

# Perceptions Regarding the Identity Elements of Oaş Land

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## Introduction

**T**ERRITORIAL ENTITIES, regardless of their size, structure and degree of complexity, are identified by a series of defining components that establish their character and eventually become strong contributing factors in the improvement of their development, dynamics and competitiveness. Thus, the awareness and understanding of these identity elements become a priority for the new regional geographical approaches, a necessary tool for their accurate diagnosis and ranking, forming the basis of any adequate interventions and strategies aimed at territorial development and the reduction of disparities.

The concept of territorial identity is a complex (it includes various types of identity elements—morphological, climatic, demographic, historical, psychological, ethnographic, behavioral, linguistic, religious etc.) and interdisciplinary one (being approached by several fields of research involved in deciphering the evolution, structure and interrelations that define the various categories of territories). Therefore, the literature is rich in explanations of the notion of identity, with a prevalence of studies that address this concept from a geographical, historical, ideological, religious, linguistic, cultural, political or social perspective. Thus, a series of specific phrases have been coined that target the main facets of spatial character, their juxtaposition resulting in the complex concept of territorial identity.

Such phrases include the following: *regional (geographical) identity* (Agostino and Trivieri 2016; Knight 1982; Mondragon 2009; Paasi 1997, 2002, 2003, 2009, 2011); *historical identity* (Embry and Cannon 2015; Gentile 1986; Himka 2006; Leone and Curigliano 2009; Ruutsoo 1995); *ideological identity* (Cohen et al. 2007; Devine 2014; Mach 2007; Mason 2018); *religious identity* (Balkin et al. 2009; Benjamin et al. 2016; Campbell et al. 2020; Dollinger 2001; Peek 2005; Verkuiten and Yildiz 2007); *linguistic identity* (Bregasi 2020; Deogam 2020; Dressier 2014; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2020; Rosamond et al. 2020); *cultural identity* (Arnett-Jensen et al. 2011; Baluch and Lopatynskyi 2020; Bhugra 2004; Sabie et al. 2020); *political identity* (Bennett 2012;

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Carr and Milstein 2020; Cerutti 2003; Huddy 2002; Weiss 2007); or *social identity* (Hogg 2016; Padilla and Perez 2003; Roccas and Brewer 2002; Stets and Burke 2000).

The notion of territorial identity has also generated a series of related expressions, which capture the various dimensions of this complex and interdisciplinary concept, namely: *identity space*, *identity traditionalism*, *identity regionalization* (Sandu 1996, 2010), *region identity*, *regional identity* (Paasi 2002, 2003, 2009, 2011) or *regional identity brand* (Durrieu 2008).

In this paper we take into account the interdisciplinary approach and the modern and applied methodology, in order to achieve our main objective, namely, to identify and rank, as accurately as possible, the main elements and spatial interrelations that give Oaş Land its distinct character. The interdisciplinary quality of our approach lies in the fact that we analyze a series of works belonging to different fields (e.g. history, ethnography, geography, linguistics, sociology, and archeology) and focusing on the region in question, which capture various aspects related to the construction of the territorial identity. We have also relied on a representative sample of respondents residing in Oaş Land, comparing their views (about the ranking of the identity elements of the region) to those expressed in the specialized research papers on this subject.

Our demonstrative approach is based on a series of relatively similar studies focusing on other entities with a “land” status in the Transylvanian space, such as *Țara Moșilor* (Boțan et al. 2015), *Țara Năsăudului* (Boțan et al. 2016), or *Țara Hațegului* (Boțan et al. 2019).

The originality of Oaş Land is well known within the Romanian landscape, and it can be captured at the level of the various components of the regional structure. By combining and comparing different views on the character of the region, we seek to better outline its image and to underline the importance of the structuring elements that can (really) contribute to its development.

## Aim, Objectives and Methodology

**A**S STATED above, the main purpose of this paper is to identify and rank, as accurately as possible, the (various types of) elements forming the character of Oaş Land and individualizing it at a national and European level. Their importance in defining the region has been built over time, due to the strong interrelations between the local community and the natural environment, resulting in a series of traditions, customs, activities, mentalities or behaviors which are well individualized and not present in other spaces.

