

TOWARDS A REGIONAL CROSSOVER MODEL? THE ROLES PLAYED BY SPATIAL VICINITY AND CULTURAL PROXIMITY AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES IN AN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN BORDERLAND

Iancu-Constantin Berceanu, Nicolae Popa, Remus Crețan

West University of Timișoara, Timișoara, Romania

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Abstract: The issue of intercultural negotiation among ethnic minorities in border areas has been widely debated in the social sciences, but the roles played by spatial vicinity and cultural proximity in influencing ethnic membership in borderland areas is still under-researched. This article addresses the role of geographic vicinity among ethnic minorities residing in a border area and the way cultural proximity is involved in this process. The research uses a questionnaire and interviews with a sample of members of ethnic groups (Hungarians, Bulgarians, Serbs and Ukrainians) who live in western Romania (Timiș county). The findings highlight that geographic proximity constitutes a key factor in the manifestation of cultural proximity in the relationship between ethnic minorities and their counterparts in the cross-border region. This process is also shaped by the bilateral relations between the host country and the country of origin of the ethnic group. Concluding the analysis, a crossover ethnic model is proposed.

Email: nicolae.popa@e-uvvt.ro

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Introduction

Previous studies in human geography and more broadly in the social sciences have shown that the process of intercultural negotiation is most active in cross-border spaces (Paasi 1991, Paasi 2003, Paasi 2018, Newman and Paasi 1998). Spatial and cultural proximity to cross-border space typically results in close political, social, and economic relationships between the people on both sides of the border (Scott 2015). Regional identity can influence intercultural negotiation in border areas because this process is based on the sense of belonging to a particular territory that is shared by people, and it is part of their cultural identity (Pohl 2001). Regional identity develops from the individual's personal and group experiences, which are socially mediated and strongly influenced by the historical experience of the place. It encompasses numerous material elements (landscape, specific architecture, material culture) and immaterial aspects (oral tradition, stereotypes, spoken language, music, dance), as well as economic distinctives and the centre-periphery relationship (Paasi 2018). It can bring together human groups who live in delimited political-administrative spaces but have a shared historical experience (Pascaru 2005).

The aim of this study is to identify the reciprocal implications generated by geographical neighbourhood, regional identity, and cultural proximity in the context of relations between ethnic minorities and their countries of origin in the cross-border area in which they live. The theme of relations between minorities and their country of origin is an important topic in the context of the European integration process (Duvold 2015, Scott 2015) and this aspect is manifested in Romania's bilateral relations with neighbouring countries (Deică and Alexandrescu 1999, Ploae 2017). Our research focuses on four major ethnic groups (Hungarians, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Ukrainians) living in the west of Romania and more specifically in Timiș county and it sets out to answer the following research questions: 1) How do the members of ethnic minorities perceive their connection with their country of origin and with their conationals in the cross-border area?; 2) How does the geographical proximity influence the relationship between an ethnic group and its country of origin?; 3) Does cultural proximity based on a common ethnic identity bring people close enough for distance to be of no account, or does physical distance limit contacts between people of the same ethnic identity?

Romanian researchers have studied the intercultural solidarity fuelled by regional identity (Gavreliuc 2003), the cultivation of interculturality in both informal and institutional contexts (Neumann 2012, Para and Moise 2014), the development of cultural, educational, and scientific research activities (Para and Moise 2014), the economic activities (Ploae 2017) and cultural affinities, and the cross-border solidarity of Romania with Serbia and Hungary (Rădoi 2017). However, the impact of geographical and cultural proximity upon ethnic minorities in border areas in Romania is under-researched. Such studies as exist either fall within broader ethnic studies

(Crețan 2006) or they make only a passing reference to work done on cross-border situations (Rădoi 2017).

This paper adds to existing knowledge by highlighting the beneficial influence of interpersonal and group relationships based on spatial and socio-cultural proximity. In addition, it focuses on the twofold perception of the host country and the ethnically related country, and it suggests potential positive implications for higher-level bilateral relations between the involved ethnic groups and their countries of origin.

Spatial vicinity, cultural proximity, and ethnic minorities in cross-border areas

Vicinity (or neighbourhood) and proximity are two almost synonymous concepts. The two terms both express the juxtaposition of two territorial or social entities that have a common reference element. The geographical vicinity of two territories is synonymous with geographical proximity because both concepts spring from the juxtaposition of two spatial units (Erdeli and Ielenicz 1999). Depending on the relationships established between human groups, the neighbourhood may involve relationships of cultural proximity (Unger and Wandersman 1985). In its geographical sense, vicinity implies a dynamic functional relationship between two adjacent territories or states, resulting from the interaction of certain geographical elements and the contiguity of others (Roberto 2018). Turning to the human factor, it is important to note that vicinity creates a special type of relationship based on knowledge and interaction between the concerned groups (Erdeli and Ielenicz 1999).

The term "vicinity" is therefore related to human groups and to the construction of spaces in which they share common values based on interpersonal relationships. The identity and boundaries of these small socio-territorial complexes are conditioned by external factors such as the actions of authorities. The concept of spatial proximity derives from the location of a territory in its immediate vicinity (Roberto 2018). And it constitutes an important geographical factor in the functionality and evolution of territorial systems (Cocean 2002, Neagu 2011).

Cultural proximity refers to people's preference for listening to and even their greater likelihood of accepting messages that are in their mother tongue or messages that come from a culture with which they share common characteristics (Felbermayr and Toubal 2010) or to which they feel close (Straubhaar 2021). Cultural proximity does not always follow geographical proximity. Two geographically adjacent countries can be very different, and their inhabitants manifest a strong perception of otherness, as is the case with the relations between Greece and Turkey. Similarly, two nations that have strong cultural identity ties and have spatial proximity between their territories may not develop relations of cultural proximity. This is the case with Russia and Ukraine

(Grumaz and Rotaru 2015, Plochy 2017, Tchernoff-Horovitz 2022), the latter of which shares a border with Romania, two countries whose relationships have influenced the working agenda of the European Union and of Romania in terms of foreign policy (European Commission 2023). Although culturally close to Russia, Ukraine has become increasingly distant from it due to the current conflict but it has also become increasingly close to the countries of its western neighbourhood, including Romania.

The country of origin of an ethnicity is an important attribute for that specific ethnicity. For an ethnic group with the status of a minority in another national state, the 'related' country is the one with which they share the same ethnic origin, language, or religion (Sheffer 2006). This phenomenon is evident in the case of countries whose nation has many minorities in other states, such as Hungary and Russia, both of which are known for their active involvement in relationships with the host countries of their ethnically related groups (Duvold 2015).

In the literature devoted to border studies, Balibar (2002, 2009) analyses the typology of contacts between European countries and proposes a crossover model or the theory of crossover ethnic contact specific to the countries on the southeastern flank of Central Europe. The crossover model of political space is specific to the countries in the eastern flank of Central Europe. The definition of political space encompasses the concept of territory approached from a constructivist perspective, as a result of interaction and negotiation between human groups (Painter 2010, Antonsich 2017). In this context, interactions between states and interactions between nations develop in various ways and at different levels, covering a wide range of interests in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres (Balibar 2009). All these factors have an impact on the complex process of preserving the ethnic identity of minority ethnic communities.

Initially, this model of interaction between countries was applied to the entire European space, where three major open spaces overlap: the Euro-Atlantic space, the Euro-Mediterranean space, and the Euro-Asian space (Balibar 2002). Throughout Europe, especially in the areas of their intersection, between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, there is no homogeneous space, neither in terms of cultural identity nor in terms of political identity.

An ethnic crossover pattern of interaction between neighbouring countries can be observed in the case of minorities whose kin state is a country neighbouring their country of residence. Communication channels are multiple and intertwined with the overlapping folds of relations between those countries. The practice of cross-border relations of communities is synergistic with the cross-border policy of states (Duvold 2015, Ploae 2017).

Additionally, a multi-modal practice may be observed in Romania's relations with the neighbouring countries, relations which have numerous roots and which generate

ramifications across a wide spectrum of the country's social and economic life (Popa 2006a, Ilieş et al. 2010, Damian et al. 2014). The present-day opening towards neighbouring countries and the permeability of state borders evokes cultural solidarities which are rooted in the modern era but also entail risks (Popa 2006b). Additionally, the model of territorial deconstruction which occurs in the social and economic life of cross-border territories, as theorised by Paasi (1991, 2018), can be confirmed from the Banat area.

