

The historical Szekely Land and its present-day spatial division

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Szekely Land is a historical and ethnographic area of 12,500 km² located in the southeastern part of Transylvania, in the geographical center of Romania. Medieval documents refer to it as Terra Siculorum, Székelyföld in Hungarian, Szeklerland in German, Ținutul Secuiesc, Secuimea in Romanian, Szekely Land or Szeklerland in English. Based on the data of the 2011 and 2022 Romanian censuses, 70-75% of the currently estimated population of 700,000 people ([1], [2]) are of Hungarian nationality. This represents the largest ethnic Hungarian bloc living outside the territory of Hungary.

The settlement of Szekelys/Szeklers in present-day Szekely Land began in the middle of the 12th century and was completed by the end of the century. The border guard population settled in the eastern border region of the Kingdom of Hungary was integrated into the country's ecclesiastical and secular administrative system. Their settlements were organized according to the "ten" system, which is the basis of military service. In the papal tithe register from the 1330s, 152 tax-paying parishes in Szekely Land were identified. Several villages belonged to a tax-paying parish, so the number of existing settlements could have been much larger (Elekes 2016).

In the 13th century, the special administrative units, the Hungarian "székek", 'seats' were already delimited territorial units of the "land of the Szekelys" (Terra Siculorum). The earliest surviving documents mention the land of the Sepszi Szekely in 1224 and then Sepszi Seat in 1252. After that, the names of Kézdi- and Orbai-, Udvarhely-, Maros-, Csík-, and then the Aranyos Seats founded between 1260–1272 were recorded in the certificates (Egyed 2014). The traditional Szekely (Udvarhely-, Maros-, Gyergyó-, Csík-, Kászon-, Sepszi-, Kézdi-, Orbai- and Aranyos) seats are shown in Figure 1 (Pál-Antal 2013, Egyed 2014, Kordé 2016, Hermann et al. 2016).

Figure 1



The Szekely seats mostly formed based on natural conditions. The administrative-military division of space established in the Eastern Carpathians was organized around the intermountain basins (Gyergyói-/Giurgeului, Csíki-/Ciucului, Kászoni-/Caşin, Baróti-/Baraolt, Felső-Háromszéki-/Târgu-Secuiesc, Alsó-Háromszéki-/Sfântu Gheorghe). Their boundaries were aligned with mountain ridges (Hargita/Harghita, Besztercei-/Bistriţei, Tarkó-/Tarcău, Csíki-/Ciucului, Nemere-/Nemira, Háromszéki-/Vrancei, Bodzai-/Buzăului, Bodoki-/Bodoc, Baróti Mountains/Baraolt), straits and passes (Tusnádi Strait/Pasul Tuşnad, Marosfői Pass/Pasul Izvoru Mureşului), and watercourses (Feketeügy/Râul Negru, Barót stream/Pârâul Baraolt). The natural geographic demarcation is smaller for the seats created in the Transylvanian basin. The border between the Udvarhely and Maros Seats runs partly along a watershed. The area of the Aranyos Seat is mostly bordered by the valleys of the Maros and Aranyos rivers (Elekes–Gyenizse 2014, Elekes 2016). Each Szekely territorial unit functioned as a legislative authority, and their extent changed little for six centuries. Over the centuries, smaller territorial units, subregions such as Bardóc and Keresztúr, tried to separate from the Udvarhely Seat, as well as Miklósvar from the Sepsi Seat (Köpeczi 1986, Pál-Antal 2013, Bereznay 2021).

As a result of several centuries of socioeconomic development, the market towns of Szekely Land, which are still functioning as towns today, were formed as part of the Transylvanian urban network. A significant number of the market hubs established along the rivers, in the traffic and trade junctions, and in the central part of the seats, had already received the title of market town in the 15th century. Over the centuries, the social, economic, ecclesiastical, military, educational and cultural life of the seats was organized and managed (Pál-Antal 2003). Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş was a market town from 1409, and then a free royal town between 1616-1876. In the 15th-17th centuries Kézdivásárhely/Târgu Secuiesc (1427), Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe (1461), Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc (1485), Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc (1558) and Gyergyószentmiklós/Gheorgheni (1607) became market towns. Apart from the period of two short reorganization attempts (1784–1790; 1850–1860), the six towns functioned as a seat center until 1876 (Oborni 2016). Even today, they form the backbone of the settlement network of the historical Szekely Land. Certificates from the 16th-century confirm the previous existence of almost 2/3 of today's settlements of Szekely Land (Elekes 2016).

