

The Ethnic Minorities in the Transformation Process. Exemplified by the Serbian and Ukrainian Minority in the Romanian Rural Regions of Banat and Dobrogea

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Introduction¹

The processes of transformation in the beginning of 1989 have had an especially important impact on *national minorities*² in Romania. Concerning formal minority rights, the country has witnessed considerable improvements. The Constitution of 1991³ includes, as most important minority rights, the right to national identity, schooling in minority languages and political representation in the Parliament. The state grants and guarantees the right to preserve, to develop and to express their ethnic, cultural, lingual and religious identity to individuals belonging to a national minority. At this present moment, 20 national minorities are represented in the Romanian Parliament⁴.

Judicial and cultural position and political integration and participation of national minorities in Romania are enhanced by the state's protective measures aiming at identity preservation, development and articulation. These measures are based on the formal principle of equality. Concerning socio-economic status though, vast differences exist between different minorities with their geographical location playing a major role in determining their status. Economic dynamism in Western Romania allows for a certain advancement of the national minorities living in that region, yet, on the other hand, the small minorities of Russian-Lipovenians, Tatars, Turks and Ukrainians, who live in the eastern parts of Romania, are affected by the negative economic development of those parts.

These observations pose a lot of questions for ethnicity and border research, on which we will focus in this paper. The present study is based on a research project on "National minorities in globalization. Ethnicity as an element in processes of differentiation in life circumstances of minority groups in rural Romania"⁵. We have analyzed a variety of factors like economy and globalization, new minority politics and international relations in differently structured regions with a high percentage of national minorities: economically relatively prosperous Banat and Transylvania on the one hand and geographically, economically and socially peripheral Dobrudja including Danube Delta on the other hand. We assumed that these factors foster changes as it concerns ethnicity within these regions.

Based on three years of research, we are now able to present a complex and diverse picture of the meaning of ethnicity for different minorities in different regions and on different scales both in their life and as a political and socio-economic factor.

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¹ Translation: Bernd Belina (Potsdam).

² The Romanian constitution does not differentiate between national and ethnic minorities but refers to both as *national minorities*, a term that is not defined in any detail. For definitions of national/ethnic minority see Heller 2004, Anderl 2006.

³ In the process of accession to the European Union, the Romanian parliament has amended the constitution in 2003, granting for example the right to

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^{*}Representatives of the following national minorities are present and organized in the common faction of national minorities: Albanians, Armenians, Bulgarians, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Jews, Croatians, Slav Macedonians, Poles, Roma, Russian-Lipovenians, Ruthenians, Serbs, Tatars, Turks and Ukrainians. Czechs and Slovaks are represented by a single representative as the two national minorities are organized in a common organization. The Hungarian Democratic Association constitutes a separate faction as it has entered the parliament with more than 3% of the popular vote in all elections up to now.

⁵ The project is carried out at the chair for social und cultural geography at Potsdam University under the direction of Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Wilfried Heller in cooperation with the chair for sociology at "Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, and the chair for human and economic geography at Bucharest university, and financed by the VolkswagenStiftung, Hannover.

We will use the examples of the Serb and the Ukrainian minority in selected Romanian border regions (the administrative districts Timiş, Banat, in the east and Tulcea, Danube Delta, in the West) to shed some light on how socio-economic, cultural and political structures frame the (metaphorical and material) spaces in which ethnic categories gain meaning and importance in individuals' everyday lives. We will start by specifying the research question and giving a review of the situation of the Serbs in Banat and of the Ukrainians in Dobruja regions (chapter 2). Chapter 3 discusses our findings, chapter 4 - the more general problem of ethnicity and transition. They are followed by a conclusion (chapter 5).

Specification of the research question

Let us start with an inventory of the two minorities in question, both located in border regions (see figure 1, 2 and 3).



Figure 1. Romania's historic regions.

Both the Serb and the Ukrainian minorities are among the smallest ones in Romania. In both cases, the national minority's so called "homeland" is located: Serbia-Montenegro to the west and Ukraine to the north and southeast. As for the Ukrainians, research was confined to the members of this minority living in southeast Romania, i.e. in Dobruja. In both regions, actors and the scales they are located in were identifiable as are involved in changes in transborder interaction.