In Timiș county, and in the Banat region in general, the process of interethnic contacts is complex, and it is made more so by the existence of autochthonous ethnic minorities with a shared historical experience, living in neighbouring countries and separated from their other fellow ethnics in Banat by small distances of under 100 km (Ilieş et al. 2010, Berceanu and Popa 2022). Another factor is that the spatial dynamics of ethnicities in Romania exhibit a decreasing trend for all ethnic groups, with the exception of the Roma, where the trend is an upward one (Rotaru et al. 2023). This same pattern can be clearly seen with the ethnic groups in Timiș county. Moreover, regional identity and a sense of belonging as Banaters are very strong in the study area. Western cultural values are associated with pride, even in sports and other activities (Crețan 2019). However, the migration of Romanians and other ethnic groups from other regions into the Banat region that took place in the communist and post-communist periods has led to a kind of social distancing against the newcomers (O'Brien et al. 2023) and even to patterns of otherness (Crețan et al. 2023).

Similar to Banat, there are many other regions in Europe that have experienced territorial and political divisions as a result of the formation of nation-states or the deconstruction of states due to ethnic territorial partitioning. One such is the case of Cyprus, divided between Greek and Turkish Cypriots for nearly 50 years (Gürdalli and Bulanik 2023). There the two ethnic groups have achieved some local reconciliation by participating in shared cultural events such as the "Buffer Fringe" festival (Gürdalli and Bulanik 2023). Furthermore, economically disadvantaged marginal regions can find opportunities in cross-border cooperation with administrative-territorial units in neighbouring countries, as it is the case for the Gemer Region in Slovakia and the neighbouring Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county in Hungary, leading to economic benefits derived from the exploitation of tourist resources (Hutárová et al. 2021). The same pattern can be seen within the DKMT (Danube-Criș-Mureș-Timiș) Euroregion, of which Timiș county is part, where cross-border exchanges have supported the economic development of disadvantaged areas in Romania and Serbia (Ilieş et al. 2010).

Methodology

Study area

Timiș county was part of historical Banat, a province that was divided between

Romania, Serbia, and Hungary at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Today, it is part of the Dunăre-Criș-Mureș-Tisa Cross-Border Development Euroregion (Figure 1, DKMT Euroregion 2023). Besides being the westernmost county in Romania, Timiș is also the largest, covering 8,697 km², which represents 3.69% of Romania's total area. To the west, Timiș county shares borders with Hungary and Serbia. The majority of the territory consists of plains and low hills, with elevations of below 300 metres (Munteanu and Munteanu 1998). The extensive plain area provides open access to the west without any physical-geography limitations.



Figure 1. Timiș county as part of historical Banat and of the Danube - Criș - Mureș - Tisa Euroregion
 Source: Timár et al. 2008, Esri Romania 2022, DKMT Euroregion 2023, Eurostat 2023

Timiș county and the sample of studied ethnic minorities

In Romania, Timiș county is one of the nine counties that had a minority ethnic population of 10% or over, according to the preliminary data of the 2021 census carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (2022). Further in the analysis, we will be referring mainly to the data of the 2011 population census, since, at the time of writing this paper, local-level data for the 2021 census were not yet available.

In the 2011 census, Timiș county had a minority ethnic population of 12.87%, while in 2021 this represented 11.38% (Figure 2). Between 92% and 95% of localities had at least one resident who declared an ethnicity other than Romanian in the previous censuses

(from 1966 onwards). In the 2011 and 2021 censuses, the most numerous minorities were the Hungarians, Roma, Serbs, Germans, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Slovaks. A characteristic of the ethnic minority population is its dispersal throughout the territory, especially evident in the case of the Hungarian ethnicity. The Serbian population is predominantly (88%) concentrated in four localities: Timișoara, Sânnicolau Mare, Sânpetru Mare, and Peciu Nou (including the village of Dinaș), but Serbs have been identified in over 50% of territorial administrative units of Timiș county. Ukrainians are clustered in the southeast of the county, while Bulgarians are concentrated in the northwest.

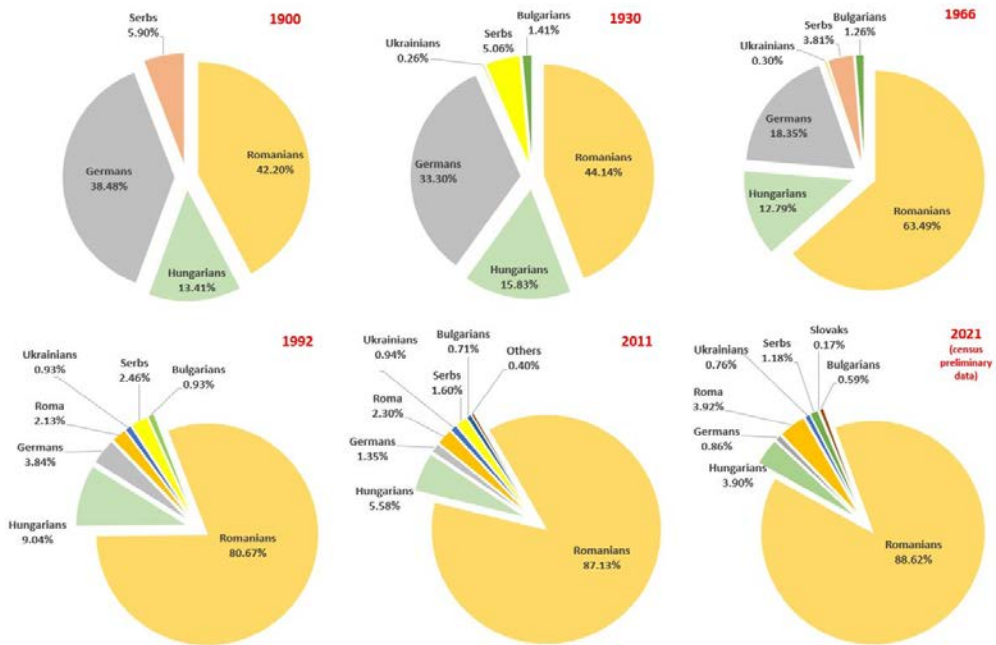


Figure 2. The ethnic structure of the population of Timiș county (selected censuses between 1900 and 2021)
 Source: Crețan 1999, Varga 2002, National Institute of Statistics 2022

Timiș county is relevant from the perspective of its ethno-demographic structure and its proximity to Serbia and Hungary. Over 50% of the Serbs and Bulgarians in Romania are located here. Hungarians, however, are the largest ethnic minority in the county (5.58% in the 2011 census and 3.38% in the 2021 census), and Timiș is also home to the fourth largest concentration of Ukrainians in the country (National Institute of Statistics 2022).

Hungary and Serbia border Romania and the territory of Timiș county, where the empirical research was conducted, but they lie partially within Romania's area of cultural proximity. The factors that bring them closer to Romania are related to their common historical experience. After 1918, Romania and Serbia became increasingly

close, initially because both countries were interested in forming a united front against the revisionism promoted by Berlin and Budapest, and then, after 1945, because both countries were part of the same socialist political and economic bloc (Connelly 2020). The post-1990 rapprochement between the two countries was due to shared economic and geopolitical interests (Naumescu 2019). The cultural proximity between Serbs and Romanians was founded on their common belonging to the Orthodox rite of Christianity and because over the centuries of shared history the two peoples had often been in solidarity, or they had common enemies (Cerović 2005, Popoiu 2017). As for Hungary, the sentiment of ethnic otherness is too strong (Cobianu-Băcanu 2007) for cultural proximity to be established, even though the two countries have been part of the same political and territorial ensembles (Warsaw Pact, NATO, EU) for at least 75 years (Naumescu 2019). In addition, the nationalistic discourse of the present Hungarian government can easily provide reasons for Romanians to distance themselves from the neighbouring country (Dâncu 2020).

If we look at the dynamics of the ethno-demographic structure of Timiș county as shown in the censuses, a sharp decrease in the proportion of minorities is evident in the decades after this region became part of Greater Romania in 1918. The main causes identified by historians are the negative population balance, emigration (especially among Germans, who left in great numbers after 1970), and an increase in the proportion of the Romanian population due to inward migration from other counties within the country (Crețan 1999, Bunea 2012).

Research methods

We used a mixed methods approach based on a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, census statistics and policy papers. Overall, the research followed a paradigm specific to human geography by addressing the territorial dimension of the issue and by investigating its spatial impact and the territorial disparities (Fotheringham 2013).