The main objective we have proposed and undertaken shall be achieved by means of an analysis dedicated to capturing the authenticity of the regional identity elements as defined in accordance with a collection of 15 scientific papers and by comparing the results to the identity heritage of the territory—recognized as such by the regional community and inferred from the answers to a questionnaire that was applied to a group of 360 locals.

Thus, the scientific approach included the following research steps: (1) detection of the elements that define the territorial identity of Oaş Land in accordance with the existing conclusions of the 15 analyzed papers; (2) application of a standardized questionnaire to people residing in the region in question, in order to rank the main elements that define the character of the territory in the local community's view; (3) collection and correlating analysis of data from the two groups of information sources and the formulation of opinions based on an extensive systematic research process; and (4) building on the body of information collected through the exploratory research process and correlating it with the potential of effective development of Oaş Land, based on the region's landmarks (according to Boğan et al. 2019).

This study proposes a fresh and innovative approach as it combines a quantitative research method (questionnaire) with qualitative methods (observation, statistical interpretation etc.); moreover, the results are analyzed critically, explained and justified according to the defining coordinates of the region. In our opinion, by combining the two scientific approaches—i.e. the analysis of the representative studies on Oaş Land and the questioning of a reasonable number of respondents—we can infer the most relevant identity elements of the region and establish their ranking (in terms of importance) based on the perception of local communities in the region.

The accurate mapping of the territorial reality from this angle can offer the local and county-level authorities a support they could use in implementing future projects and strategies aimed at promoting and developing Oaş Land. The strong identity elements of a region, acknowledged and ranked according to the perceptions of the locals, are considered to be the main sources for local and regional development, as they are recognized as such by the local community.

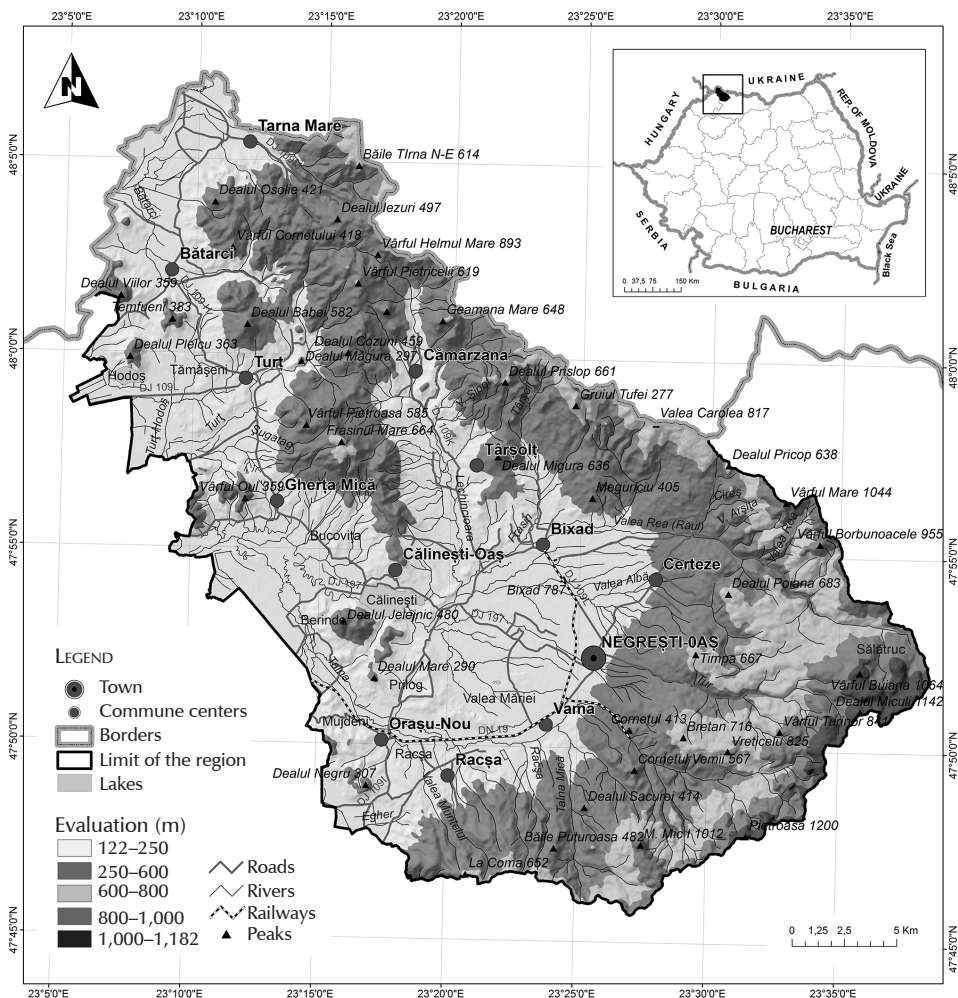
The sample group of respondents is representative for Oaş Land in terms of the perception of the importance and ranking of identity elements of the region, as it meets all the sampling criteria and limitations applying at the time of the research (limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic). Thus, the questionnaire was applied online, during March and April 2020, and its interpretation sought to correlate, first and foremost, the answers with the respondents' place of residence. An identical number of questionnaires was applied in each of the 12 territorial administrative units of the region, which allowed us to draw material conclusions regarding the importance of each identity element, its position in the ranking, and to pinpoint those areas in the region where one of them takes precedence in terms of defining the regional character. This is particularly important because it has allowed us to understand and explain the reasons why some elements are more important in some areas and less relevant in others, depending on the local specificity and distinct interests of local communities at the regional level. We have also taken into account the other sampling criteria involved (e.g. gender, age group and education), which are mandatory in order for our study to achieve the desired relevance.

