

Between their Will for Self-assertion and Securing their Livelihood

Challenges for the German Minority in Romania in the 21st Century – the Example of Hermannstadt/Sibiu

by Benjamin Józsa, Sibiu/Hermannstadt

On a mild summer evening in the year 2000 two youths hung up election posters in Sibiu, Romania, which is known as Hermannstadt in German. Although they were not sophisticatedly designed, they drew the attention of two older men, who moved closer.



Sibiu - manhole cover with the coat of arms.
Photo Kathrin Biegger

“That is him”, murmured one of them, “our Saxon”.

The Transylvanian Saxon they were referring to was no other than the still little known physics teacher Klaus Johannes (born 1959), who was preparing to run for the office of mayor, although his chances were entirely uncertain.

Hermannstadt/Sibiu (population: approx. 155,000) could hardly be distinguished from other mid-sized Romanian cities at the beginning of the new millennium. The post-

communist gloom of prefabricated high-rise buildings, giant landscapes of useless factories, a run-down old town, poorly functioning public services were just a few things which characterized life in Hermannstadt/Sibiu. The general mood fluctuated between resignation and morbid humor.

The Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania catered to this mood when it promised “a good administration” and nothing else during the municipal elections in the year 2000.

The reputation of being diligent and efficient administrators already preceded the Romanian Germans, not only in Hermannstadt/Transylvania, but also in the Banat, the Satu Mare region, in Bukovina and in the Romanian Old Kingdom.

The Romanian-German population indeed shrunk to a fraction of what it used to be due to its destiny after the war – deportation to the USSR, misappropriation of their private, collective and church property as well as emigration primarily to Germany (only 120,000 of the 800,000 Romanian Germans from the interwar period were still left in 1992)¹. Nevertheless, they still had a strong will to assert themselves politically.

In the first days of the year 1989, representatives of the Romanian Germans already decided to establish a self-representation body for the German minority, which they named in somewhat baroque fashion “Democratic Forum of the Germans in Romania” based on the mood at that time². The forum, as it was referred to colloquially, already primarily defined itself politically in its early stages. The members wanted to participate in the social development of Romania and represent the

1 www.recensamantromania.ro

2 Entry no. 473 at the district court of Hermannstadt/Sibiu from 19 February 1990

German minority. Thus the forum aimed to be much more than a folk costume association. The forum firmly committed itself to remaining in the homeland and deliberately followed the century-old political tradition of the pre-war era. “Not to speak about us without us” was the motto, which runs like a thread through the activities of the forum up to today.

Legislation soon accounted for this peculiarity of the German as well as the larger Hungarian minority: the twenty minority associations of Romania can take part in elections as if they were a party, even though they are registered as associations³. As a result, the minorities are represented with one delegate each in the lower house of the Romanian parliament⁴ and are united in one parliamentary group, the “group of small minorities”.⁵ Since the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (DFDR) attached particular importance to local politics, it nominated candidates in all municipalities and cities in which this was possible.

Despite all of this, resolute and integrity-based actions would have not sufficed alone. It was no coincidence that the DFDR played a prominent role in Hermannstadt/Sibiu, in particular, even though it was represented in most large cities of Romania. On the one hand, Hermannstadt/Sibiu had been the political center of the Transylvanian Saxons for centuries, a circumstance, which was already embedded in the conscience of the Romanian

majority. On the other hand, the size of Hermannstadt/Sibiu was ideal for conveying the message to a group which had become smaller, as is the case with the Romanian Germans. Moreover, all signs pointed to a protest vote in Hermannstadt/Sibiu around the year 2000. The center-right parties did not have a concept to offer, let alone a vision for the development of the city. The same applied to the leftist parties, which also had the negative reputation of being recruited from the old cadres of the Communist Party from the pre-transformation period. And therefore something occurred, which was initially unthinkable for everyone. Klaus Johannis was elected mayor of Hermannstadt/Sibiu in the second round of voting with nearly 69 per cent⁶ of the vote. Four city councilmen from the DFRD joined the city council together with him. It soon became apparent that an exceptional talent had moved into the city hall: in a few years Klaus Johannis succeeded in making peace with the Social-Democratic Party of Romania (PDSR), which abandoned its initial obstruction tactic in the city council. As a result, public services became fully functional for the first time (a functioning public cleansing service was still seldom in Romania in the year 2000) and paved the path towards electoral success in 2004. After all, without a functional political coalition in the city council, it would not be possible to clean up the city for the long-term.

After a professionally conducted electoral campaign, 16 city council members (of 23) from the DFDR subsequently entered city hall - a previously unheard of success. This constituted a turning point for the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania: for the first time a minority association was responsible

³ According to the Law on Political Parties 14/2003

⁴ Representatives of minorities must receive a smaller number of votes, amounting to 10 % of the share of votes, which a representative receives by average.

⁵ The Hungarian minority is a special case. It reaches the 5% threshold and is represented by a parliamentary group both in the upper and lower house.

⁶ www.sibiu.ro

for the representation of the Romanian majority, a task which would require a great deal of finesse and institution.

Yet the mayor and councilmen mastered this task as well. They kept out of political discussions and focused on city development. They initially aimed to increase investments and strengthen cultural life, while establishing a functioning public administration and developing tourism.

