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# A Dairy Cooperative in the Making: History, Ethnicity and Local Culture in an Economic Enterprise

#### Abstract

The paper presents the case study of a newly launched – or re-launched – dairy cooperative in Szeklerland, and investigates how different layers of local traditions, new views of rurality and new roles of peasantry, as well as ethnic struggles interplayed in its formation and functioning. While the cooperative can primarily be perceived as a local economic institution, its analysis offers the possibility to shed a new light on the connections between different levels in agri-businesses and on the different, seemingly non-economic factors acting from the background. The cooperative was launched in 2012 within a favourable framework of other local, ethnic initiatives, but it is seen as the successor of a successful cooperative that was nationalised in 1948. Two strong historical experiences shaped its launching: the successes of cooperatives before WWII and the failures and negative impacts of cooperatives during socialism. The investigation can unfold the ways how these discursive strategies, the emergence of new rural elite, the restructuring of agriculture, the idea of autonomy and a sort of ethnic economy gave impetus or impeded the functioning of the cooperative and its shift from subsistence to market.

Keywords: market, local–global, community, cooperation, ethnic struggles, autonomy

## Introduction: the scene and the actors of a ribbon-cutting ceremony

At the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013 different Hungarian newspapers and sites<sup>1</sup> from Szeklerland and Transylvania<sup>2</sup> announced that a dairy plant had been inaugurated in Cristuru Secuiesc (Székelykeresztúr)<sup>3</sup> in Harghita (Hargita) county. The ribbon-cutting ceremony was

<sup>1</sup> See the list of these sites and newspapers at the end of the reference list.

Transylvania is a region in the North-Western part of Romania, which was part of the Kingdom of Hungary, the Habsburg Monarchy and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire until 1920. The three main ethnic groups that populated it were traditionally the Romanians, Hungarians and Germans (mainly Saxons and Swabians). But ethnic structure changed when Germans left during communism and right after the 1989 revolution, and nowadays mainly Romanians, Roma and Hungarians live in the region. Szeklerland is a historical-cultural region in the eastern part of Transylvania inhabited mostly by Szeklers, a Hungarian ethnic group. Szeklers constitute an important part of Hungarian national imageries since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to these views Szeklers nowadays represent the clearest version of an ancient Hungarianness that has generally been forgotten by other Hungarian ethnic groups.

<sup>3</sup> Given the Hungarian majority of the region, and where indicated, I put the Hungarian names of the settlements in brackets.

held in December 2012 in the presence of the president of the county council, representatives of the Hungarian state, local authorities, representatives of local councils and other officials. The ribbon, which strongly reminded of the newly invented Szekler flag<sup>4</sup> was cut by the most important notabilities present at the ceremony; a girl in Szekler folk costume completed the view. The dairy plant, though indisputably of major importance for the region that is still weak in industrial activities, was not such a major investment implying considerable amounts and many new jobs that would justify all this ritualised behaviour and ethnic symbolism. One might ask, thus, for what reasons did local stakeholders organise this ceremonial event using elements from the arsenal of ethnic struggles, ensure a relatively large media coverage and speak about the dairy plant in celebratory notes?

The main reason was that the dairy plant was not simply a private or company-owned investment. It was launched as part of a dairy cooperative that had recently been organised in the region. The second reason was that locals and stakeholders alike viewed the cooperative and the dairy plant as the successor of the cooperative and dairy plant that functioned up until 1948. The third reason was the favourable framework within which political and economic factors intertwined: on the one hand the launch of the dairy plant is grounded in the regional and ethnic struggles for a sort of political autonomy of Szeklerland (Biró 2002), on the other hand these struggles are completed with different economic initiatives that aim at creating a new framework for locally produced and consumed goods, mainly food (Borsos 2013).

Consequently, news about this inauguration, especially from an (economic) anthropological point of view, is more than simply a piece of forgettable news that we come across day by day. Moreover, a thorough anthropological examination could reveal other aspects that in some way influenced the establishment of the cooperative and of the dairy plant. The present paper examines the reasons and aspects that constituted the general framework of this enterprise, and analyses this complex phenomenon from anthropological perspectives using on the one hand the scholarly literature on cooperatives (mainly in Hungarian contexts), on the other hand, and more generally, the results of economic anthropology and rural studies. From these perspectives this cooperative, while it is clearly an answer to the challenges of the global capitalist market – as it was at its emergence in the early 19th century –, it encompasses many other, multiple layers, thus in a sense it is a repository of rural and regional transformations in the light of global challenges. Its analysis offers the possibility to point out the ways the rural has been reconfigured in the context of the ideologies of new rurality, which in this case are topped up by certain deeply grounded ethnic elements, increasingly used in different spheres of Hungarian public discourses. The cooperative is a relevant phenomenon concerning the struggles of rural people to find their place in the global economy, it is about the ethnic processes and the activities of ethnic entrepreneurs in 21st century Romania and about the notion of community, ideologies and rival versions of different concepts related to the (imagined) Szekler community and (reinvented) Szekler countryside.

<sup>4</sup> For an anthropological analysis of the invention and usage of the Szekler flag see Patakfalvi 2015.

