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Social aspects of economic cooperation in multicultural context – The case of Transylvania¹

Introduction

The analysis of the ethnicity and economic behavior is in the agenda of the economic sociology for several decades, exploring the mechanisms of economic cooperation within various ethnic groups is still a challenging topic at the more important international scholarly forums. The common starting point of the analysis is that – oppositely to the neo-liberal doctrine of socially unsegmented markets – the ethnicity plays an important role in the governance of economic transactions, shaping the structure of various markets.

Although a general synthesis about several paradigmatic approaches has not yet been written, there are a great deal of case studies with the purpose of generalization, which can be used as a reference for further researchers to develop appropriate conceptual, methodological tools for their own analysis. It is therefore surprising that in the multi-ethnic Central and Eastern Europe the research on this subject is rather poor. Although in Romania there have been valuable public debates about the possible ethnic economic policies for the minority Hungarians², these were not preceded by systematic empirical investigations.

Based on the results of a national survey, our analysis will point out certain aspects of economic behavior of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania. We are primarily interested in whether there is, and if so, to what extent economic ethnocentrism among Hungarians in Transylvania. In what types of transactions and markets is featured more? Can we conceptualize and measure the „ethnic consumption” to the analogy of the economic term of ethical consumption? In which socio-demographic group is more present and how can we explain its existence?

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² See the debate led by Birtalan Ákos, “Minority Hungarian economic policy” in the 1999/4 issue of Magyar Kisebbség (Hungarian Minority).

Before presenting the results of the research, we will look for an appropriate theoretical support and will clarify the exact meanings of the concepts used in the title. After discussing the results, we formulate the main conclusions of the analysis.

Economic ethnocentrism, ethnic consumption – conceptualization and theoretical background

We consider important to clarify the key concepts of the analysis because they are used different from their regular meaning. Many authors used the term ethnocentrism to seize different aspects of consumer and economic behavior. Sumner was the first who conceptualized it in his 1906 study (Shimp 1984), where he defined it as a tendency of a specific ethnic group to judge the others through its own values and views. He points out that several ethnic groups define themselves as „good”, „bold”, „rich” „honest” „industrious” while they use the terms „ugly”, „bad”, „lazy” for those belonging to other ethnic groups. According to him, this phenomenon can be observed in modern, complex societies as well (Bolaffi et al 2003:103).

Malota, summarizing the scholarly literature on ethnocentrism shows that the concept is not necessarily used only in a negative sense and it should be examined through multiple dimensions. Using the typology of Kosterman and Feshbach, he separates three dimensions of ethnocentrism: patriotism, meaning the devotion to their own country; nationalism, which emphasizes the superiority of the nation; and internationalism, which includes the attitudes towards other nations (Malota 2003:38-40).

In economic studies the concept of ethnocentrism was first used by Shimp, he is talking about „ethnic ethnocentrism” to describe the attitudes of the consumers towards foreign and domestic products. In this sense, the term refers to the beliefs related to the pertinence and morality of buying domestic products: the ethnocentric consumer is a person who considers the purchase of foreign products as a threat for the country's economy. (Shimp 1984, Shimp and Sharma 1987). In order to measure the concept, the authors developed a complex scale, called CETSCALE which is commonly used in international research. The popularity of the subject is also marked by the increasing number of related articles published recently (eg. Elliot et al. 2009, Bawa 2004, Malota 2003)

The authors mentioned above use the concept of ethnocentrism in a narrower sense, referring to the consumer decisions and actions, more specifically to the attitudes towards the

consumption of foreign and domestic products. By contrast, what we call economic ethnocentrism is any kind of economic action preceded by a decision based on ethnicity, regardless of the nation-state frameworks. The semantic content of our term is broader, it does not refer only to the market of goods and services, it can appear in any form of economic transaction.

However – given the empirical constraints – it is not possible to issue a comprehensive examination of the subject in this article, we will deal in more detail with the economic ethnocentrism present in consumer decisions of Hungarians in Transylvania. Our definition of “ethnic consumption” is certainly close to the meaning of “consumer ethnocentrism” conceptualized above but it differs from it in two important aspects. First, the consumption (the use) of services is also included in its semantic content. On the other hand we consider that in the case of ethnic minorities, the use of “domestic” and “foreign” terms is less relevant, it is more important if the object of the consumption is associated with a specific ethnic group, irrespective of the nation’s physical borders.

