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ARTICLE

"For me, Germany is here." German "Superiority," Migration, and the Promise of a Better Society in Transylvania, Romania

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Abstract
The article engages the recent literature on whiteness and East-West ethnic hierarchies in Europe with an Eastern European perspective. We analyze how German ethnicity expresses symbolic superiority in a multicultural region of Romania by tracing how non-ethnic Germans affiliate with the local German minority and sustain German associational life. Such dynamics unfold within institutions of the German minority but are amplified by mobility to Germany, transnational ties, and significant German investments. We focus on how a notion of a "better society" derives not only from regional economic development due to German investments and local German political leadership, but especially from civic initiatives associated with ethnic German minority actors. We thus show how such hierarchies of superiority become articulated from below, as non-Germans attach worth, opportunity, and social improvement to a presumed more progressive "German societal model."

Keywords: migration; ethnic hierarchies; whiteness; affiliative ethnicity; social mobility; German minority

Introduction

August 2023, Saschiz, a small locality in southern Transylvania, Romania. The 33rd *Sachsentreffen*, the annual meeting of Transylvanian Saxons in Romania, brought a joyful atmosphere in this otherwise very calm locality, which is also known as *Keisd* in German and *Szászkézd* in Hungarian, with *Blaskapelle* — traditional German music bands and *Tanzengruppen* — youth dance groups, celebrating German ethnicity and culture. Ever since the early 1990s, when most Romanian Germans migrated *en masse* to Germany, such events continued in spite of a dwindling number of ethnic Germans. As in previous years, not all protagonists are Germans, as they used to be, but mostly Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma, who reenact German culture in Romania. By participating in such events, non-Germans not just help enact a vibrant "German" associational life, they also sustain a notion of perceived "German superiority." This takes place in southern Transylvania, a multicultural region that experienced a massive migration to Germany before and after the fall of the communist regime, followed by a sizable return migration and large-scale German economic investments that changed the local and regional economic landscape.

The article engages the recent literature on East-West ethnic hierarchies in Europe, more particularly debates on how white Eastern Europeans, as "peripheral whites" (Narkowicz 2023; Lewicki 2023), adapt to Western European ethnic hierarchies and notions of Western and "white"

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superiority (Drnovšek and Debnár 2021; Parutis 2011). While most studies discuss such ethnic hierarchies in Western Europe, this article takes an Eastern European perspective (Narkowicz, Gawlewicz, and Pędziwiatr 2025). The analysis centers on Romania's German ethnic minority, which was historically considered not just local but also "Western" (Cercel 2019) — an ambivalent social and cultural local understanding that remained pervasive, embedded in everyday meanings, historical narratives, and practices of distinction. Instead of looking at how broader ethnic hierarchies and norms of whiteness are instantiated in different social interactions among people of different ethnicities, we focus on how non-German urban and middle-class people, by participating in social activism, enact seemingly unquestioned norms of "Western superiority"[1] that translate locally into norms of individual success and promises for a better society. While these articulations relate to unequal relations and hierarchies between Europe's "center" and "periphery," migration, and locally reproducing institutions, focusing on valorizations of social activism, we thus adopt an "inside-out" perspective embedding ethnic hierarchies in social contexts, systems of value, and social identities (White and Grabowska 2019).

Eastern Europeans and Ethnic Hierarchies in Migration Contexts

When Eastern European migrants moved to Western Europe, they interacted with different worldviews and hierarchies of ethnicity centering around norms of belonging and exclusion (Parmar 2020; Belloni 2019; Münz 2007) that societies of destination hold and communicate outwardly and implicitly (Fox 2013; Zolberg and Woon 1999). Recent studies discuss how Western European hierarchies center on the notion of "whiteness" and "Western," scrutinizing how Eastern European migrants position themselves in an ambivalent (Lewicki 2023) and subordinate position as "peripheral whites" (Parutis 2011; Fox et al. 2015; Narkowicz 2023). Whiteness is understood not mainly in relation to phenotypic characteristics, but primarily in relation to privilege (Alba 1985), culture (Garner 2006, 2015), social status, and class (Garner 2015; McDermott and Ferguson 2022). In different national contexts, whiteness centers around certain cultural tropes, such as "development and modernity" in France (Paraschivescu 2020), competitiveness in the UK (Fox et al. 2015), Nordic "non-modern" and "Nordic exceptionalism" in Denmark (Garner 2015), and "civilization" and "peacefulness" in Finland (Rastas 2016).

While such notions of whiteness define belonging and inclusion, inequality further reveals and strengthens the maintenance of ethnic boundaries and distinctions between migrants and locals (Erel et al. 2016; Zolberg and Woon 1999). Eastern European migrants often experience public hostility and labor status degradation (Fox et al. 2015, 730). They are often "darkened" in media discourses when they are regarded as Oriental, uncivilized, or unhealthy (Narkowicz 2023), associated with crime and "backwardness" (Fox et al. 2012). Host societies also employ hierarchies of preference that allow certain migrants to cross ethnic boundaries (Zolberg and Woon 1999). Migrants can also refuse to accept the indelible inferior status that they are relegated to, and they can choose to blur or cross ethnic boundaries through the embrace of dominant values and norms (Fox et al. 2015), expressing multifaceted ethnic identities, assimilating and or trying to downplay ethnic markers or boundaries (Becker 2015). Eastern Europeans' strategies to overcome stigmatization and "become invisible" include efforts to display them as "being modern" (Narkowicz 2023: 2), "competitive," "industrious," and "flexible" (Paraschivescu 2020; Drnovšek Zorko and Debnár 2021), conforming to dominant neoliberal precepts (Harvey 2005) and trying to become "culturally similar." In France, Romanians invest in fashion so as to be seen as "too well dressed to be East European" (Paraschivescu 2020: 4). Often boundaries can be reinforced by migrants themselves, reflecting differentiated power asymmetries between the host society and migrants of different backgrounds (Runfors 2021; Hagendoorn 1995). Having an "in-between" and ambivalent status, Eastern Europeans may tend to label other migrants in dominant stigmatising terms (Fox 2013). In the UK, Romanians differentiate themselves from 'inferior Roma' while Hungarians develop racist attitudes towards other racial minorities (Fox et al. 2012). Poles use racist language to reaffirm their

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white and European identity, whilst some Latvians have difficulties in accepting the authority of their "Black" managers (Parutis 2011). Even when incorporating migrants and cultural elements that were once considered different, boundaries can shift and exclude others while still prescribing changing dominant norms and values (Lulle et al. 2017; Fox et al. 2015; Quijano 2007).

