From Carasovan to Croat: The 'Ethnic Enigma' of a (Re)Invented Identity in Romania

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From Carasovan to Croat: The 'Ethnic Enigma' of a (Re)Invented Identity in Romania

Remus Creţan, Paul Kun and Lucian Vesalon

This paper discusses a unique case in recent Romanian history of an identity shift from Carasovans to Croats and the complex socio-political context which made it possible. Given their debated ethnic origins, the identity of Carasovans is considered an 'ethnic enigma'. The aim of our research is to offer a critical interpretation of the dynamics of ethnic identification of the Carasovans. In particular, we discuss the processes of national and ethnic identification in order to reveal how the Carasovan community was recently reinvented along the lines of the Croat identity. In close connection to these processes, the paper examines the political, economic and cultural elements involved in the dynamics of Carasovans' self-identification.

Introduction

In the 1940s, the geographer Vintilă Mihăilescu, analysing the settlements on the ethnic map of Transcarpathian Romania, used the phrase 'ethnic enigma' to refer to the disputed ethnic origin of the population living in the area of Caraşova. Our paper explores this 'enigma',[1] seeking to document the ethnic origins of the community and to understand the dynamics of ethnic identification of the Carasovan community in the last couple of decades. Although interest in the Carasovan and other ethnic communities from South-Western Romania is not new among historians and anthropologists, there are very few recent studies on the ethnic identification of populations from the area. We investigate the ethnic identity of the Carasovan community in the Eastern European context with the aim of mapping rapid shifts in its identification in connection to the political and economic forces which partially account for these shifts. The selected case contributes to the growing literature on reinvented ethnicities in the post-communist area.

This paper starts from the fundamental contribution of constructivist approaches to national and ethnic identity inspired by Anderson's seminal work on the creation of national formations, to which we add the more recent discursive perspectives to ethnicity, in order to highlight the dynamics of ethnic and national identification processes. A large body of work is dedicated to the constitutive role of political and

economic factors in the construction of ethnicities and to the mapping of ethnic shifts.[2] The contribution of discourse analysis to the understanding of ethnic identification processes is increasingly recognized in the field of Central and Eastern European studies.[3] Rapid shifts in ethnic identification have been well documented mostly for the diasporic communities from the USA, Canada, the European Union (EU) and Australia,[4] but far less thoroughly investigated in the Central and Eastern European context.

In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, ethnicity re-emerged as one of the most prominent issues from the early days of post-communism. The new political context triggered complex processes of social change, which included sometimes rapid shifts in the ethnic and national identification of various groups in the region. The Carasovan case of (re)invented identity is one such case which speaks of the fundamental contribution of political power to producing a particular ethnic identification matrix and about the unique post-communist context in which new identities were negotiated and groups struggled for political and cultural recognition.

Conceptualizing the Dynamics of Ethnic Identification

To make sense of the 'ethnic enigma' of the recent identification of Carasovans as Croats, we begin with the insights provided by Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities', Hobsbawm and Ranger's idea of 're-invention of tradition' and Brubaker's 'triadic nexus' model of understanding ethnic and national identification mechanisms in Central and Eastern Europe. A large body of work was produced over the last few decades on the issue of national identities and ethnic minorities, spanning from perennialists (Clifford Geertz and Pierre van der Berghe) and modernists (Ernest Gellner, Tom Nairn and Elie Kedourie) to ethno-symbolists (such as Anthony D. Smith and John Hutchinson). Two types of social identities are at the centre of the debates on nations and ethnicity. The first consists of identification by imagination,[5] corresponding to communities living in large political structures, and the second is based on immediate relationships, corresponding to smaller communities living in narrower territorial unities.[6] The first type of identity is intimately connected with political power and unifies diverse populations from different places and times *against* the differences between them, while the latter accommodates spatial and temporal differences between members. The second type of identity emerges within a more confined geo-social context, the term 'national minority' indicating that such a community is a part of an 'imagined community'. Often, a collusion between these two kinds of identity accounts for inner tensions in the self-identification of smaller nations or in the self-identification of minorities. Nations and ethnic communities are generally seen as different identification categories, the first including politically organized communities usually dispersed over large territories, while the latter is based on features such as language, habits, religion and race shared by a geo-social community. This is especially the case with the Carasovan community examined in this paper.

Considering Anderson's definition of nation as *imagined political community*,[7] we find a certain tension between the two elements included in the expression 'national

minority'. If national communities can only be *imagined*, then the absence of direct contact among its members is considered constitutive for its identity:

> It is imagined because *the members of even the smallest nation* will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [. . .] 'All that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one.' We may translate 'consider themselves' as 'imagine themselves'.[8]

In other words, Anderson suggests that nations are such groups which fulfil the negative condition of being too large to allow direct contact between their members. On the contrary, ethnic groups are smaller communities in which group identity is usually the result of more direct reconnaissance. Indeed, even in the 19th century, many historians considered that ethnic groups like Slovaks, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians and Czechs were too small to be considered 'nations'. For our case of the shifting self-identification of Carasovans, this issue is of fundamental importance and includes a translation from the category of ethnic group to that of national minority. As we show in the next section, the tension between the categories of 'national minority' and 'ethnic minority' partially explains the complex pattern of identification and self-identification processes in the case of the Carasovan community.