#### Fieldwork and ethnographic data

In the last years I carried out fieldwork in the region where the cooperative was organised on the topics of inter-ethnic relationships (there are Hungarians and Hungarian speaking Roma in the region), traditional farming, and mainly the different forms of cooperation focusing on a specific form of cooperative work, the kaláka. This traditional form of cooperation is deeply rooted in the local economic, social and cultural life. It is linked to land use, labour use, ownership, but also to local environmental conditions. At the level of social life it is linked to kinship systems, neighbourhood relations, a local network of mutuality, while it is embedded in moral views as well. From an ideological point of view the kaláka went through an ethnic/ national canonization becoming the symbol of the Hungarian villages/rural communities in Romania/Transylvania (Szabó 2014a). That is why it was somehow natural for me to continue my research on traditional farming and cooperation with the investigation of this present-day cooperative, as like other forms of cooperation, it is economically, socially and culturally embedded too in local circumstances. The actors of these new (communal) enterprises, willy-nilly, use elements of the same argumentation that can be found in the discourses around cooperative labour. They speak about traditions that facilitate cooperation, about moral views behind it and the willingness of villagers to help each other.

Finally, I have to make three important comments. Firstly, besides the results of the current research I rely heavily on the findings of my previous investigations. Secondly, since the new enterprises had a relatively large media coverage, I used extensively the media, especially the internet sources for analysing the different aspects of the cooperative. Thirdly, the most important comment, perhaps: the cooperative and the dairy plant are relatively young, despite their imagined long history. Since its launching in 2012 the dairy plant went through a crisis management and a sort of reshaping. In a sense, both the cooperative and the dairy plant are still in making. I conducted the first interviews at the beginning of the 2014, and continued the fieldwork in the summer of the same year. Consequently, neither the fieldwork, nor generally the research is closed. This paper, thus, offers rather perspectives for the analysis of ethnically embedded rural economic practices than final statements about agricultural cooperatives.

#### AGRICULTURE AND DAIRY PRODUCTION — A SHORT DESCRIPTION

The region where the cooperative is, the western part of Harghita county is characterised by the prevalence of rural settlements and therefore the dominance of agricultural activities. Urban settlements, except the era of socialism, could not offer real job opportunities for people living in rural regions, and that is a reason why small-scale agriculture has been preserved by the date. While there are differences between the different smaller districts in the range of the cooperative, it is generally true that they were launched in foothill areas with relatively low soil quality where the narrow valleys, the steep hillsides and gorges, and the closeness of the forests make crop cultivation difficult. Such climatic and environmental conditions limit somehow the range of agricultural activities: the cultivation of cereals or other cultures (e.g. cash-crop vegetables) is relatively difficult either due to the low soil quality, the abundant rainfall, long lasting winters or because wild animals would many times simply spoil the crop. That is why the re-

gion is much more conducive for animal husbandry (Benedek 2003: 173, 186–187). The other rediscovered crops are fruits (Pakot 2011), since traditionally several villages in the western part of Harghita county developed relatively intensive fruit production (Kozma 2010: 205–206).

During my fieldwork I focused on Şimoneşti (Siménfalva), a medium size village and the surrounding settlements, which are relatively close to the dairy plant. In the villages where I carried out fieldwork, beside some cultivation and fruit production, locals were traditionally oriented towards animal husbandry and, for instance, wealthier families kept a large number of cows before collectivization, when the oxen were the markers of wealth and competence in agrarian activities. A quick look at the historical data from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would already confirm that smallholdings prevailed in the villages, but also that animal husbandry was of major importance (MKOMS 1897, Rubinek 1911). It is not incidental from this point of view either that the movement for cooperatives found here a fertile ground<sup>5</sup> and that one of the first dairy cooperatives had been founded in the region.<sup>6</sup> All these historical backgrounds are important for the present-day cooperative, because they offer an argument when arguing for or against cooperative actions.

The collectivization and the socialist modernization shifted these traditional orientations, and after re-privatisation, while locals still continued to follow the new patterns introduced during collectivization, the need for a better agricultural strategy became more and more conspicuous. After the collapse of collective farms in the early 1990s and the gradual withdrawal of state subsidies, the local agriculture had its ups and downs: the enthusiasm of the smallholders lasted roughly to the mid 1990s, then agriculture entered a long lasting decline followed by overall changes in the country's economy and by local economic restructuration, demographic changes, abandonment of agricultural land and increasing out-migration. However, the dairy production seemed to be a good solution for those who lost their jobs or earned below the national average: until the regulations brought by EU integration 4-5 cows could ensure a decent living standard for a family of four (Benedek 2003: 187). In this context two alternatives emerged: fruit production<sup>7</sup> and the farming, since locals considered that these two sectors suited the local conditions best. Beside this, they, that is mainly the intellectuals, constantly kept the need for cooperation on the agenda. However, it was clear for them that, despite the fact that many locals still had sweet memories of the successes of the cooperatives in the interwar period, due to the experiences of socialism they would be reluctant to join some sort of cooperative organisation.

<sup>5</sup> There is no room here to go into details, but one must not neglect the role of Protestantism and the activity of Protestant (mainly: Unitarian) pastors.

<sup>6</sup> The first rural reading clubs (Hungarian: olvasókör) that aimed at facilitating education in agriculture were also founded in these villages (Dávid 2000: 356).