Authors such as Aníbal Quijano (2007) assert that the current hierarchies of "ethnic preference" and structures of discrimination that are today labelled as "racial," "ethnic," "anthropological," and "national" stem from the colonial structures of power built up globally by the ruling classes of several Western European countries and their Euro-Northern American descendants in the past centuries. The ideas of superiority of the dominant Europeans over colonized societies were mutated into a system where individuals were placed in a hierarchical relationship of structurally biologically superior and inferior groups (Quijano 2007). These views endure today both in a visible as well as an invisible way in norms, institutions, and systems of practice (Parmar 2020; Quijano 2007; Garner 2007), even in multicultural regimes where difference is recognized and celebrated (Simpson et al. 2011). Using this interpretive framework, Eastern European migrants and stayers can be seen both in Eastern and Western Europe as relating to an older and prevailing East-West hierarchy of value and civilization (Todorova 1997), which is rearticulated today through processes of European integration, migration, and globalization. In this respect, our research brings a perspective from Eastern Europe, expanding the scholarship on East-West ethnic hierarchy by calling attention to contexts and instances where such hierarchy does not emerge only from migration experiences. We show how Germanness and German ethnicity become reenacted and instantiated as Western and superior not only in relation to broader national or East-West hierarchies, but also through a distinctly local and regional idiom that gains traction via "bottom-up" social activism, mobilizing notions of the common good, such as community participation, local tradition, and local history, while projecting promises of future worth and success.

Research Methodology and Analytical Lenses

We analyze this process of reenactment of German culture and re-assessment of ethnic hierarchy in a multi-ethnic context where ethnic boundaries were historically salient and where German ethnicity entailed an elevated social status (Verdery 1983). This space underwent a process of ethnic and cultural homogenization throughout communism and during the transition to democracy, due to state-driven policies (Verdery 1985) and ethnic migration (Brubaker 1998). Within this context, ethnic hierarchies and the superior status of German ethnicity in Transylvania are reassessed and amplified through new forms of cultural performance, selective heritage revival, and social activism. In order to analyze the process of reassessing German superiority and of reenacting German culture, we rely on a constructivist perspective on ethnicity, where ethnicity is not shaped by primordial characteristics but is constructed socially, negotiated, and maintained via membership in social networks and groups (Brubaker 2006). Seen through a constructivist lens, the participation of non-ethnic Germans becomes part of the broader social processes through which German identity and culture are enacted, stabilized, and rendered meaningful. According to Max Weber, members of ethnic groups recognize that they have a common linkage and shared identity based on the 'belief in group affinity' (Weber 1998, 20) due to a series of similarities existing between them, whilst Brubaker (2006, 46) discusses affinity and affiliation as principles of ethnic identification, involving similarity and attraction between individuals. Brubaker has furthermore developed an interactionist perspective on identity, in which membership in networks and groups forms the basis of individual identification (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Drawing on the interactionist perspective, ethnic affiliation relies on the "elasticity" of cultural practices and institutional membership, allowing the adoption of language and practices, permeation of institutions and groups, and affording claims of belonging through practice and immersion, without ethnic ancestry (Jiménez 2010). We link this in our analysis with the Social Identity Theory (SIT) of Tajfel (1974), where individuals seek to position themselves within meaningful social categories, and they act to

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maintain or enhance the value of these memberships through strategies of identification and continuous boundary drawing. Individuals seek to belong to groups that are valued and respected in the social and ethnic hierarchy because they provide access to a positive social identity and resources (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Through the lenses of this theory, we treat Germanness here as a high-status social category towards which nonethnic Germans seek proximity and closeness to secure a more positive social identity and tangible advantages.

The research was carried out through long-term fieldwork consisting of ethnographic research and interviews conducted in several southern Transylvanian localities with a certain degree of multiethnic composition (2 urban localities and 3 villages located in the central part of Romania), where we repeatedly returned over the following years. Between 2016 and 2018, we spent one to two months/year conducting interviews focusing on experiences of ethnicity and how this intersected with processes of migration and return. This was followed by another three months of fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2023. In the first years, we focused on Sebeș (also known as *Mühlbach* in German and *Szászsebes* in Hungarian), an industrial town of 30,000 people, with a multi-ethnic composition where ethnic Romanians represent the majority, alongside an increasingly mobile Roma population and a diminishing ethnic German community. In 2016 and 2017, we shifted our focus to Sibiu (*Hermannstadt* in German, *Nagyszeben* in Hungarian), a university city of 150 thousand, widely regarded as the cultural and religious center of Transylvanian Saxons, one of the several ethnic German groups that live in Romania, known for its vibrant cultural life and role as a hub for German investment in the region. After 2021, we focused on a series of villages depending on agriculture and small-scale tourism, which are located in the same region.