> As Stroschein puts it

> group boundaries are preserved by ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, but also through the very different stories of regional history endorsed by each group. These divergent collective memories, reified historical conversations *within but rarely across groups*, provide the foundations for group stances on how the state should treat minorities.[9]

Opposing the idea of ethnic identities as 'given' or 'natural', we show how ethnic identities can go through a process of rapid changes and shifts. Such shifts are connected to specific political, legal and economic factors, but also to cultural factors. As the case of the Carasovan identity reveals, ethnicity is context-related and it fluctuates more rapidly than might be expected, in close relation to political decisions, citizenship laws and perceived economic opportunities. These contextual elements are not to be seen as determining identification shifts, but rather as important vectors which become meaningful only when articulated within specific ethnic or national narratives.

A particularly important contribution to the understanding of identification processes is offered by Brubaker in his discussion of the 'triadic nexus' within which processes of ethnic and national identification are composed. This nexus includes 'national minority, nationalizing state, and external national homeland'[10] and is

essential for framing discourse, especially in contexts where ethnic and national identities are at specific turning points or undergoing dynamic repositioning. This discussion is particularly relevant for the restructuring of ethnicities in the political context of post-communist histories. Our analysis shows that in some peculiar contexts, for example, when an ethnic community is defined more by spatial boundaries than by language, the relationship between national minority and external national community is more the result of 'rational choice' than of reconnaissance. This line of thought is underlined by Danijel Dzino and Florin Curta, with reference to the southern Slavs.[11]

The idea that identities are social constructs has gained significant influence in social theory and in discourse theory in particular. A particularly productive hypothesis refers to the proposal that social identities are intrinsically relational and open-ended.[12] This means that ethnic and national identities are not 'given', but are constructed in specific socio-political contexts. Like other processes of social identification, ethnic identification is dynamic and unstable.[13] The concept of discursively constructed identities and the more general idea of context-related identities are particularly relevant for the study of ethnicity. They help to unpick the fundamental contribution of political contexts in the construction and re-construction of ethnic identifications.

Being constructed in particular political contexts, ethnic identities are unstable and particularly open to re-articulation where the elements of the 'triadic nexus' are fluid. Moreover, being defined in contexts where social, political interests and cultural representations mingle, 'ethnic and national identities are unpredictable and unstable cultural productions with which we identify' and ethnicity is 'a mobile and plastic category constructed through everyday language usage in specific contexts. [. . .] ethnic categories are commonly stabilized, at least temporarily, by social practice within particular socio-cultural contexts.'[14] Everyday language is therefore an essential medium for the formation and reproduction of ethnic identities, where the mass media plays a fundamental role, combining ethnic depictions in the vernacular with the political influence involved in the construction of ethnicity and nationhood. This explains why there is such interest in studying ethnic and national identities from a mass media perspective.[15] Accepting the role of everyday language in the construction and provisional stabilization of ethnic identities, we show that other factors, such as political and economic contexts, are equally relevant.

Our case refers to a situation where ethnic and national identities are highly context-dependent, the social and political factors being the most relevant for the constitution and reproduction of identities. The context dependency of national and ethnic identities includes, besides socio-political factors, the economic situation, particularly the economic opportunities (or lack thereof) available to specific groups. Indeed, it is more likely that an ethnic minority reinforces its identity if the economic and political opportunities it can access on the basis of ethnic identity are significant. This is certainly possible only if such contextual elements are integrated in Brubaker's 'triadic nexus' and made relevant to identification processes through specific narratives about ethnicity and nationhood. Among the best such examples in the region, for minorities living beyond their national borders, are the new citizenship

laws in Hungary and Croatia. The Carasovan example shows that a new citizenship law in Croatia is effectively defined as an opportunity in narratives about nationhood and thus emerges as a new identification opportunity for Croatian minorities living in the region. We will examine below how citizenship laws and the economic opportunities offered to Croatian nationals have stimulated the process of ethnic re-identification in the area of Caraşova.

Being context-related, ethnic identities are particularly sensitive to antagonisms between various social actors and to tensions among political forces which contribute to the building of identities.[16] Moreover, political power in general has a fundamental influence on determining the formation of identities, and particularly the construction of ethnicity. In connection with these issues, tensions between cosmopolitan values, multicultural norms and the (re)emergence of nationalism or xenophobia are of particular interest.[17] The representation of ethnic and national groups by external actors is equally relevant for understanding the dynamics of identities. For instance, the region of the Balkans raises problematic questions in respect to its representations by European actors. Following the valuable insights proposed by Todorova, a growing body of literature examines how the Balkans are portrayed in the Western culture and media as violent territories with problematic ethnic identities and unstable national constructs, leading to an interpretation in terms of modernization, intervention and control.[18]

Reviewing the 'instrumentalist school' perspective, Yang sees 'ethnicity as an instrument or strategic tool for gaining resources'.[19] The 'integrated approach' proposed by Yang allows a more balanced understanding of the creation of new ethnic identities, such as Vietnamese Americans or Asian Americans, in contexts where 'ethnic identity can be enhanced by competition for economic and political resources'.[20] Our case, however, is similar only to the extent to which national and ethnic re-identification can be driven by such opportunities. On the other hand, the instrumentalist pattern of identification fails to explain the complexity of the process and most of all the contribution made by political narratives on ethnic and national identities to shaping the contours of the identification processes.