Figure 2. Region studied - Tulcea county (Dobruja, Danube Delta).

Three aspects are relevant here:

- the presence of a neighboring "homeland state" and the economic, cultural and political role they play;
- recent political and economic development in Serbia Montenegro and in Ukraine;
- the impact of EU enlargement⁶ on the states' foreign politics.

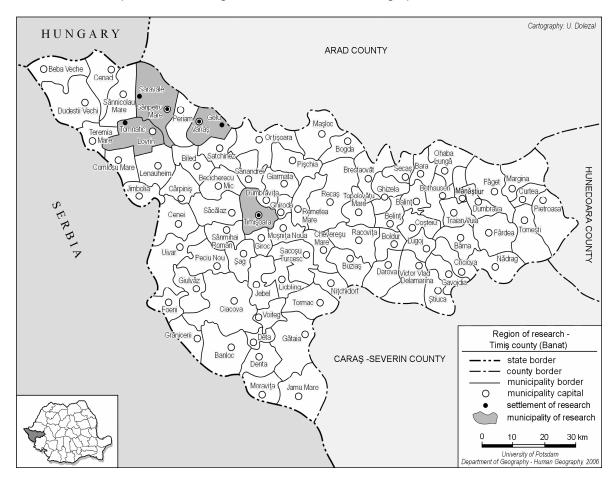


Figure 3. Region studied - Timiş county (Banat).

From this, a set of questions can be derived which focus on the socio-economic and cultural context without neglecting the political frame:

- 1. How are everyday life and chances of the two national minorities affected by different development in the two neighboring countries Serbia-Montenegro and Ukraine? Are there differences real or perceived between life circumstances of members of national minorities and those of the majority population in either the border region or on the national level?
- 2. How are the relations between the "homeland state" and the national minority in Romania?
 - 3. Is regional economic development affected by commuting or trade relations or foreign investment?
 - 4. Are there special economic relations between the members of the same ethnicity?
- 5. How far do socio-economic, political and cultural changes in the near Romania's upcoming EU accession and/or of globalization specifically affect ethnic minorities?

The two regions we have focused on differ not only in location but also, and significantly, when it comes to the path of economic development and, as we found out, the meaning of ethnicity. As for national minorities in Banat we can find Croatians, Germans, Hungarians,

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⁶ Romania is expected to join the EU in 2007.

Roma, Serbs, Slovaks and Slovenians; and Aromanians, Roma, Russian Lippovans, Tartars, Turks and Ukrainians in Dobruja. Because of these differences, meaningful conclusions concerning the relationship between economic situation and ethnicity should be possible.

Table 1. Romania's ethnic structure (1992 and 2002).

Proportion of ethnic group	1992		2002		Change 1992-2002	
	total	(%)	total	(%)	total	(%)
total population	22.810.035	100,00	21.680.974	100,00	-1.129.061	-4,95
Romanians	20.408.542	89,47	19.399.597	89,48	-1.008.945	-4.94
Hungarians	1.624.959	7,12	1.431.807	6,60	-193.152	-11,89
Roma	401.087	1,76	535.140	2,47	134.053	33,42
Ukrainians	65.472	0,29	61.098	0,28	-4.374	-6,68
Germans	119.462	0,52	59.764	0,28	-59.698	-49,97
Russian-Lipovenians	38.606	0,17	35.791	0,17	-2.815	-7,29
Turks	29.832	0,13	32.098	0,15	2.266	7,60
Tartars	24.596	0,11	23.935	0,11	-661	-2,69
Serbs/Croatians/Slovenians	33.769	0,15	29.570	0,14	-4.199	-12,43
Slovaks	19.594	0,09	17.226	0,08	-2.368	-12,09
Bulgarians	9.851	0,04	8.025	0,04	-1.826	-18,54
Greeks	3.940	0,02	6.472	0,03	2.532	64,26
Jews	8.955	0,04	5.785	0,03	-3.170	-35,40
Czechs	5.797	0,03	3.941	0,02	-1.856	-32,02
Poles	4.232	0,02	3.559	0,02	-673	-15,90
Armenians	1.957	0,01	1.780	0,01	-177	-9,04
other ethnic minorities	8.618	0,04	23.445	0,11	14.827	172,05
not specified	766	< 0,01	1.941	0,01	1.175	153,39