The field research through the use of questionnaires was aimed at achieving territorial and social representativeness (Fotheringham 2013) and it was carried out chiefly in localities in which the Hungarian, Serbian, Bulgarian, or Ukrainian minority exceeded 20% of the population (Figure 3). This threshold of 20% ethnic minority population out of the total population of a locality was established by the Law 215/2001 and it allows ethnic communities to use their languages in administration, culture, and social life (Romanian Parliament 2007). This category accounts for 73% of all localities where questionnaires were applied, and it covers 79% of the total of 382 administered questionnaires. Four additional localities, in which the ethnic minority populations are significant but their proportion is below 20%, were included: Dumbrăvița for Hungarians, Timișoara and Variaș for Serbs, and Nițchidorf for Ukrainians (Figure 4).

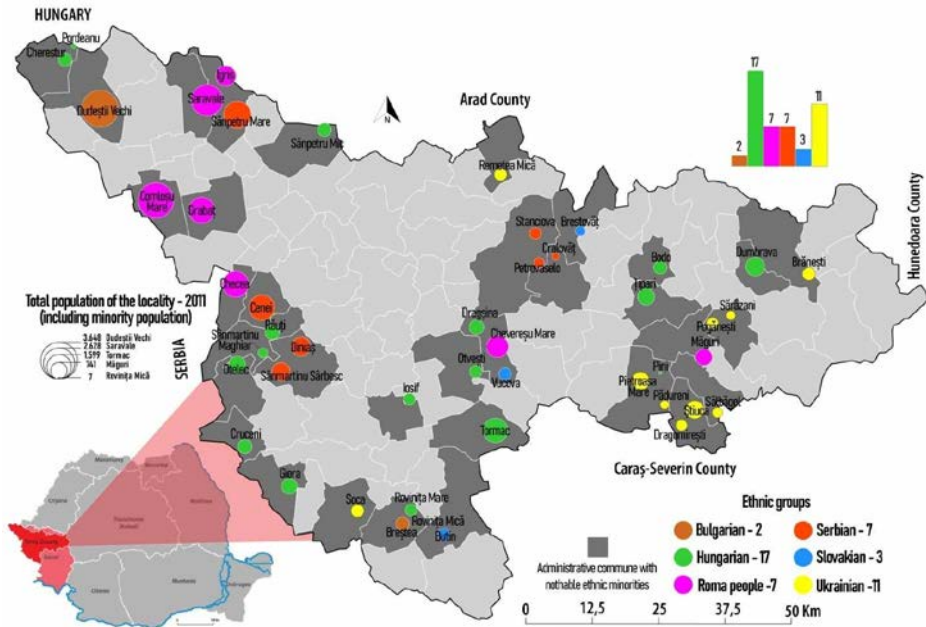


Figure 3. Local administrative-territorial units in Timiș county, evidencing the settlements where more than 20% of the population belonged to an ethnic minority in the 2011 population census
Source: Timiș Regional Directorate of Statistics 2023

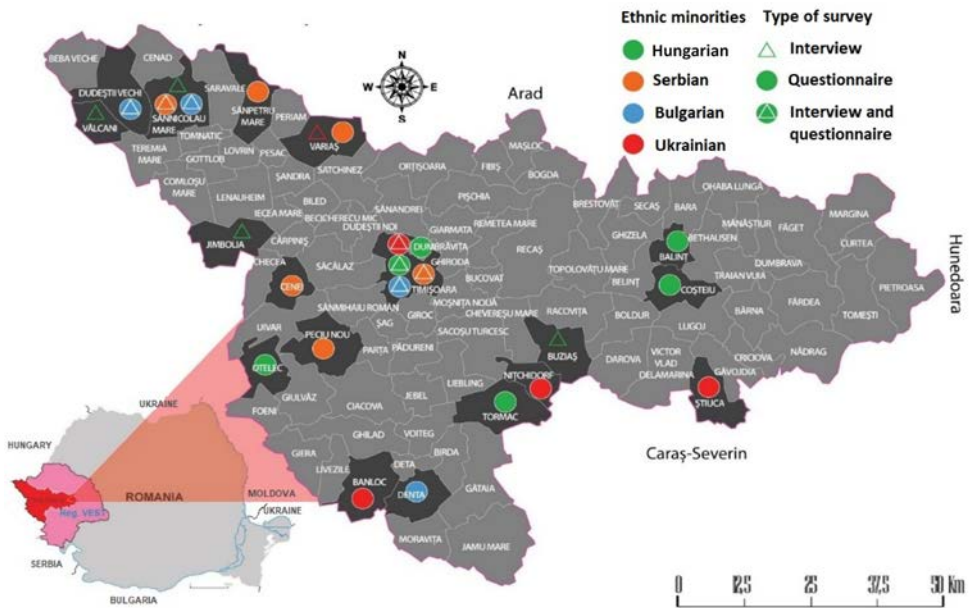


Figure 4. Localities of Timiș county in which field research was carried out during 2021
Source: Timiș Regional Directorate of Statistics 2023

The questionnaire, consisting of 41 items (21 closed-ended questions, 15 open-ended questions, and 5 matrix questions), was administered in 2021 through face-to-face contact. Cluster sampling was employed, following the methodology specific to human geography studies (Lorenzi-Cioldi 2007, Bryman 2016, Parfitt 2013). The data analysis from the questionnaires involved sorting, classification, ranking, comparison operations (Parfitt 2013) and sociological analysis. The responses to closed-ended and open-ended questions were categorised, and the frequency of response types was analysed (Chelcea 2004, Lorenzi-Cioldi 2007). Statistical calculations were made, and correlations were established between responses related to the same issues, and the results were compared and then correlated with the other findings identified in the literature (Bryman 2016).

Furthermore, twenty-five interviews were conducted with individuals directly involved in the cultural and social life of the ethnic minorities in Timiș county, including members of the Romanian Parliament, priests, teachers, and local and regional government representatives. Over half of the interviewees were based in the polarising cities of Sânnicolau Mare (32%) and Timișoara (28%).

The interview consisted of ten main open-ended questions, supplemented by follow-up questions. The purpose of the interviews was to identify qualitative aspects of institutionalised relationships between the minorities being studied and their conationals in the cross-border area (Baxter 2021). Responses were analysed to identify the most significant aspects and concrete facts mentioned by the respondents based on their experience (Valentine 2013). These qualitative insights were then compared with the results obtained from the analysis of responses provided through the applied questionnaire by the members of ethnic minorities, following social and geographical methodologies (Agabrian 2004, Davies 2010, Longhurst and Johnston 2023).

The 382 questionnaires and 25 interviews were conducted in the period 2021-2022, across a large area of the territory of Timiș county. Our field research aimed to cover as wide an area as possible within Timiș county and to have a diverse sample in terms of the social roles of the questionnaire and interview respondents.

Additionally, we used statistical data and policy papers provided by relevant ethnic cultural institutions in Timiș county. These obtained data and information were then compared with the findings from the field research (Flowerdew 2013).

For the data interpretation of questionnaires and interviews, a content analysis was used. Three main themes were identified: 1) the perceived distance from the country of origin of the ethnic group; 2) the connections between ethnic minorities and their fellow ethnics in the country of origin; and 3) the cross-border relations with the neighbouring countries.

Results

The perceived distance from the country of origin of the ethnic group

The attachment of respondents to different territorial constructs was measured by each respondent assigning a rating to a series of territorial constructs listed in the questionnaire: their hometown; the current place of residence; Timiș county; Banat region; Romania; the country of their ethnic origin; and the European Union.

From the questionnaire results, it can be observed that ethnic minority respondents have a high attachment to their host country, Romania, but that, overall, this is slightly less strong than their attachment to their country of ethnic origin (Figure 5).