To find out more about the "Hungarian" nature of a product or a service, focus group interviews were made prior to the survey. We were looking for the most common everyday definitions associated with the term „Hungarian product” or “Hungarian service”. According to this, a product is "Hungarian" if 1. it was manufactured in Hungary; 2. if its production or distribution is primarily carried out by ethnic Hungarians; 3. it is produced by firms owned by Hungarians in Romania; 4. the region where it was made is mostly inhabited by Hungarians. Besides these, a service is considered Hungarian if as a consumer, you can use the Hungarian language during the process.

Beyond the analysis of the presence of economic ethnocentrism in certain market situations it is equally important to deal with its intensity: what explains the fact that within certain ethnic groups its influence is more evident, while within the others it has less impact on consumer decisions.

We can approach the understanding of economic ethnocentrism from two theoretical directions: from a structuralist perspective and through the socio-economic paradigm. According to the structuralist approach, individual decisions are strongly determined by the social conditions imposed by the group where the individual belongs to, the margin for the decision of an

“oversocialized” individual is rather narrow (Szántó 1994), in order to understand the individual action, we need to explore the circumstances. Following Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) – who examined the presence and the success of ethnic businesses in the United States – we assume that these conditions could be operationalized along three components. The *opportunity structures* refer to those specific market conditions which could contribute to the appearance and spread of products and services positioned for the same ethnic group and their accessibility for the consumers. In terms of ethnic consumption, along with the opportunity structures, the *sociological characteristics* of the ethnic group are also important. In this respect, in Romanian context, the territorial concentration of ethnic Hungarians is an essential component. Here is a greater chance for the development of “ethnically-protected markets” (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990:115, Alesina and Ferrara 2004, Bouckaert and Dhaene 2002, Bonacich 1972), where the primary market for ethnic entrepreneurs is the community itself.³ Moreover, the marketing of Hungarian products can also be more efficient in those areas where the Hungarians are in majority. Beyond the territorial concentration, another relevant feature for the economic performance of an ethnic group is if the entrepreneurial culture is more developed in the community, if the ethnic heritage contains economically viable practices. Similarly, the *structural characteristics* of an ethnic group, its horizontal integration through social networks, the density and complexity of social interactions within the ethnic group, the social cohesion and solidarity, the presence of enforceable trust (Portes 1998) etc. are all important group features, which allow – in particular through the reduction of transaction costs – the ethnic minority members to take advantage in the mobilization of economic resources. At the interference of opportunity structures and group characteristics different *ethnic strategies* can be created assuring the conditions for economic viability and prosperity.

A comprehensive examination of these three components within the framework of current research is limited, in our empirical research we will mainly focus on the effects of sociological characteristics on the ethnic aspects of consumer behavior. Based on the analysis conducted by Koos (2009) on international data, we assume that the level of ethnic consumption is mainly a function of the available financial resources. Those with modest material situation are more price-sensitive and the moral considerations are usually overwritten by the need-oriented

³ In the case of ethnic Hungarians in Romania we can talk about ethnically protected markets only in the case of certain particular products and services. Their formation is usually fortunate only if they can be extended beyond the ethnic borders and there’s no risk of economic enclavization.

decisions driven by their bounded discretionary consumer opportunities. Similarly, the inclination for ethnic consumption is likely to correlate with the level of education, those with a higher degree may be better informed about the market opportunities and have a better view on the possible consequences of their consumer decisions. The relationship between the age and ethnic consumption, supposedly, can be understood only through the perspective of material situation, in an advanced age modest financial opportunities could limit the assertion of these preferences. Similarly, we will examine the relationship between the gender, the medium of the residence (rural/urban) and the ethnic consumption. Particular attention will be paid to the significance of social cohesion, the trust and the reciprocity in the formation of ethnically conscious consumer behavior.

