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Virtual Aunts and Uncles: Identity and Community in a Diasporic National Minority

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Abstract

The past decade has seen mass emigration of Hungarians from Serbia to the kin-state and Western European countries. This has resulted in new ways of understanding what it means to belong to the community, both empirically and in terms of theorizing it, and both for those in Serbia and those abroad. This article claims that there are virtual platforms where members of this ethnic community (re)create their identities, and that this happens through relating to certain common themes. For this reason, I analyze the common themes of two humorous Facebook pages – namely, rurality, food, language use, ethnic others, and crossing borders – popular among Vojvodina Hungarians. The article argues that these elements of identity connect members of the community who live in Vojvodina and those who have emigrated to the kin-state or diaspora. Therefore, in order to unpack the complex dynamics of identification of a national minority community with high diasporic tendencies, an approach that connects the above topics to the concepts of community, nostalgia, home, minority, and borders, and in more general terms the lens of national minority and diaspora studies is needed.

Keywords: Vojvodina Hungarians; national minority; diaspora; humor; memes

Introduction

In the early 2010s, due to the amendments to the Hungarian Citizenship Act (Pogonyi 2017; Harpaz 2019) transborder Hungarians, among them a large number of ethnic Hungarians from Vojvodina, the province in the north of Serbia, became citizens of the kin-state and acquired its passport. This made the already large-scale cross-border movement and migration to Hungary and Western European countries even more extensive. Namely, in the recent decades, even though priding itself on being one of the most multicultural regions in Europe and with its vast agricultural area being the "breadbasket" of the country, Vojvodina has been undergoing economic, social, and political changes that negatively affect its population. Thus, Vojvodina Hungarians not only face minority status, but they share with the other nations of the province economic deprivation, unemployment, ecological problems, and depopulation. These demographic and social changes call for a new way of articulating and interpreting the identity of the members of this community.

After Albanians, Hungarians were the second largest nationality in Yugoslavia and are the most numerous national minority group in Serbia. Hungarians in Serbia live concentrated in the north and central Bácska region and alongside the Tisza River, and in ethnically mixed towns and villages in South Bácska and in Bánát. The community had 442,561 members in 1961 (Palusek and Trombitás 2017), and since then it has been on a steady decline. In 1991 there were 339,491

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Hungarians in Vojvodina, in 2002 there were 15 per cent less, 290,207, and according to the census of 2011 251,136 Hungarians lived in Serbia officially (ibid.). This census coincided with the possibility provided by the 2010 amendments of the Hungarian Citizenship Act for transborder Hungarians, including those from Serbia to obtain Hungarian citizenship and emigrate not only to Hungary but also other EU countries, that caused another huge migratory wave from Vojvodina. The most recent census of 2022 shows an even larger decrease of ethnic Hungarians in Serbia, with the community numbering 182,321 people (Census of Population, Households and dwellings 2022). This is a further 27 per cent decrease in the past twelve years, and there is well-grounded speculation that even these figures are blown up, since the census methodology allowed for emigrants to be counted as residents. A realistic estimate is that around 150,000 people claiming to be Hungarians are living in Vojvodina (Szerbhorváth 2021).

Thus, while low birth rates and assimilation do reduce the number of those who identify as Vojvodina Hungarians, the greatest factor that impacts the statistical number of the members of this minority group is emigration. Vojvodina Hungarians have been a transnational community for decades; the current wave of emigrating to Hungary and Western Europe is in fact the third. There has been a considerable number of Hungarians from Yugoslavia migrating to Western Europe, mostly to Germany and Austria as guest workers in the 1960s and 70s and another exodus in the 1990s fleeing military conscription (Lendák-Kabók 2024). Many of these migrants regularly maintain their Vojvodina Hungarian identity through visits to their place of origin, family and friendship networks, diaspora organizations, cultural ties, and virtual platforms. Therefore, once we do not look at the community with a census lens, we observe that while it is a fact that the number of Hungarians living in Serbia has been reduced to its third in the past 60 years, the people missing in the census have not disappeared. Regarding this population, the questions that arise are what ways they have to relate to a Vojvodina Hungarian identity and where and how can their belonging to the community be articulated? Also, what elements of identity are common for Vojvodina Hungarians who reside in Serbia and those abroad and what are their functions in the lives of the community members?

The article argues that social media are a means of relating to members of the community who live in Serbia and elsewhere and provide a platform where belonging can be displayed. Unlike more traditional media, social media enable a bottom-up and creative way of articulating identity. In the pages analyzed in this article, membership of the community is displayed through creating memes that combine visual and textual elements and responding to the topics of the memes in the comments. Through the recurrent themes, I argue, a community is (re)created. Therefore, in the following section I discuss the benefits and limits of the perspectives of minority and diaspora studies on this research and define the use of the concepts of memes and tropes as they will be used in this article. After engaging with the methodology of this research and the specificities of the sources of the analysis, I explore the recurrent themes of the two Facebook pages in relation to some of the theoretical notions from the literature review section. Finally, I look at the role of the themes, summarize the key points of the analysis, and draw conclusions that point beyond the case study of the pages.

Literature review

The Vojvodina Hungarian community has received scholarly attention mainly in the field of minority studies (for an overview of minority politics in Eastern Europe see Stroschein 2017). The group has commonly been viewed in Kymlicka's (2007) categorization as a sub-state minority, also called accidental minority (Brubaker 2000), cross-border, or stranded minority (Waterbury 2010). Brubaker's notion of a triadic nexus (1995; 2000) consisting of the minority group, the home state, and the kin-state, with the addition of international institutions – making it a nexus with four actors (Smith 2002) – employs concepts of great exploratory value when it comes to interpreting the dynamic effects the group members are facing. However, recent processes in the spheres of

demography, politics, and economy, specifically mass emigration of Hungarians from Serbia, complicate their position and identification, making the analytical lens of diaspora studies suitable for examining the community.