We draw our analysis from 46 semi-structured and unstructured interviews (selected from a larger pool of interviews) and on participant observation conducted with non-migrants (14), return migrants (18), including first- and second-generation returnees as well as temporary returnees, migrants who relocated to Romania from Germany or Austria (7), individuals with study mobility experiences abroad (6), and one participant with limited seasonal migration experience. All interviewees were actively or peripherally involved in German-speaking institutional, cultural, religious, political, or civic networks or had connections and ties to German-speaking networks. In terms of ethnic background, 19 interviewees identified as ethnic Romanians, 16 as Romanian Germans (who identified as Transylvanian Saxons),[2] 3 as having mixed Romanian German backgrounds, 6 as Germans from Germany, 1 as Austrian, and 1 as Roma. The gender distribution includes 25 men and 21 women, spanning age groups from 18–24 to 80–90, with a concentration in the 25–44 age range. Most participants were highly educated, with the majority holding university degrees or being enrolled in higher education, often in German-language tracks or institutions. At the same time, the sample also includes individuals with high school education (4), vocational training (1), and students currently in tertiary education (2), allowing for a degree of educational diversity within an otherwise highly educated group.

We conducted thematic analysis of the interview transcripts with the aim of identifying the key mechanisms shaping this process and examining how these dynamics influenced individuals' integration into the German cultural framework, their patterns of social interaction, and the transformation of their identity and aspirations, closely informed by our long-term ethnographic engagement in the field. In a first step, we carried out open coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes, focusing on the concrete practices, trajectories, and institutional pathways through which participants entered German-speaking institutions and became embedded in German minority associational life. This inductive phase allowed us to identify recurring processes such as language acquisition, institutional participation, volunteering, religious conversion, and civic engagement, as well as the accumulation of social ties, credentials, and symbolic recognition.

In a second, iterative step, these empirically grounded categories were analytically refined through a theoretically informed reading of the material, drawing on constructivist approaches to ethnicity, affiliative ethnicity, Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, and Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural and social capital. Rather than imposing predefined codes, we used theory as a sensitizing

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framework to interpret how affiliative practices translated into embodied forms of belonging, status repositioning, and moral evaluation. This abductive movement between data and theory allowed us to situate individual narratives within broader institutional dynamics and to connect micro-level practices of affiliation with meso-level organizational structures and macro-level debates on ethnic hierarchy, Western superiority, and social mobility.

The List of Interviews Included in the Analysis is Available in Appendix Table A1

The formally listed interviews represent only a portion of the material generated in the field and were complemented by numerous other interviews and informal conversations embedded in everyday encounters. These data emerged from a prolonged ethnographic presence and sustained participant observation across German-speaking institutions, organizations, and community events in this region. We examined how non-Germans, Romanians, Hungarians, Roma, and individuals from mixed Romanian-German families came to affiliate with German identity and participate in minority associations. For this article specifically, we analyze only a selected corpus that illuminates how aspirations tied to German-language education, institutional membership, and volunteering reshape interlocutors' sense of belonging, status, and life prospects. Our analysis follows this process across three domains: the acquisition of German as a status-bearing resource, sustained participation in minority associational life, and efforts to extend German-associated norms into wider public institutions. In the following, we first describe the institutional setting of the German minority in Romania and how it evolved in the post-socialist period, and then we unpack the two main processes and forms of enacting Germanness that we have identified — individual pursuit of success and a collective promise for a better society.

Mass Migration and the Challenges Faced by the German Minority in Romania

Romania had a sizable German minority of approximately 750 thousand members before 1940 (Wagner 2000), most living in Transylvania and Banat, the Western and central parts of the country. This minority had historically acquired a high ethnic prestige (Cercel 2019; Budeancă 2016), and they founded, inhabited, and participated in the construction and development of some of Romania's most developed cities. A large part migrated mostly towards West Germany during and after the Second World War, whilst a second large migratory movement occurred during the late period of communism, followed by a third wave that unfolded until 1996 (Wagner 2000). The migration was brokered by West Germany through the *Aussiedler* policy, which favored the resettlement of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2002). From around 340 thousand Germans living in Romania in 1977 (Trașcă and Anghel 2018), in 2022, there remained only 22 thousand, mostly elderly (INS 2023). Migration to Germany became widespread, encompassing all types of ethnic groups and social categories. In 2024, Germany was home to approximately 909 thousand Romanian citizens, reflecting the significant scale of Romanian migration in the post-communist period (Statistisches Bundesamt 2024). These migrations are well reflected in southern Transylvania, where migration was predominantly oriented towards Germany already during communism, expanding and consolidating afterwards (Wagner 2000). Germany remained attractive throughout the years, and people from all strata of society migrated there for longer or shorter periods of time (Anghel et al. 2025). This produced far-reaching consequences, entailing the circulation of goods and remittances as well as social remittances such as changes in material culture and consumption, labor standards centring on quality and decent labor, and ideas on desired living standards. The almost complete loss of the German minority in the region and the migration of many Romanians were then followed by the establishment of wide and dense transnational connections to Germany as family transnational ties, businesses, and social connections intensified.

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Given the large-scale emigration of ethnic Germans, the existence of minority associations was at risk after the collapse of state socialism. German schools, which were once highly prestigious and a centerpiece of the ethnic German minority community life, were closing or were reorganizing due to declining student numbers (Oltean 2017). The Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession (to which most Transylvanian Saxons/ ethnic Germans in the region belonged) lost most of its worshippers due to emigration and had to abandon churches in villages and reorganize parishes and church administration in neighboring towns and cities from which it would radiate back and reach out to the pockets that still retained small communities of Lutheran worshippers (Oltean 2019). The Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania (DFGR/FDGR) — the cultural and political association of the German minority — that was established just after the Romanian Revolution in 1989 — was struggling to survive in the 1990s as it witnessed the rapid depletion of the ethnic German community (Oltean 2018). Many analysts predicted the outright extinction of ethnic communities and of German culture in Romania (Dowling 1991) and the leaders that coordinated the reorganization of the ethnic German political and community in life in Romania were facing a painful perspective in the early days of democracy as they struggled to give the German minority a platform and a voice, whilst facilitating the departure of those who wanted to leave the country.