In one of the villages the socialist modernizers implemented a development programme turning the nationalized lands into a large state farm for fruit production. The fruit trees, however, were not local varieties, and after re-privatisation the majority of the locals abandoned the orchards turning them mostly into pastures.

The transformations in agriculture and agricultural policies, however, made them revise their convictions, and practical pressures like the bankruptcy of the dairy plant in Cristuru Secuiesc, the concomitant dominance of a company-owned dairy plant that abused of its monopoly and the new favourable circumstances resulted in its organization and launching. These new circumstances included: the ideas of the new rurality,<sup>8</sup> the reinforcement of the idea of cooperation,<sup>9</sup> the positive examples of other successful networks, for instance, in fruit production and the willingness of the local authorities to support the cooperative.

#### The cooperative and the dairy plant

The present-day cooperative was founded in 2011 when the former dairy plant in Cristuru Secuiesc was closed and the local dairy producers were somehow forced to find solutions if they wanted to avoid the monopolization of the local dairy market by a company-owned dairy plant. Currently the cooperative has around 500 members in roughly 5-6 regions and subregions. What made this case special and unique<sup>10</sup> was that the members did not only join a cooperative in order to have better positions on the market, but they bought a former dairy plant, which originally, in the inter-war period, belonged to a cooperative that was very successful in that time. The dairy plant was nationalised in 1948, functioned as a regional branch of the county dairy factory. After the privatisation a foreign entrepreneur bought it, closed it after a short while, and intended to sell it. This was the point when the local authorities and local organisations in the field of rural development got mobilised and announced this unique opportunity to local leaders and people. Villagers and members of different organisations started a pro-cooperative campaign among the farmers and finally founded the new enterprise. The members who decided to join were obliged to buy at least three shares of 800 lei, but there were cases when a single member bought 40 shares in total. But this was not enough to buy the buildings and start the business: the Harghita County Council was one of the financial supporters, the other one was the Hungarian Ministry of Rural Development, and the money that was still lacking was loaned by a commercial bank.

#### Conquering history, struggling for the present: NARRATIVES ABOUT THE COOPERATIVES

"The social world is accumulated history" (Bourdieu 1986) and history, as we all know, is not simply the repository of successive past neutral events (Giordano–Kostova 2002: 77). History

<sup>8</sup> Few elements of this new rurality: the shift from production to consumption, the role of the local small producers, the connection of the countryside with tourism and with the preservation of the traditional landscape (see Szabó 2013).

<sup>9</sup> The idea of cooperation is supported by the Hungarian intellectuals from Transylvania. See later in this article and Szabó 2014a: 29.

<sup>10</sup> There are a few other cases in Romania of dairy cooperatives. But this is the only case when the cooperative not only pools the milk to have a better price for it, but also owns a dairy plant, processes the milk and has its own products.

is used and abused on different levels from the nation-state to local competing elite groups in different settings, and every interest group tries to make use of different past events (Boia 2001, Hofer 1991). This is especially true for totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes, hence it is true for socialist and post-socialist Romania. One can identify in this context two distinct strategies in making sense of the history. The first one is the 'annihilation of the past' (Giordano and Kostova 2002: 78), characteristic mainly of socialist regimes that intended to erase anything that was not in line with their grandiose modernist, futuristic projects. The second one is the 'reversibility of events' (ibid.), characteristic mainly of post-socialist strategies that aimed at reconnecting the present with the times before socialism as if socialism had never happened. In a sense this dynamics of ruptures and continuities is a major constituent in the historical grounding of the cooperative, too.

In the framework of these dynamics and of the reversibility of events the present-day cooperative pretends to be the direct or indirect successor of all those attempts that aimed at ameliorating the peasants' condition in the 19th century and providing the necessary means for being present on the market. Cooperatives are generally regarded in European history as attempts to fight against the disadvantages of the newly emerging markets (Ploeg 2008: 182) that started to dominate every level of life and to overwhelm vulnerable groups like workers and peasants. In Hungarian history cooperatives emerged roughly at the end of the 19th century and soon became the subject of class struggles and ideological battles between the different actors of the political life (Gyimesi 1965). However, in spite of these struggles, some forms of the cooperatives turned into very successful businesses with broad social and cultural impact. I refer here to two of these cooperatives that marked the locals' experiences to an extent that the memories of these experiences are still present in nowadays debates concerning the cooperation.

The largest and the most successful, the Hangya Fogyasztási Szövetkezet [Ant Consumption Cooperative], in today's popular discourse most commonly referred to as Hangya, had at its peak several thousand members in the whole country (Gyimesi 1965) and within it, in Transylvania (Hunyadi 2007), which was still part of Hungary at that time. Following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 the Hangya had been reorganised but it remained a successful story for Hungarians in Transylvania (Hunyadi 2007), thus for the villagers of the studied region as well. It is worth mentioning in a short note that these traditional forms of cooperatives had already intersected with ethnic groups: Transylvanian Romanians, Saxons and Hungarians had their own, ethnically organised networks of cooperation (Hunyadi 2006). The Hangya is, thus, one of the positive historical references for the new discourse around cooperation.