Yet even though the research fields of diaspora and those on ethnic minority studies converge in several aspects, few attempts have been made to combine them. Diaspora and minorities may be viewed as two opposite trends when it comes to movement and state borders: while diasporas are groups and individuals who have migrated across borders voluntarily, in the case of cross-border minorities, state borders have moved across populations without the agency of the people involved. As Waterbury (2010) notices, the separation of the two cases has led to the two fields developing not only distinct terminologies, but also divergent theoretical concerns and analytical debates. Scholarship on diaspora has developed a set of identifying characteristics that diasporic groups need to share to be perceived as such, most of which having to do with migration, mobility, and displacement (see Faist 2010). However, the large number of diaspora communities, the wide variety of social contexts in which they live, and conditions under which they have migrated has made such characterizations less valid and decreasingly useful. Therefore, current research on diaspora has challenged the concept of migration as changing one's location for an indefinite time, shifted attention from mobility to links and communication (Cohen 1997; Faist 2010), acknowledged the enhanced connectivity and proximity that globalization has created (Tsagarousianou 2004), and brought transnationalism into the debate, broadly defined as processes that transcend international borders on fairly regular bases and involve a critical mass of people (see Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Clifford 1994; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 1999, 2001, 2003). In addition, the notion of diaspora has recently been connected to its discursive formation and cultural creativity (Tsagarousianou 2004; Faist 2010). All these current foci of diaspora studies make it suitable for studying the two Facebook groups discussed in this article.

Social media is another issue that has been studied in relation to diaspora, while rarely to national minorities, even though many of its issues pertain to both settings. Like media in general, social media creates relations that are not teritorrially restricted (Lanza and Svendsen 2007), and it permits users to connect to people and experience things in other contexts (Scannell 1996). For diaspora members, this function of the internet serves as a bridge between two countries and societies. It enables personal communication between family members, relatives and friends, but also participation and involvement in the day-to-day life of the broader ethnic or national community (via forums, news portals, webpages, etc.). Digital platforms articulate diasporic identities (Theodoropoulou 2019), "hold together" community members, and reproduce as well as transform a shared imagination of the homeland (Tsagarousianou 2004; Kissau and Hunger 2010). As visible in the pages analyzed in this article, being more driven by the needs and expressions of its users than traditional media, social media can serve as a platform where identities are (re)presented, (re)constructed and de-territorialized, and where users can, at least temporarily, find themselves "at home" (Grossberg 2010 in Alinejad et al. 2019).

Memes are a feature of social media that are particularly suitable for displaying creativity and producing items that recall familiar objects, situations, and emotions, thereby creating a virtual community regardless of the actual place of residence. A meme has been defined for the first time by Dawkins (1976), who used the term to describe small units of culture that travel from person to person by copying and imitation (Shifman 2014; Denisova 2018). Memes are also seen as "digital artefacts that permit users to showcase their creativity and connect with others" (Denisova 2018, n.p.). In its narrower usage, memes have been connected to virtual humor, being defined as "any specimen of online humor, especially if multi-modal" (Dynel 2021, 79). What is common in these definitions and important for the memes of this case study is that they are spread on the internet, contain both a visual and a textual part, are humorous and creative, and used to connect with others. Therefore, in this article I define memes as humorous virtual objects containing both text and image, through which individuals "at home" and "in diaspora" connect to their communities.

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The memes display recurrent themes of life in Vojvodina, such as rurality, food, language, ethnic others, and crossing borders, to which I hereby refer as tropes. In literary studies, tropes are a term used for dominant ways of thinking about something in society by generating images and connotations above the literal meaning of the word (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Chandler 2000). In tropes "words and phrases function symbolically to evoke meanings and ideas" (Oswick, Putnam, and Keenoy 2004, 105). In the two Facebook pages I analyze in this article, I identified the most common tropes and explored the ways they are used in the memes to create humor and connect to other community members both in Vojvodina and abroad, thereby constructing a common and current Vojvodina Hungarian identity. For unpacking the meaning these tropes have for the group members, key concepts of both diaspora and minority studies, such as community, home, nostalgia, mixedness, minority and majority culture, and borders proved to be of great explanatory value.

Methodology and sources

The method for studying memes in the research was multimodal analysis, that integrates the analysis of text and images as various modes of meaning-making (see Dynel 2021). I considered all posts in the two Facebook groups that contain a visual and a textual element, that is 375 memes in the first and 827 in the second Facebook pages (until February 2023, when I finished the analysis). The two pages contain memes, each of which is accompanied by a lead/end post and followed by a thread of followers' comments. I also explored the comments under the posts, since they provide information on the ways representations offered by the authors of the pages are received, confirmed, or transformed by the followers. I only quoted comments where their authors can remain anonymous, and in the screenshots of the Facebook pages, the commenters' names and photos have been de-identified for personal data protection purposes. Additionally, I conducted an interview with Szabolcs Vass, the author of the first page in this study (who chose to be named in the article), and I also sent my questions and received the answers in writing from the three authors and administrators of the second page (this was their preferred way of communication since they wished to remain anonymous). I asked the authors of both pages about their inspiration and motivations for starting the pages, the sources of the textual and visual elements, and their views on the Vojvodina Hungarian community in general.

Even though both Facebook pages are public, which means that everyone who likes them can access the memes and comments, I informed the authors of the second page about my planned research, as well as the followers of the page by a publicly available post on the page. I did not do this for the first page since it was inactive at the time of the start of my research, however, I discussed my plans for the research with its author. Then I used online ethnography of the two pages to explore their visual and linguistic style, the type of humor the posts, memes, and the comments use, as well as the similarities and differences between the two pages. I have been a follower of both platforms; I liked some posts and occasionally commented on them, by which I gained an insider status among the followers and got to know my way around the pages (Abidin 2020), which enables me to conduct a more focused analysis. I virtually "met" some of the most active followers by noting their publicly available information. My main interest in this was to gain an overall picture of their location and age.

The first of the two Facebook pages I analyze in this article, Rokon Ilonka Copyright, was created in 2015 and contains humorous memes on the topic of everyday life in the Vojvodina Hungarian community. In the name of the page, *rokon* means "relative," while Ilonka is a common female name; accordingly, the Rokon Ilonka Facebook page feigns the internet usage of an elderly village woman (Szabolcs Vass, interview with author, October 20, 2021). The texts of the posts and memes often lack full stops and commas or contain misspelled words, as if they were written by a person with low digital literacy skills. The memes in the page are collages of various visual and textual parts, created by Vass. The images juxtapose the mundane nature of everyday life in Vojvodina with

pictures of angels and flowers carrying religious and spiritual connotations. Because of their association with Catholic imagery, these pictures represent "Hungarian digital kitsch," different from the iconography of similar humorous Serbian(-language) Facebook pages (Szabolcs Vass, interview with author, October 20, 2021). However, the pages are also different from Hungarian pages created in Hungary because of their language use that imitates the pronunciation of a rural Hungarian dialect typical of the Bácska region of Vojvodina as well as phrases that are either localisms or taken over from Serbian language. Almost all words of the memes and posts contain phonemes that are pronounced differently in the Vojvodina Hungarian vernacular than standard Hungarian. A non-native speaker of this dialect probably has no difficulties understanding the texts but is not able to reproduce it.

