Encountering in Minority Politics:
Reconfiguring the Other in Transforming Communities
in Southern Slovakia

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ambiguity in recognizing the Other by the Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia. During my research, the locals emphasized to me that they have a peaceful multiethnic community; nevertheless, the relationship between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority is often seen as hostile. Locals know the boundary between the communities is blurred, however minority politics, which inevitably concerns their life and should protect them, is still premised on an ethnic boundary. Therefore, the minority community maintains internal solidarity by tactfully using their narratives of the Other. Such reconfiguring of the Other is a reflection of encounters with the wider context of politics, and is also a reflection of the transforming cultural perceptions in society.

Keywords: the Other, minority politics, hybridity, community, encounter

1. Introduction

The concept of "encounter" has influenced theoretical arguments in cultural anthropology in the last few decades. According to Faier and Rofel (2014), who reviewed ethnographies of encounter, those ethnographies have characterized contemporary cultural anthropology in terms of understanding culture. Ethnographies of encounter do not deal with the culture "as temporally fixed and spatially bounded" but "how the cultural is made and remade in everyday life" (Faier – Rofel 2014: 364). The term encounter has been used to refer to a meeting with the Other that changes one's perception of values in everyday life, not just as a first meeting of peoples. This concept is developed from Pratt's "contact zone" (Davices – Whitad 2012: 174; Faier – Rofel 2014: 366), which implies transforming society by creating a hybrid character through interaction with the Other. Originally, the concept of the contact zone is based on colonial encounters, which means coming across those who are completely different, and involves radical inequality and conflict (Pratt 1992: 7). Such a concept of encounter in the colonial era has influenced current encounters with migrants, refugees, and other transnational flows in the globalized

world; however, encounters with the Other have existed for a much longer period all over the world.[1]

The aim of this paper is to discuss the encounter between an ethnic minority and its politics. Specifically, I focus on the Hungarian minority in the Slovak Republic (Slovakia). My focus on the non-colonial encounter with the ethnic Other may seem to replicate a classic and common research subject in Central European anthropology. Compared with colonial Others, European ethnic/national[2] minorities including the Hungarian minority appear to be relatively well integrated despite keeping their own language and community. Part of the results from minority political movements is that minorities protect themselves from assimilation. A minority education system is important to develop pride in living as a minority; however, it sometimes might risk exclusion because of lack of skill in the majority's language. Actually, such a condition of coexistence, in which some minorities who suffer from general social exclusion and other minorities who are economically successful in the dominant society, makes minority politics more complicated (Canessa 2014; Greenhouse 2008). Minority politicians represent the minority's opinion; however, an actual ethnic minority is not a single group with obvious boundaries.

Although it is difficult to define the boundaries of minority groups in each multiethnic place, the issues of minority politics can be discussed everywhere. Since the rise of discussions on ethnicity issues in the 1980s and 1990s, most anthropologists tend to be aware of the theoretical stalemate in the anthropological research on ethnic identity (Brubaker 2004). This paper does not aim to consider ethnic identity, but minority politics as another kind of encounter; inhabitants in multicultural regions often encounter an established institutional system accompanied by minority politics. In this paper, I attempt to revisit minority politics, which have the potential to overcome the classic concept of the majority encountering the minority.

Slovakia contains ethnic minorities within its territory. The Hungarian minority is the largest; it accounts for almost 8.5%[3] (2011) of the whole Slovak population. The Hungarian minority inhabits southern Slovakia, which borders Hungary. Those Hungarians became a minority after the independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918 (from

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[1] In the current cultural anthropological arguments, the meaning of encountering the Other has been expanded to encounters between humans and non-humans, which is influenced by highly controversial discussion of the "ontological turn" (Faier – Rofel 2014). Other papers in this volume may deal with that discussion; however, I will approach the topic of encounter from different insights in this paper.

[2] The Hungarian minority outside of Hungary is often called a national minority in a central European context (See Chapter 2). In this paper, I use the term ethnic minority not national minority to analyze it from a wider context of general minority issues.

[3] The data of the Slovak Republic national census is available on the official website of the statistical office of the Slovak Republic: https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/home (2016.1.26).

the Slovak perspective), or after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 (from the Hungarian viewpoint). For the last 25 years, the relationship between the ethnic Hungarians and the Slovaks has been regarded as troubled. There have been several political disputes between Hungarian minority politicians and Slovak nationalist politicians on language laws and other minority cultural rights. Various examples of ethnic tension are reported from everyday life, such as graffiti on bilingual signs and antagonistic propaganda on the Internet (Jablonický 2012; Orosz 2012). Komárno, a city that is located on the border and which has an ethnic Hungarian majority, faced controversy during the first Fico government (2006–2010) when both groups sought to erect statues representing Slovak and Hungarian history (Burzova 2012).

