

Balkán Herald* – The Online Book of Complaints of Hungarians from Romania

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Abstract: In the current study, I analyze cultural tendencies, preconceptions about cultural differences among Hungarians from Romania that are present in the virtual space. I have tried to explore the way this community treats different situations, conflicts resulted from cultural differences. The examined interface is a community blog written by Hungarians from Romania, where users share their stories considered typical for Balkanic culture. Because of the negative pejorative meaning, the site functions as a book of complaints, but also gives place to heated debates about Balkanic identity. As a result of the three years of research (from November 2008 to October 2011) I have tried to describe the trend of westernization in the Eastern European cultures, taking into consideration the characteristics of online communication as well.

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Introduction

There is an interface where readers can follow specific virtual community-discussions about cultural peculiarities. Its name is suggestive: *Balkán Herald*, a community blog with stories, images and videos on the subject of Balkanic culture.

Considering that the site is written and read mostly by Hungarians from Romania, the image of the Balkans often has a negative connotation. The tendency of westernization is not new at all, but monitoring this phenomenon in the virtual space, in the community communication raises new aspects of the subject. During my research I followed the content of the blog from November 2008 (from its startup) to October 2011. During these 3 years, I observed the different attitudes and behaviours and I made case studies about conflicts on this subject. I also performed a survey with the readers of the site, which completes the content analysis. Its goal was to identify the community which creates this content, and to compare the readers' opinion with the common

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attitude that can be deduced by reading the articles. In this case, the content analysis and the public research cannot be separated very clearly, because the content is also produced by the readers with minimal censorship. However, it is interesting to compare the consciously expressed opinion with the preconception that turns out from the stories.

The study tries to explore the question of cultural identity: the image that Hungarian users from Romania show about themselves, the way they position themselves in contrast with the Balkan culture. However, during the analysis I also take into consideration the impact of the virtual context on communication (like anonymity, the absence of meta-communication or the mediating role of the community).

Before describing the analysis, I would like to tag some explanation onto the terminology that I use. The word Balkan appears in different forms: the Balkans, as a geographical-historical unit (the Balkan Peninsula), Balkanic, as a culture and *Balkán Herald*, the name of the site. About the technical terms of the internet, there is a difference between the blog, the community blog, the portal and the forum.¹ The *Balkán Herald* is a community blog, but this cannot really be used for describing actions, so I often use the terms of blog and forum referring to the activity of the readers. Finally, it is important to note that some expressions that appear in the text like eastern, western, developed, undeveloped are not obvious notions, their meaning is determined by comparison, so it often depends on the context. In the present case, I adopt the term-usage of the readers' community: for example the eastern-western opposition refers here to the Eastern-European and Western-European countries, even though this means something different in a global interpretation.²

1. Theoretical background of cultural differences and the stereotypical Balkans

Before talking about the community blog and its aspects, it is necessary to take a look at the different meanings of the word "Balkan", because it has several different interpretations. First, we can talk about the geographical-historical unit,³ which is frequently described by stereotypes like "the barrel of gunpowder of Europe", because the place was a buffer zone between the great powers. From ancient Rome to the world wars over the former Yugoslavia, there were always disturbances, wars, and ethnic strife in this area. Furthermore, because of the diversity of the nations and religions, the peninsula has a very colourful cultural heritage. Finally, there is a pejorative meaning

¹ The blog is personal, the community blog is written by more users. The forum is discussion about different topics (not apropos of stories, images, like in the case of the community blog), while the portal is not necessarily a chronological collection of articles. www.onlinemarketingszotar.hu [2011. 11. 13.], www.onlinemarketing.blog.hu [2011. 11. 13.]

² Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order", *Foreign Affairs* 3 (1993): 22-49.

³ The region that lies on the south-eastern part of Europe takes its name from the Balkan Mountains in Bulgaria and Serbia. The Balkan states are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and the European part of Turkey. It is disputed whether the southern part of Croatia, Slovenia and Romania also belong to the Balkan. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkans> [2012. 01. 20.] The present Romanian policy considers Romania a part of Central Europe (except of Dobruja). <http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkan> [2012. 11. 13.]

related to the Balkans: in many places of the world, it is associated with poverty, disorder, corruption, connection-oriented views, the circumvention of the rules, ingenuity, and the bad quality of services and public works. In the terminology of the blog the Balkan culture is often used as a synonym of collectivistic, high-context cultures. David W. Augsburger writes in detail about differences between individualistic (low-context) and collectivistic (high-context) cultures.¹ In his interpretation, the characteristics of the low-context culture are the formal relations between people, compliance with the rules, and a problem-oriented perception, while the high-context culture can be described by informal relations, broadly defined rules and relation-oriented principles. Augsburger mentions that those cultures that are now considered individualistic had also been collectivistic, but in time (partly because of the technical progress), they have become individualistic. This explains why the high-context cultures are specific mostly to the less developed countries and in many cases, the culture transforms gradually from high-context to low-context.