## Results

**O**AȘ LAND, one of the 18 “land” level territorial entities of Romania, is located in the north-western extremity of the national territory; its entire surface is part of Satu Mare County.

A number of complex criteria have contributed to its individualization over time, such as the strong interrelations between the community of Oaș locals and the physical space they inhabit, the morphology of the landscape, the multicultural character, the traditions and customs, the high degree of mobility of the inhabitants, the agricultural specificity, the folklore, the traditional folk costume etc.

FIG. 1. THE REGIONAL SYSTEM OF OAȘ LAND



The territory of Oaş Land (822.33 km<sup>2</sup>) subsumes, wholly or in part, areas from the Igriş Mountains, the Oaş Basin, the Oaş Mountains, the Tisza Plain and the Someş Lowlands (fig. 1); it contains two different morpho-functional subsystems (i.e. Negreşti and Turţ), comprising, from a territorial administrative point of view, a number of 33 villages that are grouped in 11 rural municipalities (*comune*) (Certeze: 3 villages; Bixad: 3 villages; Vama: 1 village; Oraşu Nou: 7 villages; Târşolt: 2 villages; Cămârzana: 1 village; Călineşti-Oaş: 4 villages; Gherţa Mică: 1 village; Turţ: 3 villages; Bătarci: 4 villages; Tarna Mare: 3 villages) and the town of Negreşti-Oaş, which also incorporates the Tur village (Ilieş 2006, 39, 40, 42, 45 and 53).

The profile of the main elements of territorial identity defining the regional system of Oaş Land is based on the detailed and critical assessment of a number of 15 scientific publications belonging to various fields such as geography, history, archeology, ethnography, tourism, religion, territorial planning etc.; these are the results of long-term research carried out by a number of authors who have conducted studies that are relevant to the region concerned, namely: A. Andea and S. Andea 1981–1982; Andron 1977; Bader 1981–1982; Bănăţeanu 1955; Bogdan and Călinescu 1976; Focşa 1975; Iercoşan 1992–1993; Ilieş 2006; M. Ilieş and G. Ilieş 2001; Muşlea 1932; Netea 1940; Praoveanu 2001; Rus 1995; Surd and Gârboan 1990, and Velcea 1964.

The abovementioned works are either wholly or partially dedicated to the analysis of the entire space of Oaş Land, or they detail certain elements and phenomena specific to the region. Their diversity and different approach—namely, the fact that they analyze the issues from the perspective of objectives and methodological tools specific to different (but complementary) fields of research—has allowed us to achieve an accurate and virtually exhaustive mapping of the main regional identity elements and to understand how they contribute to the final shaping of the regional character.