The other positive historical reference is the dairy cooperative that worked in the villages during the inter-war period, when Hungarian organisations in Romania had many attempts to offer new economic opportunities and solutions for peasants and generally for rural people (Hunyadi 2007). In this region one of these solutions was the dairy cooperative that started with a small cooperative to pool milk, and continued with the funding of the dairy plant and the start of production in Cristuru Secuiesc in 1937 and 1938, respectively (Hunyadi 2007). The dairy plant was one of the success stories, it processed around 10-15,000 litres of milk on a daily basis, managed to get a better price for the peasants and besides reaching the markets of the capital city, Bucharest, they exported butter to different foreign countries.

It is important to emphasise that none of the active members of the present-day cooperative experienced the inter-war period, but they envision themselves as the followers of those ancestors who were members of those cooperatives. Agriculture and rural life is generally characterised by the imagined presence of ancestors and moral obligations towards them (Szabó 2014b: 467). In several villages of the region the Hangya had its shops, and locals generally refer to it in positive terms. The positive views about the cooperatives are augmented by the memories of the short-lived (50 months, between 1940 and 1944) Hungarian rule when following the Second Vienna Dictate the northern part of Transylvania was reattached to Hungary. Here the economic and national (ethnic) aspects intersect again, since in the locals' memories the successful modernisation of agriculture is linked to the Hungarian administration. People have memories of machines and buildings that were installed and built in those times. For instance, hand powered separators and silos came into use, and many animals for breeding were bought as well: "My father told me about a doctor, doctor B.11 When he started his practice in the village, he brought a few bulls... and they were so beautiful." The memories of these cooperatives and modernisation projects still prevail and are good arguments for those who struggle for the present-day forms of cooperative in a sometimes hostile or unfavourable environment.

The dynamics of ruptures and continuities is coupled at the same time by a constant oscillation between a pro-cooperative and anti-cooperative attitude. Cooperatives do not evoke only positive experiences. The strategy of 'reversibility of events' links the present with certain series of events before socialism, but in the meantime the annihilation of socialism went on. Those forty-five years of socialism, however, could not simply fall into oblivion. And it is not primarily about the cruelty and evil that people experienced when collective farms were organised and the well-to-do peasants, the so-called *kulaks* and part of local intelligentsia got imprisoned or were forced into labour camps, but about the deficiencies of everyday life of the collective farms that definitely diverted the idea of cooperation.

There is a vast scholarly literature about the sufferings of the villagers during the collectivisation campaigns, 12 thus I think there is no need to enumerate the details that made the collective farms one of the worst experiences of rural people in recent history. A strange case from research work conducted in the summer of 2014 clearly exemplifies this: within the framework of an inter-ethnic survey I supervised four field operators who went from house to house with a questionnaire. A man in his 50s (so he was born in the late 1950s and had no real experiences of the collectivisation campaigns) refused to speak with the field operators a few times. Later his son-in-law explained it when he said that "When the kulaks were gathered and seized, it began like this." (i.e. with the gathering of data and the filling out of forms). But, as I mentioned above, the experiences related to the collective farms are not primarily from the period of the organisation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The collective farms were not only organised in a mischievous way, but they also worked with obvious deficiencies. People accuse mainly the duplicities, the fake behaviour of the leaders and the mismanagement of the agricultural units, all inherently characteristic of the system. Under the auspices of 'cooperation' and 'com-

<sup>11</sup> The vet between 1940-1944.

<sup>12</sup> One of the most recent works in this aspect is Kligman-Verdery 2011.

munity' the leaders publicly spoke about the benefits of the community, the people and the state, but in the meantime they targeted their own individual gains. The split between the elite and the people unavoidably deepened the convictions according to which the idea of collectivisation was brought in by strangers. Although the collective farms often had their local followers or even promoters, they are generally regarded as the consequence of outsiders' activities. It is absolutely clear that the initially positive notion of cooperation was turned into something very different from the idea of cooperativeness; and it is significant that these memories are used in present-day debates about cooperation. Those who are not willing to join the cooperative always find arguments at hand taken from its history to fight against the idea of cooperation.

The historical patterns are repeated again when the activities of the intellectuals<sup>14</sup> are opposed to ordinary people's activities. There are two, in some respects contradicting patterns. Szekler communities have always shown some kind of reluctance and mistrust towards those leaders whom they did not acknowledge as being from their own communities or whom they saw as distancing themselves from their communities of origin often expressed in changing their outfits. The conflict is in some cases latently, in other cases overtly present in the life of the present-day cooperative. These concerns are often given voice in opposing those who only worked out strategies and those who really put their hands into the mud and produce milk. While there are several intellectuals who worked for the founding of the cooperative, the invention of a brand and so on, the majority of the farmers are concerned rather with the immediate economic gains of the cooperative then with the future benefits for the whole community. The opposition, nevertheless, bears some paradoxes since there are several intellectuals in the cooperative who are at the same time real farmers, put their hands into the mud and produce milk. The other historical pattern is the role played by intellectuals in the cooperatives. It is known from the history of cooperatives that these organisations functioned with relative successes mostly in the cases when intellectuals, like local priests, teachers, but also politicians as the promoters or animators took part in them (Gyimesi 1965: 647-648, Hunyadi 2007: 86-88). The present-day cooperative somewhat repeats the historical pattern: the cooperative enjoys the constant support of local intellectuals and teachers, and former agrarian leaders, pastors engage themselves in promoting the cooperative and/or in producing milk.