Talking about Europe, in the public perception this opposition also means eastern and western cultures. As Romania is central-eastern, it represents a transition between the two, from the point of view of the context as well. However, western cultures also have a pejorative meaning: this can be understood from Samuel P. Huntington's theories. In his writing *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, he talks about the decadence of western cultures. First of all, the cultural and moral decadence: the anti-social behaviour, the decline of the family models, the decrease of work ethic and volunteering.

However, in the community of Hungarians from Romania the pejorative meaning of Balkan culture is more negative than that of western culture: there is a strong demarcation from any phenomenon that is considered Balkanic. The general opinion here is that the Balkans is backward and out of date, unsatisfactory for the tough demanding customers. In the same time, many people accept the loopholes – as “the system is not good”. This generates a (self-)ironic attitude regarding the culture they live in – and that they cannot change.

The *Transindex*² portal based its Balkanic community blog on this stereotypical formation, but before starting it, the idea was maturing for more than one year. This had a good reason: the Hungarians' attitude regarding the Balkans is changing together with the people's lifestyle. It changed a lot in the past 20 years as well, since people started to travel more and more. The increasing mobility results in the exploration of other cultures,³ which leads to the discovery of the differences. Many entries in the blog were inspired by travel experiences in other countries. That's why I was curious about the travel habits of the readers.

The cultural determination is very important in each community, because every notion gets its meaning from the thoughts, feelings, images linked with it, and these are all defined by culture. This is a basis of Stuart Hall's theory, which he explains in his

¹ David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1992)

² Transindex is the dominant Hungarian portal in Romania, it has 10-15 thousand daily visitors - *Trafic.ro* [15.11.2011]

³ Kollányi Bence, *Térhasználat az információs társadalom korában* (Use of space in the age of information society) (Budapest: Pintér, 2007), 82-93.

book *Representation*.¹ He also claims that the high penetration of mass media and mass communication resulted in the interoperability of these meanings across cultures. This is another factor that I measured in my survey: the media-using habits of the community that reads and writes the blog.

2. The *Balkán Herald* community blog and the antecedents of the project

2. 1. The community blog and its roots

From the beginning of the years 2000, the presence in the virtual space became a daily practice in the life of Hungarians from Romania, but its way has changed a lot in the past decade. At the beginning, the trend was the debating on different forums. This activity is still alive but mostly in a thematic way, in different small communities, with the aim of changing information and experiences (not just for arguing on the internet). This is illustrated by the case of the *Disputa.ro* forum, an older project of the *Transindex* portal, which had many visitors a few years ago, but now there are no more new entries since 2009. After the forums, blogs and community blogs came into fashion. These have the advantage that readers are arguing about continuously updated content: there is no need to generate the subject of discussion. The *Transindex* portal started more community blogs as well: collection of restaurant critics, of erotic texts or negative campaign before elections. The *Balkán Herald* was their last community blog: since its startup, this way of online communication also started to go out of fashion. Now the online communication is more personalized, thanks to the conquest of community sites.

2. 2. The idea of the Balkanic blog

The blog itself expresses its pejorative meaning-defined concept on the first page, with the following definition: “*The Balkan is not a place, but a spirit. There is no need to conjure up this spirit or to believe in it: it can be experienced everywhere. Each confrontation with the spirit of Balkan is a Balkan-story. Don’t keep it to yourself, share it with others, to make them amazed or cheered up! Do this on Balkán Herald, the official journal of Balkan-stories, in the appropriate topic.*”² This definition includes the two most important functions of the site: to entertain and to evoke the solidarity of others. The second is needed because the Hungarians in Romania often confront situations that they cannot explain, accept or resolve, they even chafe at something that could be natural in other cultures. Hungary is situated to the west of Romania, so according to the discussed differences between cultures, the Romanian culture is a little bit more collectivistic than the Hungarian. This is manifested on the blog, when Hungarians write about the Balkanic situations that they face day by day. While the stereotypical meaning of the Balkans is negative in this context, the blog has turned into a book of complaints. Most of the stories describe a conflict resulted from the cultural differences, or a negative situation: it is extremely rare to use the word in a positive sense. This reflects the attitude of the Hungarian community, but the concept of the blog (of the editors) as well. For example, the only standard design motive of the site is the

¹ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 1-39.