The second page on the same social media platform was created in 2017 and is called University of Bótelőtt (henceforth: UoB). There was not any agreement between the authors of the two pages, but many followers see UoB as the continuation of the now mostly inactive Rokon Ilonka page. The name of UoB is also a play with words, and it is written in dialect: while "University" is in English, bótelőtt is a sub-standard pronunciation of bolt előtt, meaning "in front of the store", associating to familiar characters of village uncles standing and drinking in front of the local store (bolt usually refers to a small grocery store in a village, similar to a bodega in Spanish-speaking US contexts). UOB posts use a variety of Hungarian language spoken by Hungarians in the Bánát region of Vojvodina, that is even more stigmatized and mocked than the variety used by Rokon Ilonka. The structure of the posts created by the anonymous authors of UoB is akin to Rokon Ilonka, and it contains a lead/ end text and a meme. The lead/end text and the textual part of the meme are inseparable from each other in that they often constitute a dialogue or are to be read as two utterances by the same imaginary person that follow each other. In the UoB page, the textual is the main element in the memes, while the visuals are usually prototypical internet meme images serving as an illustration of the text superimposed on them (Dynel 2021). In this page, the memes are combining the text created by the authors with photos taken over from the internet, photographed by the authors, or occasionally sent to them by the followers of the page (Anonymous, correspondence with authors, April 21, 2021). The topics featured, the structure of the posts, and the humor used in UoB are like the Rokon Ilonka page, and many of the followers of the two pages are the same. With their comments, many actively contribute to the pages, thereby creating, not only following their content.

Analysis: tropes and concepts

The topic of the memes is related to everyday life in two unidentified Vojvodina Hungarian villages, from the perspective of the fictional character of aunt Ilonka and a village uncle lingering in front of the store in the case of UoB. In what follows, I identify and discuss the tropes of the memes, connecting them to theoretical concepts related to minority and diaspora studies. I see the tropes as discursive elements that a contemporary Vojvodina Hungarian identity rests on, and that connect members of the community that live in Vojvodina and those in diaspora.

Rurality – humor, community, nostalgia

One of the most recognizable elements of a large number of the memes is their association to village life. The visual parts of the memes show domestic animals (pigs, chicken, goose, etc.), village-style houses, fields, crops (corn, tobacco, potatoes, straw), agricultural products (eggs, meat), and agricultural vehicles and tools (tractor, harvester, truck, bucket, sweep, wheelbarrow, sickle, shovel, grinder, etc.). While these are all images that evoke rural life, there is little pastoral, romantic, or idyllic in them. In fact, many of the visuals present objects that are dirty, muddy, and worn out. Conversely, the textual parts of the memes and the posts, as well as the comments by the followers often bring up the difficulty of village life and the futility of agricultural work.



Figure 1. Post and meme from the UoB Facebook page. All memes are reprinted by permission from the authors of the pages.

An example of this is shown in Figure 1, which is a screenshot of a meme, post, and comments in the UoB Facebook page.

The picture displays a man on a tractor and the scenery behind him that looks like a village street; the asphalt is scanty and the house behind the tractor is not particularly well off. The man is in work clothes that are shabby and dirty, and so is the tractor muddy and of an older type. The text of the post translates as follows: "The tractor is there, let them drive it now... I've been wobbling in it enough..." The textual part of the meme is written as if it was pronounced in the rural Bánát Hungarian vernacular and it can be read as a continuation or the precedent of the post, uttered by the same person: "I have left the land to the young ones, let them work with it now... If I haven't worked enough in life, then I don't know who did!".

Continuing the topic of the meme as well as its linguistic style, the two comments partly visible in Figure 1 make humorous remarks on the inability of young people to take interest in and value agricultural work as the older generation did. As in other threads, the comments follow the topic of the post and endorse the dialect used in the page, often in reply to other comments. This way the post and meme serve to introduce a trope, and a chain of associations follows in the comments, whereby the followers partake in the discursive production in a creative way. As an example, under another UoB meme dealing with agriculture, where the picture shows a tobacco field, a follower writes in dialect: "I don't want to see this anymore! You need to pick it, stitch it, remove the tendrils, keep turning it, you need to take it up, there is never enough hooks [the Serbian word *kuka* is used here instead of Hungarian *horog*, as commonly used in Hungarian vernacular in Serbia], the buyers don't allow you to stitch it on nylon, etc. [,] then eventually they take it all as fifth or sixth [class product]".¹ This comment starts a thread in which other followers also partake in exhibiting knowledge of the dialect, Serbian loan words, agricultural terminology, and display their familiarity with the topic of growing tobacco (which was a lucrative and widespread practice in Vojvodina in the late 80s).

While this humor is a subtle irony of life as a Hungarian in a Vojvodina village, it is not mockery, but rather creates what the author of the page called the "joy of recognition" (Szabolcs Vass, interview with author, October 20, 2021), a feeling of community of those who recognize the scenes and characters of their childhood experience. As several studies have shown, mainly but not only in

the arena of political humor, one feature of jokes is that they can induce a feeling of solidarity (Rácz 2016; Dynel 2021; Kallius and Adriaans 2022). The memes of Rokon Ilonka and UoB are pieces of insiders' humor: they are not entertaining for someone without knowledge of the region and its stereotypes, customs, common wisdom, superstitions, beliefs, typical characters, etc. Conversely, knowledge of the local context precludes the ability to understand the puns and being able to reproduce the language of the posts. Yet while requiring insider knowledge, due to its online nature, the humor of the memes is accessible to many and is thus inclusive (Sutlovic 2024). With the possibility to comment and contribute, it enables a cultural creativity for the followers as well, not only the authors, and makes a bond between those who understand the insider jokes regardless of where they currently live but based on where they come from.