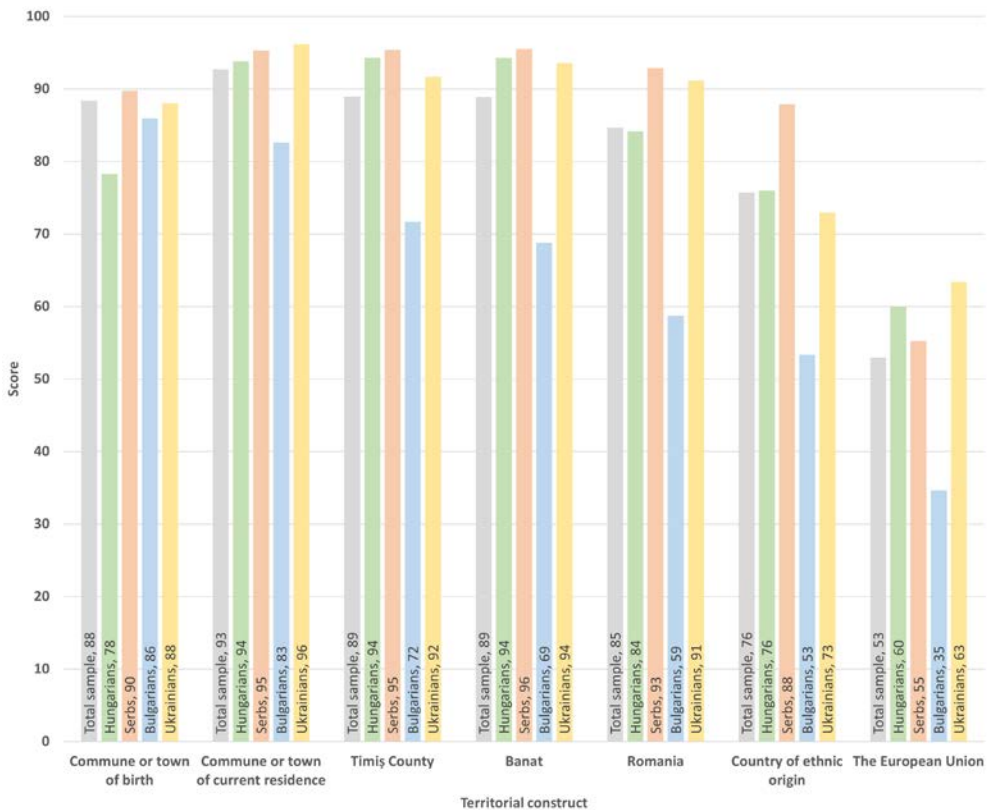


Figure 5. Respondents' attachment to different territorial constructs

In this context, the role of the cultural proximity that our respondents feel towards their country of ethnic origin is clear. It should be noted that in the case of Ukrainians, they can refer to Ukraine as a related country since their proximate origins are not within the territory of Ukraine. The President of the Union of Ukrainians in Romania emphasised this in an interview for our research, stating: "We, Ukrainians in Banat, are neither

settlers nor immigrants. Both in 1906 and in the period after 1960, we moved within the limits of the same country, not from one country to another" (G. H., interview conducted in 2021). It is worth mentioning that Banat and the region of the city of Hust, from where the Ukrainians who settled in the southeastern part of Timiș county in 1906 originated, were both part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and more specifically of the Hungarian part. Serbs feel the strongest attachment to their country of ethnic origin, but they also rated Romania highly, suggesting cultural affinities with Romanians, with whom they share the Eastern Orthodox Christian religion. In this context, the geographic proximity of the country of ethnic origin clearly did not act as a decisive factor, as Serbs and Hungarians did not assign higher ratings to their countries of origin than Bulgarians, whose country does not border Timiș county and it is over 330 km away.

The contribution of different territorial entities to the organisation of specific cultural activities for ethnic communities is perceived differently by the respondents (Figure 6). Cultural activities are an important component of identity conservation strategy for human communities, and community members attach importance to them (Cobianu-Băcanu 2007).

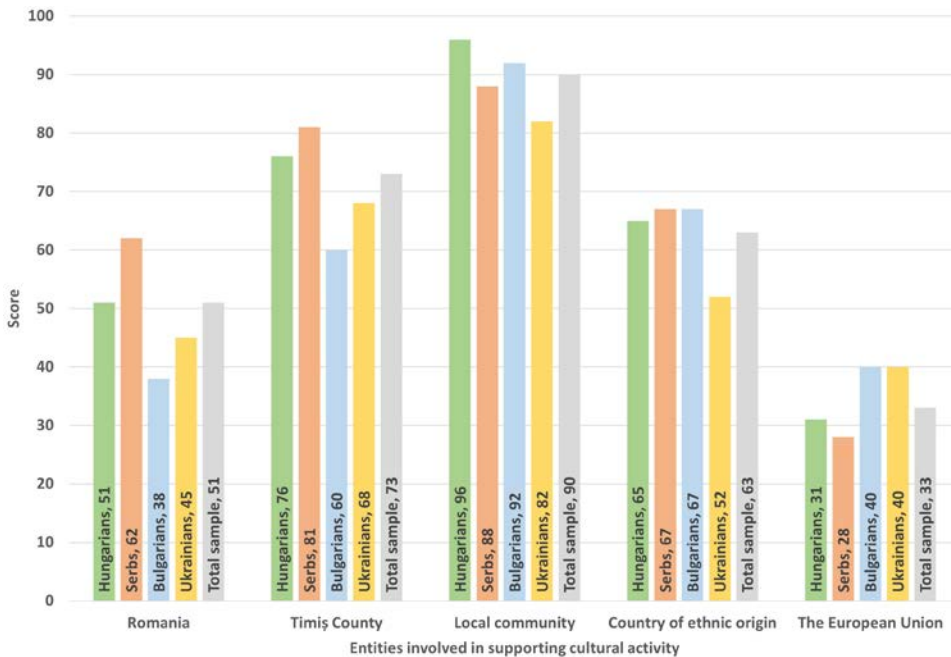


Figure 6. Respondents' perceived involvement in sustaining cultural activities

Among the questionnaire respondents, a majority of over 73% stated that they participated in their ethnic-specific cultural activities, and over 50% stated that these activities were important for the preservation of their ethno-cultural identity. Regarding the personal perception of the roles played by different political-territorial

entities (from the local community to the country of ethnic origin and the European Union) in organising these important activities for them, the score assigned to their country of origin is important. From the analysis of the responses, a higher score was attributed to the involvement of the country of ethnic origin than to that of Romania (perceived through the involvement of the central government in this process). The local community was credited with doing the most, but the European Union also received a fairly high level of trust. Serbian and Hungarian minorities gave more credit than Bulgarians and Ukrainians to their related country than to the host country.

Connections between ethnic minorities and fellow ethnics in the country of origin

We were also interested in understanding the existence of constant and long-term contacts between the respondents and their fellow citizens in other spaces, located at different levels of the regional and cross-border territorial hierarchy (Figure 7). From the analysis of the responses, it is evident that the closest connections are established with the compatriots in the same county, immediately followed by connections with the compatriots from the country of ethnic origin. Here, a distinction could be observed: Serbs and Hungarians declared connections with the compatriots from the country of ethnic origin, located in their immediate proximity, in proportions of over 77% and over 84%, respectively, while the Ukrainians and Bulgarians reported the same connections in proportions of only 44% and 46%, respectively.

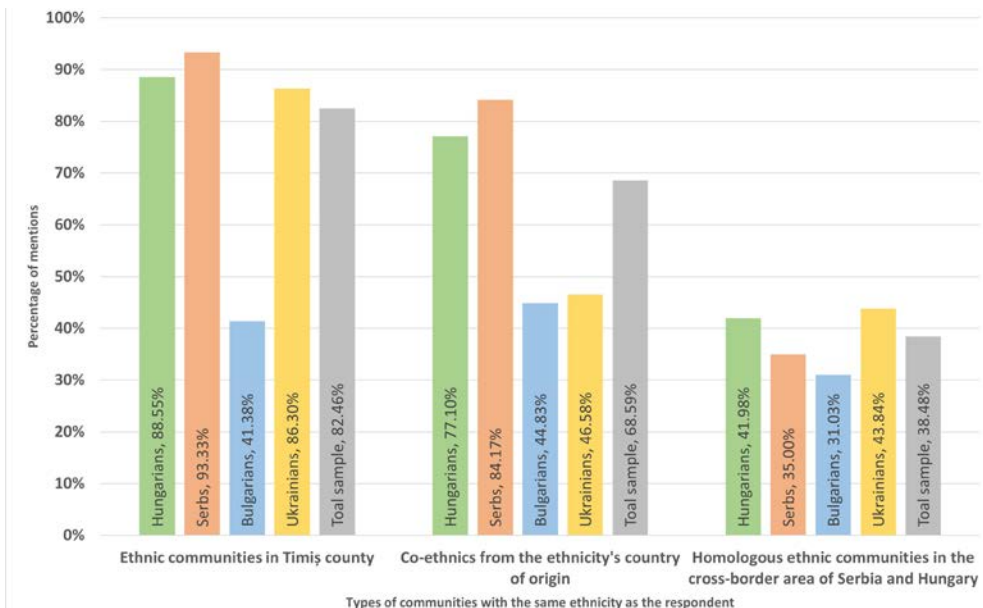


Figure 7. The existence of constant and lasting links between the members of ethnic minority communities in Timiș county and their co-ethnics at different levels of territoriality