We can approach to the understanding of ethnocentric market behavior through the individual consumer decisions as well. According to socio-economic paradigm, along with the benefit-maximizing behavior, the economic decisions of individuals are also defined by moral considerations. According to the founder of the socio-economic school, Amitai Etzioni "...the individual's decisions and behavior, rather than pursuing a single principle, to maximize the pleasure and to minimize the pain... actually reveals a conflict of two basic utilities: one is the desire of satisfying the pleasures, the other is our moral obligations." (Etzioni 2003, 321) Other contemporary authors (Sayer 2006), relying on research made in Western Europe, talk about the "moralization of markets", suggesting that beyond the rationality of price-quality balance, the actors make their decisions along certain ethical principles. An example for this is the growing popularity of organic products in Western Europe, but also the more and more successful mobilization of the masses for product boycotts. This kind of consumer behavior is called "ethical consumption" and by definition we can talk about it when the purchase or the rejection of buying of certain goods is driven by ethical, political or environmental considerations. (Koos 2009). The term „moral economy” has a similar semantic content (Thompson 1971), it is a study of “how economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms, and how in turn those norms may be compromised, overridden or reinforced by economic pressures” (Sayer 2006: 78)

In this context we conceptualize the „ethnic consumption” to the analogy of „ethical consumption” and we refer to all those consumer decisions behind which – along with the

benefit-maximizing rationality – ethnic dispositions are also present. In our case these dispositions are manifested in the preference for Hungarian products or services.

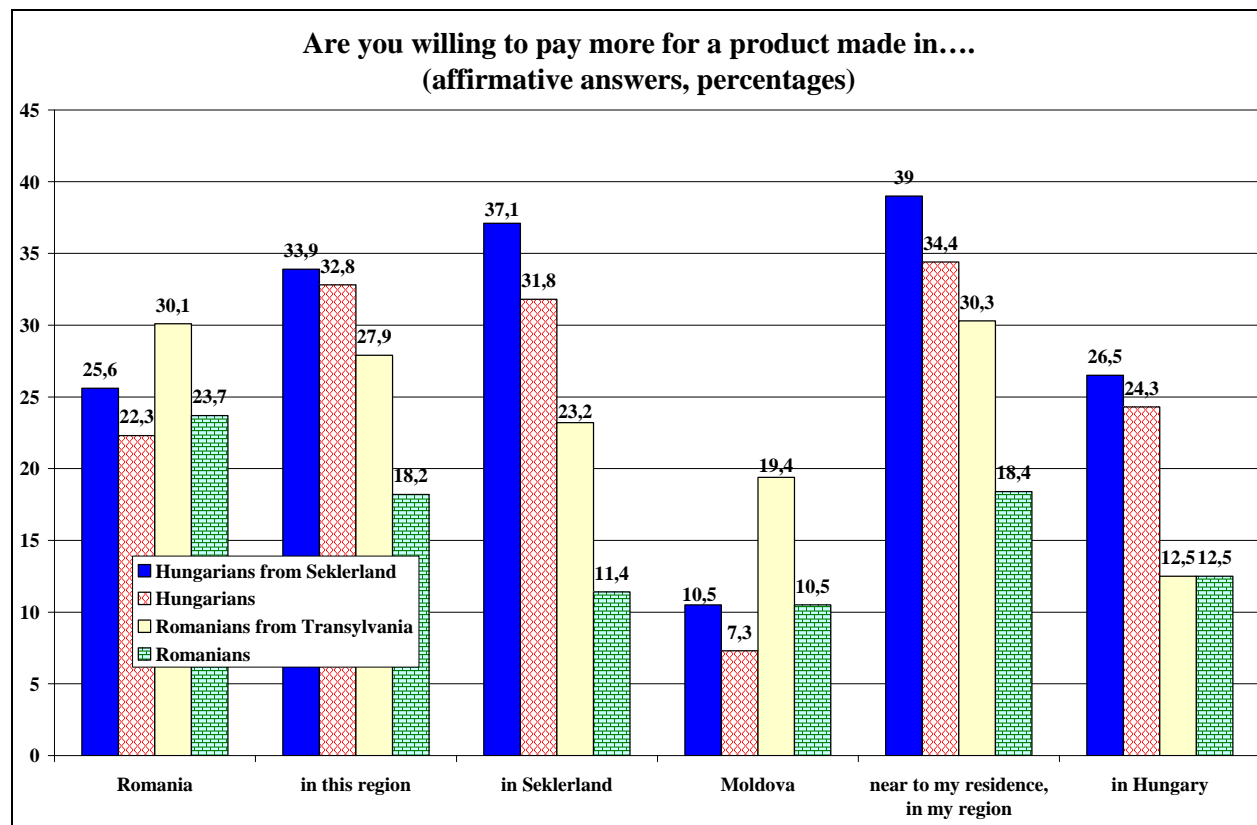
The results of the analysis

The empirical data used for the analysis is coming from a nationwide survey „Social Cohesion and Inter-ethnic Relations in Romania”, realized in November-December 2008 by the Romanian Institute for Reserch on National Minorities together with the Research Center of Inter-Ethnic Relations. The sample contains a total of 1723 cases (out of which 607 ethnic Hungarians) and is representative by geographical regions, gender and age groups. Along with our questions, the research was dealing with the main problems of inter-ethnic coexistence.