Interestingly, however, most local residents in the ethnically heterogeneous areas emphasize that their everyday life is peaceful, in spite of those incidents of ethnic tension (Frič 1993; Kambara 2014; 2015a; 2015b; Lukácsová – Kusá 1995; Macháček et al. 2011; Škovierová – Sigmundová 1981; Torsello 2003). It may be possible to find a difference in the recognition of "ethnic conflict" between the national and community levels. In other words, local inhabitants could have a different recognition of the Other from minority politicians, even though they are inevitably involved in minority politics. It is natural that minority politics is not only related to their everyday life, but also embedded in a wider political context.

My research target encompasses not only the perception of the Other in a multiethnic community but also the surrounding political context and people's reflections on politics. Compared with my previous studies on the Hungarian minority (Kambara 2014; 2015a; 2015b), this paper focuses more on each actors' interaction with the politics. In the next section, firstly I argue about the problematic of studies on the ethnic Other. In Section 3, I start to analyze relationships in multicultural communities from my field research in southern Slovakia. I add a discussion on the function of minority politics in Section 4. In my conclusion, I reconsider the impact of the idea of encounter in cultural anthropology based on these arguments on otherness and minority politics in southern Slovakia.

2. Theoretical Stalemate and Practical Needs for the Problematics of Ethnicity
2.1. Categorization of ethnicity and political contexts

In cultural anthropology, the problematics of defining ethnicity and its boundaries have been discussed for more than 20 years. It became difficult for current cultural anthropologists to study this issue more deeply, because most were guided by the constructivist idea of ethnicity and the logical limits of the concept. Although many

anthropologists agree with the premise that we should avoid "groupism" in categorizing people, the power of categorizing people has worked in the everyday life of ethnically heterogeneous mixes, as Brubaker has explained (Brubaker 2004; Brubaker et al. 2006).

Similar to the Hungarian minority in Romania referred to by Brubaker, most of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia speak both Hungarian and Slovak, and live as Slovak citizens in Slovakia. However, they also live in a system based on ethnic categorization;[4] they have established an educational system with instruction in Hungarian and have established other institutions for cultural protection as a national minority in Slovakia. Hungarian minorities are not migrants but historical inhabitants of southern Slovakia. They have stayed in the same place, while the border around them has shifted. This kind of "national minority" (Kymlicka 2001) gets its collective cultural rights relatively easily compared with non-European immigrants and the Roma. In Europe, many national minorities are able to maintain their cultural rights as part of the policies on multilingualism, multiculturalism, and regionalism, such as the Swedish in Finland, the Welsh in the United Kingdom, and the Basque in Spain. The Hungarian minority is also guaranteed an educational system to maintain Hungarian language and culture in Slovakia, and these policies are partly a result of engagements by previous minority politicians.

Current anthropologists try to avoid "groupism" when researching their area of research; however, actual ethnicity and ethnic culture have been politically categorized and reproduced in everyday life. That is why the issues of ethnicity and ethnic identity as an academic target have shifted from cultural anthropology to political science in the last decades. More complicated is many people's recognition of someone as the Other, and the naturalization of that. Moreover, the recognition of the Other is not stable. Historically, the term Other was developed in the discipline of philosophy, and for anthropologists it was used in the context of colonial or Judeo-Christian encounters (Fabian 1983; Sarukkai 1997). According to Fabian, relationships between anthropology as a study of the Other and its object have been political (Fabian 1983: 143), as social conditions decide who becomes the Other. This is the history built by one-way insights from the majority with power to minorities. Minority politics are an attempt to create insight from the opposite direction. In this paper, I will avoid further philosophical discussion on the Other; rather I will focus on actual perception of the Other in the community to consider current social conditions in a multiethnic area in Slovakia.

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[4] I used the term "ethnic categorization," however this categorization is not enforced. Ethnic Hungarian parents are able to choose elementary schools with instruction in Slovak or Hungarian for their children.

2.2. Hybridity or respecting the Other?

Ethnic Hungarians today are too diversified to share the same identity. They can choose how and where they live; for example, whether they integrate further into Slovak society, leave Slovakia, or stay as a minority in Slovakia. There is also a regional difference between the Hungarian minorities in southwest and southeast Slovakia. They have never been treated as the same minority group until the Hungarian minority became a political actor. Such diversification in a given minority is difficult to understand within the frame of ethnicity and collective ethnic identity.

In my research, informants often remarked that ethnically mixed families were an example of peaceful coexistence. Árendás, who researched the Hungarian minority, suggested they have hybrid identities; many ethnic Hungarians cannot identify with only one ethnicity, especially those who are born into ethnically mixed families and who attend elementary schools whose language of instruction is Slovak (Árendás 2011: 441). Such a hybridizing of identity is expanding not only in the case of the Hungarian minority; statistical analysis on the minorities in Central and Eastern European countries shows that most minorities regard their identity as a hybrid of their home country and their host country[5] (Cebotari 2016). Even without using the word "hybrid," some ethnic minorities in this area tend to identify themselves as "European." According to Tchistiakova and Waechter, their reason for choosing European identity also relies on the ambiguity of the definition of two ethnic groups (Tchistiakova – Waechter 2016). The minority's identifications are being transformed under the influence of the European context.