Our paper discusses the sensitive process of 're-inventing' ethnicity in the case of the Carasovan community over the last couple of decades. Nagel offered a useful theoretical background for understanding the reinvention of ethnicity by insisting on the role of politics in the construction of ethnic identity.[21] Although the majority of empirical work is focused on the immigrant communities from the USA, Canada and Australia, Eastern Europe has also been included in the literature on ethnic reinvention. For instance, Laitin writes of a new 'identity in formation' in the former Soviet Union.[22] The dynamics of ethnic and national identification were brilliantly explored in the work on the 'invention of tradition' through a 'process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past'.[23] The emergence of the Carasovan identity is similar to the process described by Hobsbawm as 'proto-nationalism',[24] with its emphasis on local customs, religion and close community ties. This early stage of identification forms the starting point of the re-identification pattern followed by the Carasovan community in transitioning from local ethnicities to a diasporic citizenship. At the same time, it retained a

fuzziness which blurs the clear-cut distinction between formal citizenship and community-based identity.

More recently, the term ethnic 'revival' denotes 'a deliberate, organized and conscious effort by members of a group to construct a more satisfying culture'.[25] It is significant that problematizations of ethnicity and nationalism in the area were for a long time related to representations of the Balkans as a violent region in which ethnicity often is paired with xenophobia and where ethnic cleavages often lead to ethnic wars.[26] The case of the Carasovan community shows that ethnic tensions and conflicts are not the norm in the region,[27] as projected by the mainstream 'orientalizing' Western perspectives, and that a process of ethnic identification which avoids tensions and conflict is also possible. Finally, the ethnic identity is, in some contexts, only a name for the peculiar economic interests of one community.

The first stage of our analysis consists of mapping the significant historiographical materials which hypothesize about a Carasovan presence in the area. Next, we focus on indexing the identification of the Carasovan community in the relevant censuses produced in the period 1880–2011. Starting from these primary and secondary data, we have used the literature on ethnic identification patterns and discourse analysis to make sense of the ethnic puzzle of Carasovans' ethnic/national identity. A second data stream comprises published interviews with community leaders, constitutional texts, media, the archives of relevant non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the online archive of 'Institutul pentru studierea problemelor minoritatilor nationale' (ISPMN), sources of which were selected for the period 1990–2012. The spatial distribution of ethnicities examined in this paper was charted using GIS (geographic information system) in order to visualize the origins and the ethnic shifts of Carasovans during the last two decades. Based on these sources, we have identified a set of analytical frames (censuses, citizenship, economic opportunities, mass media, religion and organizational levels) which help reveal the processes of ethnic reinvention in the area of Caraşova.

A Short History of Carasovans' 'Ethnic Enigma'

The most significant mentions of Carasovans in the 19th century appear in historical publications on the region (Gorove, Szentkláray, Ortmayer, Pesty, etc.) and deal mostly with their migration into the Romanian Banat. The Carasovans or 'Craşoveni' form a distinct ethnic group, with a specific dialect and customs. Their language suggests a South Slav connection, the name Carasovans often being traced back to the Macedonian area of Kruševo.[28] This initially supported the idea of a Serbian origin for the Carasovans, given the similarity of their dialect to Serbian.[29] On the other hand, they have long been Catholics, which suggests a link with the Croats. This duality was the prime reason for their ethnic identity being considered as an 'ethnic enigma'.[30]

To avoid possible confusion, it should be noted that Caraşova is both a geographical toponym and the denomination of the ethnic group living in the broader area surrounding the village of Caraşova. Other researchers consider that Carasovans have their roots in the oiconym Krasso ('karst terrain'), an area in Croatia near Osjek.[31] On the other hand, the oiconyms Karaševo and Kraševo are similar and

present also in other areas in Serbia. Vătav recalls a local story which tells that the name 'Crașoveni' comes from the Serbian settlement Kruševac.[32] In the oral tradition of the village there is a legend in which 'Carașovanii' is linked to 'Kara', a native woman who refused to be part of the 'harem' of a Turkish leader and as a punishment was thrown into the river which would bear her name. On the other hand, 'kara' means 'black' in Turkish, with reference to the colour of the river when flooding. Despite such partial evidence and attempts to connect the identity of the local community to precise geographical origins, there is no objective link between the toponymical identity and the ethnic identification of Carasovans.

The geographical and historical research on Carasovans has identified several stages in the history of the settlement.[33] In the first stage, a group of Slavs settled in Carașova and the neighbouring villages of Iabalcea and Rafnic after the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1391, while in the second wave of settlement another Slavic group arrived from the West Balkan Mountains (Figure 1). These groups sought refuge in the area, leaving their former territories due to Turkish invasion. The next waves came from Kruševo and the area of Rešava–Morava in the middle of the 15th century and formed new villages in the middle part of the Banat Mountains, such as Lupac, Vodnic, Clocotici and Nermed. The last wave took place in the middle of the 18th century, under Habsburg rule.[34]

Figure 1 Carasovan Migrations (14th–18th Century)
Sources: Adapted from data provided by Traian Simu, *Originea crașovenilor. Studiu istoric și etnografic [Carasovans' Origin. Historical and Ethnographical Study]*, Corvin, Lugoj, 1939.

Historical and geographical documents indicate that a number of small villages inhabited by Slavs on the Caraşova Plateau have disappeared or have been incorporated in larger settlements. This was the case of Garişte, Iašenovac, Selište and Tâlva. A fortress is also documented at Caraşova in 1238.[35] Following these waves of migration, Caraşova emerged as one of the largest settlements in the area. It had a population larger than the neighbouring town of Reşiţa in the late 19th century, according to the population census from 1880.[36] The Slavic community from the Caraşova Plateau were the majority group in most of the villages from the area: Caraşova, Clocotici, Lupac, Iabalcea, Nermed, Rafnic and Vodnic.