Things have not been easy for ethnic Germans during communism. While rhetorically Romania paid lip service to the protection and recognition of ethnic minorities during the communist regime, it has been silently closing state schools where ethnic Germans could study in German (Paul 2013), and was harassing and extorting ethnic Germans who applied for a definitive departure to Germany, as vividly illustrated in the documentary "Trading Germans" (Georgescu 2014). Ironically, after 1989, there emerged favorable conditions for enhancing minority rights and institutions, including for ethnic Germans, just as many of them were preparing to leave the country.

The transition to democracy led to the adoption of extended collective rights for ethnic minorities and to the creation of new institutions meant to protect and safeguard the multicultural fabric of the Romanian society (Salat and Novák 2015). In the post-1989 democratic context, German-language education received renewed state support and funding, becoming a central element of Romania's multicultural policy (Oltean 2018). Similar developments took place in other Central and Eastern European countries, where countries such as Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, which harbored ethnic German communities, promoted the political and civil representation of ethnic Germans and reestablished German education with German state support (Wolff 2001). In Romania, this revival was possible due to the continued existence of German schools within the public educational system, which, although affected by emigration and communist re-organization policies, continued to function across towns, villages, and working-class neighborhoods. With the out-migration of ethnic Germans, German schools progressively opened up to non-Germans. Similarly, the Lutheran Church underwent a process of stabilization following a prolonged period of institutional fragility. This shift was largely facilitated by the religious conversion of German-speaking Romanians, as well as the integration of worshippers from ethnically mixed backgrounds (Oltean 2019). A parallel dynamic can be observed in the youth branches of the German Democratic Forum, which have experienced renewed activity due to the increasing participation of non-Germans. These institutions, rather than being static carriers of a frozen local tradition, have engaged in a process of structural and cultural adaptation, accommodating to shifting demographic realities. Consequently, German culture in this setting is reconfigured as a dynamic and relational field, no longer reproduced solely within the local German community but continuously reshaped through acts of appropriation, performance, and reinvention by non-German actors, most notably Romanians, alongside ethnic Hungarians and Roma. This dynamic engagement highlights the fluid and negotiated nature of cultural transmission and ethnic reproduction, where ethnicity is not only inherited but also reshaped through interaction and new forms of belonging (Botea 2017; Stroe 2017a; Oltean 2018). In the following sections, we will shortly explore and examine how and why non-Germans entered these institutions, capturing their personal motivations and analyzing the effects of their involvement.

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German Organizations, Ethnic Affiliation, and Situated Ethnicity

After the collapse of communism, the associative life of the German minority in Romania had to reinvent and regroup itself after almost half a century of lacking autonomous institutions (Verdery 1985). The revival of German identity, language, and culture did not go smoothly, and neither went unnoticed in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. There was stirring criticism and fear of German revisionism in Poland (Sword 1999) and Czechia (Cordell and Wolff 2005). Meanwhile, in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia, post-1989 reconciliation initiatives, supported by German bilateral aid, facilitated both economic recovery and cultural revival for both remaining ethnic German minorities as well as for wider communities, which benefited from investments in local infrastructure and education (Wolff 2001). In Czechia, authorities implemented compensation measures for ethnic Germans and strengthened German cultural associations, whilst in Hungary, democratization combined with substantial German investment enhanced the prestige of the German language and reinvigorated ethnic German identity (Wolff & Cordell 2003). Romania's case, while similarly shaped by German and domestic support for minority institutions, differed in two key respects. One is the absence of major historical grievances between the two countries, and the second is the prominent involvement of non-Germans in revitalizing German associational life, an engagement which is far less visible elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, cities such as Sibiu (*Hermannstadt* in German) and, to a certain extent, Sebeș (*Mühlbach* in German), where we conducted our fieldwork, became increasingly branded and marketed as distinctly "German" or "Saxon" cultural spaces, reinforcing their symbolic value within both local and transnational imaginaries.

The involvement of non-Germans in local German institutions became possible under conditions where linguistic competence in German extended well beyond the ethnic German community. After 1989, the education system in the German language — a feature of the Romanian multicultural policies — has substantially expanded in the region, with the opening of new educational units, including private ones, starting with kindergarten, primary, secondary, vocational schools, high schools, and university tracks. In 2010 alone, there were more than 5 thousand pupils studying in German in the Sibiu County alone (Manta-Klemens 2010), whilst by 2023–2024 the number of pupils enrolled at the national level in public schools and kindergartens in the German language surpassed the size of the whole Romanian German minority (DFGR/FDGR 2024). Participation in German-language schools familiarized many non-German youths with the cultural repertoire of the Transylvanian Saxons, but entry into voluntary organizations provided a more assertive mode of affiliation and belonging.

In Sibiu, the youth branch of the German Forum is now composed predominantly of non-Germans who engage in Saxon dance groups, organize exchanges with German youth organizations, and participate in the political and cultural life of the minority. This movement from passive cultural exposure to active engagement reflects what Brubaker conceptualizes as the dynamic and situational quality of ethnic identification (Brubaker et al. 2006). These young people enact what Jiménez (2010) terms *affiliated ethnicity*: a voluntary, practice-based alignment with a minority heritage perceived as valuable, prestigious, or civically meaningful. Linguistic practices reinforce this affiliation process. As youths move from classrooms and organizations into broader social environments, many insert German lexical items into Romanian conversations or switch momentarily to German. These fluid forms of code-switching in daily interactions signal not only some form of playful cosmopolitanism but also an embodied familiarity with the symbolic repertoire of the German milieu.