Variables measuring the ethnic consumption first were separately examined then we combined these variables to create a compound index which shows the degree of economic ethnocentrism. This index was compared later with the above-mentioned socio-demographic variables. As the data was collected on a nationwide sample, it is possible to compare the economic ethnocentrism of Hungarian and Romanian population.

Data on product purchase (Figure 1) shows that ethnic considerations in consumer decisions are more likely to occur among the Hungarians living in Seklerland, one-third of the respondents in this region considered that they were willing to pay more for a product which has been manufactured close to the place of residence or in Seklerland, and every fourth subject preferred to pay more for a product made in Hungary or Romania. If we look at the national results, we can observe that the region-awareness manifested in consumption is significantly higher among the Hungarians. Another interesting finding is that the Romanian population of more developed and multicultural Transylvanian counties (contrary to the rest of the Romanian region) is more sensitive for ethnic issues, more subjects mentioned that they were willing to pay more for products made in Romania or Moldova. The reference for this kind of economic ethnocentrism, however, is the nation-state framework, that is why the interest for products made in Seklerland is also higher among the Romanians in Transylvania.

Figure 1.



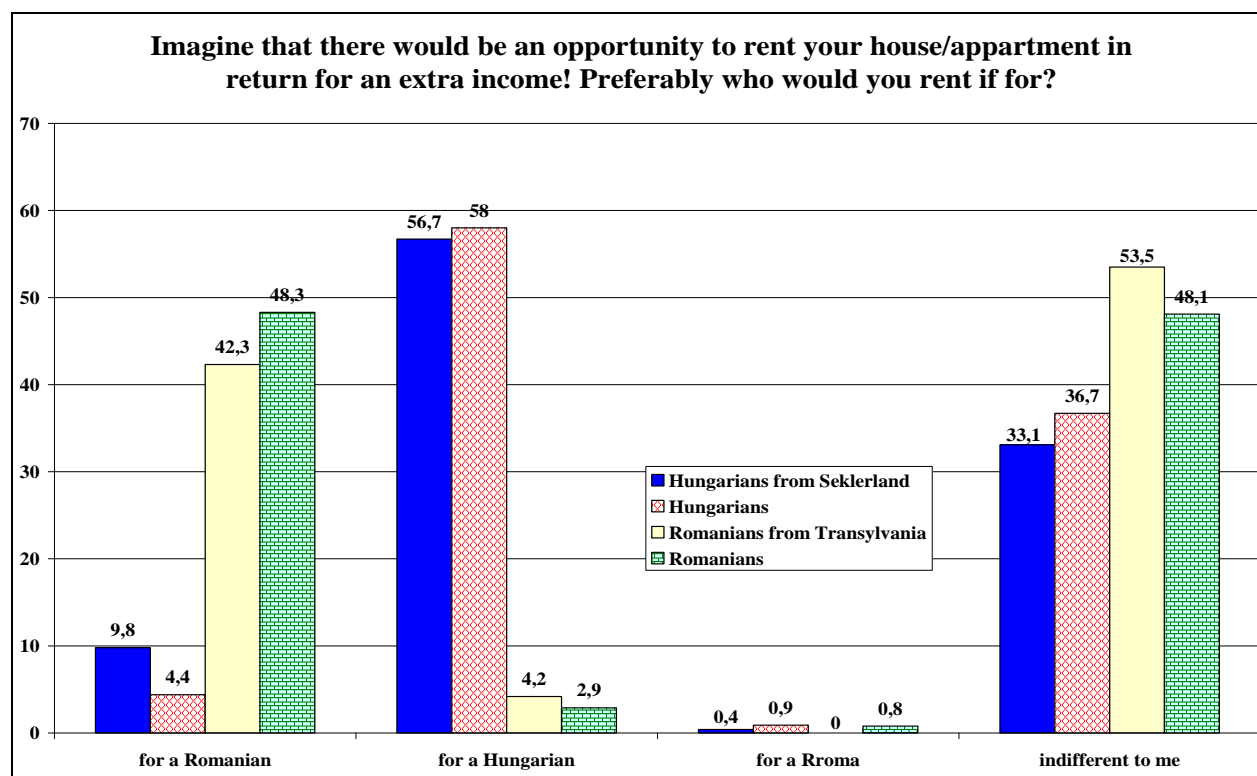
This hypothesis is also confirmed by the preference of Romanians in Transylvania regarding the nationality of the seller/distributor (Figure 2.): among them were those with the highest proportion (69.8 per cent) who are indifferent to this aspect. Compared to this – if given a choice – nearly half of the Hungarians, and Romanians outside Transylvania would have preferred to buy from a dealer/seller who belongs to their own ethnic group. For the Romanians from Transylvania it is supposedly less likely to fear the market from the Hungarians because – as they experience it in everyday transactions – they are implicitly part of it. From the everyday life of the rest of the Romanians, these experiences are mostly missing; therefore, their decisions are often likely rely on the stereotypes cultivated by the media and public life.