² The author’s translation (this note is valid for all the quotations from the site)

onion: it appears on the header and after each story. Users can appreciate the entry by throwing it with onions: germinal onions, spring onions, seasoned onions, rotten onions and so on, depending on the heaviness of the situation. This fairground nature also strengthens the stereotype about the Balkan in a negative way.

2. 3. Data about the blog and its readers

The project was launched in November 2008, and I followed its content from the beginning to October 2011. Of course, the blog is still alive, but its traffic has very much reduced. As I mentioned in the case of the *Disputa.ro* forum, in many cases the online contents do not have a definite ending, even if they are not visited any more. Based on this, I would have never stopped monitoring it. So, in October 2011 I decided to take into consideration the yield of exactly 3 years. In this time 258 entries were created and these generated 627 comments. After the first year of the blog these data were the following: 135 entries, 405 comments. This shows that the first year was the most successful, after that the number of the stories decreased, but the comments even more. This means that the blog lost its most important function – the disputing nature. In the third year just a few entries appeared, mostly written by the editors of *Transindex* portal, so currently it functions as a simple column of the *Transindex* portal, which is updated from time to time.

The number of entries

November 2008 – October 2009

Month	11	12	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Entries	3	2	8	18	10	11	15	5	7	1	3	8

November 2009 – October 2010

Month	11	12	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Entries	2	3	5	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	0	8

November 2010 – October 2011

Month	11	12	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Entries	3	4	3	3	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	2

The measuring about the target group of Balkán Herald was realized in March and April of 2010. 56 people filled out the online test, but considering that the blog had only 89 registered users at that time, this can be considered representative for the community. The survey concentrates on the users' social background, and – as I mentioned before – also refers to the travel habits and the media consumption habits of the target group.

Age of the target group

10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
3,6%	64,2%	25%	3,6%	3,6%

Occupation

Education	Informatics	Economy	Media	Arts	Student	Pupil	Other
17,8%	16%	14,3%	12,6%	7,2%	19,6%	3,6%	8,9%

Living place

Cluj county	Szekler Land	Partium	Mureş county	Hungary	Abroad
48,2%	25%	8,9%	7,2%	8,9%	1,8%

Note: The Transindex portal is edited in Cluj, one of the main cultural centres (or maybe the first one) of Hungarians in Romania.

The Szekler Land is situated on the eastern part of Transylvania, it is inhabited mainly by a Hungarian-speaking (Székely) ethnic group.

The Partium is the western part of Romania, near the Hungarian border.

Mureş county lies in the middle of Transylvania.

It was remarkable to see the users' opinion about the different functions: most of them highlighted the entertaining function: they told that they read or write stories because it is funny, only a smaller part told that they want to share their outcry or to warn others about different negative situations. This is interesting, because during the reading of the stories the complaint function is more obvious.

As I mentioned before, I also measured the travel and media consumption habits. The result is that in general the members of the community travel in the country once a month and to other countries once a year. Most of them read and watch Hungarian media products from Romania, but almost half of them also follow the Romanian and the Hungarian media, and 20% consumer media products from abroad.

Finally, I also asked about the most popular topic on the blog. The major part mentioned the scam-stories and the travel-stories. But from the point of view of the frequency, the "public services" category is at the top of the list, followed by the "travel" category. This also shows a contradiction between the content and the consciously expressed opinion of the public, because in the mentioned categories the complaining function is more evident.

3. Case studies about the conflicts on Balkán Herald

3. 1. The type of the conflicts

The conflicts on the blog can be classified according to several aspects, but in each case, the user community plays an important role. Considering the context of the conflict, there are stories which present an ended situation, where the discussion afterwards helps to interpret the facts. A lot of stories about low quality services, job conflicts, fights and some hospital and travel stories belong here.

There are other stories, which describe continuous (or repeated) phenomena that we can meet all the time, so in this case the comments are about actions that can be influenced. In this category I can mention some habits that are very prevalent in the high-context culture, like hitchhiking, or even some swindle actions that threaten the naïve citizens.