Hungarians significantly declared, in a proportion of over 41%, that they also maintained connections with their fellow ethnics in Serbia, located in the cross-border area that overlaps with the historical territory of Banat. Serbs also maintained contacts with their counterparts in Hungary, living less than 100 km from the respondents' place of residence, but to a lesser extent, only 35%. The response from the Ukrainians was surprising in this context, being at over 43% (the highest score). This response cannot be explained by a historical tradition but rather by the cultural proximity facilitated by a common mother tongue. Information supplied by the Union of Ukrainians in Romania reveals the existence of an identity conservation strategy that includes reciprocal visits between the members of Ukrainian communities on both sides of the border, as well as the role of long-distance communication tools that bring together people who speak the same language but have the status of members of an ethnic minority in different countries. The lowest frequency of contacts was observed among the Catholic Bulgarians. This result is related to the small size of the Catholic Bulgarian communities in Serbia, with fewer than 500 members.

The frequency of visits to the country of ethnic origin reflects a strong influence from the proximity factor. In the "monthly" and "3-6 times a year" categories of visit frequency, the highest proportion of positive responses came from Hungarian and Serbian respondents (Figure 8).

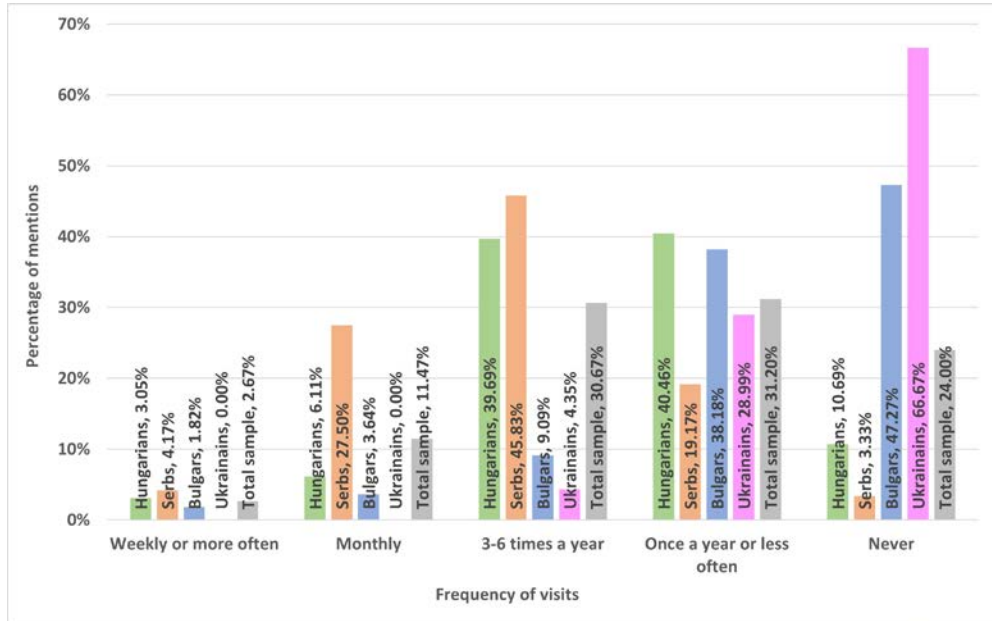


Figure 8. Frequency of visits to the country of origin of the ethnic group in the total sample

Nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents have never visited their country of ethnic origin. Within this category, the majority are Ukrainians, followed by Bulgarians.

The similar indicator, but on age groups, reveals other disparities (Figure 9). Among the studied ethnic minorities, the most active in visiting the country of ethnic origin at least 3 times a year were the individuals aged 30-64. With the exception of Hungarians, among all other respondents, the majority of individuals who have never been to their country of ethnic origin are also in the 30-64 economically active age group.

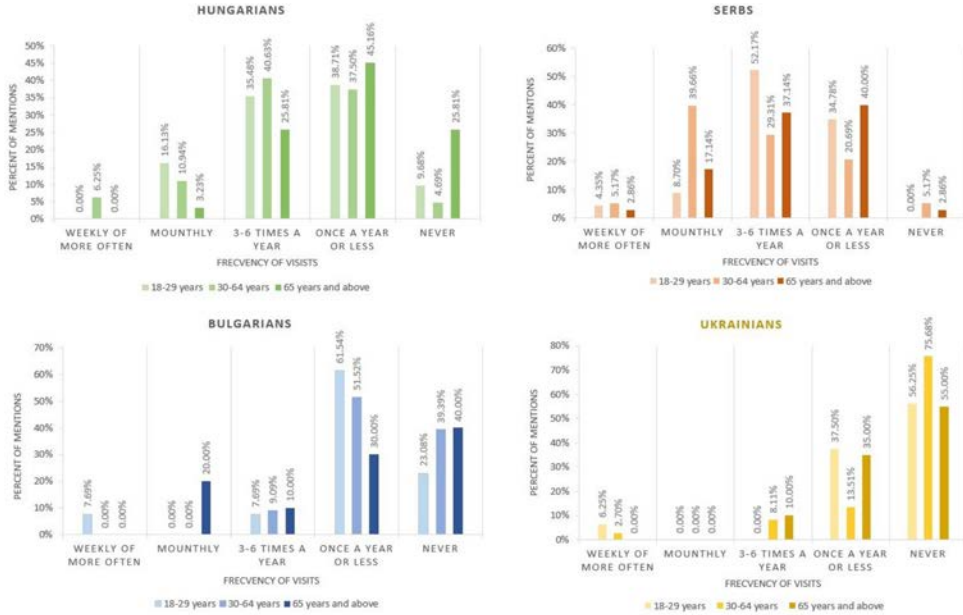


Figure 9. Frequency of visits to the country of origin of the ethnic group, by age group

The connections between the members of ethnic minorities in Timiș county and their fellow ethnics in the country of origin of their ethnicity are very frequent. Our study also investigated people's motivation for cultivating constant and long-lasting contacts (Figure 10). The analysis carried out on the entire sample reveals the predominance of contacts based on social relationships or friendship (over 59%) and those motivated by the need for communication in the interests of the preservation of cultural identity (over 53%). Disparities may be observed between the minorities studied in the category of "friendship", with Bulgarians invoking this motive to a lesser extent. Similarly, they mentioned family relationships much less frequently than other minorities. However, this difference is compensated for by those Bulgarians who are motivated to preserve their language and traditions.

In the relations between the members of ethnic minority communities in Timiș county and their fellow ethnics from the transborder space of Serbia and Hungary, the motivations are the same, but they take on different proportions. For example, Serbs have the lowest kinship relations, Bulgarians the lowest social relations, and

Hungarians the lowest economic relations. In contrast, cultural relations are well represented in each ethnic minority. These disparities are related to the representativeness of the respective ethnic communities, as minorities in the cross-border space of Serbia and Hungary.