Source: INS 2003

Serbs in Romanian Banat after 1989. The Romanian Banat⁷, bordering Serbia-Montenegro and Hungary, has always been and still is marked by an extraordinary ethnic, lingual and religious diversity. Out of the 22.518 Serbs living in Romania in 2002, according to the data from the census (INS 2002), making up for 0,1% of the total population, the majority lived in Banat. In 1992, this figure was 29.408 (CNS 1992), meaning a loss of 23,4% in ten years⁸. As all other ethnic groups (except for the Roma), the Serbs registered a decline in number after 1992 (see table 1). This can partially be explained demographically, partially with reference to out-migration (Heller, 2006). As no valid data concerning the spatial differentiation of migration are available, no final conclusion can be drawn concerning the emigration of a part of the Serb and of the Ukrainian minority. One may think of the civil war in former Yugoslavia as a further motive for the drastic decrease in number of the Serb minority in Romania. This hypothesis, though, cannot be confirmed. The war has confronted not only the Serbs but also the Croatians and the Carashovenians⁹ in Romania with their identity. Romania's siding with NATO has made the situation of the Serb minority¹⁰ further problematic. These aspects will be taken into account in the following analysis.

The Ukrainians in today's Dobruja. Dobruja¹¹, bordering Bulgaria in the south and Ukraine in the north, used to be ethnically mixed as well, and is still home to a variety of minorities. The mixture has changed significantly with its incorporation into Romania in 1878.

⁷ Until World War I Banat was part of Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The historical Banat stretches over 28,500 km² between the rivers Mureş, Tisza, Danube and the Western Carpathians in the southeast Pannonian basin. Following the 1920 Trianon treaty, Banat was partitioned in three parts. About two thirds – the eastern part with Timişoara and Arad counties were assigned to Romania, the southern part to Serbia (32.5%) and the northwestern Mureş-Tisza-region to Hungary (1%).

The final figures were published in INS 2003, but there Serbs are put together wit Croats and Slovenians.

⁹ Carashovenians are a catholic Slav group. Parts of the Carashovenians regard themselves as being part of the Croatian ethnic group, others as part of the Serbians. At the 2002 census, 206 persons have declared themselves Carashovenians (INS, 2003).

¹⁰ "To be Serb and loyal Romanian citizen goes hand in hand today." (Interview with Slavomir Gvozdenovici, President of the Serb Association in Romania, 01.10.2003).

¹¹ Dobrudja, the area between Danube and Black Sea, was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1878. The major powers at the Berlin conference partitioned it up between Romania (north Dobrudja) and Bulgaria (south Dobrudja). After the 1913 Balkan War, the Southern part became Romanian, too. Following the treaty of Craiova, Dobrudja was finally divided up between Romania and Bulgaria (see Schmidt-Rösler, 1994).

This is due to the transfer of Tartars and Turks to Turkey, and later the resettlement of Germans to Warthegau (Poland), the 'population exchange' between Romania and Bulgaria, and the settlement of Aromanians.

The number of Romanian citizens who gave Ukrainian as their ethnicity in the 2002 census is down to 1.465 from 4.101 in 2002. This decline of 64,3% came about without major migration processes, as interviews with local population and experts show (Sallanz, 2006, 2005a: 40-51). As for the Ukrainian minority in Romania, a decline from 65.472 to 61.098 persons for the two censuses can be witnessed (see table 1).

Globalization's Influence on National Minorities in Romania

Although Romania has been institutionally stabilized as a result of consistent political endeavors, the country's development can still only be understood in the context of transformation and changes in macro-economic and political frameworks. Our study is based on fieldwork, carried out in cooperation with our Romanian partners, in 2003 and 2004. As the importance of ethnic categories in everyday experience can only be captured by using a qualitative methodology, the central piece of our research was guided interviews¹² with both local population and elites who define ethnic orderings.