Finally, there are some situations when not the conflict of the story is interesting, but the conflict generated in the virtual space afterwards. Sometimes this can be a result of anonymity, because people don't know who they are arguing with, so the whole thing turns into a personal quarrel. In the following chapters, I will present some examples for these three situations. In the conflict analysis, I am going to use Augsburg's questions¹ and I will also take into consideration the characteristics of virtual space and the mediating role of the virtual community. I have chosen the following entries for analysis either because they generated very much discussion, or because they present some special cases resulting from the characteristics of online communication.

3. 2. Ended situation

One of the most argued entries belongs in this category, its title is: *How to blackmail the customers emotionally?*² In this story, the author writes that once she tried to book bus tickets from Cluj to Budapest for the next day. The employee of the bus company informed her that there were no more tickets. She offered that she tries to get some, without giving any details. After some time the client found bus tickets at another company, even cheaper. When the first company called her back, the employee was very upset with the client who chose the cheaper and sure solution. *"There began the emotional blackmailing. <The customer is like this>, she said and she asked me why I couldn't wait cause she had to call a Hungarian number for this.....then I got some more reproach and I said goodbye. After some minutes, my phone rang a very long time but I didn't answer. It's enough to get feedback about my weaknesses, I don't expect this from the employee of a bus company. After 10 minutes she called again but then I turned off my mobile.*

The situation reflects very well the disagreement between the problem-oriented and the relation-oriented culture. The employee of the bus company tries to get some tickets, although this is not her duty, while the tickets are all sold. So she is doing a favour, she initiates a positive relationship with the customer. Because the "we'll find some solution"-context is natural for her, she doesn't understand the client's attitude, who only wants to solve her problem. The fact that the employee still tries to convince the client despite the fact that they've already sold all their tickets – can have more reasons. She can hope some extra money or gratitude for the extra ticket, or her vanity was injured and she provokes the recognition of this or apology at least. Or, what is more probable: both. For her it is unacceptable to end this way their formal relation, while the client doesn't care about this, she is only interested in the ticket. She insists on the customer's right to choose the advantageous solution, as long as the rules permit this. And the written, formal rules permit it. Furthermore, she wants to maintain a formal relation with the representative of the company and not to discuss their personal problems.

¹ **Where?** (in which cultures or between which cultures was the conflict developed);

Why? (what was the reason of the conflict, was it interest-centred or value-centred); **What?** (what was the attitude of the parties); **Which?** (which type of solution they applied to resolve the conflict).

² *Balkan Herald*, <http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=85> [2011. 11. 15.] (the reference is also available for all the quoted comments of this entry)

The runoff and the ending of the conflict is intuitive, guided by emotions in the case of the employee, and logical, consistent in the case of the client. When she doesn't see the sense of the discussion she interrupts it, and she can do this easily, because the phone is an indirect way of communication.

The conflict was interest-centred at the beginning, and the situation started cooperatively: both parties' interest was to get some more tickets. But the moment the second company appeared, the situation became competitive. With this turn, the position of the parties also changed: first, the client's interest depended on the employee, but then it changed. As the client had the possibility to choose, she got in the situation to decide. The ending of the situation was positive for her, because she got her tickets and she could choose the best offer. On the other hand, the conflict ended in a negative way for the representative, whether her approach was interest-based or relation-based.

The continuation of this story takes place in the virtual space, where the blog users discuss their opinion about the situation. There are very different opinions: as in many cases, the first user contradicts the author, and after this, more users try to defend her standpoint. From the 17 comments, 9 are on the part of the author, 6 on the other side and 2 neutral. There are some comments where the user tries to bring some arguments on both sides, but anyway, it turns out what is his standpoint, for example: *"For the eventual rough tone I also condemn the representative, but I think she was right when she said that you could have waited until she called back."* It is specific that users try to convince the others by giving practical examples, e.g.: *"Imagine that you are playing tetris on the computer¹ but someone calls you to make a Photoshop-collage. Not with pleasure, but you make it, at the end it turns out really good and when you call back triumphantly, they tell that they've resolved it already."* Or: *"And when you call a taxi, and it comes later, you call another, don't you? You don't care that there was a traffic jam? ... I think not the company was Balkanic, but you were muddling. I think the employee was right and she would have had the reason to cry that she gets some stupid calls like this."* There are users who tell their own story relating to the situation, they mostly agree with the author. e.g.: *"This <we'll find a solution> cases are already suspicious. We took a knock with this once, when we had to travel on a stool thanks to the kind-hearted stewardess. I think they are sharing with the drivers."* Others are detailing what they would have done in the place of the author: *"I would have waited at least an hour, and only after that I would have begun to suspect..."* Some users begin a personal discussion with others, talk rhetorically to the whole world: *"Everybody is strayed here? Maybe I came from the Mars, and this is not the Balkans here, but..."*