However, some cultural and social events cannot be hybridized in practice in ethnically mixed cities. For example, cities and voluntary associations often organize Slovak or Hungarian historical ceremonies and cultural events for each group, in which joint attendance from both ethnicities is not expected.[6] One cross-cultural association plans the event by introducing both Slovak and Hungarian artists at the same time; however, this is rare even in southern Slovakia. One member of the association expresses confidence in their activities, as they are highly motivated by an aspiration for better ethnic symbiosis.[7] Interethnic couples often avoid occasions for celebrating or

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[5] The papers by Cebotari and by Tchistiakova and Waechter use the results of the research by the ENRI-East project on historical minorities created by changes in state borders in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Russians in the Baltic states, Ukrainians in Poland, Hungarians in Romania, and Hungarians in Slovakia.

[6] Of course, activities of other clubs, such as sports clubs, tend to be ethnically mixed. In this case, the members tend to speak Slovak.

[7] Interview with a member of the cross-cultural association in Štúrovo (2014.9.11.).

commemorating only one ethnic group (Árendás 2011: 451). People may have a hybrid identity and society may be seen as ethnically hybrid, but established systems for ethnic groups cannot easily become hybrid. The perception of otherness is still effective at a certain level. However, it does not mean they misunderstand each other. Hayden, a cultural anthropologist who researched the Bosnian community, remarked that peaceful coexistence in a territory does not always involve ethnic hybridity; it is also possible for ethnic groups that are separated by their own networks to respect each other (Hayden 2007). According to him, peaceful coexistence is sustained by an attitude of respect toward the Other and not just by hybridity. Needless to say, respect for the Other is vulnerable, because once prejudice is generated against the Other, respect can easily be lost. If the minority have to fight against unfair categorization by the majority, minority political representatives can play an important role in minority society. In today's society, where people can regard themselves as living a diversified and hybrid existence, people can understood that clearly bounded ethnic groups are imaginary. However, the assumption of an ethnic boundary itself is still effective in other parts of society. Minority politicians also struggle with transforming categories of minorities in their society.

3. The Other in Peaceful Communities Under Diversification

3.1. Hybridization and diversification in minority communities

My ethnographic research was conducted in southern Slovak cities where a relatively high proportion of the Hungarian minority lives. I have conducted one or two weeks of intensive research there each year in 2013–2016.[8] Specifically, I conducted my research mainly in Dunajská Streda (Dunaszerdahely) and Komárno (Komárom). Some interviews were also held in other cities in Slovakia from the west to the east: Štúrovo (Párkány), Šamorín (Somorja), Rožnova (Roznyó), Kráľovský Chlmec (Királyhelmec), Košice (Kassa), and Bratislava (Pozsony). Bratislava and Košice do not have ethnic Hungarians as a majority; however, many ethnic Hungarian politicians and activists live there, and important Hungarian associations are located there. To understand interethnic relationships and minority politics beyond the regional differences, I conducted interviews with community elites and some ordinary locals in several cities. My research language is Slovak,[9] and we have no problem communicating in the interviews, because

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[8] To protect informants' identities, I do not describe their personal details in this paper.
[9] My research career as a cultural anthropologist began with fieldwork in Slovakia; therefore, I did not speak Hungarian fluently enough to use interviews at that time. However, I have to note my disadvantage of understanding Hungarian in participant observation, because ethic Hungarian often talk each other in Hungarian.

most ethnic Hungarians speak Slovak fluently.

This kind of methodological approach is not typical fieldwork for the cultural anthropologist, but can be described as "multi-sited" ethnography (Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009). Although a multi-sited ethnographic approach tends to be understood as the study of people moving e.g., migrants, multi-sited ethnography originally emerged from criticism against isolated community-based research in a globalized era. Compared with "thick" description in single-sited research, multi-sited ethnography often seems to produce "thin" description. Yet the purpose of multi-sited research is different (Horst 2009:126). Minority politics are not closed inside communities, and minority elites connect with each other beyond communities. While every community has its own context, some narratives and discourses are shared in southern Slovakia.

Actually, many locals describe their ethnic relationships as peaceful. Their typical narrative is "we live here peacefully; we have no problem with each other. Only politicians bring us conflicts" (Frič 1993; Kambara 2014; 2015a; 2015b). They explain that Slovak-Hungarian conflicts are triggered by politicians and their supporters. This means that ordinary locals tend to regard their politicians more as the Other than another ethnic group in their community. However, perceptions of the Other are not divided so simply. In fact, many minority politicians who were/are members of the national council or mayors also describe a situation of ethnic symbiosis with Slovaks and emphasize that they are not against Slovaks. They demand the protection of minority rights, but this is because they believe they should be in an equal partnership with Slovaks as members of Slovak society, not against Slovaks (Kambara 2015a). By contrast, ordinary people are afraid of those who bring conflicts, as it may divide them according to ethnic belonging (Kambara 2015b).

