

Identity Matters for Development: Austrian and Romanian Experiences*

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Introduction and project framework

THE European Commission considers the rural area an important element for the implementation of the “Europe 2020” sustainable development strategy. At the European level, the rural space deals with similar problems, but to a different extent—demographic problems, structural changes in the economy in general and in agriculture in particular, decreasing human resources caused by rural-urban migration, poor infrastructure, etc.—with an impact on the communities and economy in the rural area.

The Romanian National Rural Development Programs of the last and the current programming periods focus on three key priorities: (1) increasing the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors, (2) improving the rural environment, and (3) improving the quality of life and diversification of rural economy. These key challenges are completed by the LEADER approach of promoting and operating local development initiatives.

During the last 25 years, Romania has undergone a process of development coping with changing internal and especially external social and economic factors related to globalization, migration, and the commodification of culture and heritage, all these in an effort to survive or to become competitive. In this framework, a Romanian-Austrian research team implemented a project looking for an answer to sustainable development in three different locations in Romania: Viscri/Deutsch-Weißkirch, a typical Saxon village, Rimetea/Torockó, a village with a Hungarian ethnic majority, and Marginea, a Romanian village in Bukovina. The Austrian counterparts were all located in the federal province of Carinthia: Tröpolach-Nassfeld, a winter sport destination, Kötschach-Mauthen, which became prominent for its efforts towards energy self-reliance, and Weißensee, a high-alpine lakeside tourist destination with a summer and winter season. This Romanian-Austrian research project searched for innovative initiatives in

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rural development. We present the results of the fieldwork done during the two years of the project (2014-2015).

Our study focuses on identifying the decisive factors in the strategy of economic and social revival and on the possibilities of transferring those strategies in other regions of the respective countries and from one country to another. In the research process, we focused not only on identifying all the essential elements and circumstances for a successful revival process, but also on the chronological reconstruction of this process. On one hand, we paid special attention to the local actors' role and initiatives, and, on the other hand, we researched the influence of the political, economic, and social factors. Moreover, this paper focuses on the role of local territorial identity in securing public participation in planning and thus as a planning tool.

We researched the respective villages from three perspectives, which are equally important for planning future local development: (1) the presence or absence of institutional thickness (a network of many institutions), (2) the identity of the place (natural and human characteristic features) and (3) the local territorial identity (people's pride in their community).

Theoretical Background

THE KEY concepts of this paper are territorial identity, heritage, local development and planning. The official discourse reflected in various documents about identity (at various spatial levels) and about culture and heritage is richer at the European Union level than at the national level in the case of Romania¹. In Austria, space-related identity has been a frequently studied topic in sociological, cultural-anthropological, and historical as well as in cultural-geographical research. In its focus are not only the partly very distinct provincial identities, but also the identities of historical-cultural landscapes like Innviertel or Salzkammergut. In more recent times, attention has also been paid to identities and the identity-building of cities, communes and even villages, and many efforts for city and communal branding are being made.² This is also the case of the scientific research in Romania.

In general, researchers investigated identity in relation to the process of creating it, with relevant studies especially for the regional level,³ then related to the role of identity as a resource or a tool for planning and development.⁴ For the rural area, research showed that identity is often part of branding and of a successful commodification of villages.⁵

Methodology

TAKING INTO account similar research approaches,⁶ we used case-study evidence and qualitative methods. The empirical part of this paper is based on field work consisting of interviews, focus groups and observation. The respondents were the locals who were either part of the public administration, entrepreneurs, farmers, etc., as well as representatives of various associations or NGOs from within or outside the research areas.

Results and Discussions

INSTITUTIONAL THICKNESS “includes trade associations, voluntary agencies, sector coalitions, concrete institutions, and local elites—their effects on local policy, and their consensus institutions: common agreements, shared views and interpretations, and unwritten laws,”⁷⁷ all promoters of local economic development.

Anssi Paasi made a distinction between the concept of “identity of a region” and that of “regional identity.”⁷⁸ As Lies Messely, Joost Dessen and Ludwig Lauwers underlined (quoting Paasi, 2003), “the identity of a region refers to those distinguishing physical, cultural and historical features that make one region different from another. Regional identity (or regional consciousness) refers to the extent to which people identify themselves with the region as the whole of institutionalized practices, discourses and symbols.”⁷⁹ We transferred this distinction from the regional to the local level in order to research the identity of the place (features making the respective village different from another) and local territorial identity (local consciousness, pride).