In total, there is a very diverse range of opinions, which tell much about the culture of the individuals. Changing of attitude is not characteristic in this debate, but with more and more comments, the situation becomes more nuanced. In my opinion, it is illuminating to share these experiences, because the overlook of the community's perceptions can help to process the events. By this, users can get feedback from the community they are living in, sometimes maybe they can understand better the other's point of view. That is why I think that this virtual part of the conflict was rather productive.

¹ It is quite weird to argue like this: how bad it is to disturb the employee who is playing during working time – I guess it is rather ironic, but this is hard to say exactly without the help of meta-communication.

3. 3. Continuous or repeating phenomena

The discussion about hitchhiking¹ also generates very many comments, because almost everybody has some kind of experience about this topic. The author of this entry writes about a very interesting conflict that he faced – more exactly, a misunderstanding, which turned into a disagreement. This situation is the opposite of those that usually happen. The author is a young Hungarian intellectual from Romania, who has very much experience in hitchhiking. So he knows that in Romania hitchhiking is considered rather a service than help. When he tries to hitchhike without money, he tells this to the driver before the drive. In several cases drivers were angry when they heard this, once it almost turned into battery, but in this story, the driver was upset because he felt piqued. His car is not a taxi, he said, and he does not understand the mentality that people take money from hitchhikers. His opinion was that those who are hitchhiking do not have money for train, so they need help. The traveller agrees with this perfectly, but the driver blames him for this misunderstanding, and advises him not to offer money for this kind of transport anymore. In this case, both parties have the same opinion, but because of the context, they don't know this about each other. In addition, the driver speaks Romanian, but he has a car with a foreign number. In the car they clarified the situation, with direct communication and axiomatic-deductive method (both base on their own conviction, and from this point they try to interpret the reality. The situation is cooperative from the beginning, and it is admittedly productive, because both parties can ascertain that they are not alone with their views.

In this case, the comments and stories of the users are more interesting than the initial story, because people start to discuss about hitchhiking itself. They note more aspects of this phenomenon, so the image of it becomes more nuanced.

15 people have the opinion that taking someone in the car is a favour, so it should be a principle not to take money for it. Some of them describe that they used to hitchhike a lot when they were students without money, but now they drive a car, so they always take passengers and don't take money for it. 4 people do not agree: they say that hitchhikers expect the free transport, so even if they do not pay, they should ask what they owe. Two people interpret this conceptual debate from a financial viewpoint: they say that they take money from hitchhikers not because they think they should, but because they also don't have much money for the travel. Among the last 8 comments there are analyzing, informational, storytelling, and comparing opinions. Someone writes: *"It is not necessary to pay with money. I paid once with a sandwich because the poor driver was very hungry and he couldn't find any fast food open. For a foreigner I paid once with a film, that takes place in Transylvania, and once I copied my own film to his memory stick. In addition, it is an unwritten rule that if your conversation is pleasant then you do not have to pay."* While these inventive paying methods are closer to the high-context culture, the conversation rule is also valid in the western countries. Hitchhiking means a favour there, and drivers usually decide to take someone if he is likeable. A user also writes that he takes hitchhikers when he is in the mood for talking, and another says: *"I don't take money, between Nagyszalonta and Nagyvárad, just*

¹ Together, for a world full of drivers who don't take money from hitchhikers. *Balkán Herald*, <http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=75> [15.11.2011] (the reference is also valid for all the quoted comments of this entry)

wave! If someone shows the printed version of this post, he is my guest for a coffee.” This attitude reflects that the user not just acts according to his conviction, but he tries to proclaim it. Another user also writes that he intentionally does not take old people, because they are hard to be convinced not to pay. So he feels injured when they consider him a profiteer.

Most of the users express that the western model is good, because there it is evident not to take money, but someone points out that in western cultures hitchhiking is not so prevalent: in eastern countries this custom is maintained by its service-type, but in the occident, even if they don't take money, it's less likely that they stop. All in all, I think that this discourse is obviously useful for all the participants, because they get to know other viewpoints and this may help to interpret the situations when they meet different behaviour.