Although the self-image of a peaceful community is widespread in southern Slovakia, the meaning of the phrase "peaceful community" can differ from person to person. As background to the discourse of "peaceful community," we can recall previous studies that note the general tendency of expanding hybridity in European national minorities (Árendás 2011; Cebotari 2016; Tchistiakova – Waechter 2016). The latest Slovak national census (2011) also indicated that those who did not specify their nationality [10] (*národnosť*) jumped from 1.0% (2001) to 7.0%, an increase of 330,000 people. Not all respondents relate to Slovak and Hungarian identity because bigger cities, like Bratislava and Košice, have many other ethnic minorities. However, several cities where I undertook research had remarkable numbers of people whose ethnic identity was "not specified"

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[10] The English version of the census used the term "nationality;" however, this word often conflates ethnic identity and citizenship. Therefore, I use the term ethnic identity here except in table citations.

(Table 1).[11] Table 1 also shows the proportion of their mother tongue and the language most frequently spoken at home; more than 10% of the respondents in several cities answered "not specified." Although languages do not always map precisely to ethnic identity, these figures show that many people in this area are uncategorized.

Table 1. Nationality, mother tongue, and most frequently used language at home in cities researched (2011)

City	Population	Nationality(%)		Mother tongue(%)		Most frequently used language at home	
		Hungarian	Not specified	Hungarian	Not specified	Hungarian	Not specified
Dunajská Streda	22477	74.5	2.0	79.2	2.7	72.8	10.2
Komárno	34349	53.9	10.8	58.5	11.1	56.0	15.6
Kráľovský Chlmec	7698	73.7	2.4	85.6	3.1	83.3	6.7
Štúrovo	10919	60.7	11.0	65.1	11.4	62.1	15.9
Šamorín	12726	57.4	6.8	59.4	7.3	53.9	14.2
Rožňava	19706	19.8	16.8	23.4	17.2	21.0	10.2
Bratislava	411192	3.4	2.4	3.7	2.6	2.1	9.7
Košice	240433	2.7	19.1	3.6	20.7	2.6	26.5

Source: author-created table based on data from the Slovak Republic's statistical office

In spite of these differences among cites researched, it is interesting that the discourse of "peaceful community" has been spread. For example, some cities have a highly dense ethnic Hungarian population; more of their residents declared a Hungarian ethnic identity (Dunajská Streda and Kráľovský Chlmec). Other cities, by contrast, have more locals who do not specify their ethnic identity despite a higher density of ethnic Hungarians (Komárno and Štúrovo). If Hungarian society is really diversified and hybridized, it makes sense that inhabitants would want to distance themselves from the demands of essentialist "politicians" on both sides. However, we could not characterize these ethnic Hungarian cities as sufficiently hybridized and diversified. Therefore, we need to consider the discourse and the actual condition of the "peaceful community."

3.2. Inside the peaceful community

3.2.1. The Slovak perspectives as "minority"

To understand the meaning of "peaceful community" in the Hungarian minorities' narrative, I should remark on my interviews with Slovak community leaders in Dunajská Streda, Komárno, and Štúrovo, where Slovaks are a minority among ethnic Hungarians. Actually, some local Slovaks play an important role in these cities. In Komárno and

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[11] The 2011 census was criticized for its survey method. Some informants noted that many people were concerned about the protection of personal information and so did not select one ethnic identity.

Štúrovo, many people noted that many Slovaks spoke Hungarian from childhood. Štúrovo had a Slovak mayor and vice-mayor, and both spoke Hungarian when I conducted the research. The vice-mayor insisted on the necessity of bilingualism from both sides. She is also an organizing member of a Slovak-Hungarian cultural association in the city.[12] Her attitude runs counter to the typical Slovak nationalist slogan "*Na Slovensku, po slovensky!*" (Speak Slovak in Slovakia!).

> There are some people who live here for a long time but do not learn another language ... We need bilingualism, because this city is located on the border. Some Slovaks who do not speak Hungarian are angry about disadvantages in southern Slovakia, and they complain, "why do Slovaks need Hungarian in Slovakia?" It is true. We Slovaks do not have to know Hungarian, but it may cause disadvantages here … I wanted to learn Hungarian, because I wanted to have friends in school. Now, the Hungarian language brings me big advantages.[13]

According to my interviews in Štúrovo and Komárno, most of the members of the city council understand both languages. Some locals have an ethnically mixed origin, and others do not; nevertheless, both ethnic Slovak and Hungarian informants are proud of their bilingualism. During my research, I have met people who were introduced to me as Slovak but who spoke Hungarian with ethnic Hungarians. Of course, it is difficult for some local Slovaks who did not grow up in this area to communicate in Hungarian, such as those who moved from the area where Slovaks are the majority for their ethnic Hungarian marriage partner.

> I have lived here for almost 35 years. I did not understand any Hungarian when I moved here. Many things have happened around me. We brought up two children here. Political changes also happened … When we faced serious trouble, ethnic Hungarians always helped us. Only the media and politicians want to divide us.[14]

Until she found a job in the local culture center, she made more effort to learn Hungarian. She also insisted on the need for bilingual information for local ethnic

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[12] This cross-cultural association is introduced in 2.2 of this paper.
[13] Interview with a vice-mayor in Štúrovo (2014.9.11.).
[14] Interview with an ethnic Slovak working in the local culture center in Dunajská Streda (2014.9.19).