The study of these materials—which addressed various facets of the territorial components—shows that the following identity elements play a decisive role in the construction of the character and in the individualization of the regional system of Oaş Land over time: the (long-standing) organization in counties; the volcanic landscape and mineral waters; the Oaş brandy (*şuica*) (from Turţ); the relationship with the forest and the high mobility (domestic and international) of the inhabitants; the mentality of the locals, mainly evidenced in the architecture of new houses; multiculturalism; traditional occupations; ethnography, folklore and traditional folk costumes; traditional crafts (Vama pottery) and strawberry production (table 1).

The analysis of the abovementioned works seeks to identify and explain the importance of each element in outlining the identity references for Oaş Land, as considered and explained by the authors in question, without attempting to rank said elements. In fact, any specialized study can exhibit a certain degree of bias as regards the interpretation of the importance held by various elements of regional identity, depending on the specifics of the research and the objectives set. That is precisely why the identity elements of Oaş Land, as highlighted by the analysis of the abovementioned publications, shall be ranked—based on the perception of their importance and their relevance in shaping the territorial character—solely by the community inhabiting the region, by means of answers to a questionnaire (with a total of 360 respondents).

The main elements defining the territorial identity of Oaş Land, as revealed, explained and argued in the table above, show that the region belongs to the category of humanized, closed type regions, i.e. it has long kept the same values and internal specificities, establishing itself as a relatively isolated regional system for a long time, but with extensive domestic and international connections created during the last decades.

We can conclude that this territory is clearly identified by a set of elements that are almost exclusively historical (e.g. long-standing organization in counties, multicultural character), functional (e.g. specialization in brandy production, strawberry cultivation, pottery production, logging and woodworking) and ethnographic (crafts, traditions, customs, folk costumes, architectural elements found in the architecture of houses and annexes).

Against the archaic background of regional specificity, a series of non-native elements have been inserted in the last decades (e.g. the megalomania of Oaş people in terms of building houses, competition etc.); they have been brought to the region by the large number of visiting locals who have travelled and have been working abroad for a long time now, in various regions of the world.

In the second part of our demonstration (see below), we shall establish the ranking of regional identity elements (as evidenced in the analyzed works) based on the perception of locals about the importance of these elements in defining the space in which they live; the views of 360 respondents were collected for this purpose.

TABLE 1. A RANKING OF THE ELEMENTS DEFINING THE REGIONAL IDENTITY OF OAŞ LAND  
(ACCORDING TO SCHOLARLY WORKS)

The main identity elements of Oaş Land	The main identity subcomponents	Arguments in defining regional identity
(Long-standing) organization in counties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The existence of Szatmár and Ugocsa counties (established in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively).</li> <li>• Szatmár County, based in Satu Mare.</li> <li>• Ugocsa County, based in Seleuşul Mare (today Vinogradiv, Ukraine).</li> <li>• The territory of Oaş Land was thus managed from outside the region.</li> <li>• They were noble counties, preceded by several royal counties.</li> <li>• They acted as a buffer zone between the Kingdom of Hungary and Maramureş Land.</li> <li>• Other administrative entities specific to the region were: the fair (<i>târg</i>), the domain (<i>domeniu</i>), the circle (<i>cerc</i>), the old county (<i>plasă</i>), the voivodeship, the district, the ward (<i>rayon</i>) or the administrative region, but these had a much lesser impact.</li> <li>• This form of organization (defining the analyzed region for a long time) was replaced with the county in 1920.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The municipalities in the south-eastern part of the former Ugocsa County—i.e. Gherţa Mică, Turţ, Bătarci and Tarna Mare (Ilieş 2006, 21)—have always been part of Oaş Land.</li> <li>• Up to 1918, the territory of Oaş Land was divided—it belonged to different territorial administrative entities.</li> <li>• The organization in counties split Oaş in two parts, abolishing the traditional borders of the Romanian sociopolitical entities in the area (Ilieş 2006, 23).</li> <li>• Consequently, the internal territorial administrative organization acted as a centrifugal force, limiting the internal cohesion of Oaş Land and generating two subsystems with different identity references—these are captured at the level of family organization, household configuration, specificity of traditions, apparel, customs, rural architecture, behaviors etc. (Ilieş 2006, 27).</li> </ul>