There are different identifications of Carasovans in the literature, with at least three different trends. If most of the 19th-century historians (Gorove, Pesty, Szentkláray, Czirbus, etc.) identified them as Bulgarians, in the 20th century several Serbian historians and linguists (Miletič, Zivonovič, Ivič) studied their dialect and found it to be similar to the Serbian language, while other scholars (Melich, Simu, Trâpcea) analysed Carasovan history and origins, declaring that they are more closely related to Serbian–Bulgarian roots.[37] The Romanian interwar historian Manciulea found that Serbian researchers generally identified Carasovans as Serbs, on the grounds that they speak a Serbo-Croatian language with a minority of Bulgarian words.[38] Bulgarian researchers on the other hand, consider them of Bulgarian origin, basing their conclusion on a resemblance between their old customs and those from the Vidin area in Bulgaria.[39]

If we consider the more recent identification of Carasovans as Croats, there is still a high degree of uncertainty in respect to the ethnic origin of the Croat community from Banat. Castilia Manea-Grgin divides the Croatians in Romania into four categories: Carasovans (Karaševce), Šokcians (Šokce), Turopoljens (Turopoljce) and Sulinians (in the Danube Delta area).[40] The Šokce ('Šokci' or 'şocaţi') is a name given to Serbians and Montenegrins in the region of Banat who were not of Christian Orthodox faith.[41] They are spread around the small town of Recaş and in the Lipova–Radna area. The Cenei Croats are called Turopoljens, derived from the Croatian area of Turopolje, where they originate, while the Croats in the Danube Delta are called Sulinians, from the name of the Romanian port Sulina, where a small Croat group live (Figure 2).[42] Taking these elements into account, neither the ethnic origin nor the linguistic criterion can provide an objective basis for the identification of Carasovans.

The censuses do little to clear up this puzzle. The Hungarian censuses and other official documents used the ethnonyms Serbs and Croats to refer not only to the actual Carasovan population, different from the Croatian inhabitants from Cenei/Checea, but also to several settlements from the central eastern part of Banat.[43] In the census of 1900 we find 7463 people speaking 'other languages' than Serbian and Croatian inhabiting the villages from the Caraşova Plateau.[44] Another group of descendants from Caraşova had settled in other areas than Banat and they now declare themselves to be Serbians.[45] It is baffling that in two consecutive censuses from only two decades earlier, the population from the area appeared registered mainly as Serbs and Croats. In two villages from the Banat Hills (Fizeş and Tirol), several hundred Bulgarians were registered, but it was suggested that they belonged to the same Carasovan group.[46]

Figure 2 Distribution of Croats in Romania and Subgroups (2011)
Sources: INSSE (Institutul Naţional de Statistică), *Recensământul populaţiei şi al locuinţelor din 2011. Date preliminarii—judeţul Caraş-Severin [2011 Romanian Census on Population and Households. Preliminary Results—Caraş-Severin County]*, Imprimeria Naţională, Bucharest, 2012.

In the early 1930s, there were 7466 persons registered in the Carasova area. Sabin Manuilă, who conducted the 1930 census, considered the Carasovans to be included in the category of 'other ethnicities'.[47] The data from censuses after 1930 onwards are more difficult to interpret, since Serbs, Croats and Slovenes are included as a single group, while the Carasovans were included in 'other ethnicities'. The official data from censuses are therefore equally inconclusive in establishing a clear-cut ethnic identity for the local community. In the censuses organized during the communist period, Carasovans were assimilated to Croats and Serbs. This was one of their earliest inclusions in the Romanian Croat community. In 1992, most of them declared themselves as Carasovans, the heartland of Caraşova thus including a large Carasovan group.[48] In 2002, we find a Croat majority in Caraşova and in the neighbouring villages.[49] In the area, the Carasovan identity is retained especially among the elderly, the younger population declaring themselves Croats. From the preliminary data of the last census in 2011, we conclude that in all Carasovan settlements almost 99 per cent of the Carasovans self-identified as Croats (Figure 3).[50] At the same time, the majority of Carasovans and Croats are bilingual, speaking Croatian and Romanian.

The Croats from the Caraşova area are not the only Croat populations in Romania. However, the newly forged ethnic identity of Croatians in the Caraşova area is a phenomenon largely disconnected from the presence of other Croat groups in
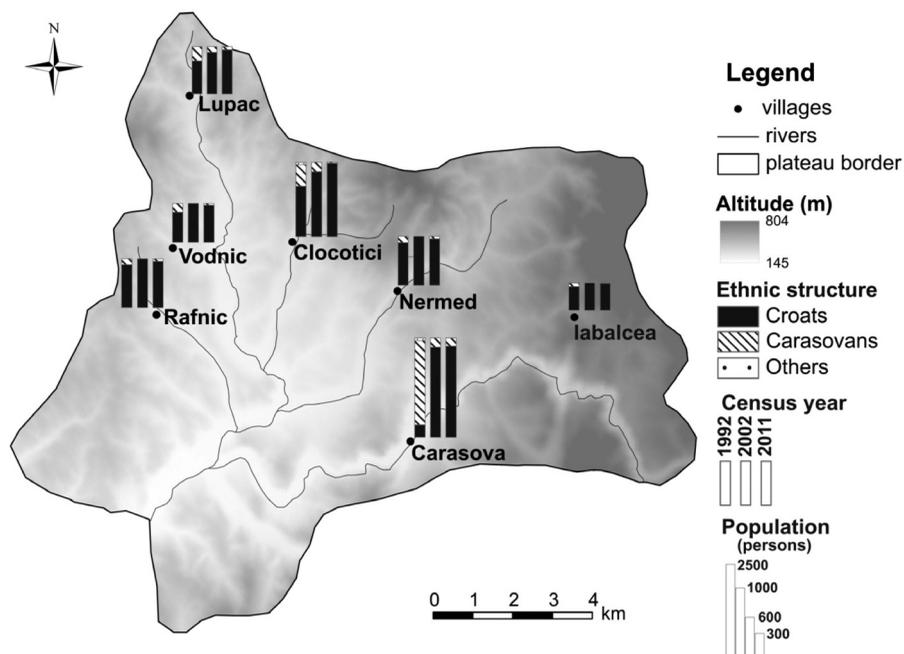
Figure 3 Ethnic Identity in Carasovan Villages, Censuses 1992–2011
 Sources: Romanian Census, *Recensământul populaţiei şi al locuinţelor din 7 ianuarie 1992 [The Romanian 1992 Census on Population and Households]*, I, Institute of National Statistics, Bucharest, 1992; Romanian Census, *Recensământul populaţiei şi al locuinţelor din 18 martie 2002 [The Romanian 2002 Census on Population and Households]*, I, Institute of National Statistics, Bucharest, 2002; INSSE (Institutul Naţional de Statistică), *Recensământul populaţiei şi al locuinţelor din 2011. Date preliminarii—judeţul Caraş-Severin [2011 Romanian Census on Population and Households. Preliminary Results—Caraş-Severin County]*, Imprimeria Naţională, Bucharest, 2012.