Hungarians from her job experience. In contrast with the previous vice-mayor's opinion, she remarked on the difference in Slovak-speaking abilities among ethnic Hungarians. While many in the Hungarian minority have no problem speaking Slovak, some are not good at Slovak because of the lack of opportunity to use it, especially in small villages where only ethnic Hungarians live.

> We also published a bilingual booklet on the prevention of drug abuse. Bilingual publications cost more than monolingual ones. Someone may say that it does not need to be bilingual, because everyone understands Slovak. But there may be someone who does not understand it or does not say that he does not understand it.[15]

Both community leaders think about the details of bilingualism differently; however, their opinions are based on respect for the other's language. In other words, they emphasize the efforts made toward a peaceful community. Despite the narrative of peaceful coexistence, some Slovak informants spoke of ethnic harassment. The following interview was with a member of the Slovak cultural association.

> It happens not so rarely that someone damages our signboards and my car. Uneducated people have no idea of how to give their opinion except with such stupid behavior. Normal people never do it. But such extreme people are few. They are agitated by politicians.[16]

He believed that the unidentified harassers were from outside the community. This means that there are certain norms to living together in a peaceful community. Therefore, he could believe in the community because those who committed harassment were the Other. Respecting another language should also be a part of their norm.

However, this kind of informal norm is not the case in all cities in southern Slovakia. For example, in Šamorím, some tensions were reported between Hungarian residents and Slovak newcomers (Botíková et al. 1994). Šamorím has been recently urbanized as the suburbs of Bratislava. Without a stable community relationship, it is difficult to maintain an interethnic relationship. Generally, those of my ethnic Slovak informants who agreed to be interviewed have a more tolerant attitude and express it more freely than ordinary ethnic Hungarians. They seem to be different from other Slovaks, because anti-Hungarian

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[15] Interview with an ethnic Slovak working in the local culture center in Dunajská Streda (2014.9.19).
[16] Interview with a director of the Slovak association (2013.9.24).

discourse exists in Slovakia, as I indicated previously.

3.2.2 Ambiguous "We" as the Hungarian community

Ethnic Hungarians are also committed to keeping their society peaceful. A member of a minority cultural institution, who still has strong feelings of belonging to the Hungarian minority, criticized people who are agitated by both nationalists coming from the north (northern Slovakia) or the south (Hungary),[17] and emphasized respect for their differences. Despite the community attitude of respecting each other, the Hungarian minority elite feels pessimism about the future of the Hungarian minority, because some among the population do not declare themselves to be ethnic Hungarian even if they are of Hungarian origin.

> All my relatives live in Slovakia, and I do not have any relatives in Hungary. Of course, I speak Hungarian with my family, but that's all. I have grown up in Slovakia, so I think I am Slovak … I visited Budapest for the first time last year. I found that mentalities are different between Hungarians in Hungary and Hungarians here.[18]

This informant completed elementary school taught in Hungarian and grew up in an wholly ethnic Hungarian family in an ethnic Hungarian village. He now lives in Bratislava and works with Slovaks. Such minorities also want to avoid ethnic conflict between Hungarians and Slovaks. They may think that a cause of ethnic conflict would be gone, if the Hungarian identity disappeared. However, the minority elite reject such ideas of assimilation. The discourse of "peaceful community" hides the contradiction between the differences in understanding among different members of the ethnic community.

The Hungarian community elite also understand that ethnic identity is not stable. They explain why some ethnic Hungarians lost interest in their ethnic identity thus: "Historically, the people in the border region have often changed their identity in order to make life easier for themselves. This area's sovereignty has changed four times in the last 100 years, transferred between the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Slovakia." "Under socialism, people used to know what could and could not be said in public. We do not express our real feelings if it might cause trouble

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[17] Interview with a member of a minority cultural institution in Komárno (2014.9.10).
[18] Interview with an ethnic Hungarian in Bratislava (2013.9.3).

for us." Actually, some Hungarian parents place their children in elementary schools that are taught in Slovak, not in Hungarian, so they can live and find better jobs in Slovakia. Indeed, southern Slovakia is an economically underdeveloped region, and some in the younger generation are leaving elsewhere. What is worse for them is that the declared number of Hungarian minorities determines how the Hungarian minority will be governed in the future. The Hungarian minority needs to stay above a certain size in order to maintain Hungarian culture, because the continued existence of bilingual access in public offices, bilingual signboards, and minority schools depends on the official size of the minority population.

Hungarian minority politicians are anxious about the decrease in the percentage of ethnic Hungarians because of linguistic and cultural assimilation to the Slovak population.[19] Hungarian community elites generally object to sending ethnic Hungarian children to elementary schools taught in Slovak, because once such children are in Slovak schools, they no longer have the chance to learn to write in Hungarian and Hungarian history. The Hungarian interpretation of history differs from the Slovak version, and Slovaks and Hungarians hold different historical figures to be important.[20] The Hungarian minority elite emphasizes the need to build minority pride through education. Actually, most Hungarian minority activists I met finished primary and secondary school in Hungarian and graduated from university in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, or sometimes Hungary.[21]Another member of a minority institution remarked that it is rare for those who graduated from Slovak elementary schools to join in ethnic Hungarian activities.[22] While some "Hungarians" do not need their Hungarian identity, others want to preserve cultural differences as an anchor against assimilation into the Slovak population.