Table 1. Imagine that when you purchase a product, you can choose from a Romanian, a Hungarian or a Roma seller. There is no difference in the supply, quality or the price of the product. Which would you prefer to buy from?

	Rather from a Romanian	Rather from a Hungarian	Rather from a Rroma	This aspect is irrelevant
Hungarians from Seklerland	1,8	51,4	0,7	46,1
Hungarians	2	48	0,9	49,1
Romanians from Transylvania	26,5	3,1	0,6	69,8
Romanians	43,6	2,3	1	53,2

Questions about the real estate market reveal ethnically differentiated perceptions as well. If we compare the two ethnic groups depending on their preferences in renting their homes, significant differences are found: a higher proportion of Hungarians would choose Hungarian tenant, for the majority of Romanians, however, this aspect is irrelevant. (Figure 2.)

Figure 2.



To the question that if they would be willing to renounce for a certain amount of the rent in order to have a tenant from the same ethnic group, the Hungarians were more likely to declare that they would ask for less. (Table 2) Answers to a further question also showed that the Hungarians would be willing to give up on a significantly higher proportion of the rent for the sake of having a tenant from the same ethnic group.

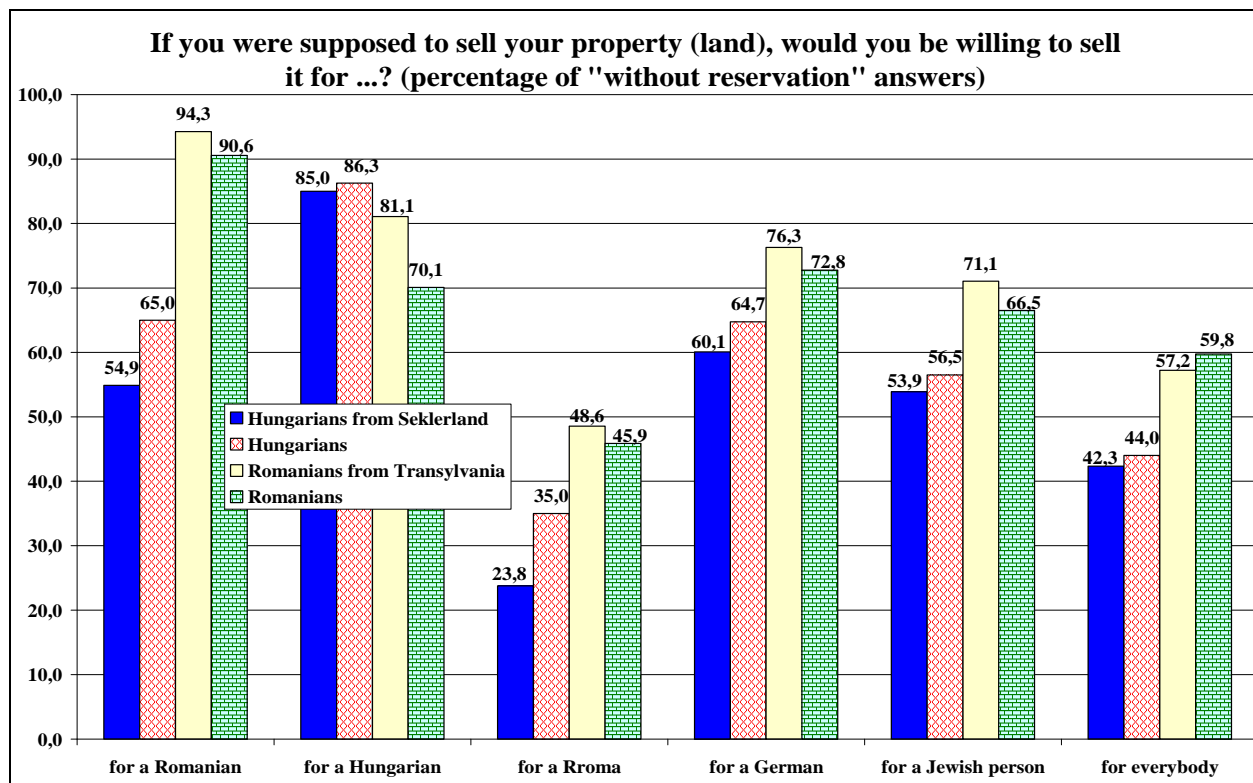
Table 2. Would you be willing to renounce for a certain amount of the rent in order to have a Hungarian/Romanian tenant (from the same ethnic group)?