Romania. This emerged in the area during the 1990s. The censuses of 2002 and 2011 reveal a total number of about 4000 Croats, 95 per cent living in rural areas, and approximately 75 per cent of them being the formerly declared Carasovans.[51] The main centre of this new Croatian population is around the old Carasovan heartland, where more than 3000 Croats are registered, followed by the Cenei–Checea area and Timişoara, with almost 300 persons.[52]

Comparing the data concerning the Carasovans in the 1880–2011 censuses reveals a striking situation of several shifts in ethnic identification (Table 1). Although the language and the ethnic background of the local population suffered no major changes, the ethnic identification varied considerably. We have seen that the available data and research on the ethnic origins of Carasovans cannot alone provide a basis for an objective account of their identity. The historical records and geographical study offer useful data, but this is not conclusive for an accurate account of their origins. In addition, linguistic investigations in the area increase this uncertainty. In turn, statistical data are difficult to interpret, given the political context of nation-building

Table 1 General Shifts in Declared Ethnicity of the Carasovan Community, Internal and External Institutional Contexts (1900–2002)

Phase	Description	Period	Institutional background	
			Internal	External
Shift I	Serb and Croat to Carasovan	1880–1930	Transition from Austro-Hungarian structures to those of the new Romanian nation-state	–
Shift II	Carasovan to Croat and Serb	1930–89	Socio-economic institutional crises, Second World War and communist institutions	Cultural influence from Croatia and Serbia
Shift III	Croat and Serb to Carasovan	1990–92	Weak post-communist ethnic institutional structures. The creation of the Democratic Union of Serbians and Carasovans from Romania	–
Shift IV	Carasovan to Croat	1992–2002	Emergence of ethnic organizations; disintegration of the Democratic Union of Serbians and Carasovans from Romania and the creation of the Union of Croats in Romania	Croat Citizenship Law

processes in the region, and reveal a dynamic characteristic in the ethnic identification of Carasovans. In the next section, we propose a way of solving this 'ethnic enigma' by considering ethnic identity as an open process, as identification rather than a stable or given identity, a perspective supported by the constructivist approaches to identity. According to this perspective, even in circumstances of clearly identified ethnic origins, an open process of ethnic identification is still possible, given that identities are always constructed in contexts determined by political, economic, religious and cultural elements.

Making Sense of the 'Ethnic Enigma'

The ethnic self-identification of Carasovans is a dynamic process which takes place in a context determined by important political and economic changes, confessional factors and social transformations. Following the insights provided by the constructivist perspectives on social identities, the ethnic identity of Carasovans appears as an open process of self-identification which can be connected to the complex and highly dynamic socio-political context of the last two decades. The dynamics of Carasovan identity could be understood along two different identification patterns. The first option is to connect it to a geographical identification, based on the boundaries of the space inhabited by the community. The geography of the area offers an appropriate environment for such identification, being a relatively isolated and closed area which provides physical boundaries for an 'enclosure' of the local community. Indeed, some aspects of the local culture,

especially its archaic overtones, are accountable in these terms. The physical context was eventually permeated by political influences which proved to be stronger than the local customs.

A second pattern of identification is therefore more relevant for the case, one based on using national identity as a ground for transforming the ethnic identity of Carasovan into a Croat one, rooted in a common language and religion. However, contacts between the local community and the Croatian nation were weak, excepting the circulation of ecclesiastical and schoolbooks published in Zagreb during the Habsburg period[53] and visits of Croatian intellectuals in the area of Caraşova in the late 1930s and early 1940s. This indicates that the shift from Carasovans to Croatians took place relatively independent of close cultural contacts with the Croatian nation. The tension between community and nation/nationality as sites of identification is commonly explored in the literature.[54] A key element for understanding the dynamics of ethnic identification is the political context in which social identities are forged. For our case, the specificity of the political context is related to the citizenship laws of both the Romanian and Croatian states after 1990s, and to the evolutions of ethnic and regional identities in the framework of a contested multicultural politics. The political contribution largely explains why the Carasovan identity is highly dynamic and context-related.