In historical Transylvania, the system of counties-Szekely seats- Saxon seats and regions operated with minor interruption and change for 6 centuries, until 1876. (Köpeczi 1986, Hajdú 2001, 2019, Hermann et al. 2016).

In Transylvania, the traditional administration was reorganized for two short periods during the Habsburgs, between 1784–1790 and 1850–1860. Both served the centralizing aspirations of the empire. Between 1784- and 1786, a system of districts including several traditional territorial units was created. In the period 1786–1790, a new administrative level of “large districts”, covering several districts, was formed. The creation of extremely heterogeneous territorial units and multilevel public administration served stronger centralization and the process of socioeconomic homogenization. The second reorganization took place in 1850, after the conclusion of the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence. The territorial division of the new system operated between 1854 and 1860. Military subdistricts were created instead of districts, military districts were created instead of counties, and military districts were organized above them. After 1860, traditional territorial administrative units were restored in Transylvania (Elekes 2016).

In 1876, the county-region-seat system was finally abolished in Hungary and a new administration system was established. The top level of the spatial organization was formed by counties largely aligned with historical boundaries (Gyalai 1989). The Maros Seat and the eastern part of the historical Torda County formed the new Maros-Torda County. The Udvarhely Seat and the territories of Felső-Fehér County to the southwest formed Udvarhely County. The historical Csík, Gyergyó and Kászón Seats formed the new Csík County. Háromszék and the neighboring areas of Felső-Fehér County formed Háromszék County. The Aranyos Seat was named Torda-Aranyos along with the western part of the historical Torda County.

The middle level was composed of districts, and the lowest level was composed of settlements. The role of the county and seat center was performed by towns with legislative and organized councils, as well as large communities. The administrative level of the county and the district, established in 1876, survived in Hungary, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and included Transylvania (Hajdú 2001, 2019), then in Greater Romania between the two world wars (1920-1940) (Bárdi 2016) in the divided Transylvania during World War II (1940-1944) and in post World War II Romania, until 1950 (Bucur 2012, Elekes 2016). Between 1876 and 1950, despite the changes in the national border, politics and ideology, the county seats in Szekely Land were the traditional centers: Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş Maros-Torda/Mureş-Turda, Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe Háromszék/Trei Scaune, Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc Csík/Ciuc and Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc Udvarhely/Odorhei (Elekes 2016, Máténé Bella–Ritzlné Kazimir 2022).

In Great Romania between the two world wars, the lowest level of public administration was the village or urban commune, which included one or more settlements. The village community system created after 1925 still constitutes the lower level of spatial organization in Romania. The village commune, established after 1925, forms the lowest level of Romanian spatial organization to this day. In 1930, in the spirit of stronger centralization, the provinces were created above the counties, and their size was the same as the historical regions. (Bárdi 2016, Elekes–Szilágyi 2020).

Between 1940 and 1944, in the northern part of the divided Transylvania and Szekely Land, the Hungarian territorial division established in 1876, and the Romanian territorial division enforced from 1926, operated in the southern part. (Bereznay 2021).

The Soviet-style spatial organization that was introduced in 1950 and then transformed in 1952, 1956 and 1960 was implemented at the level of the region-rayon-commune. This reorganization permanently abolished the districts. Founded in 1950 the Maros/Mureş Region with the Marosvásárhely center shared the historical Szekely Land with the Stalin region/Regiunea Stalin with the Stalin center (Brassó/Braşov). The Hungarian Autonomous Region/Regiunea Autonomă Maghiară, which includes the majority of the historical Szekely Land and is centered in Marosvásárhely, was established in 1952. This reorganization can also be viewed as a nominal revival of the territorial self-determination of Szekely Land, which existed for six centuries before 1876. Seven out of the nine rayons of the region were mostly organized in the area of historical Szekely Land. Six rayons were organized around the centers of the traditional seats, Marosvásárhely, Székelyudvarhely, Sepsiszentgyörgy, Kézdivásárhely, Csíkszereda, Gyergyószentmiklós. In the area of the Hungarian Autonomous Region, an important territorial change of the 1956 reorganization was the creation of a rayon centered on Székelykeresztúr/Cristuru Secuiesc, mostly in the area of the historical Keresztúr territory. The Maros-Hungarian Autonomous Region/Regiunea