The main identity elements of Oaş Land	The main identity subcomponents	Arguments in defining regional identity
Volcanic landscape and mineral waters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typical volcanic landforms: volcanic ridges, cliffs, plateaus, glacises, depression basins.</li> <li>• The Igriş Mountains, Oaş Depression, Oaş Mountains; the Negreşti, Târşolţ, Câmârzana, Turţ, and Bătarci depression basins; the Şirlău-Tarna Mare glacis and plain.</li> <li>• The Oaş-Gutâi-Țibleş-Toroiağa mofette halo.</li> <li>• Exploited mineral springs: Bixad, Valea Măriei, Puturoasa, Certeze, Tarna Mare.</li> <li>• Other mineral springs, not exploited economically: Huta-Certeze, Vama, Oraşu Nou, Bixad, Tarna Mare etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The existence of mineral springs is genetically conditioned by volcanic processes.</li> <li>• The specific landforms have directed the location of the habitats, the architecture of houses and households, as well as the specifics of the agricultural activities.</li> <li>• The mineral waters have been used for treatment and bottled water.</li> <li>• They have therapeutic qualities.</li> <li>• The most intensive exploitation took place in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (currently, only the Valea Măriei springs are used as a spa and the Certeze ones are capitalized by the bottled water industry).</li> <li>• There are also thermal-mineral springs (e.g. Valea Măriei).</li> </ul>
Oaş brandy (from Turţ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All the rivers in Oaş Land seem to be a huge brandy still (Ilieş 2006, 91).</li> <li>• The generalized production of alcohol generated a series of brand names (e.g. Turţ brandy; Certeze brandy; Bixad brandy; Târşolţ brandy etc.).</li> <li>• The phenomenon is generalized to all the municipalities in Certeze, Bixad, Târşolţ, Câmârzana, Gherţa Mică, Turţ or Bătarci.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oaş Land is an important region for plum production.</li> <li>• The capitalization of plum orchards generally takes the form of brandy production, in artisanal stills, in each municipality.</li> <li>• The distillation facilities are responsible for polluting most watercourses due to leaks from the storage of by-products.</li> <li>• The fruit crops have generated a series of typical landscapes: orchards planted on glacises/glacises and eruptive landforms.</li> </ul>
Relationship with the forest and high mobility (domestic and international) of the inhabitants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In the Negreşti woods there are trees so thick . . . that carpenters can fashion doors and tables using just one piece of timber for each” (Muşlea 1930, quoted by Ilieş 2006, 94).</li> <li>• It is the most representative forest region in Satu Mare County; the rural municipalities of Certeze and Vama and the town of Negreşti-Oaş should be noted in this regard, due to the forest areas they own.</li> <li>• The forest is perceived as a focal point in the region’s economy.</li> <li>• The habit of Oaş locals to work in places other than their native land is a defining trait.</li> <li>• Work experience in the field of forestry has been the basis for the intensity of the phenomenon of seasonal migration (domestic and abroad).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About 1/3 of the region’s surface belongs to the National Forestry Service.</li> <li>• Timber extraction has prompted the construction of a narrow-gauge railway on the Satu Mare-Bixad-Huta-Certeze-Valea Rea route.</li> <li>• The forest/population/specific economic activities relationship experienced several evolutionary stages: subsistence, trade, work experience, forestry entrepreneurship, focus on other economic fields, domestic and international migration.</li> <li>• The people of Oaş have gathered extensive work experience away from home.</li> <li>• Carts loaded with fruit traveled to Hungary or to Maramureş Land.</li> </ul>