1. Austrian case studies

Tröpolach is a village in the Gail Valley [Gailtal] at the bottom of the Carnic Alps [Karnische Alpen/Alpi Carniche] in the Political District [Politischer Bezirk] Hermagor of the Austrian Federal Province [Land] of Carinthia [Kärnten]. It is part of the large commune of Hermagor-Preseggersee and close to the country town of Hermagor, its center. Villach, the next city, is 50 km away; the motorway from Villach to Italy is closer. Tröpolach used to be a purely agricultural community until World War I, very much in danger of floods of the River Gail in spring and autumn. Only after the river regulation, starting in 1875, the place became safer. When, in the course of battles on the Carnic front with Italy, beginning in 1915, a mountain path to the Nassfeld/Passo Pramollo was developed into a military road, Tröpolach became better connected with a picturesque high alpine pastureland at an altitude of 1,500 to 2,100 m, very appropriate for alpine skiing. Skiing, however, remained the sporadic activity of a few passionate sportsmen throughout the interwar period and up to the 1960s. Only due to the initiative of some local entrepreneurs—from Hermagor and the wider region (Carinthia)—and due to the early interest and co-operation of the local (commune) and regional (province) administration with these private initiators and investors, tourist infrastructure development in Nassfeld started and transformed the mountain pass area (up to the 1990s) into an international skiing destination—the largest in Carinthia and one of the largest in Austria.

Up to 1999, Tröpolach participated in this winter tourism just with a few pensions and private accommodation facilities, since the skiing area was only accessible by car and all major accommodation facilities were located in the skiing area at the mountain pass. The village was still characterized by its agricultural orientation and a minor metal factory offering some extra-agricultural workplaces. In 1999, the construction of a cable railway from the village up to the skiing area and the simultaneous introduction of a long downhill slope from the mountain area to the bottom station of the cable car changed the situation completely: Tröpolach was now the main starting place

for the skiing area, attracting all the tourists. External investors built some large hotels and a lot of smaller hotels and pensions developed in the village. Also, catering enterprises started to flourish or were newly established.

The character of the village changed in visual appearance as well as in its economic and social structure: not the parish church, but the “dome” of the cable car station became the visually dominating feature; the metal factory was closed down and, now, most of the villagers live directly or indirectly from tourism. The tourism boom brought also some new permanent and even seasonal residents—in many cases from mainly East-Central European countries. Recently, in addition to the intensive winter season, a secondary summer season has emerged. The majority of tourists reside in hotels, while the formerly widespread private room renting has substantially declined. Tourists are today much more international: while earlier the German market had clearly prevailed, tourists are now Dutch, East-Central Europeans, with even the British contributing a larger share.

For the identity of the place and for the life of local residents, with whom we conducted our focus-group discussion, this “conversion” had serious consequences. Most of them regard it as ambivalent: (1) they accept that the tourism boom provides them with economic advantages, offers work and helps to maintain the local infrastructure like the elementary school, the post office and some shops, while already in the next village (Rattendorf) all of that has been closed down, and (2) they complain about the loss of the “former character,” the outsiders’ and temporary residents’ intrusion (also traffic jams and noise).

What connects traditional residents most and essentially maintains their feeling of being “at home” as well as local identity is their engagement in voluntary associations. These remain more or less “reserved” for traditional local residents, although they have also external members and even members abroad—former inhabitants of the village, who out-migrated later.

Tröpolach boasts a large number of associations (e.g. a fire brigade, a choir, a young boys’ and a young girls’ association). It is mainly membership, contact and co-operation in these voluntary associations that provides traditional village residents—irrespective of age, gender and profession—with a feeling of place-related identity—as it was explicitly and repeatedly mentioned during our focus-group discussion.

Interestingly enough, local feasts like the church patron’s day have recently been shifted from the summer season, when everybody is busy with tourists and when every event turns into an entertainment for tourists, to autumn, when the village is calm and traditional villagers are “among themselves.” This is also an occasion for out-migrants and external members of associations to return for some days and to enjoy the company of relatives and old friends.

Our investigations also conveyed the impression that the feeling of village-related identity has by no means declined. Traditional residents emphasize the special place of the village in the commune and complain about “being neglected” in some instances by communal authorities. They also put weight on the right to have their delegate and voice in the communal council and do not wish “to be put into one pot” with other villages. The capacity to emphasize the village’s specific identity and position seems, how-

ever, to be very much dependent on individuals able and willing to represent the village's interests and to articulate them. In Tröpolach, there is a journalist working for regional newspapers.