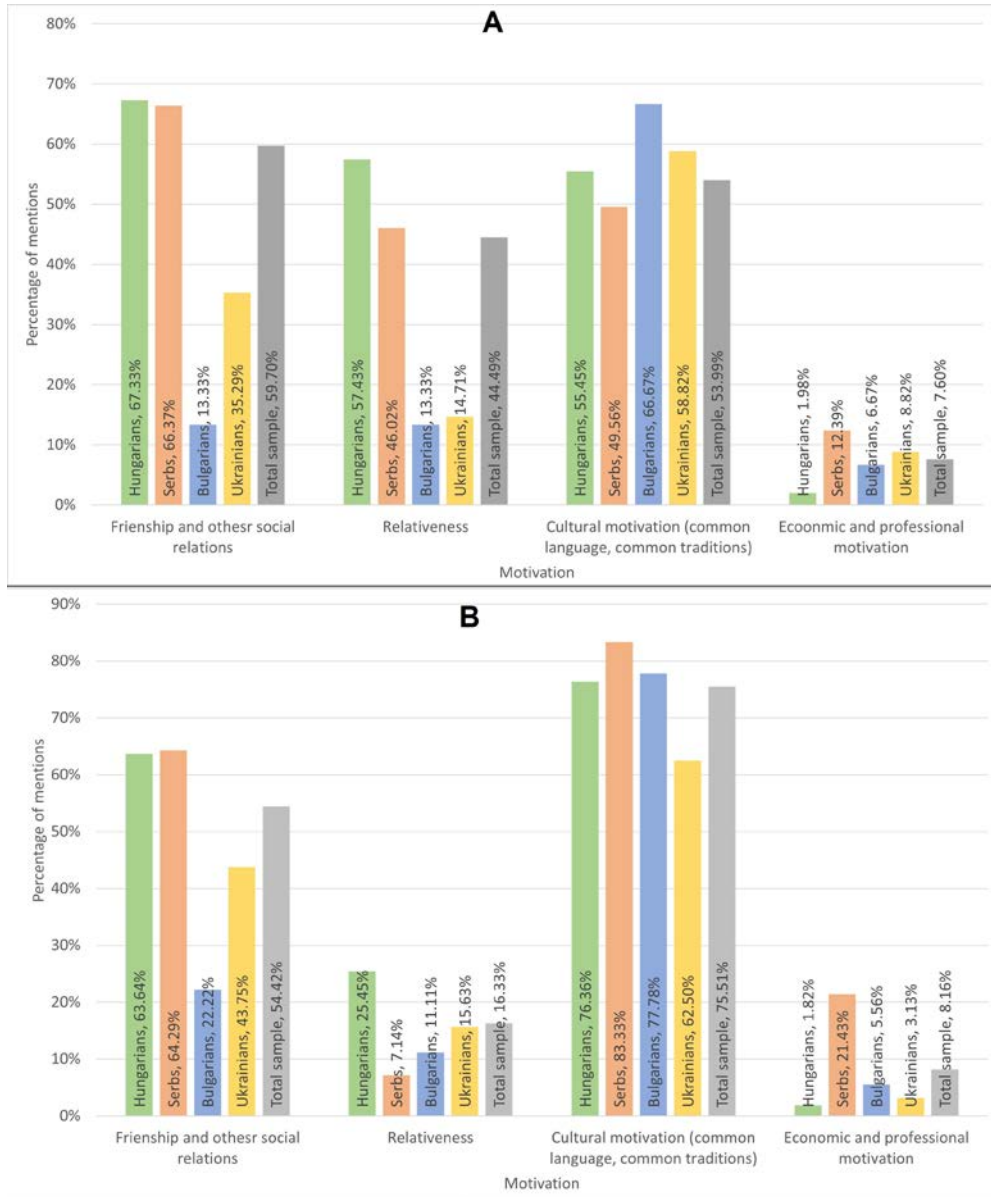


Figure 10. Relations between the members of ethnic minority communities in Timiș county and their fellow ethnics from the country of origin of the ethnicity (A), and from the transborder space of Serbia and Hungary (B), grouped by areas of interest

On the other hand, the respondents were asked whether they consider the possibility of migrating in the future to the country with which they consider themselves ethnically related. Individuals who stated that they had considered the possibility of emigrating to their country of ethnic origin made up a low percentage (less than 20%) of the total sample. This intention was expressed even by the Ukrainians, whose related country is located at the greatest distance and it has the lowest level of relations with Romania when compared to Serbia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. It is worth mentioning that the survey was conducted in 2021, before the outbreak of the war, so that responses cannot have been influenced by it.

If we analyse the responses represented separately, based on the respondents' educational level, disparities emerge. While differences also exist in the analysis of this indicator across age groups, it is evident that individuals in the 65 and above age group will exhibit the lowest intention to emigrate, due to age-related factors. For all but one of the ethnicities, the proportion of those who have considered emigrating to their ethnic-related country increases in line with the educational level. It is worth mentioning that all those individuals who reported graduating higher education in their ethnic-related country also stated that they had completed their education there. This could be acting as an influencing factor in the analysis. The Serbs constitute an exception, but the difference between the responses received from high school graduates of this ethnicity and those received from college graduates is less than 2%, a percentage that falls within the margin of statistical error for any study of this type (Lorenzi-Cioldi 2007, Parfitt 2013).

Cross-border relations with neighbouring countries

In terms of cross-border relationship with Serbia, a wide range of connections can be observed, forming a complex system of relations between the two countries; these relations are influenced by their shared historical experience and common Orthodox Christian religion (Glenny 2012, Novák 2020), as well as by the bilateral treaties and the cross-border movement of people (Aelenei 2018). In addition, the relations since 1990 have been influenced by European and NATO politics. In this context, the establishment of the DKMT Euroregion in 1997 has stimulated closer bilateral ties in various fields (Creţan 2006), and cross-border development projects have brought numerous economic and social benefits to both countries. The NATO intervention of April-June 1999 in the region generated reactions from the Serbian community in Romania, as reflected in the interviews. A representative of the Serbian community in Timiș county, a writer and publicist, stated: "Romania did not support the Orthodox Easter peace ceasefire (supported by Greece, a NATO member). Romania opened up its airspace for NATO aircrafts to use it for bombing raids, while Hungary and Bulgaria did not" (D. B., interview conducted in November 2020). But the European integration process of Romania has had a positive impact on the Serbian community, as they also have cross-border projects.

As it is clear from our analysis of the interviews, cross-border relations between Romania and Hungary have been active and marked by numerous twists and turns, starting with the delineation of the border between the two countries after the World War I. A central theme in the dialogue has been the existence of the Hungarian minority in Romania and the preservation of its ethno-cultural identity (Novák 2020). The integration of both countries into the European Union (Hungary in 2004, and Romania in 2007), accompanied by the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects, has played a role in this process. The interviews reveal a positive perception of the effects of the European integration process on the social and cultural life of the Hungarian minority in Timiș county.

The relations between Romania and Bulgaria have developed in a positive evolution since the World War II (Aelenei 2018, Connelly 2020). As with Hungary, the collapse of the communist regime in December 1989 and the process of integration into NATO and the EU have played a positive role in strengthening the relations between the two countries. But, the cross-border projects with European funding have had a much smaller impact on Timiș county, as their area of implementation is in southern Romania.

The importance of the relations between Romania and Bulgaria was also revealed by the responses given in the interviews with individuals directly involved in the cultural life of the community. The Bulgarian respondents stated in the questionnaire survey that they maintain constant relationships with their counterparts in their country of origin up to a proportion of 25.86%, while with counterparts from Serbia and Hungary up to a proportion of 31.03%. The main cause of this behaviour, in contrast to the case of Serbs, lies in their cultural identity itself. In Serbia, there are Catholic Bulgarians who originated from the settlement of the population from Dudeștii Vechi in the 19th century (Vasilcin 2013). On the other hand, the distance from the country of origin, as well as the different religious identity and tradition of the last three centuries have kept them at a distance from them.

The frequency of visits to the country of origin of the Bulgarian ethnicity is significantly lower than that of Hungarian and Serbian respondents, due to the distance of over 330 km (the distance between Timișoara and the Calafat border crossing) to get there. Two Bulgarian respondents stated that they visit their country of origin weekly because they engage in economic activities that require such travel. Also, 20% of respondents over the age of 65 make monthly visits. The majority of the respondents visit the country of origin of their ethnicity once a year or less frequently. The highest proportion of respondents who have never visited Bulgaria is found among those over 30 years old. Some of them, pensioners, do not have the necessary financial means for such travel. Young people aged 18-30 and adults under 65 visit Bulgaria at least once in high proportions (over 50%), as they are attracted by the tourist facilities in this country. In addition to good prices in tourism, another attractive factor is their ethno-cultural affiliation.

Among the questionnaire respondents, only a percentage of 5.17% have pursued study programs in their country of origin, but over 65% know people who have done so in the recent past. Additionally, 27% know people who have attended school in their country of origin, and they have lived there.

In the case of Bulgarians in Timiș county, the fact that their country of origin does not directly border Timiș county, and it is at a significant distance from their place of residence, has negatively influenced the frequency of contacts. Additionally, cultural proximity is manifested only in the context of linguistic identity, as the culture of Catholic Bulgarians has an original character, with its own writing system and a different historical experience over the last three centuries (Markov 2012, Markov 2013, Bogdanov and Szóke 2019).

The relationship between Romania and Ukraine, as neighbouring countries, began in the immediate period following the Declaration of Independence in 1991. Romania's relations with Ukraine were driven, on one hand, by the existence of a substantial Romanian minority in Ukraine, coupled with the presence of a Ukrainian minority in Romania (Călian 2017), and on the other hand, by the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy (Longinidis 2016).