3. 4. Conflict after event, in the virtual space

The entry titled *“Why is the jeep parking in the place reserved for disabled people? Just like that...”* presents a one-sided conflict, which generates a very personal discussion on the internet.¹ The author writes that she saw in the parking of a hypermarket, that a jeep stopped on the place reserved for people with handicap. A big family got out of it, talking loudly about the shopping list, when the author warned them about the parking. The father told very kindly that he knew about that, he thanked for the warning and added that they would not stay long. This case shows how the development of a conflict depends on cultures – if one party doesn't face the conflict, this makes the other one incapable too. The author considered this gesture a serious problem, so she was prepared to face a conflict, but the driver didn't even understand what the matter was. In his culture, the actions are rather determined by the personal relations and less by the written rules.

Furthermore, for the author this is a value-centred confrontation, while the driver interprets it as an interest-centred situation. So, he ends the situation by a formal arrangement, that nobody is angry with nobody. This is typical for the high-context cultures: important is to resolve the relations with the other people; the problems will be solved after that. From the point of view of the author, this is just a superficial cover-up of the situation, the important part, the problem was not solved. So the situation cannot really be considered productive for any of the parties.

In contrast, the following discussion on the Balkán Herald is more interesting in this case as well. From the 14 comments 10 users condemn the behaviour of the driver and they agree perfectly with the author. The other 4 comments are from the same user who condemns the condemners and says this is intolerance and prejudice regarding the jeep-drivers and the big families. Several users react very vehemently, there are some, who raise the idea of aggression: *“Because the words are of no use, their legs should be broken at least in two places, so they would become entitled and the problem would be solved. If the news got through to others, maybe they would end this habit – the fee doesn't help here, these people pay it from their vest-pocket.”* Others express their indignation by description: *“Probably there are all able-bodied people, just lazy pigs to go a bit further”*. Among the destructive comments, there is a constructive one too: someone describes how he used to proceed in such cases and how well this functions.

¹ *Balkán Herald*, <http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=70>

There is a user, who continuously contradicts the others and he confesses only after a few replies, that he is also disabled – but tries to see with the others' eyes. Finally, he concludes that in this dispute everybody is against him, just as in real life. This is interesting because people who contradicted him (sometimes maybe too tough) probably did not know that he was affected.

The discussion reflects that users consider tolerance an important value of western cultures, and the “everyone gets along as he can” mentality is a Balkanic (meaning not to be followed) way of existence.

This case represents an interesting example of the special situations in the virtual space: when users are talking in incognito, they don't know anything about each other, they also cannot know what kind of sensibilities they can hurt. It is also a question if there is a value-based or an interest-based dispute. For most of the users (especially those who are not affected in any way) it is a value-based discussion: they talk about principles. But the one, whose interests are concerned, doesn't want to enter in this kind of arguing at all. In this entry, the community is not mediating between the actors of the initial situation, but it has some tension-relieving role between the parties of the new conflict, especially between the disabled user and the others. During the discussion, there can be noticed some change in the attitude, which refers mostly to the tone of the comments. When the delicate subject arises, the comments become more explicit, more polite and less spontaneous.

Despite the occasionally tough tone of the debate, this entry can also be productive, people can learn not to judge too quickly, and some bring up concrete ideas to deal with situations of the same kind.

4. Cultural tendencies observed in the discussions

4. 1. Balkanic identity – horizontal and vertical borderlines

As I mentioned before, Romanian culture is somewhere between the individualistic and the collectivistic cultures. Both attitudes can be observed on the blog, but it is more characteristic that users are distancing themselves from both. One user expresses this in the following way: *It happened half a year ago in Dresden, that the last tram, after my 200 m Olympic sprint, closed its doors and left in front of me. (...) It is not good to reach the other extreme either. Herr O. – and maybe the Germans in general – respect the rules in a way that they often lose sight of the man (who should be served by the rules...). Compared to this, Mr. O. is an understanding archangel. Of course, just that he is Balkanic.*¹

According to my research, the users of the site travel to other countries once a year. In many cases, these experiences make them express their opinion. That explains why one of the most popular categories is about travelling. Many entries were inspired by travelling by bus, car, taxi or train, which is understandable: in these situations, people can observe the differences and compare one culture to another. In this category the Balkanic identity manifests itself, separated in horizontal space from the western culture's identity. The most commented entry is about travelling home from Germany to Romania. In this story, the bus was late and the author called the company. The driver

¹ The New Conquest a'la Transylvanian Transporter. *Balkán Herald*, <http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=37>

was very upset because he was “demanding” and had “all kinds of pretensions”. The author was outraged about the disrespectful tone of the driver. This dispute comes to prove the distancing between the western and non-western groups. From the 36 comments 17 are on the side of the author (they usually despise the “Balkan behaviour”), 13 on the other side (they despise the snobbery of those who travel in the world), and 6 are neutral.