Kötschach-Mauthen is a small market town ("market" in the juridical sense) in the upper Gail Valley in the Hermagor Political District of the Federal Province of Carinthia. It is located where an old crossroad through the Eastern Alps (from Roman times) touches the valley bottom between two mountain passes, one of them (Plöckenpass/Monte Croce Carnico) connecting it with northern Italy. This road, however, has lost in importance compared to earlier times, when trans-Alpine motorways were not available. Compared to Tröpolach, Kötschach-Mauthen is in a much more remote position related to central places in Carinthia (Hermagor, Villach), but has closer relations to Lienz, a district center in Tyrol [Tirol] and is much better connected with Italy than Tröpolach.

Kötschach-Mauthen includes two locations (Kötschach and Mauthen), of which Mauthen is the older (tracing back to the Roman trade post of Loncium) and was in history more important due to its gateway and customs function at the bottom of the mountain pass. There is some rivalry between the two, reflecting the competition between the "autochthonous" and the "newcomer." Both places, however, have rather the character of small country towns than villages: their main streets have respectable old burgher houses and especially Mauthen has a church quite valuable from the cultural-historical point of view. In World War I, during and due to the Austrian military campaign against Italy along the Carnic front (and specifically also at Plöckenpass), Kötschach-Mauthen became connected with the Austrian railway network and the terminus of the Gailtal railway line. This prompted after the war also some industrialization, mainly in the form of sawmills. Until now, Kötschach-Mauthen has been the second (but also secondary) center of the District, with some higher education institutions and a hospital. Starting from the 1960s, Kötschach-Mauthen also used its pleasant landscape, its vicinity to a picturesque high-Alpine valley with many elements of traditional Alpine culture (Lesachtal), its hiking and mountaineering opportunities in the nearby Carnic Alps rising to their highest elevations and most attractive peaks nearby, as well as its good opportunities for canoeing and rafting on the Gail River for a moderate kind of tourism development. Efforts to develop a skiing area comparable to the Nassfeld had to be abandoned in the 1990s due to the latter's competitive advantages based on objectively better natural conditions. A smaller skiing site with some infrastructure remained. Nevertheless, Kötschach-Mauthen lacks a distinct tourism image. It has just "a bit of everything," although it styles itself a "nature and adventure resort" and profits from the continued attractiveness of an aqua park for Italian visitors.

Kötschach-Mauthen lost in importance in recent years, also relative to the district center of Hermagor. This is mainly because of the decline of the Plöckenpass road's transit function. Kötschach-Mauthen has made many efforts to compensate this decline by rather unconventional activities (e.g. the commune's efforts towards energy self-reliance based on water, wind power, and biomass, which brought Kötschach-Mauthen a certain reputation within Austria and beyond, and it is on these grounds visited by student and expert groups). Other activities are carried on by small entrepreneurs (e.g. an ecologi-

cal hotel, a small brewery, a bio-products shop). All these activities convey the impression of last attempts to slow down economic decline and out-migration.

Also in Kötschach-Mauthen, although voluntary associations constitute the backbone of local identity building and maintenance and—at least from an outsider’s point of view—local space-related identity has many more ingredients than, for instance, Tröpolach’s: the history of the place, cultural monuments, landmark-type mountain peaks, the fact of having been a main battlefield along the Austrian-Italian front in World War I, the image of a gateway to the south, the vicinity of a very traditional, truly high-Alpine valley. These and the fact that it has become calmer in recent years attract a large number of amenity migrants from the rest of Austria and elsewhere. Some of them engage themselves in local affairs and provide the place with valuable inputs. They may be regarded as another potential for successive development.

Weißensee is a commune in the Spittal an der Drau Political District of the Federal Province of Carinthia. It has several small villages forming a continued agglomeration in the western part of a narrow high-Alpine (around 900 m) valley, which is otherwise filled by a picturesque fjord-like lake and surrounded by high mountains. The commune has, due to its remote high-Alpine location and its characteristic (Lutheran) traditions, a very specific position in Carinthia’s cultural pattern. While the commune’s remoteness from all transit routes and also the absence of a connection to the railway network were certainly a severe disadvantage for economic development at least until the age of a dominating automobile tourism and overcrowded major tourist destinations, it turned into a real asset thereafter. Weißensee offers “pure” nature: a unique lake in an Alpine scenery. The lake is covered by ice every winter and thus offers opportunities for skating. It is also good for bathing in summer and it is an eye-catcher for hiking tours along its shores and in the nearby mountains. Summer sports in the mountains (e.g. hiking, biking, etc.), skiing in winter, and a well-maintained cultural landscape are additional assets.