Generally, the local Hungarian minorities regard themselves as different from Hungarians from Hungary. Compared with interethnic relationships at the community level, the imagined connection with Hungarians in Hungary is relatively weak. Attachment is not provoked only by the similarity of language and culture. Some Hungarian minorities tend to be sensitive to the differences with Hungarians in Hungary;

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[19] In 1991, the proportion of the Hungarian minority was 10.8%. In the last 20 years, its size has fallen by 100,000 people: https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/home (2016.1.26).

[20] For example, one ethnic Hungarian academic researcher mentioned that some ethnic Hungarian students who graduate from Slovak elementary schools do not know who Ferenc Rákóczi (Rákóci), the leader of Hungarian uprising in the 18th century, is and why his remains are in Košice (2016.9.7.).

[21] In 2004, Selye János University, where the language of instruction is Hungarian, was established in Komárno. I heard that many ethnic Hungarians entered after high school. However, in my research I never heard of the graduates being among the community elite. This may be because there are still not so many graduates and because they are too young to become community leaders.

[22] Interview with a spokesperson of a minority cultural institution in Šamorín (2013.9.16, 2014.9.9).

what others notice is the difference of being a minority versus not being one. An ethnic Hungarian remarked that when she moved from Komárno to Győr, Hungarians in Hungary regarded her as a Slovak, although she could not speak Slovak well.[23] Such experiences strengthened their feelings about the differences between Hungarians. Previous research also shows the Hungarian minority's reluctance to alienate Hungarians in Hungary when they realize that they are also foreigners in their "mother country" (Macháček et al. 2011: 48–49). Here is another boundary of the Other among the Hungarians.

3.3. *Reconfiguring the Other*

In the case of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, which has an educational system in its own language and is allowed bilingual signboards, and which has different kinds of cultural events and relatively strong political parties, there appears to be an obvious ethnic boundary between Slovaks and Hungarians. However, the ethnic boundary is ambiguous and is not so important to ordinary locals' everyday lives. Instead, local people create their own boundary of the Other at the minority community level beyond the ethnic boundary. Figure 1 shows the differences in the perception of Others in each sphere. In the context of minority politics, the Other means simply the ethnic Other. However, this Other is often reconfigured in actual minority life and community life in southern Slovakia. The general narrative of "peaceful community" by locals includes Slovaks, Hungarians, and also those of unspecified identity. They could be called "hybrid" through the process of encountering the ethnic Other and the (Czecho-) Slovak political situation. It is important for locals to know whether the person is a "politician" who might bring conflict to their community. They understand that reported ethnic tensions are caused by those outside their community, like "politicians," "extremists," and "nationalists" (Kambara 2015a; 2015b). Ethnic boundaries cannot completely disappear even at the community level, because ethnicity is formed by every interaction (Brubaker 2006: 358). The local heterogeneous community maintains internal solidarity by tactfully using its narratives to retain its peaceful community.

The minority elite usually develop their Hungarian identity more; however, for many, their "Hungarian" identity is not the same as Hungarian identity in Hungary. As the ethnic Slovak and Hungarian community elite remarked, they just wish to maintain mutual respect in their community. The spheres of minority politics and the local community are not as clearly divided as locals believe. Moreover, locals do not clearly define who the

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[23] In this case, I spoke with her in English, not Slovak (2014.9.20).

"politicians" are. For example, some minority social activists and leaders of cultural associations remark that they have no relationships with a political party. They regard themselves as "non-political," but others regard them as engaging in a "political" movement. In the next section I would like to consider encounters that concern minority politics in the post-1989 context. Minority elites appear to be preserving Hungarian culture; however, they have also been transformed through encountering the democratic process because the minority movement became possible after the collapse of socialism.