Mureş-Autonomă Maghiară operated between 1960-1968 with the territorial transformation of the former region centered on Marosvásárhely (Bottoni 2008, Novák 2006).

In the last century and a half the administrative classification of the towns has changed the most. The system of free royal towns and market towns, which also previously played the role of county, rural, seat and district center, was abolished by the civil administration of 1876. Instead, towns with legal authority and organized councils were created. After 1925, the concept of urban commune arose in Romania, and between 1950 and 1968, towns were classified into republican, regional, and rayonal subordinate groups. Since 1968, county seats and large cities in Romania have been called municipalities (towns with county rights) (Bucur 2012).

In 1968, a new county system was introduced in Romania ([3], Oroveanu 1986). From a historical, economic, and social point of view, most heterogeneous territorial units are managed by county towns of urban rank. The smallest administrative unit is still the commune, which includes one or more villages.

Most of the territory of the historical Szekely Land, which contains half a thousand settlements, belongs to Kovászna/Covasna, Hargita/Harghita and Maros/Mureş counties, established in 1968. In 1926, 1950, and then in 1968, the eastern mountainous edge of historical Szekely Land, which is predominantly covered by forests, pastures, and mowing fields, and has a mixed Romanian-Hungarian population, was temporarily or “permanently” annexed to Moldovan administrative units. Since 1968, the eastern part of Gyergyószék/Gheorgheni belongs to Neamţ, and the eastern edge of the Seat of Csík belongs to Bákó/Bacău County. The eastern and southeastern edge of Háromszék/ Three seats (Kézdi- and Orbaiszék), which is the southeastern part of Szekely Land, was annexed to the Counties of Bákó/Bacău, Vrancea and Bodza/Buzău (Elekes 2020). The western border of Kovászna/Covasna and Hargita/Harghita Counties was partly drawn along the historical seat borders. The southwestern and western border of Háromszék County, today's Kovászna/Covasna County, which was expanded with the Bardóc 'fűszék' belonging to Udvarhely Seat, partly follows the border of the historical seat and the Olt valley. Its northern border with Hargita/Harghita County was marked along the southern border of Csík Seat and the northern, northwestern border of Bardóc 'fűszék'.

The territory of the county includes the Lower-Háromszék-, Upper-Háromszék- and Baróti- basins and a part of the mountain range surrounding them. According to the preliminary data of the 2022 Romanian census, 71.8% of the 200,042 residents of Kovászna County who declared their nationality are mostly Roman Catholic, with a smaller number being Hungarians of Reformed and other Protestant denominations ([2]). Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe is the county seat. Hargita County was formed from the “reduced” area of the historical Udvarhely, Csík, Gyergyó and Kászón Seats counties. The Roman Catholic Hungarian population organized around the Gyergyó/Gheorgheni, Csík/Ciuc and Kászón/Caşin basins was integrated into

the same administrative unit as the mostly Protestant (Reformed and Unitarian) Hungarian population of hilly Udvarhely Seat.

Of the similar importance of Székelyudvarhely and Csíkszereda, the latter became the administrative center of the new county. The southwestern border of Hargita County runs partly along the periphery of the historical seat, and partly along settlements separated from its territory. In the northwest, the area of the county was increased by the area of Maroshévíz/Toplița with a Romanian–Hungarian mixed population outside the historical Szekely Land. Of the 291,950 inhabitants surveyed in 2022, 85.7% of those who declared their nationality are Hungarian ([2]). The Maros seat became the central part of Mureș County, which is very historically, economically, and ethnic-denominationally heterogeneous. It is an administrative unit predominantly located in hilly areas. It also includes the territories of historical counties with Romanian–Hungarian–German populations and the former Saxon Segesvár/Sighișoara seat in southern Transylvania. Its seat is Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureș, the most important city of Szekely Land. In Maros/Mureș County, in 2022, 35.6% of the 518,193 inhabitants who declared their nationality were mostly Reformed, with a smaller number belonging to Roman Catholic and other Protestant denominations. The Hungarian population of the county mostly lives in the area of historical Maros seat. The reorganization of 1968 divided the area of the historic Aranyos seat, which had a greatly reduced Hungarian population, between Kolozs/Cluj and Fehér/Alba Counties.

