

Vasile Docea [ed.]

Paths to Belonging

Constructing Local Identity in Banat by Means of
Monuments, Cultural Heritage and Historiography



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Foreword

Although it is not new, the regional issue has lately grown into a major discussion topic in the European Union, whose policies are more and more sensitive about the place and role of regions/Euroregions in the community development. This is not a chance occurrence, since the entire debate about regions is closely connected with the European construction as a transnational project: speaking about regions means not speaking (or speaking less) about national states. Whether they are placed inside national states, or, more often, they are shared by several countries, the regions go beyond the concept of border, relativizing it. The relativization of frontiers contributes, from the community's perspective, to the consolidation of cohesion within the European Union.

In this context, it is legitimate to have a scientific interest in regional identity, an interest displayed by more and more researchers in the field of social and humanistic studies. The present volume is the result of such a scientific interest. It brings together the studies of several researchers devoted to the exploration of Banat identity, a region currently shared by Romania, Serbia and Hungary. Geographically speaking, the region is bordered by the River Mureş in the North, the Tisa in the West, the Danube in the South, and the westernmost ridge of the Southern Carpathians in the East, on the banks of the small Cerna river, having a surface of approx. 28 000 square km, comparable, for example, with the surface of Belgium.

The name of the region – Banat – has no connection with the origin, ethnicity, language, or religion of its inhabitants, as it happens in many other places. The origin of the name of Banat is still a controversy. Some scholars report it as deriving from the root of a verb common in several Germanic tribes, *ban*, meaning *to proclaim* or *to announce*. From Germanic it was borrowed in medieval Latin, as *bannum*, which means – for the Franks, for example – *proclamation*, but also the *district* in which that particular proclamation was to be applied. Others claim that *ban* comes from Persian, where it means *master*. From Persian, it could have been borrowed by the Avars and brought into the Pannonian Plain, where they ruled between the 6th and the 8th centuries. This opinion is contradicted by those who believe that *ban* has an old, proto-Indoeuropean root, *bha*, mea-

ning to *speak*. Finally, a number of scholars consider *ban* to be a term of Slavic origin.

Irrespective of their origin – Germanic, proto-Indoeuropean, Persian, Avarian, or Slavic –, the terms *ban* and *Banat* were employed in the medieval South-Eastern Europe to express a military-administrative office, and the territory in which this office was held. In the south-eastern part of Europe there used to be several Banats. In present-day Croatia there were high dignitaries called *Ban*, like in Bosnia, whose territory was referred to as *Banovina*. In the area, the term *Ban* may have meant what in the Germanic space was a *Markgraf*, the leader of a borderline territory, with important military missions. After the defeat of the Hungarian armies at Mohacs, in 1526, the territory bordered by the Mureş, the Tisa, the Danube, and the Carpathians, so far divided in several Hungarian counties, came under Ottoman rule. The war between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans between 1716-1718 brought the region under the rule of Vienna. With the Austrian administration, the name *Banat* became the official name of the province administered by the „Kaiserliche Banater Landes-Administration“. Only in 1778 did the region return to the Hungarian administration, when it was again divided in counties (Temes, Torontal, and Karasso), losing its initial name. The name *Banat* was still used by a part of the initial province. Before that, along the Danube and the easternmost border of the province the central administration organized „the Banat Military Border“, with two regiments – German-Banat and Illyro-Romanian –, which remained under the direct command of Vienna until 1872, when it was dissolved.

The name *Banat* regained momentum as an official name in 1849. Then, the Vienna Court linked the Serbian Voievodina with the three counties, creating a single province, entitled „the Serbian Voievodina and the Timiş Banat“, with its administrative capital in Timişoara. After the Austro-Hungarian dualist compromise of 1867, when the region fell under Hungarian rule, the name *Banat* lost its official character, the area being known as Southern Hungary (*Dél-Magyarország*).

Banat was never used again as an administrative name after World War I, when the old historical province was divided between Romania (2/3), Serbia (1/3) and Hungary (1%). Only for a short while, during the communist regime, between 1960 and 1968, the western part of Romania, with the present-day counties of Timiş and Caraş-Severin and a part of present-day Arad, was officially known as „the Region of Banat“. Even if the administrative role disappeared, the name *Banat* is still valid for the inhabi-

tants of the territory between the Mureş, the Tisa, the Danube, and the Carpathians. It survived as an identity mark for the region's inhabitants. The Romanians living here call themselves Banat Romanians, and so do the Serbians and the Germans, who call themselves „Banaterschwaben”, Banat being for them a synonym of „Heimat”. Maybe this is why the name of the region was kept alive, despite its administrative disuse: it has the name of none of its inhabiting communities, so it belongs to all of them.

The origin of the present volume is an international conference with the topic *Regional Identity and Social Cohesion*, organized in October 2013, in Timișoara, by the „Eugen Todoran” Central University Library within a cross-border research grant (Romania-Serbia). The purpose of the conference was that of drawing the line of research carried so far about the Banat identity and of exploring new approaches. Of the more than 30 papers presented then, nine were selected for publication in this volume. These initial nine studies were joined by three others in the meantime (signed by anthropologist Simona Adam and historians Philipp Hochbaum and Mircea Măran), to complete the picture of Banat, drawn during the conference. The full 12 texts can be read in this book.

The articles, like their authors, come from diverse areas of expertise: history (Albert Weber, Vasile Docea), art history (Ileana Pintilie), journalism (Lucian-Vasile Szabo), political studies (Barna Bodó, Corina Turşie), cultural studies (Gwénola Sebaux, Andreea Lazea). They focus on three major issues, with a chapter devoted to each. The first point is the role played by „cultural heritage” in shaping the regional identity. The chapter entitled *Cultural Heritage, Monuments and Identity Construction* comes with a series of conceptual explanations, also offering four case studies about how ethnic groups construct and renegotiate their identity, by means of monuments in the region, but also how other types of heritage (artistic and printed) are connected to the issue of identity. The second point is the identity reconstruction of Banat in various historical ages. The chapter entitled *Reconstructing the Regional Identity* looks at how the identity of the region was changed/reconstructed by means of colonizing the Serbs by the Austrian administration; how the identity of the region was reconstructed after the fall of the communist regime; how the Banat Germans seek their identity after emigrating to Germany in the 1990s; how the local identity is affected by the city of Timișoara preparing to apply for the program of European Capital of Culture. Finally, the third chapter (*Local Historiography as Identity Discourse*) analyzes, in case studies, the self-legitimizing character of the region's historical texts.

Notwithstanding the informative character of the studies included, the volume as a whole was conceived as a report – a mirror, as it were – of the stage of development reached by multidisciplinary research in the field of regional identity. The diverse research methods employed by the authors, like the diversity of approaches, lead to clarifications which, otherwise, with the traditional tools of monographic investigation, would not be possible. This is why the editor expresses his gratitude to those who accepted to contribute to this volume.

Vasile Docea

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