The bilateral relations between Romania and Ukraine, as neighbouring countries, have effects on the social imaginary of the Ukrainian communities in Timiș county. One of the interview respondents from the locality of Știuța emphasised that an intensification of the relations between Romania and Ukraine would be beneficial for preserving the ethnic identity of the minority to which they belong. The President of the Union of Ukrainians in Romania, Timiș branch, stated that although Ukraine is far away, an improvement in the relations with this country would have a positive effect on the Ukrainian minority and on the relations between Romanians and Ukrainians as ethnic groups.

The strong attachment to the local and regional geographical horizon was emphasised by the respondents through the high scores given to these territorial constructs. From the analysis of the responses to the question: "From which one do you feel closer to?", two categories of territorial constructs emerge in terms of the respondents' declared attachment: the local community, Timiș county, Banat, Romania, and the country of ethnic origin – with high and close scores – followed by the European Union at a considerable distance.

The analysis of *the motivation for maintaining connections between the members of ethnic minority communities* in Timiș county and their compatriots in the cross-border areas of Serbia and Hungary (the historical Banat region) reveals a statistically similar distribution of responses to the same theme studied in the context of maintaining connections within minority groups and compatriots in the country of ethnic origin. However, the motivation for Serbs to maintain connections with their counterparts in

Hungary, and for Hungarians to maintain connections with their counterparts in Serbia, is primarily based on the preservation of ethnic identity, especially through the use of their common mother tongue. In both cases, the economic and professional motivation was mentioned by a minority of respondents. The occurrence of these responses, however, demonstrates that cultural proximity is directly involved in economic exchanges. In practice, people who speak the same language seek each other out and they meet across borders to engage in economic or professional activities. This result supports the hypothesis stated in other research papers that cultural proximity has a positive impact on economic exchanges (Ploae 2017, Rădoi 2017, Crețan 2019, Rotaru et al. 2023).

Direct relationship with the country of origin of the ethnic groups was visible to all analysed ethnic groups. After 1989, the possibility of collaboration with cultural actors from Serbia emerged, as one interviewee stated: *"Initially, it was more difficult, but in the past two decades, folk groups have increasingly relied exclusively on choreographers from Serbia to stage dance routines. The grants provided by Serbia (...) seriously affect perhaps the most important field for preserving the Serbian minority's identity in Romania: the preservation, conservation, promotion, and development of Serbian traditions"* (M. L., Serbian folklorist, and former deputy of the Serbian minority in the Romanian Parliament).

The relations between Romania and Hungary have a visibly favourable impact on preserving the identity of the Hungarian community, for example, schools in Timiș county are twinned with schools in Hungary. On this, one Hungarian interviewee stated: *"(...) so, our students participate in visits, school camps, excursions to Hungary, and they become aware of Hungarian cultural values, getting to know the achievements of the Hungarian people. The sense of belonging to the same culture, the same values, plays an important role in preserving the Hungarian identity in a globally interconnected world"* (K. F., school inspector).

It is obvious that the Hungarians have educational, cultural, and recreational activities in the community, together with social assistance, organised and announced through phone calls and social media networks.

In terms of Bulgarians relations to Bulgaria, a Bulgarian consulate has been opened in Timișoara, and this is of real importance because through this consulate Bulgarian citizens can ask for the honorary consul's help in various situations where a translation is needed in their discussions with the Romanian authorities: *"(...) through the help of this consulate, efforts are being made to establish a Bulgarian language lecturership at the West University of Timișoara"* (B. P., teacher from Dudeștii Vechi). Also, another Bulgarian interviewee added: *"In the first 10 years following the 1989 Revolution, many Bulgarians from Banat went to Bulgaria to see the places where their ancestors came from and the villages that were established when our people returned to Bulgaria after being liberated from the Turks"* (K. C., historian, and teacher in Dudeștii Vechi).

Ukrainian interviewees consider that the relationship between Romania and Ukraine does not have a direct impact on their community in the area of Banat. One Ukrainian interviewee considers: *"I strongly believe that implementing joint Romanian-Ukrainian projects would be useful because they would develop stronger feelings of belonging to the Ukrainian ethnicity, especially if these projects were cultural, related to tradition, customs, and mutual understanding"* (B. N., professor, interview conducted in 2022).

Results on the implications of the European integration process towards the cultural development of ethnic groups in the cross-border area reveal different aspects for the analysed ethnicities. Serbian and Ukrainian interviewees were more reluctant on the EU integration impacts for their ethnicity: *"Personally, I don't see any concrete effect due to this European integration process. I could be wrong, but I think it's more about bilateral connections and understanding. The exception being the IPA Cross-Border Program"* (M. L., Serbian folklorist, former deputy of the Serbian minority in the Romanian Parliament). Also: *"The European Union does not have a direct involvement in the life of the Ukrainian minority in Romania. Maramureş and Suceava counties have economic benefits, and the Ukrainians there are supported in their cultural activities"* (G. H., President of the Union of Ukrainians in Romania, interview conducted in 2021).

On the other hand, some of Hungarian and Bulgarian interviewees see the EU integration as having many advantages for the Hungarians and Bulgarians in the Timiș county: *"The integration process helps more in the relationship between the Romanians from the community and those abroad, as well as between the Hungarians abroad and those in our community. There are families living in Hungary and commuting to Romania for work. Also, many residents in our county have bought vacation homes in Hungary, both ethnic Hungarians and Romanians"* (D. Z., project manager and local project promoter in the public administration of Sânnicolau Mare, interview conducted in 2021). Additionally: *"The European integration process has had a positive role within the Bulgarian community in the area and, of course, in the relations between Romanians and Bulgarians. Excursions have been organised where mixed teams of Romanians and Banat Bulgarians have participated in tournaments organised in Bulgaria"* (B. P., teacher from Dudeștii Vechi, interview conducted in 2021).

To sum up, the direct relationship with the country of origin of the ethnic groups is an important issue and it does not depend so much on the spatial proximity, while the EU integration process has a lower impact on the studied ethnicities whose home countries are not in the EU (i.e., the Serbs and the Ukrainians).

The analysis of the responses given by the respondents to questionnaires and interviews also reveals our findings to the three questions stipulated in the introduction of this study. On the one hand, responding to the first question, we observe a high degree of closeness between the studied ethnic minorities with respect to the related country and with the co-ethnics in the cross-border territory of Timiș county.

On the other hand, for the second question of this paper, we noticed that the Serbs and Hungarians are much closer to their ethnic country of origin than the Bulgarians and Ukrainians, and this is also perceived in supporting cultural activities that help preserve their ethnic identity. No big differences were identified between Serbs and Hungarians, respectively Bulgarians and Ukrainians, in the frequency of contacts with their compatriots from the cross-border area of Timiș county (western historical Banat). This means that if the dialogue partners are in the same region or in a neighbouring area, the intensity of the dialog between them is little influenced by their ethnic identity.

Finally, for the third question of this study, our response is that cultural proximity based on ethnic identity is not strong enough to keep people in contact, as Ukrainians and Bulgarians have had a much weaker connection with the country of origin of the ethnicity. This reality is revealed by the frequency of visits and the frequency of interpersonal contacts with the co-ethnics from their countries of origin.

Discussion

The construction of a potential crossover ethnic model

The analysis of interactions between the ethnic minorities in Timiș county, on the one hand, and their counterparts in the home country and the cross-border areas of Serbia and Hungary, on the other hand, could be seen according to the following conceptual framework. In the relationship between the studied ethnic minorities and their compatriots in the neighbouring country and the cross-border area (Serbia and Hungary), several factors come into play. The primary factor is the geographic proximity, followed by the regional identity (manifested in the relationship with the compatriots from Banat region), and the complex of subsequent bilateral relations influenced by Romania's cross-border policies in the context of European integration.

The conceptual framework aims to analyse and understand the multifaceted dynamics of interactions, considering the geographical, historical, cultural, and political dimensions. It recognizes the importance of geographic proximity as a facilitator of connections and exchanges, allowing for regular contact and a sense of shared regional identity. Additionally, the framework acknowledges the impact of Romania's cross-border policies, influenced by its European integration process, on fostering bilateral relations and facilitating interactions between ethnic minority communities and their compatriots.