Also in the travel category, there is another horizontal borderline, which separates the Hungarians living in Romania from the Hungarians living in Hungary. It is very usual that users put someone in a category, without knowing anything about him. This resulted in a conflict in an entry where one part of the users thought that the author lives in Hungary and started to attack him from this point.¹

The most typical examples reflect an identity, which can be defined by distancing from the other cultures. Not just from the so-called Balkanic, but from the western as well. Of course, there are groups which express their negative opinion about the other, but there is no model that could be followed. In general, the low-context cultures appear as positive just in comparison with the high-context ones.

The other phenomenon is the vertical borderline that can be observed in the category of services. By this, people separate themselves from the system that they live in. This is especially characteristic for Hungarians living in Romania, because their culture is a little bit more individualistic, than the Romanians', and they often cannot accept the relation-based, rule-circumventing (ergo Balkanic) solution of the problems. One user writes: “*In Romania the state's father-role was replaced by the state's stepfather-role. It is not a shame to steel from him, but a virtue. This damned popular attitude is anachronistic, or rather infantile in an age when the society is regulated by the other pole – the market.*”² More users express the same opinion, and this interface is very useful to deduce the tension of situations that cannot be changed. Looking at the entries from the category of services and bureaucracy, most of them reflect a customer-consciousness: the individual, who points out the system's weaknesses, can feel at least in moral superiority, especially when the members of his small community understand him. This can be a form of the fight against the authority, described by Foucault.³ The difference is that in this case the manifestation is directed neither to the head of the system, nor to the closest representative, but to the public. In this case, it is not excluded that the message gets to some of them.

In the same time, this community functions as a mediator, this can be observed in the case of entries written out of sudden indignation. There is a need for this, because writing on the blog is devoid of the traditional steps of publishing – anyone can be publicist after the registration. For the site, it is good to have traffic, so practically anything can appear that doesn't violate the rules. At the same time, readers react fastest to the things they do not agree with, so a community censorship takes effect.

¹ Hospitality in Csíksomlyó. *Balkán Herald*, <http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=35>

² The New Conquest a'la Transylvanian Transporter. *Balkán Herald*, <http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=37>

³ Michel Foucault: *A szubjektum és a hatalom* (The subject and the power), ed. Bókai et al.: *A posztmodern irodalomtudomány kialakulása* (The formation of post-modern literary studies) (Budapest: Osiris, 2002), 396–410.

Previously I wrote about the horizontal division of the community, but a hierarchy also exists between the users of the blog. On top of this hierarchy there is the administrator, who moderates the entries. He is followed by the registered members – among them the editors of the *Transindex* portal represent the highest level, the registered users can write entries and comments, upload photos. The users who are not registered, can only write comments, and there are users who can just read the content. Practically anyone in the world can join the community – there are no restrictions. In this case – in the world of web 2.0. – the opinion-forming effect of mass media is very complicated, because the public texts are created by the voice of the public. This is good for the portal, because they get free content, and for the users as well, because they get publicity.

4. 2. Linguistic identity

Another aspect of cultural identity is the expression of linguistic tendencies. The way the users express themselves generates a theme for discussions as well. This is a little bit more than the usual arguing about orthography on the web 2.0. interfaces: here the question is if it is acceptable to use Romanian words written with Hungarian spelling, or words that remind of the Szekler dialect, all these mixed in a way that cannot be called literary at all. Some users do not like this at all, for example, a user who comments the entry *Urdzsencia á la Khuzs*¹: “So, you also forgot to write in Hungarian there? But really: what’s the sense of it, that everyone tries to be funny by creating such a degenerate mix of standard and Szekler?” And the reply: “Who said that the Hungarian orthography is essential on this blog? (...) Just hold on, supporting the Hungarian orthography and read the *Új Magyar Szó* (New Hungarian Word) and the *Hargita Népe* (Nation of Hargita)², they write correctly and they don’t even try to be funny.” There are more arguments on both sides: a part of the users rejects the mixing of other languages in Hungarian, but there are some, who treat this issue more dynamically. They are of the opinion that the theme and the medium legitimize a more special use of the language. Unfortunately, in some cases it is hard to separate this special conceptual use from the mistakes.