We thought it to be important to also question the role of globalization for both the Serb and the Ukrainian minority. We understand globalization to be - in accordance with the vast literature on the subject - the increase of international influence on a national society. This influence is not confined to economy but includes political and social aspects as well. In our case, this is especially the case of the influence of the European Union and the European Council on regional and national politics, expressed for example in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1993 by the European Council and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of the European Union. Outside economic influences are especially visible in Banat (and much less in Dobruia) as foreign direct investments. Out of the approximately 13,6 million US \$ of foreign investment (until 31.12.2004) 6% went to the two administrative districts in Banat, Arad and Timis, with only 0,1% in Tulcea county (Heller 2006).

Whereas, thus, the economic influence varies geographically, the political influence is equally important in all parts of Romania.

Comparing the preliminary results of this research for the Serb and the Ukrainian minority, the following point can be made:

a. The presence of Serbia-Montenegro as a neighboring country and its economic, political, and cultural significance for the Serb minority in Banat.

As mentioned earlier, the Serb minority in Romania was affected by both internal and external factors: The political burst from 1989, the war in former Yugoslavia and the economic sanctions against it lead to far reaching changes in public and individual every day life for the members of the Serb minority.

Before 1990, strong trade relations existed between Romanian and Yugoslav citizens on both side of the border, and under Ceauşescu regime Yugoslavia was among Romania's most important regional trade partners.

The existence of a Serb minority in Romania¹³ and of a Romanian minority in Yugoslavia undoubtedly influenced significantly the economic dynamic which has calmed down significantly today.

But nevertheless, international relations of Banat are still stronger compared to other regions and it is still characterized by economic growth. Due to its location at the Western border, Banat is successful in attracting a large share of foreign investments in Romania¹⁴.

¹² As experts/elites we interviewed mayors, administration, teachers, entrepreneurs, politicians and NGO representatives (total 145); as persons affected we interviewed members of national minorities as well as of the majority population. In each village we interviewed two persons of Romanian nationality about interethnic relations and their perception of national minorities (total 128).

It was possible to study Serbo-Croatian at Bucharest university before 1989 already. Since 1990, a Serb department exists at Timisoara university. In an interview with Deutsche Welle, a representative of the Croatian minority states: "Serbs claim to research both Serb and Croatian, but in reality it is the old Serbo-Croatian that tends to negate its Croatian influences." The civil war in former Yugoslavia has left traces in Romania, too.

14 Foreign investors, especially from Italy but also from Germany, Austria and Hungary, are present not only in urban but increasingly also in rural

areas.

Furthermore, it can be said that lingual and ethnic traits that are common across international borders give rise to the development of economic relations and that ethnic minorities, by commuting trade and investment relations, are active in regional economic development.

Among the main reasons for this is a certain Hungarian, German or Serb cultural life that has always existed in Banat: Hungarian and German schools and Serb school departments exist in Banat, as do the Catholic, the Protestant and the Serb-orthodox churches. Within this context, informal networks based on ethnicity have developed, whose continuity and significance as resources for econmonic, political and cultural development must not be underestimated.

The intensity of the various ethnic minorities' relations to their national "homelands" differs, though. The relations of the Hungarian ethnic minority to Hungary, which is in an economically better situation than is Romania, for example, provide them with significant potentials.

From Germany and Austria, too, significant investments are made in Banat. In comparison, the Serb minority benefits much less from its "homeland" Serbia-Montenegro. This is due to the still uncertain economic and political situation in that country. Nevertheless, negotiations between Serbia-Montenegro and the EU about an association treaty – six years after Milošević's resignation – may point towards a better economic development. Its success will depend on many factors, including the minority question.

On the regional scale, though, the living standard of the members of the Serb minority was more or less equal with those of the Romanian, as well as the other ethnic minority populations. This means that the fundamental restructuring of economic, social and political circumstances in general equally affects national minorities and the majority population. No difference along nationality lines — neither in measurable nor in perceived terms — are to be found on the regional or local scale.

b. The presence of Ukraine as a neighboring country and its economic, political, and cultural significance for the Ukrainian minority in Dobruja.