The easiest part was what initially seemed difficult: attracting investments to the city. The German language and a functioning German school system quickly facilitated communication with German investors. Due to the speedy public administration (often only a few weeks and sometimes even just a few days passed from expression of interest to the first ground-breaking ceremony) and the German-speaking employees at city hall, who actively provided advice and support to the potential investors, the city was soon able to report the sale of all property in the first commercial park - and soon the second as well. And after just a few years of full employment, the people of Hermannstadt/Sibiu earned their money from Siemens, Continental, Marquardt, Tondach, and RUD-Ketten, to name just a few.

Simultaneously to the investments, the city's budget increased tenfold in just a few years. In addition to the increased tax revenues, the improved taxpayer ethics also played a role. (The firms were initially warned, and then the tax liabilities were made public. If this was of no avail, the tax collectors were sent out).

Thus, the city began to clean the streets as well as the pipes below them. The main city squares as well as the city hall were renovated. The state philharmonic orchestra was given a new headquarters. New buses started operating, which were even on time. Hermannstadt/



A view to the downtown of Sibiu. Photo Kathrin Biegger

Sibiu slowly started to become more like other Central European cities and attract the first herds of tourists.

Hermannstadt/Sibiu's experience as cultural capital in Europe in 2007 provided the greatest impetus. In order to become more visible on the map of cultural cities, Hermannstadt/Sibiu competed together with the metropolis of Luxembourg in 2004 to act as European cultural capital of 2007. As chance would have it, the year as cultural capital coincided with Romania's accession to the European Union. Suddenly the city was visible across Europe. The Hermannstadt/Sibiu theater festival – Europe's third largest -, the jazz festival, the state philharmonic orchestra, the Bach choir, the many outdoor festivals were suddenly accessible to a large public. And the city greatly benefited, as the restaurant and hotel industry and even the international airport

only began to fully develop after the flow of tourists in 2007.

After two additional electoral victories in 2008 and 2012, in which the mayor was re-elected with more than 80 percent of the vote respectively and the Forum maintained its two-third majority in the city council, Klaus Johannis opted to become involved in national politics. In order to gain a foothold in Romanian state politics, Klaus Johannis had to leave the Forum though, because presidential campaigns cannot be financed or operated by a small association. He found a new political home in the center-right National Liberal Party, which is a member of the European People's Party. The National Liberal Party nominated him as its presidential candidate in 2014 and introduced him to the broader public to whom he was previously not well-known. Although he had to endure the dirtiest campaign of post-transition period (he was accused of not being a real Romanian, a German and not a Romanian citizen; even his childlessness was openly criticized), he asserted himself with his calm perseverance. Despite this – or perhaps precisely because of this – the election of a German candidate was a political sensation. It shifted the focus of attention to the small community of Romanian Germans, which once again proved that it is not a matter of size, rather the will to actively participate in social and political affairs.

However political successes cannot disguise the fact that the Romanian German community faces enormous challenges.

The first – and most difficult – challenge is the demographic development of the past decades. Of the 119,462 Romanian Germans in 1992, only 59,764 remained in 2002. The 2011 census was again sobering – 36,042 citizens of Romania identified themselves as

Germans and 26,557⁷ indicated that German is their mother language. Along with this, the German population is overaged and there are few young people – a situation which is now already impacting the activities of the Forum. The second great task is to maintain school instruction in German. Up to now, the German schools could only be preserved due to Romanian pupils who are in the majority. Since German schools are regarded as elite schools in Romania, the Romanian majority likes to send their children there because they tend to have good opportunities on the German labor market with their German language skills.

Yet despite the general popularity of the German schools, the operations of 30% of the German classes had to be shut down, not due to lack of pupils, rather the absence of teachers. The teaching profession in Romania is chronically underpaid, which means that a job in the German-speaking businesses in Romania is a viable alternative for German-speaking teachers. The most financially challenging task is to preserve the cultural assets. The church fortresses of Transylvania, the Brukenthal Museum in Hermannstadt (one of the first public museums in Europe), additional material as well as non-material cultural heritage must be preserved. The main actors, the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania and the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania, have done very much in this regard, but their efforts alone are by far not sufficient to maintain all these cultural assets. Despite numerous private initiatives this task will continue to define the agenda for several decades.

The German minority in Romania is faced with

⁷ All data are official census results from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics. (www.re-censamantromania.ro)

an enormous challenge at the beginning of the 21st century. It must raise a new generation of young people and offer them prospects to stay in the country. It must strive to preserve the school system and ensure that the schools do not degenerate into mere language schools. It must preserve material cultural goods and keep alive non-material cultural assets in the 21st century. And finally, Romanian Germans must remain loyal to themselves, as an independent and distinguishable voice in both the German and Romanian chorus.

Translated by Michael Dobbins

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Józsa, born in 1973, completed his degree in Germanic studies in Hermannstadt/Sibiu. Since 1991 he has held various voluntary and full-time functions in the *Democratic Forum of the Germans in Romania* (DFDR). He is also involved in publishing, initially as the editor of the youth magazine *Der Punkt*, and later as a freelance collaborator with the *Allgemeine Deutsche Zeitung in Rumänien* (ADZ). Since 2014 Józsa has been the full-time director of the DFDR.

e-mail: benjamin.jozsa[at]fdgr.ro