The study of post-communist politics of ethnicity shows that the initial period of 'conflicting rhetoric and violent ethnic conflict' was followed, after 1996, by a period of 'political accommodation'.[55] The politics of ethnicity in post-communist Romania largely evolved around the demands of the Hungarian minority for greater political and cultural autonomy. Among the most important rights provided by the Constitution were seats for ethnic minorities. Apart from the parliamentary seats, a number of special legal and administrative provisions were formulated for ethnic minorities. These provisions cover the issue of education and local administration in minority languages, specialized departments in ministries, public mass media for minorities and anti-discrimination legal guarantees. As Stroschein explains:

> so many laws and policies regarding minorities had to be forged via ethnic debates in the 1990s. Two state-level issues were particularly contentious:
> (1) minority language use in the public sphere, including in education; and
> (2) the level to which government might be devolved to the local level.[56]

One of the most significant political influences on the shifting self-identification of Carasovans is provided by the citizenship law of the Croatian state. This presented a true opportunity for the political identification of the minorities in diaspora, and for groups formerly disconnected from the Croat political community to declare themselves of Croat identity. The Romanian Constitution, in turn, provided important opportunities for minorities, such as political representation in the parliament. Carasovans were thus exposed to two different and cumulative opportunities offered by the Croatian and Romanian policies of citizenship. A key factor in this context is what we call a 'strategic re-contextualization of identity', meaning that the minority status allows both the formal and the cultural

identification with the nation to which it adheres. It is noteworthy that the term 'minority' is largely absent from the self-identification of Carasovans.

The Croat identity itself, to which the former Carasovan community currently relates, has undergone significant changes since the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia. As Goulding and Domic document, a particular re-articulation of local and regional histories was unfolding in Croatia after its independence, with the new state being particularly active as a 'marketer of cultural meaning'.[57] In fact, after the fall of communism and the dismantling of the former Yugoslavia, there was a significant trend in the regionalization policies and regional identifications in the area. This trend was particularly enforced, and to a large degree informed, by the Western European politics of regionalization. In this context, political parties of regionalist orientation increased their demands for regionalization, new political and economic opportunities for regional structures playing a fundamental role in the process. As the case of the region of Vojvodina in Serbia shows, ethnicity is not always a significant force in such regionalization demands.[58]

Croatia became an independent state in 1991, the same year in which a new citizenship law was adopted. According to this law, Croatian citizenship was offered to all Croatian nationals living outside the newly created state, on the condition of proving their belonging to the 'Croatian nation'. Besides official documents provided by state institutions, the status of Croats for individuals applying for citizenship was to be acknowledged through papers released by churches or by the associations of Croats living in the diaspora.[59] It is highly relevant for examining the political dimension of the process of ethnic identification that organizations such as the Union of Carasovans in Romania and local churches gain a significant power in discriminating between members and non-members of the Croat community.

The Act on Croatian Citizenship became a fundamental part of the matrix of factors which led to the assumption of Croatian nationality by the Carasovans. A process such as this is not defined exclusively by association with and restricted to the territory of a national state, but is tied to the assumption of a cultural and linguistic identity. Hayden explains the peculiarity of this process by what he calls *constitutional nationalism*, meaning

> a constitutional and legal structure that privileges the members of one ethnically defined nation over other residents in a particular state. . . . Such a definition is manifested in laws defining citizenship, which are an integral part of regimes of constitutional nationalism. The most basic rights in the new republics will be determined by citizenship: not only the rights to vote and stand for election, but the right to own property, the right to work, even the right to reside in what has always been one's home. The distinctions to be made are not between newcomers and natives, however, but largely between peoples who have long lived in the republic in which they found themselves when Yugoslavia disintegrated in 1991–1992.[60]

For this reason, he concludes that '[a] better example of the power of the imagined community to destroy actually existing communities would be hard to find'.[61]

However, this 'constitutional nationalism' is an attempt to reconcile two opposing concepts of sovereignty, territorial and ethno-national.[62] The Croatian government is not only preoccupied by the 'stranger from within', but also by the 'brother from outside'. Winland, who analysed the relationship between diaspora and homeland, underlines that this new view of citizenship introduces a transnational dimension.[63] Of particular interest for our case is also the distinction developed by Gamlen between 'diaspora building', which is based on attempts to 'cultivate new diaspora communities and recognize preexisting ones' and 'diaspora integration', referring to strategies 'which project various membership privileges and responsibilities onto various extra-territorial groups'.[64]

> According to Article 16 of the Act,
>
> [a] person who belongs to the *Croatian nation* [our italics] with no domicile in the Republic of Croatia can acquire Croatian citizenship, if he fulfils the requirements of Article 8, Paragraph 1, Point 5 of this Act, and if he gives a written statement that he considers himself a Croatian citizen.

Point 5 states that this 'can be concluded from his behaviour that he respects legal order and customs of the Republic of Croatia, and that he accepts Croatian culture'. Certainly, this is a highly subjective, if not fuzzy condition, which can be fulfilled by potentially anyone who is interested in adopting Croatian nationality. In other words, the self-attribution of the Croatian identity becomes more important than any other condition.

Based on these constitutional provisions for citizenship, the Croatian state acts towards unifying the Croatian nation against the other (minoritarian) nations from Croatia, as Article 2 of the Act stipulates: 'A citizen of the Republic of Croatia who also has a foreign citizenship is considered exclusively as a Croatian citizen at the Governmental bodies of the Republic of Croatia.' In other words, any member of the Croatian (cultural) nation who is also a citizen of another state is—within the territory of Croatia—Croatian *only*. The reason for this strategy is reportedly that of eliminating any possibility of confusing Croatian and Serbian identities. For the Carasovans, the problem can be formulated in these terms: if you want to be Croatian, you must renounce at any other possible identity, be it Serbian, Bulgarian, etc. If you want to live and work in Croatia like a Croatian, then you must be *only* Croatian.