Yet it can be deduced from the information on the place of residence, education and/or workplace publicly visible in the Facebook profiles of the followers that most of them have moved away from the life portrayed in the memes either geographically and/or in terms of education and work. With a few exceptions, most commonly the followers are millennials or older who live in Western Europe, in Budapest or in larger towns in Vojvodina, have university degrees and do white-collar jobs. They possess the cultural knowledge to understand the humor that builds on the everyday life in a Vojvodina Hungarian village and can reproduce the local dialects used in this context, but they can also speak standard Hungarian and belong to a middle-class environment, being accustomed to a more urban way of life. Therefore, for most of them, the tropes in Rokon Ilonka and UoB are not part of their everyday lives in its actual sense but virtual sources of humor. This in turn creates a community of those who recognize the social situations the memes derive from and the language they are reproduced in, and share a nostalgic sentiment for their home region.

Being defined as longing for a home that that no longer exists and has never existed (Boym 2001), nostalgia is a concept utilized in diaspora studies. Yet as the above examples show, it can have explanatory value for members of communities that did not emigrate as well. People can feel nostalgic because they wish to be in the place they left, but also because they yearn for a time that passed, or because they long for a country that disappeared. The former Yugoslavia is a space where the longing for a lost time and a lost home coincides (see Velikonja 2010; Popovic 2016). It is this time and space that most of the images in both pages feature: pieces of furniture and household equipment (*trosed* [a type of sofa popular in the 80s in Yugoslavia], dining table, stove, heater, phone, dishes), food and beverages of Yugoslav brands (Smoki crisps, Balonka and Shock chewing gum, Kapri, Leni, Rumenko, Sneško ice cream, Eurokrem blok chockolate bars, Sinalko soda, Jelen, Lav, and Apatinsko beer, Gorki list alcoholic drink, etc.), ornaments common in the 80s (tablecloth, doily, needlepoint), popular vehicles popular (Zastava 101 or Lada Samara car, Zmaj tractor), etc. It is therefore not only the humor of the text, but the nostalgically imbued visuals as well that create a community and construct a Vojvodina Hungarian identity.

Food – home

Food brings back nostalgic memories of childhood related to events when it was consumed in the circle of family and friends. Memories of dishes eaten together are associated with social and ethnic groups and geographic locations, including one's homeland (Baker, Karrer, and Veeck 2005 in Holak 2013). Like nostalgia, the home is a crucial part of the diaspora experience and a central issue in diaspora studies. Instead of a replica of the place of origin and return though, as in earlier research, the home has become a continuously re-imagined community, constructed in creative ways (Danforth 1996, Tsagarousianou 2004), and virtual platforms and social media have had a major role in this (re)construction. Yet in the case of communities that are both a minority and diasporic, like the Vojvodina Hungarian, the orientation towards the home applies also to members who remained at home.

One of the reasons for the importance of food in the case of regions like Vojvodina, as reflected in the Rokon Ilonka and UoB memes, is that these dishes reflect a "mixed identity", as people from



Figure 2. Post and meme from the UoB Facebook page.

the region refer to it. It means that like language, identity is perceived as deriving from more than one community; conversely food eaten at home is often not connected to one ethnic group but is rather a mixture of various ethnic foods found at most dining tables in the province, creating a distinct "culinary citizenship" (Mannur 2007). The memes and posts therefore feature food such as ham, eggs, and horseradish, traditionally served for Catholic Easter, *pogácsa, paprikás, madártej*, and *barátfüle*, traditional Hungarian home-made dishes and sweets, but also *gyuvecs, csevap, ajvár, tursija* (which are the Hungarianized spelling and pronunciation of the Serbian words *đuveč, ćevap, ajvar*, and *turšija*), that are consumed in the Balkan countries, as well as bean stew and chicken soup, that can be found on the home menu all around the region regardless of ethnic membership.

Other than the mixed nature of identity specific to Vojvodina Hungarians, another way food is prominent in the memes is depicting situations of dishes being served when family and relatives visit home from abroad. Due to a historically high number of "gastarbeiters", visiting family and friends, eating large amounts of home-made food on these occasions is a customary situation in Vojvodina, and one that connects those in the province and those members of the community who emigrated. This topic is explored in a meme from UoB shown in Figure 2 depicting a group of men sitting around a table filled with food and drinks. The text of the post and meme reads: "Finally these holidays are over... I have had enough of the relatives... // One couldn't take a normal nap for half an hour because someone was always coming..."²

In the visual part of this meme, food signifies visiting friends and family and communal gatherings. Food plays an important role at the times of holidays and connects residents and visitors, those in Vojvodina and those who emigrated. This way, food marks the occasions when residents and diaspora come together and when the community is unified.

Food also ties those who left the region to home and the people there is through an image of a conspicuous object frequently represented in the memes. Family members, especially mothers packing food in boxes is a common practice in the region. Food most commonly packed in the box are stuffed cabbage, stuffed paprika, *paprikás* or other stew-like dishes that can be reheated and consumed, while the box itself is a reused plastic container, most often originally holding ice-cream. An example of such memes is one from UoB that visually presents a box containing a common Serbian brand of ice-cream, and the text of the meme saying "Don't you throw away the box! It will be good for the kid when he goes to the university", and the post, the addressee of which becomes the young person who goes to university: "Start bringing them home already because there is nothing to pack in!".³ Rokon Ilonka also uses the theme of the box, for instance in a meme displaying a few

packages of paté of a Serbian brand and an egg-holding box, with the text and the post reading: "Put it outside to dry / And bring home boxes because I don't have anything to pack in // What time does it leave? Don't miss it!".⁴ From the first line of the meme that has to do with drying, presumably clothes washed at home and taken back to the student accommodation in Hungary, the post that refers to the bus schedule, and the food items shown in the visual part, it becomes clear that like the one in UoB, this meme is also about a student visiting home for the weekend.

Eating "ethnically mixed" dishes or situations such as visiting home or receiving guests, gathering around the dining table during the holidays, or memories of food packed in ice-cream boxes are familiar to diaspora members who yearn for the space where they are from, but also to those individuals who remember the lost time of their childhood. Thus, home ceases to be a geographically bound place, rather it moves to the domain of virtuality, nostalgia, and becomes something that is always already constructed, "remembered and practiced through shared rituals, memories, food, smells, and conversations" (Stavrevska et al. 2023, 7).