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The main identity elements of Oaş Land	The main identity subcomponents	Arguments in defining regional identity
Relationship with the forest and high mobility (domestic and international) of the inhabitants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fruit transportation.</li> <li>• Migration for agricultural work.</li> <li>• Migration for forestry work.</li> <li>• Migration for construction work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For plowing, sowing or harvesting, the people of Oaş moved to the Banat region in great numbers.</li> <li>• The main areas of movement for Oaş forest workers: Maramureş, Bukovina, Banat, Transylvania, Moldavia, Oltenia (Focşa 1975; Velcea 1964, quoted by Ilieş 2006, 115).</li> <li>• The main destinations for working abroad (especially in the field of construction and home renovation, which require experience in working with wood) are: the United States, France, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Germany.</li> </ul>
Mentality of the locals (as evidenced in the architecture of new houses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a direct link between the main international destinations of Oaş migrating workers, the income achieved, the rate of home construction and their size.</li> <li>• The identity of Oaş people has been influenced by the constant movement for work away from home.</li> <li>• The municipalities of Certeze, Huta-Certeze, Racşa and Negreşti-Oaş are famous for the very large houses built recently and their modern facilities.</li> <li>• The megalomania of Oaş people.</li> <li>• The pride of Oaş people.</li> <li>• The industriousness of Oaş people.</li> <li>• Social cohesion.</li> <li>• The desire to be rich.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those who work in the United States or France tend to build more and larger homes, as their income is higher.</li> <li>• Those who work in Portugal or Spain tend to build fewer and less opulent homes, as their income is lower.</li> <li>• The houses do not belong to any architectural style; the sole objective of the construction is the size and level of household equipment.</li> <li>• Permanent willingness to leave home and family for long-term employment elsewhere.</li> <li>• Willingness to live in very modest conditions (with a modicum of convenience and food) so as to make more money.</li> <li>• Oaş people show deep respect to their employers.</li> <li>• A person's home is the fundamental element in establishing wealth and status within the community.</li> </ul>
Multiculturalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multicultural character.</li> <li>• Ethnic diversity.</li> <li>• Religious diversity.</li> <li>• Linguistic diversity.</li> <li>• Architectural diversity.</li> <li>• High mobility of locals.</li> <li>• Import of foreign attitudes, skills and mentalities.</li> <li>• Cross-border features.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peoples whose historical presence in Oaş Land has been attested: Thracians, Dacians, Wallachians (Vlachs), Romanians, Celts, Vandals, Hasdingi, Gepids, Slavs, Hungarians, Székelys, Germans, Jews, Ruthenians (Ukrainians), Slovaks, Czechs, Roma (Gypsies).</li> <li>• Various customs, traditions, folk elements and mentalities.</li> <li>• Neighboring effect: adopting and implementing attitudes, mentalities and skills specific to neighboring communities living across the border (in this case, Ukraine/Hungary).</li> </ul>



The main identity elements of Oaş Land	The main identity subcomponents	Arguments in defining regional identity
Multiculturalism		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopting some of the mentalities of the developed countries where workers from Oaş spend long periods of time.</li> <li>• Implementation of Western cultural models by blending them with the traditional ones, resulting in a kitsch culture as evidenced in: large houses, state-of-the-art household equipment, expensive cars, money (flexing), opulence/toil, sacrifices, rudimentary living abroad, hard work etc.</li> </ul>
Traditional occupations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sheepherding.</li> <li>• Transportation of merchandise.</li> <li>• Cultivation of fruit trees.</li> <li>• Forest work (logging).</li> <li>• Woodworking.</li> <li>• Vine cultivation.</li> <li>• Strawberry cultivation.</li> <li>• Brandy production.</li> <li>• Typical household activities (spinning, weaving, leather manufacturing, pottery).</li> <li>• Typical rural technical equipment (fulling mills, carding combs etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sheepherding is one of the most typical and oldest occupations in the region.</li> <li>• Sheepherding led to a Dacian custom called “the living fire” (Muşlea 1930; Scurtu 1940, quoted by Ilieş 2006, 174).</li> <li>• Fruit transportation facilitated the exchange of products, ideas, techniques, equipment, and information.</li> <li>• Large areas for fruit tree orchards (plums, cherries, apples, walnuts etc.).</li> <li>• Adoption of specific conservation and transportation techniques.</li> <li>• Long-term specialization in forestry work led to the migration of Oaş people to other regions.</li> <li>• The vine culture dates back to the Iron Age.</li> <li>• The term “vii” (vineyard) is found in the name of several nearby municipalities.</li> <li>• Crafts were developed and diversified as a result of the needs of households and local communities.</li> <li>• There were specific crafts for men (e.g. leather manufacturing, pottery, making various wooden objects etc.) and women (e.g. weaving, sewing, spinning etc.).</li> </ul>
Oaş ethnography, folklore and traditional folk costumes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific elements: folk costumes, dances, the rhythm and melody of folk songs.</li> <li>• Embroidered women’s shirts.</li> <li>• Women’s vests.</li> <li>• Women’s ponytails.</li> <li>• Unique men’s cloche hats.</li> <li>• Men’s short shirts.</li> <li>• Men’s traditional bags (to carry one’s knife).</li> <li>• Men’s redingotes (<i>gubă</i>).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Folk costumes which are unique in Romania.</li> <li>• The most frequent colors of the Oaş folk costume are: red, white, black, green, brown, yellow, blue, purple (Bănăţeanu 1956, quoted by Ilieş 2006, 170).</li> <li>• Traditional music is played by instrumental duets.</li> <li>• Through the typical features of dances, folk costumes, music and <i>ţâpurituri</i>, Oaş Land is clearly individualized as compared to the neighboring regions.</li> </ul>