At the time of performing this study, the data for the settlements of the 2022 Romanian census had not yet been published. In 2011, the largest city of Szekely Land ([1]) was Marosvásárhely/Târgu Mureș with 134,000 inhabitants. Between 1950 and 1968 it was the regional center, then until today it is the county seat of Maros/Mureș County. In terms of population, economic and social significance, it is followed by Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe (56,000 inhabitants), the county seat of the historical Háromszék, and Kovászna/Covasna County since 1968. The third most populous town is Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc, (population 39,000) the countytown of Hargita/Harghita County, comprising the areas of Csík/Ciuc, Gyergyó/Gheorgheni, Kászón/Cașin and Udvarhely/Odorhei seats. Its socioeconomic importance is approached by Székelyudvarhely/Odorheiu Secuiesc (34,000 inhabitants). The four towns listed, as well as Kézdivásárhely/Târgu Secuiesc with 18,000 inhabitants, bear the title of municipality. Gyergyószentmiklós/Gheorgheni lost this title at the beginning of dualism, and then regained its role as a town in 1907. Currently, it is the sixth municipality of the historical Székely Land. Szováta/Sovata and Kovászna/Covasna with 9,000–10,000 inhabitants, as well as the ten small towns with a smaller population (Székelykeresztúr/Cristuru Secuiesc, Barót/Baraolt, Szentegyháza/Vlăhița, Nyárádtő/Ungheni, Bodzaforduló/Intorsura Buzăului, Balánbánya/Bălan, Nyárádszereda/Miercurea Nirajului, Erdőszentgyörgy/Sângerorgiu de Pădure, Borszék/Borsec and Tusnádfürdő/Băile Tușnad). Székely-

keresztúr/Cristuru Secuiesc and Szentegyháza/Vlăhița, which have different historical significance, lost them during dualism, and after 1950 they regained their town classification thanks to their growing industrial role during the Romanian communist period. The appreciation of Szováta/Sovata, Kovászna/Covasna, Borszék/Borsec, Tusnádfürdő/Băile Tușnad for tourism, Balánbánya/Bălan for mining, Barót/Baraolt for mining and industry, and Bodzaforduló/Intorsura Buzăului for industrial purposes made them small towns. After 1990 Nyárádszereda/Miercurea Nirajului regained its town status, which had been lost during dualism. Additionally after 1990, Erdőszentgyörgy/Sângeorgiu de Pădure and Nyárádtő/Ungheeni were included among the towns. (Elekes–Szilágyi 2021).

Traditionally, the proportion of urban residents in the historical Szekely Land is below the Transylvanian and Romanian averages. In 2011, 42.6% of the total population living in Hargita/Harghita County, were urban residents, 47.6% in Kovászna/Covasna County, and 50.2% in Maros/Mureș County, which includes Maros seat in Székely Land. Meanwhile, the average value in Romania was 52.8%.

Despite the "significant rural character", the spatial organizing, economic, social, educational and cultural role of the traditional town network of Szekely Land still prevails today. The regional identity based on the traditional division of space is still present in Szekely Land and in the area of historical seats.

Between 1990 and 2022, Romania's resident population decreased from 23.2 to 19 million. Of the current 19 million people, the nationality and religion of 16.5 million people are known, while those of 2.5 million people are unknown.

Between 1977 and 2022, the number of Transylvanian Hungarians declaring their nationality decreased from 1.7 million to 1 million ([2]). Transylvanian Hungarians see one possibility for their survival in the autonomy of Szekely Land, which has been requested and proposed several times after 1990 (Kántor 2006, Bárdi 2008, Kocsis 2013, Bakk 2015).

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