Under these conditions, mainly during the 1980s and the 1990s, the commune developed a tourism sector that comprises an infrastructure of a wide variety of high-quality medium-to small-scale hotels owned mainly by locals and a wide choice of pensions and private accommodation facilities. The commune’s preference is quality over mass tourism. This also affects the catering facilities, the traffic regime (limited accessibility for private cars, a public bus connecting all villages) as well as a good balance of various tourist offers in winter and summer providing for some kind of “soft tourism” with two seasons. Starting in the later 1980s, tourist demand has been extended from a summer season to a season also in winter. This was due to Dutch guests, who used to arrive for skating competitions every January. So Weißensee enjoys real two-seasonal tourism providing for a high occupation rate in accommodation facilities. Carrying capacity is—taking into account the claim to be a quality resort—already exhausted. Tourism managers aim nevertheless at a (small) further increase in arrivals and overnight stays. Offer and demand are diversified and rather independent of problems in a specific segment or on an individual market. The offer corresponds also to several current trends in European tourism, e.g. towards quality tourism, ecological consciousness, good opportunities for seniors as well as guests interested in sports.

Tourism in good combination with high-Alpine agriculture, i.e. mainly cattle-breeding on pastureland, which nicely cultivates a “typical” high-Alpine environment and is also financially supported by tourism (a part of the tourism tax goes to farmers) looks to provide for a sustainable livelihood for the small (just 755) resident population. It nevertheless also causes some problems, for instance, due to (according to some opinions) the “over-protection” of the landscape with the consequence of strict regulations and limitations for construction, expansion of the built-up area, access for motor vehicles, use of motor boats on the lake, use of the lakeshore, forest management, etc. Disputes on these issues led to the emergence of factions in the local society: “driving forces in tourism” (“touristicians”) versus “normal” inhabitants. Although most of the residents live indeed directly or indirectly from tourism, the (not so pleasant) impression prevails that “we are all in the hand of tourism, and tourism dictates our life.” Another issue is the growing number of non-local actors in tourism, mainly among seasonal employees and mainly in catering, most of them from East-Central European countries. To some permanent residents, they convey increasingly the impression that tourism is just a business among external actors.

It is not really necessary to add that also in Weißensee voluntary associations are the main carriers of space-related identity. But it is also obvious that in this case it is easy to maintain, since it rests on two very strong pillars: the uniqueness of the cultural landscape and the Lutheran tradition. In a predominantly Roman-Catholic environment, being a Lutheran “island” still means something, even amid a declining role of religion in society.

2. Romanian case studies

New social and economic conditions after 1989 determined many rural communities to act in order to survive (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Triggering factors of development

Triggering factors of development	Rimetea	Viscri	Marginea
New mobility	Free border crossing; tourism	Exodus of the Saxon population	Working abroad
Need for economic growth	Industrial redundancy, structural changes in agriculture	Industrial redundancy, structural changes in agriculture	Industrial redundancy, structural changes in agriculture; forestry
New interest in culture and heritage (endangered); awareness raising	Built heritage, traditions	Built heritage, traditions	Religion, spirituality, traditions

Rimetea/Torockó (Alba County) is a commune with two villages (Rimetea and Colțești/Torockószentgyörgy) with an ethnic Hungarian majority near the impressive Piatra Secuiului Mountain (1,171 m). Once a town (17th century) and a mining center, it is a quiet village with an impressive villagecape. The exemplary activity for protect-

ing vernacular architecture, for preserving the anthropic heritage, has transformed Rimetea into one of the most beautiful and well-known villages of Transylvania.