Language – mixedness

Apart from the "mixed" dishes eaten, it is the use of Serbian language that differentiates UoB and Rokon Ilonka from humorous platforms from Hungary and makes these Facebook pages uniquely Vojvodina Hungarian. Unlike with other tropes where Rokon Ilonka and UoB treat topics in a similar way, in dealing with language, there is a difference between the two Facebook pages. Specifically, the combining Serbian words into Hungarian sentences is present in the UoB page but not in Rokon Ilonka. This difference arises from the context – namely, the contrast between living as a Hungarian in Bánát or in Bácska, in an ethnically mixed area and in an ethnically homogeneous "Hungarian world" (Brubaker et al. 2006). While in the former, speaking a "mixed language" is the usual case, and for many the only vernacular they know, in Bácska, where Rokon Ilonka is imagined to take place, standard Hungarian (with a local way of pronunciation but without Serbian idioms) is the norm.

Conversely, when it comes to humor and language, the main source of fun in UoB is the mixture of languages, while in Rokon Ilonka it is the lack of knowledge of the state language. Thus, for instance in Rokon Ilonka, one of the memes bring up this issue. The text of the meme explains the lack of knowledge of Hungarian children in a village in Bácska by superimposing the word "Dobodáá", denoting a Hungarianized pronunciation of the Serbian greeting *dobar dan*, over an image of an angel wearing a *šajkača*, a type of hat typically worn by elderly Serbian men in the countryside. The text of the meme reads: "Who would we have learned it from? / In the city the kids play with the Serbs, of course they know", and the post is: "Here one can hear only Hungarian, I don't know why they are surprised!"⁵ Other than explaining Hungarians' lack of knowledge of Serbian, the last part of the post is a legitimizing discourse, implicitly responding to allegations occasionally heard in the public and read in the media at the times of this post (2017) that Hungarians in Serbia do not want to learn the state language.

On the other hand, in the UoB page, knowledge of the Serbian language is taken for granted most of the time. Therefore, the textual parts of the memes, and conversely the comments contain Serbian words commonly used by Hungarian speakers in Vojvodina. These "mixed" expressions are employed instead of standard Hungarian words, and they are spelled in their Hungarianized forms. Such words are *dalmatinac* (instead of *dalmata*, the Dalmatian dog breed), *sépa* (from the Serbian *šepav*, meaning "lame"), *privát* (from the Serbian *privatnik* for "private entrepreneur"), *zsúrka* (from the Serbian *žurka*, instead of *buli*, meaning "party"), *déda* (from *deda*, instead of the standard Hungarian words *tata* or *nagyapa*, meaning "grandpa"), *vikkend* (from *vikend*, instead of *hétvége*, meaning "weekend"), *tetovázsa* (from *tetovaža*, meaning "tatoo"), *rucsna* (from *ručna kočnica*, instead of *kézifék*, for "handbrake"), *szájám* (from *sajam*, instead of *vásár*, for "fair"), *kladionica* (the Serbian word for "betting office"), *dzsézma* (from *džezva*, for "coffee pot"), *passzus* (from *pasoš*, instead of *útlevél*, for "passport"), *inspekcijó* (from the Serbian word *inspeakcija*, meaning



Figure 3. Post and meme from the UoB Facebook page.

"inspection"), koverta (from koverat, instead of boríték, meaning "envelope"), smiga (from žmigavac, that means "blinker" in Serbian), pruszlik (from prsluk, instead of mellény, meaning "vest"), kopacska (from kopačka, for "football boots"), etc.

The meme in Figure 3 illustrates a situation in which Serbian words are used in Hungarian sentences.

The picture of the meme shows a Serbian vehicle license, while the text reads: "Give it already, they are asking for the vehicle license too"6. The Serbian word used in this meme alongside Hungarian phrases is "szarobratyájni", that not only is the localized version of saobraćajni, or in standard Serbian, saobraćajna [dozvola], meaning "vehicle license", but is a word play with the additional "r" in it, thereby the beginning reads as "szar", which means "shit" in Hungarian. The post contains a Serbian phrase with a Hungarian spelling: "já szám" is ja sam and means "it's me", while "Tivádár" is the Hungarian name Tivadar as it would be pronounced in Serbian. The spelling of these words is Hungarianized, and they lack any translation or explanation, thus implying that the readers understand them in such forms. The sentence displayed in the meme may be read as if one person was interpreting to the other, thereby implying that in this imaginary situation where the police officer is asking for the document, the driver does not speak Serbian well enough to understand them. The commenters under this post relate mostly to situations of language mixing, but also to misunderstandings arising from the lack of language knowledge. Such is the first comment visible in Figure 3 in which the commenter makes up a dialogue happening in Serbian between a policeman and a driver. The police officer, representing the authority of the state and speaking its language is asking for the driver's name, who is called Bela Koza, which is a neutral Hungarian name, but in Serbian it means "White Goat". The officer's reply shows his lack of understanding of this fact, as he is saying "Get out of the car immediately, you found me to fuck around with.'

What Hungarians in Vojvodina commonly refer to as a mixed language (Márku 2004, Basity 2015), is discussed in sociolinguistics as translanguaging: mixing phrases belonging to two or more languages in a hybrid and permeable way in speaking or writing. It stands in contrast to the more widely used term of code-switching by focusing on the interrelatedness of the languages instead of their separation, their non-hierarchical use, and the emphasis of language users and their practices rather than the identification of the languages used (García 2009; Otheguy et al. 2015; Creese 2017; Jonsson 2017; Jakonen, Szabó, and Laihonen 2018; Goodman and Tastanbek 2020). The capacity of translanguaging lies in its contradicting the monolingual norm, in which speaking the standard form of one language is seen as the rule to which speakers are expected to comply (Blackledge 2008;

Jonsson 2017). Translanguaging as a phenomenon has been studied mainly in diaspora social contexts (see Hua, Wei, and Lyons 2017; Hua and Wei 2019; Regnioli 2019). For the context of Hungarian diaspora in Catalunya, Szabó (2022) argues that conveying the desired meaning in "purely" one language only is not possible. In a similar fashion, transposing the concept to a minority social context, discussing the topic of everyday life in rural Vojvodina in a "mixed" language that is actually used in such a setting is more natural. Furthermore, thinking of languages in a more permeable way subverts the common normative view that ethnic minority members need to comply to the standard language spoken in their kin-state as much as possible, that in turn stigmatizes their use of localisms and of loanwords of the language of the majority speakers of the country they live in. Mimicking the language use of Hungarians from Bánát, constructing it as something humorous and a language skill that only those who are from there can demonstrate, the UoB Facebook page not only gives space to followers to read posts in the dialect of the Hungarian language they grew up with and to display their knowledge of it in creative ways in the comments, but it also destigmatizes this vernacular. This practice creates a bond between "insiders" and constructs a community. Thus, the two pages are different from similarly humorous ones in Serbia because they use a different language, but also differ from Hungarian pages from Hungary because of the vernacular they use.