Figure 1. Differences of Others in spheres between minority politics
and local community
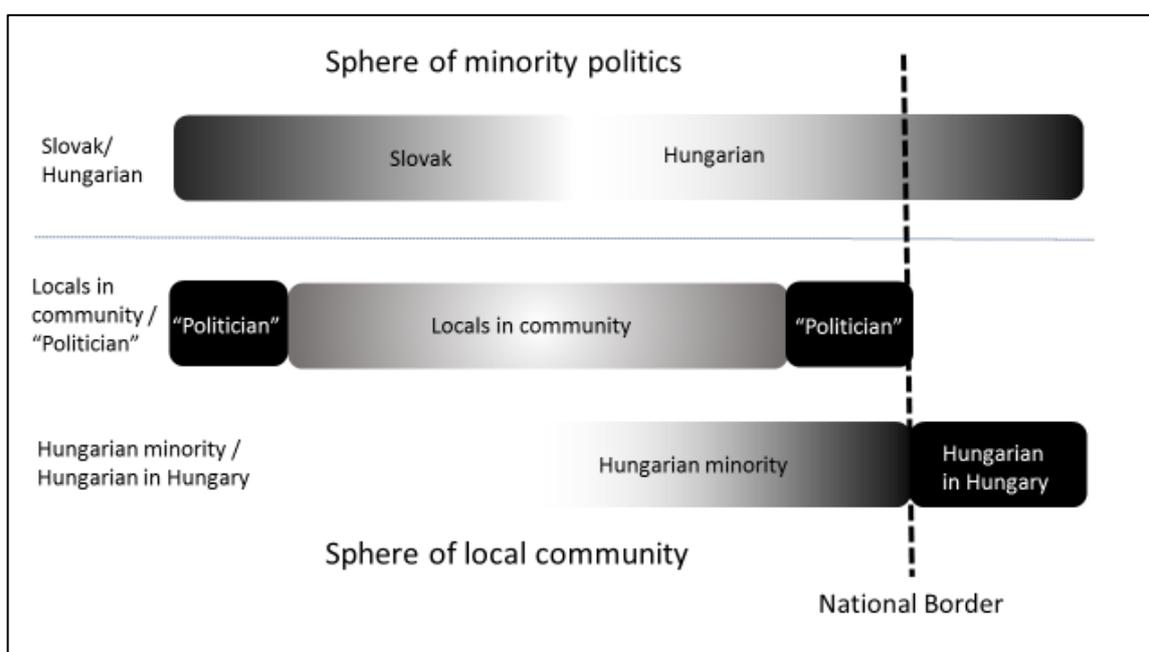
Source: author

4. Encountering Democratic Minority Politics and Hybridity

In the socialist era, there was the Hungarian cultural association *Csemadok*,[24] as well as the Hungarian educational system and Hungarian publishing, just as there is today. However, under socialism, the ethnic problem did not officially exist, and Hungarian cultural activities were under the control of the Communist Party. Some of the current

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[24] *Csemadok* is a cultural association mainly dealing with traditional culture. Its name was originally an abbreviation of *Csehszlovákiai Magyar Dolgozók Kultúregyesülete* (Czechoslovakia's Hungarian employee cultural association). However, the abbreviation is currently used as the name of the association.

minority elites were political activists at the end of the 1980s. I found such former activists through my interviews; one is a politician from *Strana Maďarskej Komunity* (SMK, Party of the Hungarian Community), and another is a founding member of a minority research institute. In the 1980s, Hungary made more progress in democratic reform than Czechoslovakia did. Ethnic Hungarian dissidents were relatively able to easily gather information about it through their Hungarian acquaintances. They struggled against the former regime and later started to engage in a minority movement in democratic society.[25]

After the socialist era, some previous Hungarian associations like *Csemasok* and kinds of folk-dancing groups were reorganized as voluntary non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Meanwhile, ethnic Hungarian volunteers created many new NGOs in Slovakia. One of the most famous minority institutions is also established as a civil association that researches minority problems in Slovakia and contributes to other forms of social engagement, such as political activity and regional development. Most NGOs and associations do not have stable financial support; therefore, they also have to engage in fundraising. They plan not only cultural events but also job training courses for the unemployed in cooperation with municipalities. These kinds of grassroots projects were promoted through the European integration process and some associational activity that was naturally close to politics.

Both voluntary engagement in the society and the social movement against inequality, including the issue of ethnic minorities, are regarded positively in contemporary Europe. However, this tendency risks causing friction in "peaceful" communities in southern Slovakia. Even a member of the minority association questioned those who took part in protest movements against discrimination.

> Their aim is understandable, but at the same time, their activity risks worsening confrontation between ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians over small incidents. It is not necessary to call attention to every single instance of ethnic harassment.[26]

He does not say that ethnic harassment should be tolerated; he simply worries that reporting it will disrupt the peace of the community. For a certain part of the local community, political activism is regarded as a cause of ethnic conflict. Ideally, such kinds of misunderstanding should be resolved by public discussion in a democratic society.

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[25] This tendency—that those who took part in the political movement in 1989 continue to engage in their society as social activists—is true not only of the Hungarian minority but also of Slovaks as a whole (Kambara 2015c).

[26] Interview with a member of a minority cultural institution in Komárno (2014.9.10).

However, this kind of vague opinion is difficult to turn into an alternative to minority politics, which is established as political movement.

Similar problems between established political actors and unshaped collectives of alternative opinions have emerged in other multicultural places. While many anthropologists were interested in the issue of ethnic identity in the 1980s and 1990s, minority protections have been established, and some minorities have managed to improve their political circumstances. However, once categorized, minority groups tend to be fixed, even though diversity and hybridity have been created inside the group. Current anthropological studies concern invisible minorities that are categorized in the same minority group behind the discourse of protection or respect for minorities (Canessa 2014; Theodosiou 2011). Minority politicians who want to protect their rights face contradictions with such ambiguous boundaries. Some parts of the society could become hybridized, although in other parts inhabitants have realized and reproduced ethnic boundaries in everyday life. In fact, many other multicultural societies are also managing such ambivalence between the minority's collective rights and their hybridity (Greenhouse 2008).