The first steps towards a conscious built cultural heritage protection were taken in 1993-1994, when students and young researchers started a project to identify houses of vernacular architecture worthy of being restored and preserved. Rimetea did not have single houses with valuable traditional architecture, but an entire ensemble in the main square. The village gained international attention in the context of a comparative study conducted by the initiators on behalf of the ICOMOS,¹⁰ in the context of a Slovak village proposed to be included into the UNESCO built cultural heritage list. A founder and former vice-president of ICOMOS suggested and organized a grant program to sponsor the rehabilitation of the traditional houses. The supervising entity of the grant program is the Transylvania Trust, “a registered charity, set up by conservation professionals and volunteers in 1996. [Their] principal aim is to conserve and promote Transylvania’s rich and diverse built heritage, to encourage society to be receptive towards the built environment.”¹¹

Rimetea has become a major heritage conservation project for the Trust. Since 1996, a conservation grant has been offered annually to 130-140 of its historic building owners. The longevity of the program and financing are decisive in the effectiveness of the project. Despite some fluctuation in the amount of money, it is a continuous source of grants for conservation works. Very important is also the fact that the people themselves contribute with twice or three times the sum they receive to improve the appearance of their houses, and also people who are not included in the program invest in tending their houses.

The work done in Rimetea was rewarded with the Europa Nostra¹² Medal international award in 1999, at the time the most important recognition for built cultural heritage protection. In 2000, the village was designated a Conservation Area by the Ministry of Culture in Romania. The international recognition of the heritage stimulated the conservation works, the international fame and tourism based on uniqueness, authenticity, simplicity, and traditions.

In addition, the inhabitants’ attitudes have changed towards the architectural heritage that they are proud of and prefer to renovate and capitalize rather than replace old buildings with new ones, to boast about it and to learn how to preserve it. The Trust considers this attitude change a major achievement of their activity.

From the focus group discussion in Rimetea we learnt that Transylvania Trust appeared in the village at a favorable moment, supporting the endeavors of the villagers to develop tourism based on their cultural potential; it gave them a fresh jolt; it helped to regard the vernacular architecture as a value to be cherished and protected, as a possible income source. The focus group argued that maintaining the appearance of the houses was a lot of work; but Rimetea was always a highly classed settlement, a mining town, a market center with a town-like structure. The people from Rimetea are exigent, this being reflected in the architecture or in the elaborate traditional costumes. They ascribe this feature to their ancestors: Austrian mine workers and Szekler frontier soldiers, a mixture of cultures.

In this context, as successors of free citizens, former mine workers, the citizens of Rimetea are proud people with a strong local identity. At first, this strong local identi-

ty and pride was helpful to the Trust's built cultural heritage protection activities. Later on, the same pride and local identity were more of an obstacle as some citizens were refusing consultancy from experts. The communication difficulties occur mainly because of the generational change, meaning that when the younger successors are taking over the houses and businesses from their parents, they reject discussions with the Trust who is the monitoring institution for building activities in the village.

This pride is reflected also in their relationship with Colțești, the other village of the commune. Colțești is a farmer village, with agriculture as the main occupation (the cultivation of flowers is a very common activity, alongside cattle breeding), a village of former serfs in comparison with Rimetea (who had mostly free citizens throughout history, being an important mining center with a town-like settlement structure and craftsmen). This historic consciousness shapes the relationship between the two villages. Also similar is the situation of the "Outsiders," people who moved recently into the village: with some exceptions, they are accepted very slowly or not at all by the proud local inhabitants.

Further elements that constitute the identity of the settlement is their religious affiliation to the Unitarian church, Rimetea being one of the strongholds of this Christian denomination.

People are proud of: the location, the Székelykö/Sekler Rock, the inhabitants' hospitality, the traditional costumes (there is an official village museum and two other private collections), food, traditional recipes, and the still practiced religious and secular customs, such as the children's confirmation ceremony or the carnival/Fasching and firemen balls. All inhabitants take the initiative in maintaining or reviving these traditions.

There are also associations such as: a church-supported and active Women's Association, a choir, a "Wind-Band" (a brass instruments orchestra). All these initiatives are rather new phenomena (of the last decade).

The church has an important role, ensuring unity among the inhabitants since there is a new and highly appreciated Unitarian priest with a great influence. He also set up a theatre club and the village hosted once a theatre contest, when the entire community got involved.

The endeavor of protecting and maintaining the architectural ensemble of the village, the developing community life (associations), the church as mobilizing agent, can be seen in the broader context of various policies and actions meant to preserve the identity-defining elements of the strongest ethnic minority in Romania.

To sum up, the identity of the place is constructed through the following elements: the ethnic belonging, the built heritage, the network and external support, the tourism and leisure services, the picturesque setting and their spirituality.

Still, Rimetea lacks good leadership. There is no real co-operation between the local administration and the community. The local authorities are not regarded as leaders. There is no local leader whom everybody accepted; groups form around several strong personalities (mostly entrepreneurs in tourism) and these groups are rather competing with each other instead of working together for a common interest.