Ethnic others – majority people and culture

It is not only language use that differentiate the Rokon Ilonka and the UoB Facebook pages from each other, but a difference in the presence of references to the majority culture and people is also visible when comparing the two pages. Conversely, like UoB, imagined in an ethnically mixed village in Bánát, jokes with the (over)use of Serbian phrases, it also includes many references to Serbian people, music, movies, cartoons, etc. This trend is visible also in the posts and comments of this page, where followers tend to drop Serbian names, referencing neighbors, friends, or relatives.

In this fashion, a meme and post from this page is concerned with Serbian music, in particular with so-called "ex-Yu" performers and songs. This genre corresponds with the period of the 80s that the Facebook page tends to refer to and when many of the followers were born. The visual of the meme shows a screenshot from a Youtube playlist called Najbolji ex Yu miks ("the best ex-Yu mix"), "ex yu rock" in the search field, and playlists similar to the one being played as suggestions called "Ex Yu Rock/Pop Mix", "Ex Yu pop rock mix", and EX-YU mix za dobro raspoloženje ("EX-YU mix for a good mood") parts 1 and 2. Continuing the nostalgic tone, in the visual part of the meme, the playlist that is being played has the former Yugoslav blue-white-red flag with a red star in the middle as its cover photo, while the text reads: "Play me some ex-Yu... So that some Riblja Čorba, Crvena Jabuka and Balašević is definitely among it", followed by the post "If I drink a few pálinkas, I might even cry at *Ne lomite mi bagrenje*...".⁷ While playing different genres of music, the rock band Riblja čorba, Crvena jabuka with their more pop-sounding songs and the singer and songwriter Đorđe Balašević's chansons (Ne lomite mi bagrenje [Don't break my acacia trees] mentioned in the post is one of his most popular ballads) have been some of the most well-known performers of the late Yugoslav period and most of their greatest hits were from the 80s. The songs of these three singers and bands, and many other Yugoslav popular singles of those times have become evergreens, are still played on the radio and at parties, and are widely known today, being a proxy for the best years of Yugoslavia. The fact that the UoB meme thematizes this and lists these popular performers displays the cultural intimacy with Serbian/Yugoslav popular culture, a common cultural reference, and since it brings memories of past times and a lost country, the current place of residence becomes unimportant.

The Rokon Ilonka Facebook page, on the other hand, is imagined to take place in a largely Hungarian environment and therefore references to Serbian culture are rare and also is the mentioning of Serbian people. In this page in fact Serbians are mentioned mostly with reference to negative stereotypes attached to the majority nation. Two of the memes and their accompanying



Figure 4. Post and meme from the Rokon Ilonka Copyright Facebook page.

posts of Rokon Ilonka deal with Serbian people and both contain explicitly or implicitly negative stereotypes uttered by imaginary characters. The first one can be read as a piece of marital advice given by a parent or a grandparent to a young man: "Son, look for a Hungarian one / I don't want mules here," with the post: "Catholic, respectable, and Hungarian!".⁸ Here, mules allude to (grand)children born from an ethnically mixed marriage and are seen as bearing a negative identity. The second meme can be seen in Figure 4 and shows two characters in tracksuits, which is presented as the stereotypical clothing of Serbian men. The lead post of the second meme reads: "The *dobardans* are coming", alluding to the Serbian greeting as with a meme described in the previous section, and turning it into a *pars pro toto* for Serbian people, while the post translates as: "Well if two Serbs walk in the street, you can hear it in the other street too"⁹, figuratively characterizing them as loud.

However, even if Rokon Ilonka Copyright does not contain common references to Serbian culture and people like UoB does, in terms of the visual parts of the memes that page also has a strong situatedness in Serbia. The photographic elements representing objects commonly used in Serbia and/or Serbian brands of various products testify to this. Some of the examples of this are small coffee cups Turkish coffee is drunk from, Serbian dinar bills, or Serbian brands of cosmetics (Intesa hair spray, Kolynos toothpaste), food products and drinks (Dobro jutro margarin, Sunoko sugar, Carnex paté, Sentella pasta, spice mix for fish soup), coffee (Grand and Mokate), bevarages (Jelen and Apatinsko bears, Frutella and Apella soft drinks), car (Zastava 101), furniture used in Serbia (storage heater, sofa), Hungarian newspaper published in Serbia (*Magyar Szó*), etc. The text and the visuals of the pages embed the characters and situations presented in the memes as taking place in Serbia, thus making it the main geographical and sociocultural reference point.

Even if fewer in number than local references, allusions to Hungarian culture from Hungary are also present in both pages. Examples of these are places in Hungary (Árkád shopping center in Szeged, Mórahalom spa), television shows (South-American and Turkish soap operas, reality shows and series [Murder, She Wrote, Inspector Rex, Sandocan, Jóban-rosszban] aired on Hungarian TV channels), food products and beverages (Túró Rudi, Dunkavics sweets, goose liver paté, sausages, Unicum), books (Gőgös Gúnár Gedeon, János Vitéz, history textbook), etc. Like "mixedness" is a term to describe the double identification of Vojvodina Hungarians in terms of language use, embeddedness in both countries and cultures can be viewed as having "multiple connections" (see Papp 2015, who used this term in relation to Hungarian Jewish humor). Therefore, displaying multiple belonging and being different from both Serbian and Hungarian humorous platforms, the two Facebook pages have a distinct minority point of view from which the authors and followers articulate their experience.

Crossing borders

It is not only crossing linguistic and ethnic borders that is in the core of the minority and diaspora experience, but diasporic communities and groups with high intensity connections with their kinstates such as the Vojvodina Hungarians routinely cross the border in its materiality. The launch of the two Facebook pages in this case study has coincided with not only the heightened mobility offered by Hungarian non-resident citizenship, but also with the beginning of the period since when the situation at the border crossings between the two countries has deteriorated. Despite the good political relations of Serbia and Hungary and public discourse emphasizing the favorable conditions of the Hungarian minority in Serbia, frequent long waiting hours due to lengthy lines, few open lanes, slow work of border officers, and on occasions IT system failures at the Hungarian border, apart from passport controls and customs inspections, characterise the everyday routine of those crossing it. This, combined with an increase of the ever-frequent crossborder movement of Vojvodina Hungarian students, workers, commuters, Serbian shoppers, spa guests, Turkish gastarbeiters, Western tourists, legal and illicit traders, etc. has created a situation in which for those living in the north of Serbia, many of their movements are marked by the border.