The economic situation of Ukrainians in the Danube Delta is neither better nor worse than that of Russian-Lipovenians and Romanians who live there. This has been emphasized again and again in our interviews. All habitants of the delta were equally affected by the resignation of the fish industry and the restrictions on fishing. Furthermore, since 1990 fishing permissions were increasingly given to individuals and institutions from outside the delta.

Most Ukrainians in the delta were fishermen. Only recently agrarian tourism has begun to develop as a new source of income. Romania's joining of the EU was seen positively by the interviewed, although most of them did not expect it to improve their economic status.

We also asked about economic and cultural activities on parts of the Ukrainian state in Dobruja. From the interviewees' point of view, no such activities are taking place. This is what we found to be the case, too.

The Romanian-Ukrainian border is very hard to pass. The only exception is the ferry between Tulcea and Izmajil in Ukraine, the use of which is possible only under certain conditions for the inhabitants of the delta (Dobraca, 2006).

Therefore, no commuting relations on the side of the Ukrainian minority between their home and their "homeland" exist. Furthermore, no trans-border cooperation of any kind is in place. Among the Ukrainians in Dobruja, work induced migration seems to play a much less important role than with the Russian-Lipovenians, for example (Sallanz, 2005b).

Migration within the Delta has become important phenomenon also among the members of the Ukrainian minority. A relatively high percentage of especially young Ukrainians from the Delta lives in the next major city outside of the delta, Tulcea. This has different reasons. First, after graduating secondary school in Tulcea, many do not return to the delta because of the lack of employment opportunities there; second, relocation to Tulcea is also an escape from the extreme isolation living in the delta.

This is also true for Ukrainians in the delta villages. Many interviewees put a strong emphasis in their wish for their children to graduate from secondary school and, if possible, university, both of which is not possible in the delta.

Most schools from the Delta have to rely on unqualified teachers who work as qualified ones are reluctant to move to that region. This situation makes many parents send their children

to a boarding school in Tulcea at the age of 10 already, to give them the possibility to apply for a university after graduating secondary school.

They know that their children will most likely not return to the Delta (except for holidays). As one mother told us, when asked, if she was aware of this: "Yes, and it is our wish for them not to come back. Fishermen here live a harsh life. Many die early and leave behind widows (interview with Clementina Malcovici, Sfântu Gheorghe, 19.09.2003).

The significance of ethnic categories in the transformation process

The question on the significance of ethnic categories after almost 16 years of transformation cannot be answered without taking into account the role the regional, the national and the transnational networks have for local reality. For many members of the national minorities, accentuation of their own culture is very important for their self-esteem and their recognition by the majority population (Anderl, 2006). And yet, the significance of belonging to a national minority among, for example, young Ukrainians in Dobruja, is in decline.

To explain this, we have to recognize that changes in the regional situation in Dobruja are perceived as changes on the regional, but especially on the national scale. Therefore, Ukrainians in Dobruja frame their ethnicity in this national context. In Banat, on the other hand, tendencies towards an indigenous regional development and the importance of contacts across the border can be found. From this, we can conclude, that everyday life in the region, and especially ethnicity are regarded as elements that are in the hands of the regional population itself, and also as aspects of trans-regional and even international importance.

For the Serb minority in the Romanian Banat, ethnicity still is a key element. The declining figures notwithstanding, language, religion and a proud past, inextricably linked to Banat's history, are the elements of an ethnic and regional identity that is kept up and reproduced. Diffusing the own language in school and in cultural life in general, is seen to be an important task – even when it is not the primary language any more. Furthermore, the Serb Association in Romania acts as mediator between the two states¹⁵.

Although this is true for the association of Ukrainians in Romania, a change in identity can be seen among the Ukrainians in Dobruja. Even in rural areas, the majority of the interviewees of Ukrainian ethnicity have opted for Romanian nationality. When asked, Ukrainian is given as primary language. Almost all of the younger interviewees talk Ukrainian with their parents and Romanian with their spouses and children. Ukrainian traditions and customs are not passed on and most children speak very little, if any, Ukrainian.