Building on these dynamics of organizational belonging, Alexandru, an ethnic Romanian heading the Forum's youth branch, a graduate of the most prestigious high school with instruction in German in Sibiu, worked with the IfA (Germany's Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, active in Sibiu and across Romania) cultural managers to build organizational capacity and organize the membership base of the youth branch of the Democratic Forum. Their civic-oriented projects

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became key sites of coproduced heritage, where youths did not merely sustain the cultural life of the German minority but actively reinterpreted it through contemporary forms of engagement. For Alexandru and his peers, such involvement fostered an affective and embodied attachment to Saxon cultural repertoires, extending earlier modes of linguistic and institutional affiliation into practices of performance and heritage-making. In Sibiu, these "Germanized" young people now reenact longstanding Saxon traditions such as *Maifest* or winter dance balls, which have themselves been institutionalized and commodified after the fall of communism as elements of local identity (Stroe 2017a; Cercel 2015). They participate in cultural festivals and annual reunions of Transylvanian Saxons across Romania and Germany, positioning themselves as carriers of this heritage. As Alexandru noted, "we are proud to wear the traditional Transylvanian Saxon attire and show it at festivals and celebrations and take this heritage further." For others, joining these groups also functioned as a form of social positioning. Radu, another Forum member and graduate of the German High School, described his entry into the activities of the Youth Forum as a socially recognized accomplishment: "My girlfriend at that time joined the Saxon folk dance groups, and she brought me with her […] I enjoyed it, and I continued to attend even after we were no longer a couple. Later, my mother was extremely proud to learn that I joined this group." His involvement exemplifies how youths navigate and appropriate a historically privileged ethnic milieu, accruing social capital and symbolic legitimacy through participation in its associational life. Participation in these activities allows non-ethnic Germans to achieve symbolic proximity to a historically prestigious group, thereby securing recognition, distinction, and access to social and cultural capital. We build here on the Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel (1974), who emphasizes that social identity is sustained through everyday practices of categorization and comparison, whereby boundaries between "us" and "others" are continuously produced and reaffirmed. However, in this context, rather than signaling ethnic assimilation, these dynamics reflect a strategic and context-dependent form of identification, in which Germanness becomes a symbolic resource mobilized within specific organizational and interactional settings. Radu's account illustrates how affiliation generates emotional significance and value attached to membership, generating a form of positive differentiation, as Tajfel and Billig (1974) show in their work on categorical boundary making and ingroup preferences. Through this process, the German-speaking youth acquired cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), materialized in linguistic competence, institutional credentials, and dense social ties forged through youth clubs, charity events, and communal festivities, resources that were simultaneously valued because they indexed membership in a locally high-status social category and thus contributed to a more positively valued social identity (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1986).

As these newly affiliated entrants accumulated recognition, visibility, and legitimacy within German minority institutions, their involvement increasingly exceeded individual trajectories of advancement and began to reshape the organizational practices, civic orientations, and public-facing activities of these institutions themselves. Moreover, over time, this mode of cultural stewardship generated new forms of institutional mobility. Some youth members translated their affiliation efforts into paid administrative and leadership roles within the German Forum. Some moved even further into this milieu by converting to the Lutheran Church, which they viewed as more progressive, community-oriented, and socially engaged than the Orthodox Church. Amalia, an ethnic Romanian and graduate of the German High School in Sibiu, exemplifies this deepening affiliation. Initially Orthodox, she became involved in the Evangelical Youth Association, and, influenced by both the German-speaking environment of her school and the more dialogical religious teachings encountered in Lutheran religion classes, decided to prepare for confirmation in the Lutheran Church. Her preparation resembled a rite of passage, requiring participation in activities and visits to symbolic sites of the Lutheran community, each yielding tokens needed for the final ceremony. As Amalia explained, confirmation required sustained commitment over time: "I attended classes once every two weeks. We studied the Bible, learned the catechism, and had to know the Creed and other basic notions necessary for confirmation." This formal instruction was

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inseparable from practical engagement in congregational life, as "you had to go to church services two or three times, attend the youth club meetings several times, and take part in women's circles where elderly women would crochet or engage in other activities." These obligations extended beyond religious instruction into collective charitable initiatives embedded in the German minority's associational life. Amalia recalled that "every year, a month before Christmas, we would meet at the house of Priest Johann and make gingerbread houses, which were later sold at the Christmas bazaar organized by the German Forum," emphasizing that "the money raised was used to buy Christmas gifts for children." Through such routinized participation, religious socialization became inseparable from civic engagement, volunteering, and intergenerational sociability, embedding Lutheran affiliation within a broader moral economy of community involvement and care. Amalia's entrance into the Lutheran Church is not singular, as half of her class in her generation decided to undergo confirmation, reflecting a broader pattern. They acquired and practiced traditions associated with the ethnic German habitus in Transylvania, thus internalizing the cultural capital embedded in these practices (Bourdieu 1986). Through this process, the German-speaking youth acquired cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), materialized here in the form of knowledge, credentials, and social ties through youth clubs, charity events, and communal festivities, and they were recognized as members of the Lutheran and German-speaking communities. At a wider level, in Tajfel's (1974) terms, these forms of capital did not merely enhance individual opportunities but stabilized Germanness as a socially meaningful and positively evaluated category through which affiliation became desirable and self-reinforcing.

What warrants emphasis, however, is not only that *Germanness* was reinforced as a valued mode of identification but that this reinforcement depended on its continued attainability by non-ethnic Germans through sustained practices of affiliation, learning, and participation, rendering *Germanness* an achieved rather than an ascribed status. This was made possible by German minority institutions, which extended recognition to such committed non-ethnic participants by effectively conferring a form of "honorary" ethnicity. This recognition elevates entrants' symbolic standing and legitimizes their capacity to acquire, embody, and mobilize the cultural capital required to navigate the institutional, cultural, and moral worlds of the German minority.