Viscri/Deutsch-Weißkirch (Braşov County), a small village in a remote hilly area of Southern Transylvania, near Sighişoara city, is renowned for both the architectural heritage of the former Saxon population and the numerous projects initiated and implemented at the local level, which improved significantly the living conditions and diversified the income sources of the present population.

Viscri is one of the five settlements that together with Criţ/Kreutz, Meşendorf/Meschendorf, Rodeş/Radeln and Buneşti/Bodendorf form the commune of Buneşti. The Transylvanian Saxons shaped the landscape of Southern Transylvania for the last 800 years, until their exodus in the early 1990s. The authentic villagescape, with the fortified church, and the structure of the village with typical Saxon households preserve important features of the Saxon traditions.

Nowadays there is just a handful of Saxons, the main share of the inhabitants are Roma and Romanian. The main income source in the village is subsidized agriculture, the access to subsidies bearing a huge conflict potential in the commune. Subsistence agriculture and traditional products (jam, cheese, honey, etc.) for direct sale are also important for villagers. The mainly unspoiled, for Western standards archaic, traditional villagescape, the remote quiet location, its Saxon character and the built cultural heritage with the UNESCO listed fortified church and main street with its households confers the settlement a certain tourist potential.

Viscri is a village where several civil society initiatives promote and support the natural and cultural heritage protection, applying complex regional and local development measures which involve the community.

Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET) focuses on the built cultural heritage, offering also training, the learning of crafts in house restorations, brick manufacturing or even guest-house management for the affected population. MET aims to make the local community aware of the heritage they now use and live in, and to support it in using it in a sustainable way for their own, but also the heritage's benefit.

ADEPT Foundation is committed to natural heritage protection, mainly the biodiversity resulted from traditional agricultural practices, endangered nowadays by land abandonment or overgrazing. The measures implemented by both NGOs consider the social aspect as priority and aim to empower the community. Their endeavor is to protect and preserve, but at the same time to improve the general wellbeing and the living standards of the population.

The association "Viscri incepe" (Viscri begins) was established in 2008 alongside the initiatives of MET or ADEPT. Around 80 inhabitants affiliated to the association knit wool socks and since 2010 make also slippers that are sold as souvenirs to the tourists on the street leading to the church or in the couple of souvenir shops established close to the fortified church, but are distributed also to Germany and Austria through connections with the Protestant communities.

Ms. Caroline Fernolend got involved into preserving the cultural heritage of her community long before she got the support of MET. After the political changes in 1989, the vast majority of the traditional village community was gone, almost nobody remained who cared about and knew how to maintain the village. This meant that the cultural heritage was in danger. Further on, the structural changes in the economy caused high unem-

ployment for the remaining population. In her endeavor to do something for her community, Ms. Fernolend got into politics, became the first representative of Viscri in the municipality council and undertook several projects to mobilize the community. Repairing the school building was the first community project and numerous others followed. Important was the regular consultation of the inhabitants in setting priorities and realizing projects: house restorations, an ecological sewage plant (the first and only one in Romania), waste management, and leisure activities for tourists. These measures aim to solve the social, cultural and economic problems of the local community. The integrated concept developed in Viscri was the model for the so-called “whole-village” development strategy applied by the MET in various rural communities in the area.

Still, the most important accomplishment is that people take responsibility for the cultural heritage and are proud of their village—which is actually not theirs, but the Saxons’. In 50 or 100 years, all the villages here will be populated only by Roma. Therefore, a mental transfer of the cultural heritage to them is so important.

The present identity of the place is built with the interaction of the following features: Saxon exodus, endangered cultural heritage, unemployment, Roma population, social and cultural intervention as a matter of survival, development of tourism, leisure services, built heritage preservation activities, handcraft learning for diversifying income, and the empowerment of the local population.

Local identity is manifested through locals’ awareness of the celebrity of their village. They consider that the villagers of Viscri are in a better situation than others, as they earn more. The village impact on the wider region is due also to Prince Charles of the House of Windsor, who promotes Transylvania and Romania.

Not everybody is content with the preservation of built cultural heritage, complaining about the building restrictions and about the road conditions. Moreover, the building and renovation requirements are not always strictly observed and a conflict between modernization and maintaining authenticity occurred.