#### RIVAL MORALITIES, COMPETING IDEOLOGIES AND MEANING FORMATION IN THE COOPERATIVE

The cooperative is not simply an economic enterprise – just like Szeklerland is not simply a place. The parallel is not simply a writer's trope: the discourses around the cooperative are built

<sup>13</sup> This attitude can be perceived as an alternative strategy for the annihilation or at least for delimitation: people do not identify with the events of these years.

<sup>14</sup> In local Hungarian terms: 'pantallós gazda' (farmers with suits) whose activities are sometimes criticised by the real farmers, the people of the land, who traditionally wore not suits but tight trousers, the Szekler outfit for men, which could mark social status in a closed community.

many times on the same expressions that are also frequent in the promotion of rural tourism. 'Authentic', 'local', 'home-made', 'small scale' are only a few of the terms that are used by the local members, the leaders and the media, and needless to say that these are frequently used in rural tourism, as well (Szabó 2012 and 2013). The cooperative is not only embedded in local culture, but it is actively perceived and presented by its stakeholders as being an organic part of the local settings. Thus, if one wants to understand the cooperative beyond its economic aspects, they definitely have to understand its cultural and ethnic aspects that – besides the historical experiences described above - shape its functioning at least to the same extent as the economic factors. The cooperative can be perceived in this sense as the battlefield of different competing concepts that are sometimes called values by local stakeholders. These alleged values are believed to emerge from the local traditions and are incorporated into the endeavours and discourses of the new rurality that are constantly contrasted with the moralities/values of the market and ideologies of globalization.<sup>15</sup> The cooperative and the villagers constantly position themselves within this network of different, but obviously overlapping concepts like communalism versus individualism, cooperation versus competition, political and economic autonomy in the context of Hungarian versus Romanian nation-building, local versus global, alternative food networks versus market exchange, ordinary smallholders versus intellectuals and leaders. In what follows I offer an analysis of these concepts that in some cases are overlapping, in other cases are opposing, and I highlight the tensions that are inherently present in them.

#### Cooperation versus competition and the shifting meaning of community

Since any type of long term cooperation implies a sort of community or communal sense, the most important issue related to cooperation is the existence or absence of, and the shifting meaning of community. There are three interrelated aspects regarding the issues of community in the context of the present-day dairy cooperative, consequently the direct and indirect historical experiences are reinterpreted from other perspectives, too: first, the issue of the traditional forms of cooperation, the reciprocal help in different types of work, called *kaláka*; second, the canonisation of *kaláka* in Hungarian national contexts; and third, the everyday experiences of the villagers about the disintegration of local communities. They are important because the communality that is generally thought to be characteristic of Szekler communities is an important background when building up the epistemological frameworks of the cooperative. The logic is simple and encompasses somehow the turning of the social phenomena into natural facts (cf. Bourdieu 1991: 222, Ulin 1995, especially pages 522–523): if these traits of communal behaviour are naturally part of Szekler communities, then any newly established communal enterprise incorporates this inherent communality. The community is in this sense the foundation, the core or *sacra* (cf. Gudeman 2001) of the economic sphere.

<sup>15 &</sup>quot;We are in the middle of an economic war, that cannot be fought but with cooperation." See Katona 2013

<sup>16</sup> There is a large scholarly literature about this issue since the question of community is practically on the agenda of social sciences like sociology or anthropology from the very beginning.

The *kaláka* seems to be a very simple and clear economic practice that at first glance shows the generosity, the moral behaviour and the willingness of the villagers to help each other, thus it is at hand when the embedding of the cooperative in the local culture occurs at a discursive level. The practice, nevertheless, is much more complex and as such it is not simply about the generosity of the villagers or about their alleged charity. I have described at length elsewhere the practice of *kaláka*, pointing out also that the practice of mutual aid in the field of different rural works is not limited to Szeklerland and it is known in various peasant and farmer communities (see Szabó 2014b). In this sense the *kaláka* is not unique. It is rather the specific historical and economic circumstances reinforced by the processes of national canonisation that make it relatively unique. To sum up briefly the functioning of, and the main issues related to this practice one should emphasise that it is generally linked to Szekler, or Transylvanian villages and it is thought to be rooted in long historical traditions.

The *kaláka*, however, was rather a locally comprehensible rational <sup>17</sup> answer to given economic and social conditions than simply the display of an imagined communality. These economic and social conditions included traditional agriculture that was poor in resources, the feudal type of agriculture implying the traditional management of common resources, the thick social networks and ritual events that abounded the life of villagers. The *kaláka*, therefore, worked in the following way: if a household in a village needed to carry out work that required more labour than that available within the family, they organised a *kaláka*, in some cases calling for the village fellows' help, in other cases this help being simply offered as a reward for their previous participation in reciprocal work exchanges. The *kaláka* was characteristic especially of periods of accumulated agricultural works, thus harvesting, threshing, corn husking, mowing, hay making etc. was organised in this way, but work related to the construction of family homes, stables and barns also made use of *kaláka*.