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The main identity elements of Oaş Land	The main identity subcomponents	Arguments in defining regional identity
Oaş ethnography, folklore and traditional folk costumes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Men’s trousers (<i>gaci</i>).</li> <li>• The main musical instruments are the violin (<i>ceteră</i>) and the guitar (<i>zongoră</i>).</li> <li>• Folk songs.</li> <li>• Well-known folk music artists.</li> <li>• Folk dances.</li> <li>• The so-called <i>țâpurituri</i> (a unique form of musical shouts).</li> </ul>	
Traditional crafts (Vama pottery)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vama pottery and ceramics are important identity brands.</li> <li>• The Vama municipality is the only pottery center of the region still functioning today.</li> <li>• The potter’s wheel, introduced by the Celts (Kotogorsko 1995, quoted by Iliș 2006, 168).</li> <li>• Connection to developed pottery centers nearby: Medieșu Aurit, Lazuri, Satu Mare etc.</li> <li>• Stamped ceramic elements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a craft, it dates back to the Bronze Age.</li> <li>• Numerous ceramic vessels dating from the Bronze Age, the Dacian period or the Middle Ages, produced in developed pottery centers.</li> <li>• Availability of quality raw materials: white clay (kaolin), red clay, dyes etc.</li> <li>• Part of the Paleolithic ornamentation has been perpetuated on ceramic vessels to the present day.</li> <li>• Used on various important occasions, such as: weddings, births, baptisms, funerals etc. or as objects for everyday use in all households.</li> <li>• Potters left Vama to spread their craft to other pottery centers.</li> </ul>
Strawberry production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strawberry production is identified with Oaş Land.</li> <li>• It gave birth to a national brand: “Satu Mare strawberries.”</li> <li>• There are municipalities almost exclusively specialized in the cultivation of strawberries (e.g. Prilog, Gherța Mică).</li> <li>• Turț and Negrești-Oaş host strawberries markets which are famous at a national level.</li> <li>• Easily salable in the main Transylvanian cities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strawberries were introduced into the agricultural production of the region during the 1960s–1970s.</li> <li>• Their cultivation creates a typical landscape in the region, over large areas.</li> <li>• Oaş Land, together with several neighboring municipalities in the Someș Plain, account for about 75% of the national strawberry production (Iliș 2006, 177).</li> <li>• Strawberry production is present in the life of all the ethnic groups in the region.</li> <li>• The experience acquired by Oaş people in this agricultural activity has facilitated the migration of many workers abroad, to work in the same field (e.g. in Italy or Spain).</li> <li>• Strawberry production brings substantial income.</li> </ul>

The answers confirm that the identity of Oaş Land is based on the ten elements mentioned, and we can see a clear consistency between the conclusions drawn by the authors of the analyzed works and the opinions of the representatives of the regional community. It should be noted that the identity elements of the region were presented in the questionnaire in a randomized order; the respondents were asked to rank them according to their own perceptions regarding the importance of said elements and to justify their ranking. The distribution of the questionnaires strictly observed the rigorous requirements we set in the methodological part of the paper.