This evolution aligns with the broader shift within the German Forum toward engaging non-German constituencies and is equally visible in the transformation of the Lutheran Church, which has gradually assumed a dual institutional identity, acting at once as both a religious organization as well as a civic-cultural actor embedded in the everyday life of the community by cultivating an outward-looking and socially responsive profile. It initiated educational programs in local neighborhoods, launched the "Green Friday" farmers' market in Huet Square (one of the historical squares of Sibiu), and developed a wide range of social initiatives, ranging from hot-meal delivery for the elderly to community gardens, fundraising campaigns, and seasonal activities for children. Such practices reposition the Church as a mediator between heritage, welfare provision, and civic participation, reflecting what scholars of post-socialist societies describe as the refunctionalization of religious institutions in contexts where state capacities remain uneven, and community needs are increasingly diversified (Zrinščak 2011).

Furthermore, this civic reorientation of the Lutheran church went in parallel with the church acting as a strategic node within wider transnational circuits, mobilizing flows of volunteers, interns, and civil-society actors from Germany, Austria, and other European contexts. These recurrent movements, ranging from circular mobility to short-term, project-based engagements, have fostered cross-border cooperation, social activism, and forms of civil-society brokerage. Through these exchanges, the Lutheran Church became more than a local religious actor; it functioned as a transnational civic infrastructure that circulated people, practices, and resources while consolidating a recognizable repertoire of "German" civic virtues consisting of discipline, reliability, and community-oriented engagement within the local public sphere. In Tajfel's terms, the Church helped anchor Germanness as a positively valued social category, making its associated

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norms available as a standard of evaluation that extended beyond the ethnic German community (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Enacting Superiority and the Promise of a Better Society

The idea of a "better society" associated with Germanness did not remain confined to the boundaries of the German community or German speakers. Rather, it has progressively scaled up and out, becoming a regional repertoire of evaluation and aspiration in Sibiu and other localities in southern Transylvania. In a context where, as Brubaker et al. (2006) argue, everyday life in Transylvania is not organized around acute ethnic boundaries, ethnic difference nonetheless becomes salient in specific institutional arenas and symbolic moments. Here, multi-ethnic heritage is not experienced as everyday tension but mobilized as a valued resource, a source of local pride and identity. Within this repertoire, Germanness operates as a high-status social category (Tajfel and Turner 1986) to which non-Germans can affiliate (Jiménez 2010), and as a model of "how things should work" institutionally.

This model becomes most visible at the intersection of economic transformation and local governance. Large German industrial investments in cities such as Sibiu, Sebeș, and Brașov (all located in southern Transylvania) have reshaped regional labor markets, anchoring transnational production networks. In 2022, roughly half of all employees in Sibiu County's fifty largest firms worked in German enterprises, primarily in the automotive sector, whilst many others were integrated into German-linked supply chains (Turnul Sfatului 2022). The region became an important manufacturing hub for the automotive industry in Central and Eastern Europe, literally generating a regional economic revival after the dissolution of the state-run industrial capacities built during communism. These dynamics reinforced local perceptions that German capital is synonymous with prosperity and developmental advantage. At the same time, such economic ecosystems remain unevenly distributed, concentrated around university cities and far less present in smaller towns or rural areas where employment opportunities are more limited.

The political field represents another key site where this symbolic hierarchy has been translated into institutional form. The Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania, founded after 1989 as an umbrella organization for the political representation of ethnic Germans, participates in elections and articulates the cultural and political interests of the community (Dragoman 2013), within a broader multicultural governance framework that guarantees representation and cultural recognition for Romania's 19 recognized minorities (Salat 2021). Whilst being the second largest ethnic political formation in the country, it did not manage to build the same political clout as the political formation representing the ethnic Hungarian community, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR). However, the 2000 local elections in Sibiu marked a turning point and changed the political status of the Democratic Forum. Voters rejected the clientelism and perceived inefficiency of mainstream Romanian parties such as PNL and PSD, in favor of the Democratic German Forum (DFGR/FDGR), which they voted in to run the local administration, explicitly endorsing attributes that they associated with the German minority, such as administrative competence, industriousness, and consistency (Dragoman 2013; Stroe 2011). They elected Klaus Iohannis, the Democratic Forum candidate as mayor, and pushed the Forum to become one of the most important political forces in the local council. The following electoral cycles confirmed and enhanced the political clout of the Forum and extended the electoral success to other German-speaking municipalities, turning the Democratic Forum into an influential regional political party. In terms of Social Identity Theory, this electoral realignment can be read as a collective strategy of status re-positioning (Tajfel and Turner 1986), aligning the city's political leadership with a minority perceived as "higher status" and "more Western," which offered local residents a route to a more positive social identity and a way out from the grim years of the first transition decade. The Democratic German Forum strategically capitalized on this symbolic capital, presenting itself as a governance-oriented actor, distinct from the volatility and corruption associated with

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mainstream party politics (Zamfira 2013). This was not merely a change of political preferences and party alternation but a broader transformation of local political culture, in which pragmatic, performance-based governance began to outweigh ideological and ethnic logics (Dragoman 2013; Zamfira and Dragoman 2009). By linking administrative efficiency to regional economic growth and institutional modernization, the Forum contributed to institutionalizing Germanness as a template for "good governance." The development of the city, the betterment of everyday life, and the status upscaling of the local community when the city of Sibiu became European Capital of Culture in 2007, enshrined in the local imaginary the allegedly superior model of governance institutionalized by DFGR/FDGR (Dragoman 2008), leading the German Forum to capitalize on these achievements and extend its influence to other localities. The Forum's capacity to link quality governance with regional economic growth and institutional modernization significantly strengthened its legitimacy and political capital and enabled electoral victories in Sibiu and neighboring townships across successive electoral cycles, gradually extending its influence throughout Sibiu County and into parts of north-west and south-west Romania. In this process, non-German voters, together with segments of the local social and economic elites, through their electoral support, have aligned themselves with the symbolic and institutional repertoire associated with Germanness, embodied by the DFGR and publicly framed in terms of administrative efficiency, probity, and Western-oriented governance. By endorsing and legitimizing this repertoire at the ballot box, they have helped diffuse and institutionalize a particular vision of a "better society" that is ethnically coded yet regionally shared.[3]