Although seemingly not complicated, the *kaláka* was a very complex system starting immediately with its origins: it is not clear whether the practice was embedded in the organisation of the feudal *corvée*, or if it was rather part of the economic life of former free peasant (yeoman) communities. Although it is an issue of major importance for the general understanding of *kaláka*, this would be a marginal question when trying to understand how meanings related to community were generated, if the present-day canonisation of *kaláka* would not take for granted that the practice shows the willingness of Hungarian villagers to cooperate and to act as members of a community.

When depicting life in Hungarian villages in Transylvania, Hungarian elites use many times simplifying views of these villages. It is well known that the ideological reconfiguration of the rural – either in a positive or negative way – has a long history, thus it is no wonder that the present-day elites operate with this framework of simplification.<sup>18</sup> Hungarian villages are very

<sup>17</sup> It is important to emphasise that this logic is valid only when taking into account all those symbolic revenues, the prestige and honour called symbolic capital by Bourdieu (1990) that determines local economic and social life, but falls outside of the domain of mainstream economics. From an outsider point of view all these practices would be regarded irrational.

<sup>18</sup> The 'peasant' and the 'rural' in general played an important role in the nation-building, and followers of different ideological orientations (mainly: conservatives vs. liberals) interpreted the rural in different ways opposing the values on the one hand with the backwardness on the other.

often perceived as locales of traditions, true Hungarian culture, closeness to nature and above all the willingness to cooperate. 19 In this sense the kaláka went through a canonisation at the national level, since the elites viewed it as the main characteristic of rural people. In 1945 the Hangya Cooperative was reorganised and the new cooperative was called Kaláka Cooperative. The Hungarian Studios of the Romanian State Television in the 1970s launched a TV-show called Kaláka that presented the folk culture of Hungarians in Romania. But more recently the kaláka has been revived in a special movement that aimed at rebuilding the small local mineral baths (borvízferedők) in Szeklerland: usually a few locals, ordinary people and leaders alike, together with volunteers (mainly students from architecture) from all over Transylvania and Hungary worked for several days to rebuild the baths in a local style using local materials. The president of Harghita County Council even declared that a small airport could be built in the framework of kaláka (Kozán 2015). The ideological reinterpretation becomes clear especially if one takes into account that the kaláka in its original meaning worked only in smaller communities and that elites here speak rather about volunteering than about real work parties in the traditional sense of the word. But the term 'volunteering' does not bear that ideological layer that is evidently present in the term kaláka.<sup>20</sup>

In this sense the *sacra* is extended to encompass the whole ethnic community, which becomes replaceable with the ethnic group and *vice versa*. Thus the newly established cooperative could benefit in this respect from the ideologically constructed willingness of the locals to cooperate. All these interpretations are far from the original meaning of the *kaláka*. However, they are useful means to approach the local cultures of the villages and to subtract its imagined essence. These views contribute to the formation of a positive framework regarding the chances of cooperatives, and the actors on different levels refer to these when arguing in favour of cooperatives, or sometimes it is just a hidden background to these discourses.

The existence of this ideal community, however, which would be in line with the alleged expectations of the Hungarian ethnic group in Transylvania – or of its leaders –, is at least questionable. Negative experiences are not linked exclusively to collectivisation. In villagers' perspectives something happened to the local communities compared even with the socialist period that might influence the cooperatives as well. In recent interviews locals have complained about the disintegration of local communities. The traditional *kaláka* does not work in the same manner as it did before. In most cases it implies only the contribution of close relatives, neighbours and friends. This is again a serious reason for the locals to have doubts regarding the chances of the cooperative. The dominance of the market principle and discourses of market economy do not favour the persistence of cooperative actions, and communal values

<sup>19</sup> It is only a small detail, but it might be important: the foundation of the the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians from Romania is called Communitas Foundation. The *communitas*, beside its meaning in Latin, was the self-organisation of the Szekler communities in late Feudalism.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting another aspect, too: the meaning of civil society and volunteering either was not known or traditionally accepted in Romania, or it was diverted by the socialist planning of society. Volunteering (called *muncă patriotică*) during socialism became emptied for it was practically mandatory to provide volunteer work for the benefit of the community, the state or different institutions.

are marginalised to a certain extent. However, one should not lose sight that, paradoxically enough, the inability of the locals to act collectively and the competition imposed by the privately owned dairy plant that pushed its influence towards the extremes contributed to the formation of the cooperative. I have mentioned above that in the last years a privately owned dairy plant managed to dominate the dairy sector of the region, and contributed also to the closing of the former privately owned dairy plant in Cristuru Secuiesc. The plant abused its monopoly, prices decreased and payments were delayed, but it still managed to pool the necessary quantity of milk because farmers competed for selling their milk to this plant. Thus issues concerning the willingness of the locals to cooperate gain another meaning in the context of this domination. The newly established plant owned by the cooperative not only offered a fairer treatment and better prices, but emphasised the importance of cooperation as opposed to competition.

It is important to emphasise again that from this point of view the cooperative is not just relying on an already existing community, but it actively contributes to the formation of a new community. Quite recently the cooperative and the dairy plant ventured in a joint project within which school trips are organised to the plant or the dairy plant visits the schools offering free products to the pupils. This newly created and constantly reinforced community is in a sense the result of market pressures, and this leads us again to the issue of tensions between market and community.