The affective and material experience of the border has made it an influential discursive trope in the lives of border populations. In the discursive formation of its experience, online and offline communication cannot be viewed separately: for those living near it, the topic of the border has been a constant inspiration for anecdotes and a cause for frustrations. It is a topic of poetry, prose, social media posts, news items, comments, etc. As a response to the situation at the border, a Facebook group for sharing information, then a telephone application for tracking waiting times at various border crossings has been created. The memes of Rokon Ilonka and UoB dealing with the border are also means to present the experience in textual and visual form. On the other hand, the border situation is not only represented on various platforms, but by talking and writing about it, taking photographs of it and exploring "meme-worthy" situations, the various discourses of the border, including the memes, construct the experience of crossing it, thereby blurring the boundary between media platforms and the everyday (Kallius and Adriaans 2022). For instance, since a few years ago, when crossing the border between Serbia and Hungary in a group of people by bus or carpooling (a common way of transport since public transit between the two countries became scarce), it is common to hear a passenger say "a szerbet a szerbné[l,] a magyart a magyaron," a phrase that provokes others laughing. The laughter suggests that those in the means of transport are familiar with this phrase, and marks those who do not understand the humor as outsiders. While the text of the meme presented in Figure 5 may sound like a historical proverb, "the Serbian at the Serbian, the Hungarian at the Hungarian" refers to the unwritten rule that double citizens shall hand in the Serbian document to the Serbian border police for inspection, and the Hungarian passport to the Hungarian officer.

With the exception of the above meme that shows passports, most of the visual parts of the memes dealing with the trope of the border share the reference of long lines of vehicles and waiting times. The textual parts of the posts and memes are sentences such as "Well, we aren't going shopping to Árkád [shopping center in Szeged] today either" superimposed over the screenshot of the BorderWatcher application for tracking waiting times at the border crossings in which all borders are color red, meaning longer than 120 minutes waiting times, with the post "All borders are



Figure 5. Post and meme from the Rokon Ilonka Copyright Facebook page.

as red as grandpa's Ferguson", "I understand that they [Hungarian border police officers] have small salaries and all... But I am also going over for a little [money] and I still do my job!", "Last time they asked for the vehicle licence too / The two borders already came together, but instead of hurrying, he keeps feeling the passport... I don't know, are they fucking with the people on purpose?", "Look, it is in the news that from tomorrow it's possible to come without a quarantine.... Tell to Ilci's [family] that they can get going home from the Germans'," complemented with the post "Well I guess there's gonna be such a crowd at the border that no one has seen", or "Shall I go for Rábé [border crossing] today? Or should we still not go that way?"¹⁰ Like most of the other memes dealing with the trope of the border, the visual part of Figure 6 shows a border, in particular the Ásotthalom - Bački vinogradi border crossing, with lines of cars on both sides, a passenger undergoing passport control on one side, and a police officer on the other side of it. The textual part of the meme and the post say: "Shall we say the cigarettes? // Say that there are two unopened and an open and that's it..."¹¹

Like the Rokon Ilonka meme "the Serbian at the Serbian, the Hungarian at the Hungarian" in Figure 5, the meme and post in Figure 6 also does not explicitly state its object. In both cases, as well as in the texts of the other memes quoted above, it is the visual of the passports, the mobile phone application, or the border crossing point that give the reader the cues. Furthermore, the texts of these memes build upon the intimate knowledge of crossing the border, such as the names of border crossings, the rules for crossing, and landmarks across the border. Without such insider knowledge one would not understand the phrase "borders coming together," that means that the line at the Hungarian checkpoint is so long that it ends in the no-man's-land, would not recognize the interface of the application for tracking waiting times, would not know that the hesitance about going to a certain border crossing or not has to do with the seasons when long lines are expected, would not have heard about the speculation that Hungarian border officers are on a "silent strike" so they do their job slowly on purpose to express dissatisfaction with low wages, would not know that in Figure 6 "opened"



Figure 6. Post and meme from the UoB Facebook page.

and "unopened" refers to boxes of cigarettes allowed to take across the border, and that to "tell" means to "report" in this context, and would not guess that "Hungarian" and "Serbian" refer to passports.

Waiting in line at the border crossing or being subjected to passport check, customs inspection and other border procedures are equally part of the life of Vojvodina Hungarians as travelling by carsharing or bus to Hungary, speaking a "mixed" vernacular, or eating defrosted home-made food taken in boxes across the border. The intimate knowledge of the border connects those who cross it every day, every week, once a month, for summer holidays, for occasional shopping trips or visits, etc. and those who, like a village aunt or an uncle, stay at home, cook home-made dishes, give advice to youth, and hear about and occasionally experience border-related situations. Estévez (2009) claims that nostalgia can be felt by those in the home country as well as by those who migrated and became diaspora, because both have lost a place as they knew it. Similarly, whether residents or emigrees, borderwork is part of the lives for most people living near the border since they "have to live with all the formal and informal borders [...] and they live with having to cross them, or having to avoid crossing them, or thinking about how they might try and cross and what they need to cross" (Green and Malm 2013, 110). The experience of the border is not reserved only for those who settled abroad but is constitutive of the everyday life of the entire community.

Conclusion

In the previous subsections, I have dealt with Rokon Ilonka Copyright and University of Bótelőtt, two humorous Facebook pages that deal with Vojvodina Hungarian everyday culture. I have distinguished the most common topics, called tropes, that the memes of the two pages tackle. These tropes are recurrent elements of the identity construction of Vojvodina Hungarians. I have connected them to some of the key concepts of diaspora studies and research on ethnic minorities, such as home, nostalgia, minority, majority, language, mixedness, and borders. I have explored these concepts and tropes with the aim of exploring how, due to the processes of depopulation and mass emigration that has been taking place in the past decade, members of the community who live abroad and those who stayed in Serbia articulate and create a common identity. The pages where these humorous memes appear are virtual places from where common identities can be constructed.