	Igen	Nem
Hungarians from Seklerland	32,4	67,6
Hungarians	30,2	69,8
Romanians from Transylvania	18,2	81,8
Romanians	12,8	87,2

Renting a home is for a shorter term and the contract can be terminated at any time. In comparison, selling a land or a property means a definitive transfer of ownership. Because of the unfavorable changes in the history of Hungarians in Transylvania: the land law from 1922, the negative experiences in the decades of communism (assimilation efforts, a purposeful and controlled change of the ethnic structure of the cities), this question has an ethnically greater symbolic importance even today. As a result, the prevailing ethnic preferences in land sales are even more striking (Figure 3)⁴. A little more than half of the Hungarians in Transylvania would be willing to sell their land without reservations to a Romanian; in contrast, the ethnic aspect of the transaction is relevant only for 20 percent of the Romanians.

⁴ It should be pointed out, however, that the question has a greater symbolic importance so the chances of desirability could be high.

Figure 3.



Summarizing the results presented above, we can state that the economic ethnocentrism of the Hungarians is higher in every hypothetical transaction situation. It was therefore expected that the value of a synthetic index⁵ made from the merger of these variables would be significantly higher for the Hungarians.

⁵ The economic ethnocentrism index was created through the merge of the following six variables: 1. "Are you willing to pay more for a product which has been manufactured in Romania/Hungary", 2. "Imagine that when you purchase a product, you can choose from a Romanian, a Hungarian or a Roma seller. There is no difference in the supply, quality or the price of the product. Which would you prefer to buy from?", 3. Imagine that there would be an opportunity to rent your house/apartment in return for an extra income! Preferably who would you rent if for?", 4. "Would you be willing to renounce for a certain amount of the rent in order to have a Hungarian/Romanian tenant (from the same ethnic group)?", 5. "If you were supposed to sell your property (land), would you be willing to sell it for a Romanian/Hungarian?", 6. "If a Hungarian/Romanian employer wants to hire, it is normal to give preference for a Hungarian/Romanian person". The values of the new variable can vary between 0 to 6, the higher score represents a higher degree of economic ethnocentrism.

*Table 3. The mean and standard deviation of the economic ethnocentrism index
(on a scale from 0 to 6)*