#### Community, culture and market: the cooperative in the making

The dairy cooperative is not unique and was not even the first enterprise in the context of the reinvention of the rural and of the agricultural production in Szeklerland. There are several new enterprises and networks of different size and influence around Szeklerland that attempt at this rural-urban reconfiguration. These social-economic attempts are not simply about the local histories and local interpretations of historical processes, but also about the new ideas and images that compete for or conquer the rural. In the case of Szeklerland the general view and the canonisation of the rural, the new concepts of the rural, the shift from production to consumption, the new forms of the rural-urban opposition/continuum are profoundly grounded in an ethnic/national framework. It is worth mentioning that the canonisation of rural Szeklerland as the truest, most traditional Hungarian land (Horváth 2003: 264) in the Hungarian public discourses takes place on multiple levels. Recently foundations, associations and other organisations have been launched to work on the (re)invention and branding of the local economy and culture, taking the first steps towards the shift between the description and the (re)production of a local/regional economy and culture (cf. Bourdieu 1991). The activities of these organisations are many times paralleled by the endeavours of the local authorities aiming at political autonomy and by the ongoing Hungarian nation building in the region.

The enterprises that form a favourable framework and/or offer a positive background for the dairy cooperative are – just to name a few – the Székely Termék (Szekler Product), Góbé<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> This is a popular name for Szeklers that denotes their inherent cleverness and ability to get by in difficult situations.

Termék (Góbé Product), the Átalvető (Haversack Network), the Élő Szövet – Térségi Közösségi Együttműködésért Alapítvány (Foundation for Regional Cooperation) and the Székely Gyümölcs (Szekler Fruits) project (see Gáll 2011). All these projects use the rural image of Szeklerland, elements of the folk culture, and rely on an imagined communality in Szeklerland. The design often uses elements of folk culture, the Szekler rune that is going through a renaissance is often incorporated, and the related events are marked by folk costumes. It is striking how local cultural elements imbue economy and market activities, and how all these enterprises benefit from what Christopher Ray labelled culture economies emphasising the role of neo-endogenous elements in local rural development (Ray 2001). Moreover, some of these attempts are heavily supported by the Harghita County Council, just like the dairy cooperative and the organisations or even persons behind these enterprises took part in the founding of the cooperative. From this point of view this is rather a network of enterprises of different size and scale than independently functioning organisations. These enterprises are positioned on the intersection of economy and culture combining economic and ethnic, politic endeavours even if the latter are often only latently present.

The other sphere is that of the politics that often inseparably overlaps with these economic enterprises. It is not new that the people of Szeklerland are subjects of a doubled nation building. Politically they are integrated into the Romanian state even if many times they are reluctant to acknowledge this, but culturally maintain countless links to Hungary that have recently been topped up by the laws granting double citizenship for ethnic Hungarians abroad. On top of everything, according to a relatively recent study, Hungarians from Transylvania show higher willingness to consider ethnic factors in their economic decisions (Csata-Deák 2010). While Hungary failed to elaborate a consistent economic plan for the Hungarian communities in Transylvania<sup>22</sup>, and the support came mainly in the domain of culture and education, there are cases when the Hungarian state, different actors of it or even private persons from Hungary offer substantive help to various Transylvanian endeavours. In the case of the dairy cooperative and dairy plant the financial support of the Ministry of Rural Development of Hungary is only one, but unquestionably very important aspect. The other one is that Hungarian experts take part in these actions that are - and this is important, too - imagined and implemented as Hungarian actions, as ethnically embedded economic endeavours. The cooperative follows a real or imagined Hungarian model and when arguing for the historical models, highlights and reinforces the national character of these antecedents.

The Hungarian nation building is complemented by local struggles for autonomy. Hungarian politics in Romania is generally characterised by the use and abuse of the often fuzzy notion of autonomy both in economic and ethnic terms, augmented by a sometimes stronger, other times weaker discourse about regional differences in Romania, especially related to the differences between Transylvania and the southern counties. This macro level discourse has its local replica, and locals willingly embed their arguments in favour of the cooperative into this context, too. The topics of autonomy imbued the political life at every level, and county officials

<sup>22</sup> One has to admit that the most important Hungarian party in Romania, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, failed in this respect as well.

as well as village mayors quite frequently use these topics. Since political actors too play a role in the cooperative, or the middle level leaders of the cooperative are active in local politics, too, it is somehow expectable that these topics are present in the image of the cooperative.

The struggle for the cooperative, however, does not take into account only local or national stakes. According to Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, global markets exert an unprecedented pressure on peasants (van der Ploeg 2008, 2010), thus it is expectable that any peasant movement would operate to a certain extent with this local-global tension and would try to make use of the sense of locality and community. "We need local producers and local consumers" - stated a politician at the inauguration (Press release 2012). Globalism is definitely present in everyday people's life in various forms (Appadurai 1996). For instance the behaviour of the entrepreneur who bought the buildings of the dairy plant after the privatisation is labelled as typical of foreigners: "You know who bought the buildings? An investor from Israel. But that was only a cover story since he wanted only to close everything down and sell it as scrap iron." The condemnable strategies of the other, company-owned dairy plant that at some point started to dominate the local dairy production are also part of this local-global battle: "The butter that they sell is actually not made of local milk. Have you ever checked the label? It is written on it that they only distribute it. The butter is from Poland." In this context the terms 'local' and 'locality' gain a new, entirely positive meaning: the local in this context is not only a place of living, it is the opposite of the distant and yet present global structures that they are hardly able to influence. The cooperative is embedded in a community and it contributes to the creation and maintenance of this community. This holds true for the locality too: they not just embed their enterprise into this locality, but they actively contribute to the formation of this locality.