On the other hand, there is a growing number of people who would like to use the village for their own purposes, but without benefits for the village. It is Ms. Fernolend’s intention to let the local community profit—not somebody else; and she regards it of paramount importance that the local community is respected. In this context, she concedes that she, as well as the Trust, have underestimated the dangers of touristic exploitation, especially as some outsiders are not appreciating the simplicity of village life. The danger consists in a strategy to serve tourists first and the local population last. As a means of counteracting this, she regards the empowerment of the local community as the most effective instrument.

In addition, the importance of a strong local community is obvious for the locals. They have two associations which are important for developing their civic consciousness (the Women’s Association and “Agro-Eco Viscri”) as well as various projects (e.g. the communal kitchen).

The risk of this community is that, under a new, possibly less charismatic management, the current general harmony will very likely give place to more individualism, which means that the village will assume a more ordinary shape and will lose attractiveness. A further challenge is the local and regional administration which in many cases is rather reluctant towards the innovative approaches of the Viscri community.

For Viscri sufficiency and simplicity are vital for its preservation as a resilient rural area. This case proves that both a leader (i.e. somebody able to engage a critical mass, while representing and defending the interests of the community) and social capital are crucial for participatory development.

We researched innovative ways to better address societal challenges and the case of Viscri had a pioneering character and its development underlined the importance of having initiative, of assuming a certain risk, and of the significance of a cohesive local population.

With over 10,000 inhabitants, **Marginea** is the biggest commune in Suceava County and one of the biggest in Romania, having more than 2,500 inhabitants currently working abroad. Its position at the contact of the mountain area to the tableland, and at the intersection between two important national road networks, favored the development of commercial activities. The locals' main economic activities are retail, agriculture, wood exploitation and processing, services, construction work, and livestock (over 80 companies and 100 individual businesses registered at local level). More than half of its area is forested (4,329 hectares). The establishment of significant foreign investors in the wood processing industry nearby has a positive impact on the local economy, involving subcontractors and creating new jobs. Moreover, the commune has a regional economic role, attracting labor force from other settlements and due to local entrepreneurs' investments in other villages.

Marginea lost its traditional village landscape and hosts nowadays a faceless agglomeration of homes of migrant workers and commuters to nearby cities like Suceava, and of some remaining farmers. The commune is an example of the impact that external migration had on rural development in Eastern Europe in general and especially in Romania and of how difficult it is to manage the fast urbanization of a traditional rural area. Now Marginea is a weekend site for commuters and a place of reference or return for migrant workers.

Despite the strong urbanization the commune undergoes, its trademark remains the glazed black pottery, which is unique in Romania, and the local brand. Diverse cultural activities—a male group of traditional song and dance, an annual festival of popular traditions (theatre, carols, sayings, etc.), courses on local traditions for pupils at local schools (egg and icon painting)—cultivate and maintain the living traditions as defining elements of their identity. There are still families preserving the traditional handicrafts of wood carving, embroidery, traditional costumes, braids of straw, etc. Religion and spirituality have an important role for community life and cohesion.

The strengths of the community relate to a series of material and immaterial features that the inhabitants are proud of. They are proud of their open-minded community, having good entrepreneurial skills and driven to improve their life (e.g. the outmigration of a significant part of the workforce). They consider themselves very diligent and disciplined and regard these features as a result of their ancestors being subjects of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Community belonging and involvement are strong, as proved by the active local civic society (especially useful during emergencies like fires and floods). Moreover, the locals and the local entrepreneurs are involved in the decision-making process, through different consultations conducted by the local public administration.

Tourism in Marginea is dependent on two assets: the nearby Sucevița monastery (on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1993) (tourist pensions of citizens from Marginea) and pottery (a local tradition and tourist offer). The place has lost its tourist potential (formal aspects like architecture), and that cannot be undone. If more than a decade ago it was imaginable that the area around the Sucevița monastery and Marginea could assume complementary tourist functions (Sucevița as an cultural tourism attraction and Marginea as a place for long-term vacations on the farmstead and agro-tourism combined with occasional visits to Sucevița and other monasteries as well as courses in pottery), this potential is definitely lost, and quality tourism is almost impossible. Folklore, costumes, customs preserved from the ancestors could be better capitalized.

The weaknesses of Marginea are the following: (1) destruction of traditional architecture and villagescape, (2) the preservation of local traditions has been and will be severely affected by the workforce's out-migration, (3) high housing density, and (4) disregard of planning regulations for preserving traditional architecture.