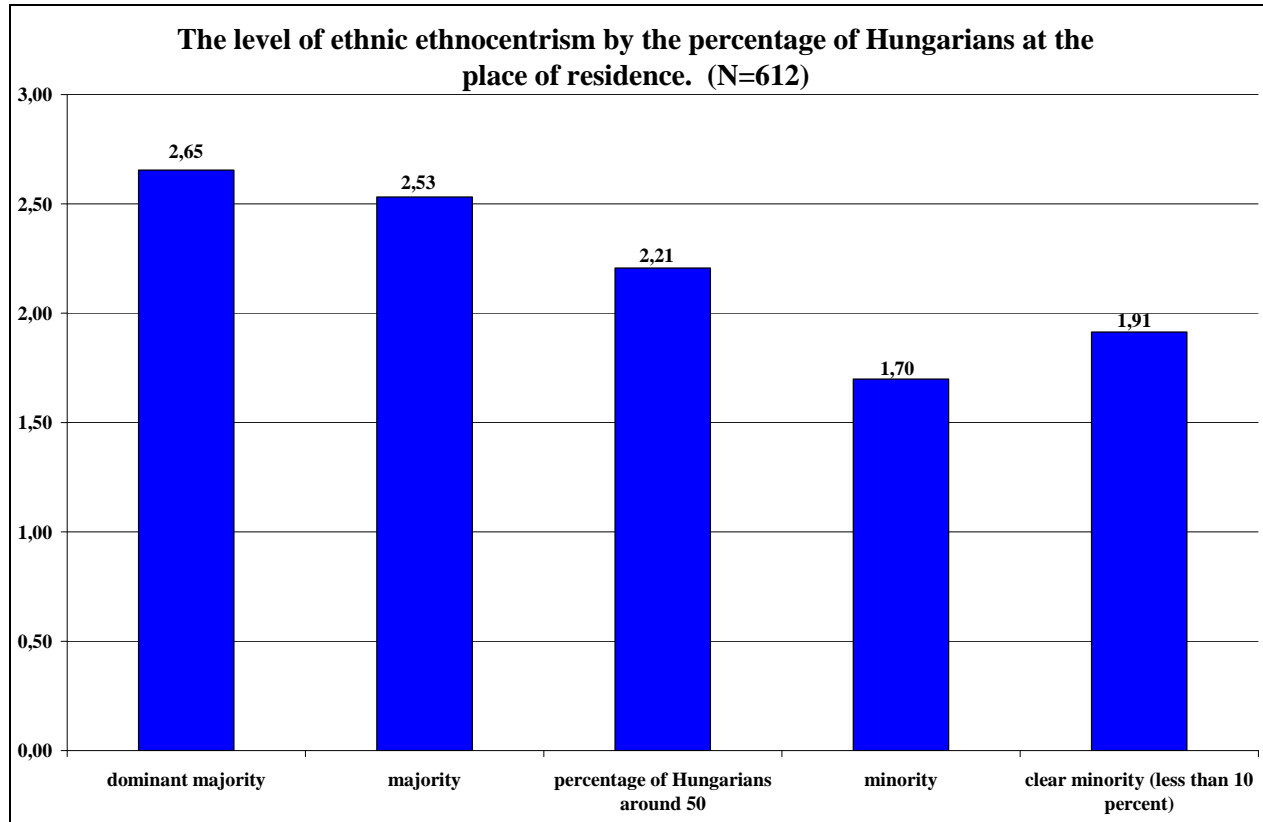
	Mean	SD
Hungarians from Seklerland	2,68	1,76
Hungarians	2,27	1,69
Romanians from Transylvania	1,53	1,33
Romanians	1,84	1,41

The results show that on a scale from 0 to 6 (where 6 means a highly ethnocentric attitude) the average is 2.27 for the Hungarians and 1.53 for the Romanians, and the difference is significant ($p < 0.001$).

Beyond the description of the phenomenon from an inter-ethnic perspective it is equally important to explore the main economic and socio-demographic factors that is correlated with. Taking the ethnic ethnocentrism index as a dependent variable, we examine the effects of the variables presented in the theoretical part of the study.

First of all we are going explore the effects of the structural factors we previously defined as components of Aldrich's (1990) “opportunity structures”. This includes the territorial concentration of ethnic Hungarians: following our hypothesis, due to a higher density of interactions among co-nationals, the ethnic aspect of a consumer decision is more likely to be relevant where the proportion of Hungarian population is higher. This relationship has already been presented for the larger regions: the level of ethnic ethnocentrism is higher in the counties belonging to Seklerland (2,68) than in the rest of Transylvania (2,27) ($p < 0,001$). This relationship was measured on a city-level data as well, where the proportion of Hungarians was taken into account. The results meet our prior expectations: in those settlements where the Hungarians are absolutely dominant (beyond 95 percent), the economic ethnocentrism is high and it decreases almost linearly with the decrease in concentration

Figure 4.



Source: Survey on „Social cohesion and inter-ethnic relations”, 2008.

In order to avoid ecological fallacy, we also examined the effect of ethnic embeddedness on economic decisions on an individual level. For this we introduced the concept of “ethnic bubble”, which refers to the individual's "ethnic isolation", to the chances of getting in contact with other nationalities (in our case with the Romanians) in everyday transactions. Following Aldrich (1990) the opportunity structures of the individuals can vary depending on the density of interactions with people from other ethnic groups. The term “ethnic bubble” was operationalized along two variables available in the dataset: the density and intensity of interactions with Romanians and the nationality of the parents. The results show that there's a reverse correlation between the density of Romanian contacts and the index of economic ethnocentrism ($r = - 0.258$), which means that a more intensive and wide-ranging networking with the Romanians leads to a smaller degree of economic ethnocentrism. The other indicator of the ethnic bubble was the ethnic composition of the family. The results are consistent with the previous observations: the

economic ethnocentrism average of those who are coming from a homogenous Hungarian family is significantly higher (2.33) compared to those with Romanian and Hungarian parents (1.59).