The Croat citizenship law triggered numerous critical reactions in the area, especially from the Serbian communities. For instance, in the period following the adoption of the new citizenship law in Croatia, leaflets were distributed with the following text: 'Carasovan brothers! Do not deny your ancestry and your roots! Do not sell yourself to get Croatian citizenship or a Croatian passport.'[65] Despite such critical reactions, there were neither major tensions nor outbursts of violence in relation to the shifting identities of Carasovans. By comparison, the similar case of the Hungarian citizenship laws was more complicated, involving political tensions both in Romania and in Hungary. In both cases however, the influence of political

decisions on processes of ethnic identification was tremendously important. An interesting situation involves the Seklar community in Transylvania and their self-identification dilemma: they are Seklars, but they are also members of the Hungarian minority from Romania. Recently, with the adoption of the Hungarian citizenship law, they can also be considered Hungarian citizens. Such shifts seem always open in their area, and the constant shift between the Hungarian and Seklar identity varies according to political priorities, political parties, censuses and electoral campaigns.

The contribution of religion to forging a new Croatian identity in the area of Caraşova is also fundamental. In the former Yugoslavia, the religious differences between Catholic and Orthodox were an effective symbolic boundary, especially between Croats and Serbs. There was an equally potent divide between Christians and Muslims. The impact of religion on the construction of a Croatian identity in Banat is well documented historically.[66] However, it is worth stressing that local adaptations of Catholicism led to a locally specific faith and religious rituals in the Banat Mountains. In this respect, Mândroane finds that 'the Catholic religion used in these villages has unique features, using the old calendar rites, without entirely distancing from the Orthodox rites, involving strong beliefs and superstitions'.[67]

The religious element involved in the dynamics of ethnic identification is particularly significant, given the increasing importance of religious identification in the post-communist space. Recent studies document the 'revitalization of religion' among Croats and highlight the major differences, patterns of religious identification and the social role of religion within the post-communist area.[68] The two authors confirm the findings which indicate Croatia as 'singled out as a country where religion has played or still plays an inevitable role in the formation and preservation of the separate national identity of the people'.[69]

The local Catholic priest Marian Tincul, in an interview, spoke about the flight from Turkish invasion of as many as 20,000 priests and monks from Bosnia and Herczegovina.[70] Such statements show very well how the historical background is used to produce a narrative for the origins of Carasovans which establish both a geographical and a religious origin. Interestingly, he also speaks about the period 1937–47 during which teachers from Croatia came to the area of Caraşova and played an important role in 'awakening the Croat consciousness' and in spreading Croat culture. Marian Tincul also mentions that religious holidays are important for those working abroad to reconnect with their community and that the language of religious services is Croat and rarely bilingual, in Romanian. On the other hand, the priest is opposed to the so-called 'cultural ghettoization' of Carasovans. Apart from the details provided through such interviews, it is worth stressing the significant contribution of the Church and of priests in shaping the adoption of the Croat culture within the Carasovan community.

Probably the most palpable element involved in the shifting identity of Carasovans is the economic opportunities available in Croatia. This was especially important in the 1990s, after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, when the economic disparities between Croatia and Romania were significant. With a strong tourist sector and an expanding construction industry, Croatia was one of the most economically developed countries in the region, offering significant opportunities for foreign

workers. The restructuring of the economy after the fall of communism produced massive unemployment in Romania, and especially so in heavily industrialized areas. Given that numerous Carasovans worked in industrial units in the area of Resita, the closing of these units generated high rates of unemployment in their villages. In fact, the area of Caraşova is still one of the poorest in Western and South-Western Romania, its economy being currently based on semi-subsistence farming. Employment opportunities in Croatia were therefore especially important for Carasovans.

Petru Neiescu, a linguist from Caraşova states that 'in the 1930s Carasovans considered themselves Carasovan, not Serb, nor Croat', adding that identification 'options can change according to interests and advantages'.[71] Touching upon these interests, Neiescu believes that in Reşiţa there are thousands of Romanians with dual citizenship, Romanian and Croat, simply because the Croatian passport does not require a visa in numerous states, especially in the Western world. The employment opportunities for Carasovans are not limited to jobs in Croatia, but also in Austria, Germany and other Western European states. This was especially important before 2007, when Romania joined the EU as a member state.

The economic opportunities open for the Croatian minorities in the region largely account for the strengthening of their ties with Croatia. In general, economic opportunities play a key role in the dynamics of ethnic and national identities. Economic factors are regarded as particularly relevant in nationalism studies, especially where access to particular opportunities are connected to 'competing nation-building' processes.[72] The newly forged Croatian national minority from Caraşova emerges in an economic context where significant opportunities were suddenly made available for the Croatian diaspora. While such economic opportunities play an important role in shaping and shifting identities, they cannot account alone for the shift in the self-identification of Carasovans. The economic context has to be rather understood as a politically structured opportunity and correlated with the broader representations implied in the processes of ethnic and national identification. It is therefore crucial to note that economic opportunities opened up by the Croatian citizenship law account for identity shifts only if integrated in an identification narrative which articulates such opportunities to a specific representation of the Croatian nation.