The loss of these people's Ukrainian identity has a lot to do with the influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The orthodox Ukrainians in Dobruja are subordinated to the patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Religious services in places with Ukrainian minority are held in Romanian only.

Although the Ukrainians in Dobruja cling to old style orthodoxy, the usually very young Romanian Popes, who often serve their first position in these backward villages, celebrate religious holiday ceremonies (except for the celebration of the consecration of the church) according to strict rules of the Romanian orthodox church which does not tolerate any exceptions. According to the late Member of Parliament and President of the Association of Ukrainians in Romania, a request to the Romanian Orthodox Church asking for a separate vicariate for the Ukrainians in Dobruja – similar to the ones in Maramureş and in Banat – was not allowed (interview with Stefan Tcaciuc, 29.09.2004).

As we were told, the leaders of the Ukrainian minority try to keep the memory of the Ukrainian roots. But every year, the problem of financing such activities has to be faced, which is why many take place only irregularly. More, these events are small scale rather than mass mobilizing activities. The Ukrainian minority in Romania is scattered around the country which makes common meetings costly and difficult.

The Ukrainians in Dobruja are not only unhappy because of their isolation, but also with the leaders of their association in Bucharest, by whom they feel abandoned.

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¹⁵ Representatives of both the Serb and the Ukrainian minority accompany Romanian delegations on visits in Serbia-Montenegro or Ukraine. This is an example of how ethnicity can be used as cultural capital.

We summarize: We found that both minorities, the Serbs in Western Romania and the Ukrainians in eastern Romania, in language and in culture identify with their own ethnic group as well as with the Romanian majority. While the self-consciousness of the Serbs - civil war in former Yugoslavia notwithstanding - can be regarded as a balanced and complex identity, combining Serb, Romanian and aspects specific to the Banat, the example of the loss of ethnic identity among the Ukrainians in Dobruja shows that a bicultural, bilingual and regional identity cannot be achieved under all circumstances.

As we have seen, the Romanian state secures a formal framework for all national minorities when it comes to basic rights. But there is no point in keeping these minorities alive at all cost; an ethnic minority, in order to survive, must be kept up by its members. In order to achieve this, a stable ethnic and cultural identity based especially on the own language, and a strong regional identification that can contribute the endogenous economic growth, are the most important factors that enable socio-cultural survival of small ethnic minorities within a multiethnic state.

Conclusion

What can we conclude from the situation of the two ethnic minorities, Serbs and Ukrainians, in Banat and Dobruia, two different local and regional contexts? Differences in the spatial-economic situation between ethnic minorities are real and visible, but they can be only indirectly explained by membership to an ethnic minority. Much more important are local and regional specificities and national and international processes. Regionally uneven economic development affects everyday life and life chances of these groups, because they are distributed unevenly over the national territory (Heller, 2001). This means that national minorities in Romania enter transformation processes under different preconditions.

Differentiation between dynamic and stagnating regions in Romania reveals – similar to Czech Republic and Slovakia – that western parts of the country and applomerations develop progressively whereas eastern and rural parts are left behind and stagnate (cf. Hector, 2000). As Hector argues, this pattern is the result of firms with strong trade relations seeking to minimize the distance to the European Union.

In the course of EU enlargement, this brings about the chance for Banat to become a space of cooperation beyond the border regions, stretching over regional growth poles in Romania and in the neighboring states of Serbia-Montenegro and Hungary. This perspective of becoming a "European region of competence" is determined by clear political and economic conditions in these states, though. This is only partially the case of peripheral Dobruja¹⁶, where hardly any investments from Ukraine or Russia occur.

Representatives of the national minorities explicitly welcome Romania's EU accession as they assume that the Bucharest government will have to take into account their political and cultural needs more strongly. The improvements betterments for minorities were only introduced after pressure from EU and European Council, though. Romania is hoping for general improvement following its joining the European Union, for example an increase in the standard of living and the modernization of the rural areas including the elimination of regional, economic and social disparities. This would provide opportunities for national minorities, too.

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¹⁶ In Dobrudja, only the harbor city of Constanța and its surrounding show any signs of economic growth.

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