Conclusions

The goal of my research was to explore the cultural tendencies among Hungarians from Romania that are present in the virtual space, and the way this community deals with the different situations resulted from cultural differences. These situations (often conflicts) are frequent in the daily life of the mentioned group, and the *Balkán Herald* is a good interface to share – and to examine – these experiences. The original objective of the site was to share the stories with others, but due to the negative image of the Balkan, it got a complaint-book function.

I have monitored the site from the beginning, so my first impressions, hypotheses were born before analyzing the content. I could expand and reconsider these

¹ The Romanian word *urgenta* (urgency) and the Romanian name of the city *Cluj* are written here with Hungarian spelling, all this together with a French formula.

<http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=55> [14.11.2011]

² Regional Hungarian newspapers

assumptions by the scientific methods. I tried to describe those differences that function as a basis for people's distancing from the Balkanic culture, and I tried to take into consideration the characteristics of online communication regarding this subject. Another issue was to observe the role of a community on such an interactive surface.

It was an interesting observation about the Balkanic-western opposition, that the low-context culture does not appear as a positive model, because of its impersonal, inhuman and consumption-oriented nature. However, it appears as a model in a latent, unvoiced way, in opposition with the negative traits of high-context culture. It is very hard to find a positive model in an explicit mode, and this can be special for the community, but for the medium as well.

It is also interesting that in spite of the negative attitude that regards the Balkans, the communication between the members also reflects the characteristics of high-context cultures. This can be the influence of the medium as well, but it still gives the impression of a less formal way of communication with strangers.

Furthermore, I assumed that the conflict mediating abilities of Hungarians from Romania are more effective, because usually, the more cultures we know, the more tolerant we are with others. But here I saw that those who travel to other countries and experience other ways of living, have much more pretensions regarding the culture they live in. I can explain this by the fact that it is easier to be tolerant with others and harder to accept our own culture, when we are aware of our own weaknesses. From the point of view of tolerance, the community has an important role, it can be compared in some way with those traditional societies where the community played the key role in mediating the conflicts. Of course, with many differences.¹

The research of the public shows similar proportions regarding the content in many aspects, but the answers to the more personal questions are sometimes surprising. Based on the responses, users visit the site for entertainment, but their favourite category is about scam stories. This is a little bit contradictory, because there is more fun in the pictures that usually belong to the Balkanic design category, and among the scam stories the complaining function is more evident. This may be because complaining can be a form of entertainment, especially when someone does it in a superior way. In this case, in addition to the moral satisfaction, the user can gain popularity.

Regarding the future of the blog, I thought earlier that the cultural differences in Transylvania can maintain this interface for a longer time (these things do not change from a day to another). The world of the internet changes faster, so the blog can decline rather because the medium of community blogs becomes obsolete. This oracle seems to be confirmed: now the structure of online communication is different, people reach the contents on personal channel. Today if someone has a blog, or reads a blog entry, he posts that on a community site and people comment it there, not at the original source. But probably the opinion of the public on this topic – as long as the theme is actual in a community – will find their way to be discussed, whatever channels are used.

¹ In his book, Augsburger illustrates the mediating role of traditional communities with different stories. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, 188-228.

Images from the site

The dustbin expressed in future time, *Balkán Herald*
<http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=50>



Note: “furat” means “stolen” in Romanian.
Piata M. Viteazu nr. 3-4 is the address where the dustbin belongs.

The local crossing, *Balkán Herald*
<http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=62>



Break off your hands! *Balkán Herald*
<http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=111>



Note: the text written in Romanian means: May the hands of the thief be broken!
The fact that Romanian people are usually religious also contributes to this curse.

Asphalt tango, *Balkán Herald*
<http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=143>



Facefood, Lady Gaga on the manicure table and Others, *Balkán Herald*
<http://balkanherald.transindex.ro/?p=240>



Note: There are texts in Romanian and Hungarian too, but the most Balkanic aspect of this photo is the text written in Romanian (with big letters): *Do not try if you don't buy!* This refers to the negative attitude of many people who work in customer service.