Another key role in understanding the dynamics of the Carasovan identity is played by the mass media. The major TV and radio stations from Croatia are available in Caraşova and receive a wide audience in the local community. Although not regularly, several newspapers from Croatia are distributed locally. The local newspaper, *Hrvatska Grancica*, is published in the Croat language and is closely connected to the Union of Croats from Romania. It generally includes information of local and regional interest, ranging from the political and economic to the cultural and religious. It is well connected to the political and economic environment of Croatia and frequently highlights economic, educational and cultural opportunities open to the Croat-speaking minority of Romania. It serves to connect the local Croat community to the political and social life of the Croatian nation, for instance, by reporting on national festivities and major political events in Croatia. Cultural

events connecting the local community to the Croatian culture are given special importance.

Numerous villages from the Caraşova Plateau established close ties with Croatian villages after the fall of communism in Romania. This has contributed to cultural exchanges in the first instance, but also to the integration of Romanian Croats into Croatian culture. An interesting aspect about these cultural exchanges is that Carasovans from Clocotici were criticized for preferring Serbian to Croatian folk music. However, as an interview with Milan Radan, a prominent member of the Carasovan community, revealed that '[Carasovans] originality consists in symbiosis, naturally produced especially in relation to Romanians, who are closer to us and not to Croats, who are hundreds of kilometres away'.[73] On the other hand, the imaginary linguistic identity of the Carasovan community is highlighted by Radan in the following terms: 'we speak an archaic Croatian and have preserved in its purity, in contrast to the evolved Croatian language of Croatia. In the Caraş Valley our Croat dialect is very well maintained, with minor Romanian and German influences.'[74]

As in other cases in the region, NGOs play an active role in supporting and organizing ethnic minorities. The contribution of Croatian NGOs to reinforcing Croat national identity abroad is significant especially for the Carasovan community, given their efforts of connecting to the values and everyday life of a different nation. One such Croatian organization is 'Hrvatska matica iseljenika' (Croat Heritage Foundation), which offers support for various programmes and cultural events connected to Croatian culture, Croatian language schooling and workshops. In Romania, the main organization which brings the Croat community together is 'Zajednistvo Hrvata u Rumunjskoj' (Union of the Croats of Romania). The Carasovans were initially represented within the Democratic Union of the Serbs and Carasovans from Romania, but they left the organization in 1997 and joined the Union of the Croats. At the organizational level, this marked the shift in Carasovans' ethnic identity and their preference for Croatian identity. The Union of the Croats has participated in parliamentary elections since 2000, and in the local elections was able to win important positions, including that of mayor of Caraşova.

The situation revealed by the analysis of censuses points to the contribution of state power in forging national and ethnic identities. The Carasovan community was too small and lacked the political muscle to raise significant problems for the Austro-Hungarian Empire and afterwards for the Romanian state. However, in both political regimes, the authorities tried to include this small community in larger ethnic formations. This is evidence of the way that censuses, while demographic tools, can also be used to define identities. Censuses from the last century help to elucidate the factors which contributed to the dynamics of Carasovans' self-identification and also to determining opportunities and limits of such identification. The dominant political factor moulding identity in the region was the formation and reconfiguration of national states. Censuses limit the identities available for populations. It is thus illustrative that Carasovans were included in the group of Serbs and Croats in the censuses of the Hungarian state,

while later on, in the 1930s, they were not included among the Croats, Serbs and Slovenians, but in the 'other ethnicities'. To put it briefly, censuses offer the horizon of group identification.

National minorities are usually seen as 'groups that formed complete and functioning societies on their historic homeland prior to being incorporated into a larger state'.[75] The translation of the Carasovan ethnic identity into a new Croat minority shows that national minority identification can also emerge *after* the inclusion of ethnic groups into a nation. Following Brubaker's insights on the role of the triadic nexus, we conclude that such identity shifts are possible in a context where new national homelands are themselves in a process of political re-articulation of citizenship. Ethnicity is then based on 'transactions' which involve internal and external factors and constraints.[76] At a more general level, this case reinforces the idea that ethnic groups are 'constantly recreating themselves and ethnicity is continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both with the group and the host society'.[77]

Conclusions

After centuries of relative isolation in the Banat Mountains, the Carasovan community has experienced an ethnic (re)invention. A small Croatian community emerged from a complex context involving political, economic, legal and cultural aspects. These dimensions offered a range of appealing 'opportunities for being Croatian' in the region, which largely account for the dynamics of Carasovans' ethnic identification. The shifting identity of Carasovans should not only be seen as motivated solely by such opportunities: rather as politically informed in particular ways. The political contribution to the ethnic and national identification of Carasovans includes the politics of citizenship of the Croat state and also the treatment of ethnic minorities in Romania. Finally, the censuses from the last century played a key part in setting this 'ethnic enigma', by providing the ethnic identification matrix for the Carasovan community.

This paper discusses the phenomenon of the shifting identity of Carasovans and their recent embracement of Croat identity. The complicated history of the Carasovan community,[78] considered since the 1940s as an 'ethnic enigma',[79] has recently added yet another layer consisting of a change from a local and ethnic identification to a national minority identity. The dynamics of the Carasovans' self-identification process is a reminder of the revival of ethnicity in the Balkans and the related processes of reinforcing national identities on a stronger ethnic ground, which led to tensions and open conflict in the region. The topic of ethnic identification in the Balkans drew considerable interest among the academic community, especially in connection to the possibilities of overcoming the violent confrontations between ethnic groups.[80] Our case shows that ethnic revival and identity construction is possible without leading to tensions and conflict, providing an interesting example for the region. On the other hand, it shows the decisive contribution of political power to the (re)invention of ethnic identities[81] and also the unstable social terrain on which political decisions intervene.[82]

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