By examining these interconnections within the proposed conceptual framework, a comprehensive analysis can be conducted to better understand the dynamics and implications of interactions between the ethnic minorities in Timiș county and their compatriots in the home country and the cross-border areas of Serbia and Hungary.

In the context of the identified crossover connections in Romania's relations with the neighbouring countries (which are kin countries for the ethnic minorities in the studied region), several levels or layers can be mentioned: the level of interactions between the individuals; the level of interactions between human groups; the level of interactions between administrative units (implemented within cross-border cooperation Euro-regions); the level of bilateral relations between countries; and the level of relations within the European Union. At this level, it should be noted that Romania is a co-member of the EU together with Hungary and Bulgaria, and it develops relations with Ukraine and Serbia within the partnerships that these countries have with the EU. Manifestations and implications of these multi-layered relations have been identified, with varying intensities, in the responses obtained from the questionnaires and interviews.

In the case of Romania's western border, especially in the sector that borders Timiș county, crossover interactions consist of political, economic, social, and cultural links that act synergistically (Ploae 2017, Rădoi 2017), and correlate with the social imaginary of the populations on both sides of the border (Decoville and Durand 2019).

People who belong politically to a certain state may belong culturally to another state or another politico-territorial construct. Hungarians, through their cultural model and historical evolution, belong to the Western world or the Euro-Atlantic space. Bulgarians and Serbs belong to the Euro-Mediterranean space through their cultural heritage of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, of Byzantine origin. Ukrainians are Eastern Slavs, a periphery of the Euro-Asian space, but they have been influenced by the Western political space. This comment refers to the political identity assumed by the respective ethnic groups' home countries or the nation-state representative of the respective ethnicity (the case of Ukrainians). Cultural proximity, manifested in the relationship between minority ethnic groups in Timiș county, brings minority ethnic groups closer to their kin country.

Active factors include regional identity and geographical proximity. The intensity of relationships with fellow ethnic people from the ethnic group's country of origin is much higher for Serbs and Hungarians compared to Bulgarians and Ukrainians. Analysing the relationships that Ukrainians and Bulgarians have with their counterparts in the transborder area overlapping with the historical Banat, it is observed that they feel more attached to Banat than to their kin country. The proportion of respondents who maintain contacts with their compatriots from Serbia and Hungary (where their counterparts are also ethnic minorities) differs by a few percentage points. The factor that brings them closer is the common ethnic identity and social relationships. The same statistical distribution of motivations for maintaining contacts is also observed in the case of relations with compatriots from the kin country. Significant differences are only observed among the Serbs and Hungarians. It was

noticed that for them, social relationships are more important than the common cultural identity in the case of relations with the compatriots from the kin country.

Regarding the implications of geographical vicinity and cultural proximity on the connection between ethnic minorities and their counterparts from the kin country and the transborder area, the information obtained through interviews indicates that the geographical proximity of the two countries has an impact on the community under study, but this impact is weaker due to the distance of Timiș county from the kin country of the ethnicity. Additionally, cultural proximity, although manifested through awareness of the common language and customs, is weakened by the distance factor and the fact that Ukrainians in Romania do not have direct experience with Ukraine, and their community does not even have origins there.

It is observed that the share of Ukrainian respondents who maintain relationships with Ukrainians from their ethnic homeland and feel close to them is almost double compared to Bulgarian respondents. The cause can be found in the intensified cultural activities of the past decade, which have connected the Ukrainians in Romania with their counterparts in Ukraine. Additionally, the internet greatly facilitates long-distance communication between compatriots.

The frequency of visits by the Ukrainians to their ethnic homeland is much lower compared to Hungarian, Serbian, and even Bulgarian respondents. The distance from Timiș county to the nearest border crossing point with Ukraine (at Halmeu) is over 335 km. It is worth mentioning that most of the Ukrainian respondents were born in Suceava and Maramureș counties, where there are border crossing points. In this context, distance plays a key role, but the visits to their ethnic homeland are not the most important factor in preserving the ethno-cultural identity.

The motivation for maintaining constant and long-lasting connections with the compatriots from the country of origin of the ethnic group is also predominantly linked to linguistic affinities, ethnic origin, common customs, and traditions. In second place there are social friendships that have been established between Ukrainians in Timiș county and those in Ukraine. The percentage is higher than in the case of Bulgarians but lower than in the case of Serbs, indicating that the distance from the country of origin (which is approximately equal) is an important factor in cultivating these kinds of relationships but not a decisive one. It is worth mentioning that a majority of respondents who maintain relationships with compatriots from Ukraine are originally from northern Romania, meaning from the neighbouring border communes. Other respondents also mentioned family relations in this context correlated with their place of origin and that they know compatriots who have emigrated from Romania to Ukraine. However, only few Ukrainians stated that they would like to emigrate to their country of ethnic origin, mostly based on cultural affinities.

Takeaway for practice

Geographical proximity and regional (cultural) identity viewed as active factors in this analysis can be used as bases for collaboration between the administrative units at local and regional level within development projects. The preservation of the common cultural heritage, resulting from the shared historical experience, generates solidarity between people and between communities. Spatial and cultural proximity could be a starting point in the application of cross-border development plans, as it has been seen to act as a strong pro-active factor in people-to-people communication. All this will strengthen the cooperation between Romania and the neighbouring countries, with positive effects in the economic and social development of the south-eastern flank of the European Union.

Conclusions

The spatial proximity of Romania, Serbia, and Hungary has resulted in the construction of a complex system of bilateral relations between these countries, which has been accompanied in the post-communist time by institutional relations between the communities and the administrative units located on both sides of the border. If the geographical proximity has also facilitated the movement of people between these countries, the cultural proximity in Timiș county is derived mainly from the ethnic identity (through the mother tongue) and the regional identity (derived from a common historical experience).

This study examined the implications that geographical proximity can have on the manifestation of cultural proximity and it demonstrated that there are strong implications of geographical proximity in the manifestation of cultural proximity. However, cultural proximity also motivates people to maintain contacts with their counterparts in a neighbouring country or in the country of their ethnic origin. The theoretical implications of these findings include the geographical interpretation of the manifestation of cultural proximity, bringing to the attention of researchers another field of investigation. Cultural proximity is not sufficient to bring ethnic minorities closer to their kin country. Even though previous studies have demonstrated the importance of cultural proximity in the economic and social life, especially in interpersonal communication, the reception of media messages and in economic relations, geographical proximity intervenes as an important factor in this process.

The responses to the first research question in our study, which related to how members of ethnic minorities perceive their connection with their country of origin and with their conationals in the cross-border area, show that the members of our selected ethnic groups perceive these links as strong ones. The respondents feel close to their country of ethnic origin and they cultivate frequent and long-term relationships with their conationals, which arise from a range of motivations.

In terms of the second research question, regarding how geographical proximity influences the relationship between an ethnic group and its country of origin, we found that the geographical proximity of the home country does influence the relationship between the home country and the ethnic minorities living in a different state. Our research reveals that the frequency of visits and the numbers of long-term stable contacts are significantly higher in the case of Serbs and Hungarians of Timiș county. Furthermore, social, and economic relationships are more common among these two groups, and an intention to re-emigrate to the ethnic group's home country is mentioned more frequently.

The third research question was intended to help us understand whether cultural proximity based on a common ethnic identity keeps people close enough for distance to be of no account, or whether physical distance limits the contacts between people of the same ethnic identity. We highlight the finding that cultural proximity based on ethnic identity is not strong enough to keep people in contact. The responses show that the Ukrainians and Bulgarians resident in Romania have a much weaker connection to their countries of ethnic origin than the Serbs and Hungarians, judging by the lower frequency of visits and interpersonal contacts with the co-ethnics in those countries. Speaking the same language is not sufficient to make people feel close. If the distance between them is substantial and they do not see or visit each other regularly, the strength of the connection between them weakens. The cultural link invoked by most social scientists as a key factor in communion between people living a long way apart is less important than territoriality.

In the future, the epistemic framework that led to the realisation of this study could be tested in other territorial contexts. For example, in Dobrogea there is a significant Ukrainian minority too. Conducting a field study could reveal the extent to which their ethno-linguistic identity influences their connections with their ethnic fellows in Ukraine, to which they do not feel a regional attachment, but more of a spatial proximity. Additionally, such a study could shed light on whether Romanian-Ukrainian cross-border projects and the ongoing war in the neighbouring country have an influence on this process. Also, other similar studies could be made in different other European regions in order to see if geographical vicinity and cultural proximity behave the same or they are different than in our study.

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