Beyond participation in elections, sustained support for the DFGR and active civil engagement of the Lutheran Church, civil society in southern Transylvania has been significantly shaped by a dense network of associations linked to the German minority acting in different smaller cities and villages. While the Forum and the Lutheran Church remain central, a wider ecosystem of German-based activism and cultural initiatives has emerged, extending the reach of Germanness beyond ethnic boundaries. These spaces enact what Brubaker et al. (2006) describe as *performed ethnicity*, visible in settings where ethnic difference becomes momentarily salient, even in an everyday environment otherwise marked by low ethnic tension. Within these arenas, Germanness functions as a resource and a repertoire to which non-Germans can affiliate (Jiménez 2010), and through which local actors articulate a vision of a "better society."

One such initiative was the "Burgberg"[4] indie music festival, launched by a group of young people from the Forum in a former Saxon village near Sibiu. Drawing inspiration from Romania's expanding festival culture and new socialization forms (Trandafoiu 2024), the festival emerged as a key alternative music event, featuring bands from Austria, Germany, Romania, and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Held within a 13th-century fortified church, which functions as a religious space as well as a historical monument, the festival became a cultural landmark amongst music festivals in Romania. Organizers leveraged the Forum's connections, securing funding from the German Embassy, the Austrian State of Carinthia, and private sponsors, including German multinational companies in Sibiu. With ties to the Austrian and German music scenes, the festival attracted not only international artists but also German-speaking communities, reinforcing transnational links among German minority organizations in the region.

Other activities grouped around heritage preservation and economic development are organized by a number of German and Romanian returned migrants and engage local communities, often involving transnational German-based networks of individuals and NGOs. They aim to involve local communities in activism and activities related to cultural tourism and food production, offering job opportunities by attracting more initiatives and resources. Some of these people are involved in a broader process of rebranding the region of Transylvanian Highlands as "Saxon," highlighting its historical, idyllic, and multicultural tone with Saxon medieval fortresses, bucolic villages, and rich biodiversity (Iorio and Corsale 2014; Corsale and Iorio 2014; Stroe 2017b). Thomas, one of the returnees, and his wife, both interviewed here, were involved in an action group mobilizing the local community, including groups of women, in a series of cultural and touristic

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activities. They successfully attracted millions of Euros of European funds for renovating the medieval Saxon Church and the peasant fortress in their village (which is ranked as one of the UNESCO heritage sites in Romania), and are active in fundraising campaigns for local cultural and sports events. They are further involving the local community in different activities, including festivals devoted to the Saxon culture and food, cycling events, and attracting tourists to their village. Activism in other localities delved into similar touristic activities, such as targeting German tourists as hosts or guides, or setting up networks of villagers offering housing, meals for tourists, and organizing different "authentic" workshops and horse-drawn carriage trips. On other occasions, they adopt a more altruistic approach, similar to that of the Lutheran Church, for example, by organizing campaigns to support the education of disadvantaged children or by fundraising to improve healthcare facilities. While such activities usually come from among the more resourceful individuals, they attempt to involve local communities. They stand out for their local activist efforts, which are particularly noteworthy in a country where civil society had to be established anew after the fall of communism, and where prospects for development, especially in rural areas, have been limited until now (Voicu and Voicu 2009).

German-based activism, coupled with the growing German influence in the economy and regional politics, articulates an idea of a better society promoted by the German minority, German investments, German returnees, and German-speaking local and transnational networks. German speakers interviewed in Sibiu implicitly and explicitly outlined the fact that their community-oriented approach and active participation in the civic life of the city differentiate them from the rest of the population. Alexandru, a member of the German Forum's youth association, believed that in comparison to their Romanian friends, "[students at the German high school] had a more structured free time and purposeful activities, as instead of spending their free time on outdoor terraces of the city sipping coffee all day-long," they participate in local social and cultural organizations. He articulates a distinct orientation toward structured leisure practices, an expression of a habitus that privileges disciplined engagement and implicitly positions German-school youths as morally and civically superior to their Romanian-track peers. Similar assertions recurred across interviews, framing the Transylvanian Saxon model of community organization as a valuable local resource and a civic infrastructure capable of fostering social cohesion, improving governance practices, and cultivating a more responsible citizenry. In this reading, the German community's legacy is not merely historical but performative and future-oriented, mobilized as a template for civic conduct and communal resilience amid broader patterns of societal disengagement.

However, the idea of German superiority is contested in multiple situations. Affiliation with the German community and identity is largely a middle-class phenomenon, present particularly in urban centers and among emerging rural elites. This connection is most evident in the context of German schools, which were traditionally attended by wealthier Romanians and Hungarians. Ethnic Roma who enacted different forms of German heritage and culture were mostly present in rural areas that retained ethnic German institutions and organizations, and were rather absent from urban settings where this process was middle-class-centered. It is often suggested that individuals who became active in the German Forum and other associations of the German minority were predominantly selected from these schools, highlighting the role of education and social class in shaping participation in these organizations. Returned migrants who were engaged in volunteering were also emerging as local elites. Thus, while German values and social norms were promoted within these circles, in the wider society and especially among the lower-income segments of the population, there was less adherence to them. For instance, some projects run by ethnic Germans were also arousing suspicion, even public hostility, as was the case with the creation of a large natural mountain reserve in the Carpathian Mountains, where locals, including local entrepreneurs, campaigned against (Vesalon and Anghel 2024). Far more pronounced contestation surfaced in the media during political campaigns when German politicians were running for election. While the German Forum secured the political leadership at the Sibiu County level, opposition parties and politicians often employ derogatory speeches against ethnic Germans.