Contrary to our prior expectations, the economic ethnocentrism is not correlated neither with the material/financial situation nor with the level of education and there are no significant differences between the different gender and age categories either.

However, we found a significant positive correlation between the lack of generalized trust⁶ and the level of economic ethnocentrism, which is not surprising, several previous studies emphasized the importance of trust (and social capital, in general) in a more cost-efficient coordination of economic transactions (e.g. Putnam 1995, Fukuyama 1997).

Following Yamagishi (1998), the generalized trust and the formation of commitment are two alternative solutions to reduce the social uncertainty behind the economic transactions. Where there's a lack of trust or it is present in a lower amount, additional social guarantees are needed for the transactions (cooperation) to succeed. In our opinion, the economic ethnocentrism of the Hungarians in Romania could be considered as a specific form of such a commitment which promotes the economic cooperation between co-ethnics in the absence of general confidence. This hypothesis is also confirmed by the observation that a higher level of distrust against the Romanians is associated with a significantly higher economic ethnocentrism.⁷

In order to explore the direct effects of the above mentioned factors on the economic ethnocentrism, we introduced the variables with significant correlations in a common linear regression model.

⁶ We measured the generalized trust with a common question, used in international surveys: „ Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?”. The economic ethnocentrism index of those who agreed that most people can be trusted is 2.05, for those who said they should be careful dealing with people is 2.32.

⁷ The value of the index for those who trust in Romanians is 2.06; for those who don't is 2,98.

Table 4.: The social determinants of economic ethnocentrism - a linear regression model (Hungarian subsample)

($R^2=0,125$, standard error of the estimate: 1,426)

	Regression coefficient	Standard error	Standardized regression coefficient
Constant	2,885	0,207	
Residence in Seklerland	0,301*	0,145	0,098
Hungarian majority in the residential town/village	- 0,097	0,179	-0,023
Percentage of Hungarians around 50 in the residential town/village	-0,235	0,189	-0,057
Hungarian minority in the residential town/village	-0,462**	0,184	-0,129
Percentage of Hungarians below 10 in the residential town/village	0,002	0,251	0,001
Ethnically mixed family	-0,337	0,252	-0,055
Density and intensity of networking with the Romanians	-0,083***	0,025	-0,140
Generalized trust	-0,089	0,175	-0,020
Trust in the Romanians	-0,665***	0,141	-0,189

legend:

* $0,05 > p > 0,01$

** $0,01 > p > 0,001$

*** $p < 0,001$

The reference category for „The ratio of Hungarians in the town/village” variable is the „dominant majority”.

The results reported in Table 4 show that the most influential factor for the economic ethnocentrism of the Hungarians is the level of distrust against the Romanians, but a lower level of networking with majoritary Romanians also increases the probability of an ethnocentric market behavior. Residence in Seklerland has a slightly weaker, but still significant effect; furthermore, the ethnic sensitivity of those living in minority at their residence seems to be significantly lower. The regression analysis shows that the above discussed generalized trust has

a measurable (indirect) effect on economic ethnocentrism only through the distrust against the Romanians.⁸.

Summary

In our analysis we pointed out certain aspects of economic behavior of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania. In a nationwide questionnaire study realized in 2008 we measured the economic ethnocentrism through several hypothetical market decisions and we marked the main social factors it is determined by.

In the first part of the study we defined and operationalized the key concepts of the analysis using the structuralist approach of the new economic sociology and certain theoretical elements of the socio-economics.

The descriptive part of the analysis shows that compared to the majoritary Romanians, the economic ethnocentrism of the Hungarians is higher in every hypothetical transaction situation: more of the Hungarian respondents prefer to consume Hungarian products, buy from a Hungarian seller, they are willing to give up a greater part of the rent in order to have a Hungarian tenant and more of them have serious reservations to sell their property to other nationalities. The economic ethnocentrism index built on these variables is correlated with the level of confidence in Romanians, the intensity of networking with the majoritary population and the ethnic composition of the village/town of residence.

⁸ The correlation coefficient between the two variables is $r=0,109^*$

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