The opposition between the market exchange and alternative food networks, between the price and quality is another aspect of this global-local battle (van der Ploeg 2010). The aim of the dairy plant is to find a niche on the market and to ameliorate the situation of the partly self-sufficient farmers, who are very much divided from the market's perspective through market strategies. Given the context, however, market strategies are frequently hidden behind the techniques of recent local attempts enumerated above, that operate somehow with the logic of alternative food networks. The dairy plant not only collects the milk and sells its products, but encourages its members to buy and consume the same products. Dairy products are given out instead of dividends. In the framework of the campaigns that aim at branding the products and building a community at the same time, free products are handed out to school children. A few products have already received the Góbé Product label, which again reinforces the idea of local consumers reached directly by local producers. From a financial point of view, the products of the dairy plant sometimes can hardly compete with other cheaper products on the market. Beside other competing concepts that are used in arguing in favour of the cooperative, this aspect is interpreted in another context, the opposition between price and quality. The term 'authentic' is frequently used in the discourses around the cooperative and the dairy products, but this term often has another layer of meaning referring to quality. Members of the cooperative and managers emphasise that they put only local milk into the dairy products, that there are no harmful ingredients in their products and that is why they have to sell them at a higher price. The argumentation sometimes uses the loyalty of the locals towards local products as an extra element - and then we are back again at the contrast between local and global.

#### Instead of conclusions

It is not incidental and it is not just a minor detail in the whole story that besides the help of the Harghita County Council, the Hungarian Ministry of Rural Development also gave a substantial help, and Hungarian experts support the cooperative in general. The cooperative is an economic institution, but – just like its antecedents in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and during the inter-war period – it is deeply grounded in (local) culture and politics in the broadest sense of the term. That is why I argue that the cooperative tries to find its position at the intersection of positive and negative memories and experiences, local and global economy, local and global views about the rural, Hungarian nation building and the Romanian state. That is how the local authorities, the Szekler flag and the Szekler folk costume ended up at the scene of the inauguration and became the constituents of the image of a cooperative that basically aims at ameliorating the situation of the local farmers.

The economic conditions, however, cannot be neglected. Since its launching in 2012 the dairy plant went through a crisis and a crisis management. The dairy plant has had to find or has had to create its niches on the market. It is not an easy task, though. The dairy plant is not a private-owned business; it has in the background a group or groups of farmers with experiences, knowledge and expectations that can be an advantage or a disadvantage at the same time. These farmers sometimes stick together, while at other times are very much divided. Everyday cooperation is fairly widespread, but only with certain limits regarding kinship, neighbourhood etc., since it is important that they could control each other. There is no formal leadership in the *kaláka* that could offer any gains to its leaders. At another level, formal cooperation is often rejected, one of the reasons being that there is a formal leadership that, in people's perception, could use the enterprise for their individual purposes. They definitely have expectations regarding the results of the cooperative and the dairy plant. The situation is even more complicated as several actors of this domain see the cooperative as a flagship for similar attempts: if it succeeds, many others might follow in different fields; if it fails, other attempts might see it as a bad omen.

The analysis of the cooperative can shed new light on Gudeman's approach to the intersection of community and market (Gudeman 2001): they are not separate spheres of life, but rather mutually understandable and interconnected sides of the same reality. Market and community are intertwined in the functioning of the cooperative. But the local and global, the local and national and other levels also intertwine within it. Cooperatives constantly negotiate positions in relation to the market and in relation to state and development (van der Ploeg 2008: 182), but people have to find solutions within the context of their close surroundings and in that very moment when they face problems. If this 'immediate struggle' (Narotzky–Smith 2006) is partly given impetus from outside these communities, when local experiences are themselves twofold and do not always meet the ideological constructions of the elites, a huge tension is created within this struggle. It is important to emphasise that notwithstanding global conditions, rural people are not entirely devoid of power and capacity of action (van der Ploeg 2010). However, this agency is formulated and reformulated in the context of local communities, state and market (Wacquant 2012) and a careful interpretation should take into account the relative weight of each. All in all, different moralities and normative views become

inherent parts of these struggles, the performative discourse (cf. Bourdieu 1991: 223) of creating the local economy and the culture economies benefits from different experiences, thus if one wants to understand the cooperative as an economic institution, one has to understand its cultural, and in our case, its ethnic aspects, too.

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#### A Dairy Cooperative in the Making: History, Ethnicity and Local Culture in an Economic Enterprise

#### Sites of ethnically embedded enterprises

Átalvető

http://www.atalveto.ro/

Élő Szövet – Térségi Közösségi Együttműködésért Alapítvány

http://eloszovet.ro/

Góbé Termék

http://www.gobetermek.ro/

Nagy-Küküllő Mezőgazdasági Szövetkezet

http://www.tarnalact.ro/

Székely Gyümölcs

http://www.szekelygyumolcs.ro/

Székely Termék

http://www.szekelytermek.ro/