In the first subsection of the analysis section, I have dealt with the trope of rurality, arguing that village life is a topic in the memes that is a common ground for jokes that only group members understand. The second trope I have unpacked is that of food, since many memes in the two pages present traditional home-made dishes that are eaten in the circle of family and friends. Food presented in the memes often transcends ethnic labels and is rather associated to a more regionally defined home, while packing food and taking them abroad is the object of nostalgia and the reminiscent of home, an issue connected to diaspora. I have analyzed memes that deal with language in the third part of this section, connecting it to the concept of mixedness. Due to the language of the memes, that uses local expressions as well as Serbian loanwords, the memes are different from not only Serbian-language humorous pages, but also Hungarian ones, and point to the mixed identity of the community members. This mixed language of the memes also becomes an insider knowledge of the followers and destigmatizes the Hungarian vernacular used in Serbia. The fourth trope I have explored is that of ethnic others, and this is the topic where the two pages differ the most: while Rokon Ilonka is imagined in the part of Vojvodina where Hungarians live as a relative majority and thus lack deeper knowledge of Serbian language and culture, which becomes the main source of humor, UoB is set in an ethnically mixed environment, and conversely the memes in that page display and joke with more elements of Serbian culture. Regardless of the level of familiarity with the state language or the majority popular culture, both pages are contextualized as taking place in Serbia, but point to a connection to Hungary and Hungarian culture as well. The last trope I have analyzed is crossing borders, a practice that is a prominent part of the everyday life of Vojvodina Hungarian students, commuters, and emigrants, but also of those who remain to live in Serbia.

Some of the tropes (such as rurality) point to a distinct Vojvodina Hungarian identity, while others (like crossing borders) differentiate Hungarians from Serbia from the majority population that is not that transnational. The trope of food on the other hand has a regional connotation, distinguishing Hungarians from Vojvodina from Hungarians from the kin-state, similarly to the "mixed" Hungarian language spoken in the province and the references to Serbian people and culture present especially in the UoB memes. Regarding the trope of ethnic others and the construction of identities vis-à-vis the majority people and language, the distinction of whether one lives or had lived in Bánát or in Bácska proves to be more important than the distinction between those living in Vojvodina or abroad. While certain themes in the tropes are more important for some, as home is for those who migrated to the kin-state or live in diaspora, or minority experience and contact with the majority culture for those in Serbia, most of the tropes and concepts are equally meaningful for both those who live in Serbia and those in Hungary and diaspora. Therefore, the article explored the two Facebook pages as virtual spaces where those who left Vojvodina and those who stayed to live there can share common experiences and partake in maintaining and building a collective identity regardless of their residence. In other words, changes in the past decades in the Vojvodina Hungarian community have led to identification patterns that do not rest any longer on being *in*, but rather on being *from* Vojvodina.

Exploring how a sub-state national minority group with a waning population in the home state and a growing diaspora construct their identity calls for an analysis that combines the lens of ethnic minority and diaspora studies. I have argued in this article that social media pages, particularly those displaying humorous memes have the capacity to construct a platform where identity elements can be displayed and produced, regardless of whether the members of the community are a minority or diaspora. Even though this article explores two Facebook pages popular among Vojvodina Hungarians, the questions raised when examining this community, such as the ways of identification new socio-economic situations have created, the role of virtual platforms, and the link between those living in the country of birth and abroad can also have a more general relevance for the cases of other minority ethnic groups with high diasporic tendencies. Acknowledgments. I would like to thank the authors and followers of the Rokon Ilonka Copyright and the University of Bótelőtt Facebook pages for creating memes and writing comments; their humor has really made me feel at home. I am also thankful to my friends and colleagues, first and foremost Mišo Kapetanović, for encouraging me and making me believe that this is a research-worthy topic.

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Notes

- 1 "Látni nem akarom eszt többet! Szönni kő, fűzni kő, kaccsazni kő, forgatni kő, fő kő hordani, sosincs ölég kuka, nejlon madzagra nem engedik fűzni a fináncok stb. oszt aztán a végin mög eviszeik az egészet ötödikbe mög hatodikba"
- 2 "Csak ha emútak ezök a zünnepök... Mán ölegem van a rokonyokbú... // Nem lehetött lédűni röndössen égy fél órára, me mindig valakit ide övött a fene..."
- 3 "A doboszt e né dobd! / Jó lösz az a gyeröknek mikó mén a zegyetemre // Horgyad mosmá haza űket, me nincs mibe pakóni!"
- 4 "Majd tedd ki száradni ha odaérté / A dobozokat meg hozd haza mer nemtok má mibe pakolni // Hánykor indul? Nehogy lekésd!"
- 5 "Kitű tanutuk vóna meg? / Ott a gyerekek városon a szerbekke jáccanak jóhogy beszélik // Erre csak magyart lehet hallani, nemtom mit csodákoznak!"
- 6 "Add mán ide, kérik szarobratyájnit is..."
- 7 "Engeggy lé neköm égy kis éksz jút... / Égy kis Riblja Čorba, Crvena Jabuka, mög Balašević lögyön benne okvetlen! // Ha mögiszok pár pálinkát a Ne lomite mi bagrenjená lehet rílok is majd..."
- 8 "Kisfijam! Valami magyart nézzé! / Nem köllenek nekem ide öszvérek // Katolikust, tisztességest és magyart!"
- 9 "Jönnek a dobardánok // Na ha két szerb mén az uccán / Azt meghallod a másik uccán is"
- 10 "Na mámma sé mönyünk a Zárkádba soppingóni… / Ojan piros a zösszes határ mind tatának a Ferbusonnya…; Értöm én hogy kevés a fizetésük mög mindön… / De há én is azé a kevésé mék át oszt lédógozom a zényim akkó is!; Tüllem mútkó ekérték a száobrátyájnit is… / Mán összeér a két határ, de nem hogy sietne, csak ott fogdosi aszt a passzust… Én nem tom, ezök direkt baszogatik az embört?; Néda mén a hírökbe, hogy hónaptú karantin nékű löhet begyünni… / Szójjá a Zilciéknek, hogy bírnak indúni haza a némötöktű! // Na gondolom most ojan gúzsva lössz a határokon hoccsakna…; Emerjek mán mámma indúni Rábé felé? / Vagy még né mönnyünk ara?"
- 11 "Mongyuk a cigiket? / Mongyad, hogy van két bontatlan mög éggy bontott oszt kész..."

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