The position of Hungarian minority politics could be relevant to the perception of minority issues in Slovak society. When the SMK was part of the governing coalition, the condition of the Hungarian minority improved, something Western countries praised as democratic progress (Duin – Poláčková 2000; Vizi 2011). The establishment of a university where instruction is in Hungarian is one of their successes. However, according to Regelmann, their improvements were also limited because of lack of cooperation with other parties (Regelmann 2009). She suggested the inclusion of minority political actors on the institutional level to advance community integration (2009: 195); in fact, SMK has not been in government since 2006. Additionally, part of SMK broke off and formed a new party, Most-Híd, in 2009 because of the difference in political priorities between minority rights and liberal democratic policy. Most-Híd is composed of both ethnic Hungarians and Slovaks and has been in government twice (2010–2012, 2016–present). Most-Híd emphasizes ethnic tolerance but does not call itself a Hungarian party. As a cultural anthropologist, I cannot argue about the future potential of both parties, however, Most-Híd should be an alternative that reflects the diversity of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia.

As I mentioned, Hungarian minority politicians are more anxious about the decrease of the ethnic Hungarian population than about ethnic conflict. Maintaining and enlarging minority rights plays a role in maintaining the multiethnic character of the region in order to avoid assimilation and exclusion. Both ordinary locals and minority elites emphasize

their present peaceful situation; however, "peace" means something different to each. Ordinary locals actually accept an ambiguous multiethnic community, with the associated risk of assimilating their ethnic identities. By contrast, the minority elite aims for an ideal ethnic symbiosis in the future. Such an ideal symbiosis cannot avoid facing the inequality between ethnicities, even if it might be the cause of the ethnic conflict. Moreover, ordinary locals' desire for a "peaceful community" sometimes combines with mistrust or unconcern with politics. There is a fundamental contrast in perceptions between ordinary locals in the community, and minority elites categorized as the Other.

This difference concerns what culture means for them. Ethnic minority politics have not existed without a culture being defined to distinguish the minority group, although the definition of culture does not always include all aspects of the actual local culture. Through the minority movement and minority politics, their "culture" has been standardized at a certain level. For example, linguistic anthropologists understand that languages are composed not only of national languages and minority languages but also of non-territorial languages, sign language, and other languages that lack a unified grammar. However, in Europe especially, language has been de-naturalized, and the concept of language has already been standardized, despite the terms of language diversity and language rights (Gal 2006). The conditions surrounding the term "culture" are the same. Protecting their culture is a part of the process of politically making their culture. It is also one result of encounters in the contemporary field for anthropologists.

Encountering ethnic Others and political institutions creates a new perception of the Other in the local community. Each member values his or her local "culture" highly; however, the contents and assumptions of the "culture" are different. Hungarian minority politicians wish to preserve their culture as a minority, while local inhabitants accept their heterogeneous everyday life, including their respect for other ethnic groups, their hybridity, and their unconcern about their ethnic identity as part of their "culture." Although we tend to believe that we share the same concept of culture in society, there is a perceptual difference over what they regard as "culture." The concept of culture has to be rethought in the political context; the perception of culture itself is local knowledge.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I analyze the perception of the Other based on the theoretical discussion on the concept of encounter in the case of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Minority politics is aware of ethnic Other in the society; however, the minorities do not always share the same perspective about the Other. The local community struggle to maintain

both a Slovak-Hungarian hybridity and respect for other ethnic groups to avoid ethnic conflicts. Therefore, minority politicians themselves sometimes tend to be regarded as the Other rather than those who belong to another ethnic group, because "politicians," including those who are too aware of ethnic identity, are seen as potentially causing conflict for their community. In multiethnic locations, encountering minority politics has brought further diversity to their community. The local community has norms for living together through everyday mutual encounters with ethnic Others. They protect their heterogeneous community by configuring the Other as those who engage in minority politics. Indeed, a certain level of anti-political attitudes remains in the southern Slovakia communities.

At the national level, minority politics has taken on an important role in improving minority rights, and these activities are regarded as a part of democracy. However, minority politics itself creates a new Other in the community. They have different assumption of local community and culture. Generally, minority politicians have to think that "their community" means the minorities' one, however locals who can agree with the idea of a "peaceful community" regard "their community" as more heterogeneous. Encountering the ethnic Other connects to further encounters between people and a new institutional system with identity politics. It may again reflect locals' practices in communities. We need to rethink the difference in cultural perceptions triggered by continuous encounters in a transforming heterogeneous society.

I have described the ambiguity of inhabitants' recognition of the Other as relying on the sensitive balance in this area, as well as covering perspectives on minority politics and the local community. Of course, this research has some limits, because I conducted multi-sited research in an overly broad area of southern Slovakia. However, encountering ethnography needs the perspective of a wide context. In particular, current minority activists keep contacts with each other to create a political movement from the grassroots. There is also a contrast between local communities and minority associations beyond the community. The current minority society is composed of such heterogeneous factors brought on by various encounters.

from the floor concerning my presentation of the preliminary version of this paper at the World Congress of the International Council for Central and East European Studies in 2015.

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