The case of Marginea is an example of rural change and landscape transformations in post-socialist Romania and of why local administration should be more aware and pay more attention to spatial policies.

The future local development plans for 2014-2020 include solutions to some of the above-mentioned problems: a trans-border project with Moldovan partners to promote the local black pottery tradition; building a local history museum (traditional tools, costumes, furniture, etc.); rehabilitating the local cultural center; creating new technical training programs for tourism and construction work at the local high school, according to the local and regional necessities.

The Romanian studied cases have three main strengths: (a) *strong community life*, (2) *strong identity and cultural heritage*, and (3) and they are *communities that reinvented themselves* (examples of resilience with different strategies: Rimetea and Viscri: innovative use of the cultural heritage for a better living, and Marginea: taking advantage of new opportunities such as increased mobility).

The identity-shaping elements of rural Romania are: the cultural heritage; still living, but endangered traditions and customs of an archaic, traditional way of life; authentic, rather unspoiled villagescape; religion and spirituality as identity-defining elements. In the case of the minorities, we also add this major aspect which manifested itself in their endeavor to maintain their culture, significant artefacts and values of their community. Not only the cultural heritage, but also the natural heritage in the shape of a biodiversity created by archaic agricultural practices contribute to this identity.

A strong connection to the cultural landscapes created through human activities over the centuries is also characteristic for the Austrian cases: landscape, homeland is especially appreciated and defines the community. The Austrian rural space being more secular than the Romanian one, with a more modern society, it lost most of its customs and tries to revive them partly by way of dedicated associations. This strong community binding network and the practice of associations is rather missing in Romania. Further on, the Austrian studied cases proved to have a longer tradition and a greater possibility of participation in decision-making, which is rather difficult in Romania.

The rural population of Romania needs more empowerment and, as seen in our case studies, there are efforts in this direction.

In all the Austrian and Romanian case studies, the challenges for sustainable development are represented more or less by: leadership issues, the co-operation between entrepreneurs and local/regional authorities, mass tourism, the clash between heritage commodification and/or the protection and quality of life for some, profit development, and the absence of a master plan.

Social entrepreneurs, people who have a vision to change and improve the area (i.e. empowered people with a sense of initiative), are needed to undertake such “rural transformations” and the local context is very important for community building.

Relative transferable strategies of development could be identified in the cases of Rimetea (for other villages with an architectural ensemble), of Viscri (for villages with similar potential and challenges in other parts of Transylvania: the western parts of the former Saxon Land), while Marginea is an anti-model for the preservation of built heritage. As regards the Austrian cases, smooth co-operation between private entrepreneurs and very open-minded and supportive public authorities as well as the dense network of voluntary associations as an important means of local identity-building could be mentioned as having potential model character. A precondition for their transfer, however, is trust in the public sphere as well as a quite well developed civil society, where people are used to take responsibility not only for their personal, but also for public affairs.

Conclusions

The natural and built heritage, together with a strong local identity, create the necessary social capital to support and develop various economic activities, thus ensuring a better quality of life for the locals, while sustainable development needs more attention, effort and a strategic approach.

The cultural landscape and heritage have great tourist potential, but the attitude of the affected population towards heritage protection and its benefits are decisive for a successful heritage preservation.

Diminishing regional disparities in the rural area is essential for the European Spatial Development Perspective and for the EU Regional Policy. There are many research programs focusing on the rural area and therefore there is the possibility of further research on this topic and starting from the results of our project. Such research is based on innovative approaches that have as their main objective competence and knowledge transfer as well as the dissemination of good practice. In such a context, our project could be seen as a feasibility study.



Notes

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Abstract

Identity Matters for Development. Austrian and Romanian Experiences

Two research teams from the Faculty of Geography of Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Urban and Regional Research conducted a research project looking for sustainable development strategies in the rural areas of both countries. The surveyed Romanian villages are: Viscri/Deutch-Weißkirch, Rimetea/Torockó, and Marginea. The Austrian counterparts were all located in the federal province of Carinthia: Tröpolach-Nassfeld, Kötschach-Mauthen, and Weißensee. We used the results of interviews and focus groups with locals, entrepreneurs, NGO representatives, and members of the local administration to underline the relationship between leadership, successful tourism, culture and heritage commodification and protection, the role of local identity and future sustainable development perspectives. The question of transferring these development models to other settlements in both countries and elsewhere was also answered.

Keywords

identity, social capital, economic revival, rural communities, best practice examples