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While such contestation does exist, it does not seem to limit, however, non-Germans' drive to go to German schools, participate in social events, or take jobs in German companies, nor to severely undermine the cultural logic and mechanisms of reproduction of German superiority.

A limitation concerns the institutional and spatial vantage point of our material. By focusing on German-speaking organizations and their civic ecosystems, the analysis foregrounds contexts where affiliation is mediated through formal minority infrastructures, thus underrepresenting the many German speakers and ethnic Germans who do not participate in minority associations but nonetheless benefit from the labor-market value and symbolic prestige of German language competence. Moreover, while similar processes of affiliation also occur in villages, including among lower-income groups and Roma, they are more intense and consequential in towns and cities, particularly among urban middle-class populations, where institutional density and civic opportunities are greater.

Conclusions: Discussing Ethnic Superiority in Countries of Origin

This study analyzes how "Western superiority" and adherence to "morally superior" "Western" norms are enacted in southern Transylvania by individuals affiliated with the Romanian German minority. During the analysis, we uncovered how this process is coupled with ideas of individual success and the striving for a "better society." The dynamics described here are rooted in a broader transformation of the regional institutional landscape, shaped simultaneously by migration and expanding transnational connections. Large-scale emigration restructured local demographics and opened spaces in German schools and minority institutions that were increasingly occupied by Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma. Intensified mobility produced dense transnational linkages with Western Europe, bolstering the institutional support for German-language education. Within this evolving landscape, German-language education became a key avenue of upward mobility and drew growing numbers of non-German populations into the organizational and symbolic sphere of the German minority.

Empirically, our findings show that affiliation with Germanness functions as a key resource where linguistic competence, school reputations, and their associated networks become forms of cultural and social capital which can be converted into status and income. We observe a durable orientation towards a German-coded institutional world which reconfigures aspirations, everyday practices, and self-understandings. The active enactors of this German identity rewrite their own identity by acquiring linguistic competence and cultural knowledge and renegotiating ethnic boundaries and borders, claiming ethnic recognition through affiliation. Second, participation in minority organizations, the Lutheran Church, and German-branded social activism illustrates a deepening of affiliative practices into what we call embodied belonging. Young people educated in German gradually move from passive exposure to active stewardship of Saxon heritage, from occasional involvement to sustained participation in youth clubs and civic initiatives. Confirmation into the Lutheran Church, employment within the German Forum, and engagement in heritage-based local development projects act as milestones in this trajectory. These practices are not merely instrumental; they are accompanied by affective attachments, narratives of pride, and a sense of moral ascendance associated with a perceived "German" model of order, responsibility, and community-orientation. Nor does such embodied belonging imply a disavowal of participants' inherited ethnic identities. Engagement with Saxon heritage and German-coded institutions unfolds without necessitating ethnic conversion or genealogical claims. What is at stake is not ancestry, but access to moral, institutional, and symbolic repertoires associated with Germanness. Drawing on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1974), Germanness functions locally as a high-status category, and aligning with it, whether through schooling, associational life, or voting for the German Forum, offers individuals and communities a route to a more positive social identity in contrast to a post-socialist environment often characterized by corruption, economic insecurity, and institutional distrust.

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Finally, we explored how affiliative ethnicities relate to "coloniality of power" regarding East-West hierarchies (Bhabha 1984) and how hierarchies between centers and semi-peripheries are instantiated into local ethnic hierarchies, which are yet not simply imposed top-down. They are instead internalized through a sense of worth, success, and "social good" coming with a presumed different, more progressive, and "superior" model of Western society. Ethnic superiority is, at the same time, entangled within local histories, people's mobility, and transnational projects between the semi-periphery and the center, minority institutions, and "Western" social norms. In this respect, the article advances three main contributions. First, it brings the concept of affiliative ethnicity into conversation with debates on East-West hierarchies and coloniality, showing how a minority-coded Western repertoire can be appropriated by majority-ethnic actors in a semi-peripheral context, not only through migration but also through schooling, institutional membership, and civic engagement. Second, it demonstrates how Germanness functions as both a status category and a set of institutional infrastructures, which together structure opportunities for social mobility, local governance, and civil society activism. Third, it highlights the importance of looking at countries of origin and everyday local settings, rather than only at migration destinations, when analysing how ideas of Western superiority are produced, inhabited, and contested. In doing so, it invites further research on how whiteness acts and helps people negotiate statuses, identities, and belongings not only in London or Paris, but also in places like Sibiu, Sebeș, or the Transylvanian Highlands.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2026.10154.

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Notes

1 We employ this concept from a critical viewpoint, as a system of prestige around which ethnic hierarchies are structured and negotiated.
2 In this article, "Romanian Germans" or "ethnic Germans" refers to the various German-origin groups that have lived for centuries in the territories of present-day Romania, including Transylvanian Saxons, Banat Swabians, Sathmar Swabians, Bukovina Germans, Bessarabia Germans, Dobruja Germans, Maramureș Zipser Germans, and Transylvanian Landlers. While these communities are part of Romania's officially recognized German minority, they are also embedded in a broader transnational German cultural space, particularly after large-scale emigration to Germany following the fall of communism. Thus, in this article, "German" refers both to members of the German minority in Romania and to a wider transnational framework of Germanness.
3 The electoral success and administrative probity of the Democratic Forum and the performance of Klaus Iohannis as mayor of Sibiu generated sufficient political capital for Iohannis to become a presidential candidate and win the presidency of Romania in 2014 and 2019. Although, his second presidential mandate was marked by absenteeism and discretionary action, eroding his political figure, the DFGR remains a relevant political formation in Sibiu and other counties with German speaking population.
4 Name anonymized.

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