - Harghita county,
  - *tourism associations with a cultural character:* the Carpathian Society of Transylvania Braşov and its Satu Mare branch.

- *associations organized to promote the cultural heritage of a historical, literary personality*: Pro Bartók Association, Remenyik Sándor Association – Maramureş county, Petőfi Sándor Cultural Association – Mureş county, Körösi Csoma Sándor Association – Cluj county,
- *religious associations in the activity of which culture plays an important role*: Országos Dávid Ferenc Ifjúsági Egyesület (Dávid Ferenc National Youth Association) – Cluj county, Erdélyi Ifjúsági Keresztyén Egyesület (Youth Cristian Association of Transylvania) – Cluj county,
- *cultural-scientific associations*: Erdélyi Muzeum Egyesület (Transylvanian Museum Society) – Cluj county, Association of Hungarian Sociologists from Romania – Harghita county,
- *Cultural Association involving the cultural field of music, choirs* : Bocskai István Dalkör (Bocskai István Coral Association) – Mureş county, Asociația Culturală Corală Mikes Kelemen Zagon (Mikes Kelemen Cultural Choir Association) – Covasna county, Bitykó Zenei Egyesület (Bitykó Musical Association) – Harghita county.

At the social level, associations (as well as other civil society organizations) contribute to creating employment, strengthening rural or urban communities by attracting investment (thus slowing down the pace of migration to city, to other localities, impeding emigration). Furthermore, they ensure the revival of cultural life by organizing public events.

At cultural level the association promote professionalism, improvement of the quality, implementation of strategies to strengthen the Hungarian community. They also contribute to the so-called vertical self-organization of the different organizations through the formation of foundations and national unions, which may become coordinators of the cultural and scientific life. Thus, they perform complementary functions amanding those of the state institutions.

Another way of self-organization is the grouping of associations under umbrella organization. At country level there are only a few umbrella organizations representing the interests of associations, especially because of poor financial resources. In the sector of the Hungarian organizations were formed over the years though such organizations. In the case

of youth organizations - including youth organizations with cultural activity - we found two such umbrella organizations active in recent the years and currently: Youth Conference of Hungarians in Romania (Magyar Ifjúsági Értekezlet – MIÉRT), Youth Council of Hungarians in Romania (Magyar Ifjúsági Tanács – MIT). The self-organization of civil society today goes beyond the country borders and for the Hungarian minority such collaboration strengthens the national ties. One of the forums where this collaboration functions is the so-called “Magyar Ifjúsági Konferencia” - MIK - (Hungarian Youth Conference).

The case studies highlighted the importance of associations in local communities. The thesis presents on one hand the traditional associations with an impressive historical past, like the Transylvanian Museum Society (Erdélyi Múzeum - Egyesület, EME) or the Hungarian Cultural Society of Transylvania (Erdélyi Magyar Közművelődési Egyesület - EMKE), followed by the presentation of the largest Hungarian youth organizations in Romania, the Hungarian Scout Association in Romania and on the other hand two associates with a complex cultural activity among small communities in Baia Mare and Blaj, the Hungarian Cultural Centre Teleki (Teleki Magyar Ház) and the “Szülőföldünkért” Association.

“What do you think the role of the Hungarian cultural associations from Transylvania is?” was the final question for each interview with the leaders of organizations. From the answers given by the respondents we can conclude that the role of the Hungarian cultural associations is to bring culture closer to those sections of the community, which require it less,, through various programs, by disseminating and promoting Hungarian culture among members of each age and social group. They also serve to emphasize the importance of learning on the mother tongue at every level, because only in this way one can know their literature, history and national culture. Hungarian cultural associations are vital in terms of preserving and strengthening the identity of the Hungarian community, in small communities they play the role of cultural institutions. Organizations presented in the case studies fulfill this role not only for the benefit of the local Hungarian community, but for the benefit of the entire society.

The analysis highlights the importance of civil society, shows the level of development of the founding community, the life strategies formulated by it and the potential of development of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania.

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