Thus, the respondents confirmed that the ten identity elements of the region clearly define the character of Oaş Land; following the analysis of the answers to the questionnaire, the following importance-driven ranking emerged (as shown in table 2 and fig. 2).

The ranking of regional identity elements, as based on the perception of the respondents, features in its top position the relationship of Oaş people with the forest and their high degree of mobility, acquired through overspecialization in forestry work; we can find the ethnographic, folkloric and traditional costume aspects in the second place, while the third place is occupied by strawberry production, an identity element that is also considered to be defining for their region.

The least relevant elements of regional identity are considered to be those occupying the last three places, namely: the volcanic landforms and the mineral springs genetically related to them (eighth place), the long-standing organization in counties (ninth place), and the multicultural character of Oaş Land (tenth place). Of medium importance for defining the identity of the region in question—in the local community’s view—are the elements occupying positions four (traditional occupations), five (mentalities of Oaş people as evidenced in the construction style and household equipment of new houses), six (pottery—practiced as an uninterrupted activity for millennia—and the production of Vama ceramics, in the form of household and/or ornamental objects) and seven (the production of alcohol, namely, the well-known Oaş brandy).

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF ANSWERS ESTABLISHING A RANKING OF ELEMENTS THAT DEFINE THE REGIONAL IDENTITY OF OAŞ LAND

Ranking based on respondents' answers	The identity elements of Oaş Land	Relationship with the forest and high mobility of locals	Oaş ethnography, folklore and traditional folk costumes	Strawberry production	Traditional occupations	Mentality of the locals (as evidenced in the architecture of new houses)	Vama pottery	Oaş brandy (from Turt)	Volcanic landscape and mineral waters (Long-standing) organization in counties	Multicultural regional character	
1		99	63	44	31	23	25	15	12	13	8
2		48	81	41	33	30	23	20	14	16	11
3		50	41	90	30	37	32	24	20	13	15
4		33	28	34	95	48	40	17	19	19	13
5		31	17	33	47	88	43	13	21	20	21

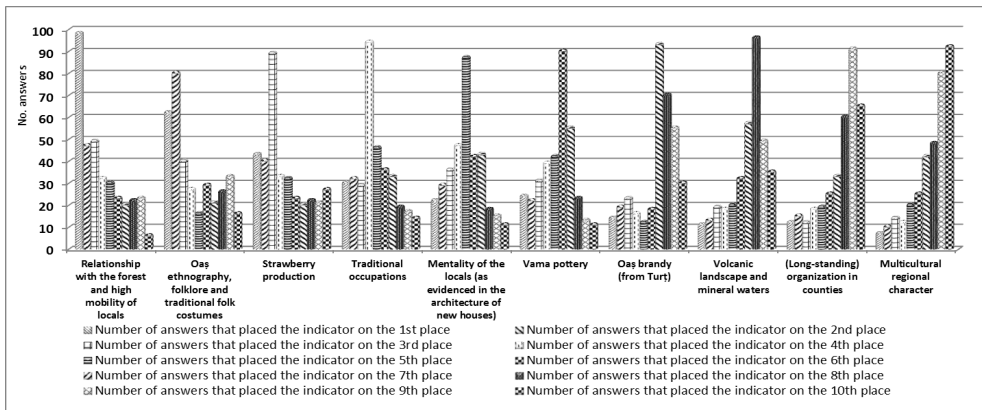
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Table—Continued

Ranking based on respondents' answers	The identity elements of Oaş Land									
	Relationship with the forest and high mobility of locals	Oaş ethnography, folklore and traditional folk costumes	Strawberry production	Traditional occupations	Mentality of the locals (as evidenced in the architecture of new houses)	Vama pottery	Oaş brandy (from Turt)	Volcanic landscape and mineral waters (Long-standing) organization in counties	Multicultural regional character	
6	24	30	24	37	43	91	19	33	26	26
7	21	22	21	34	44	56	94	58	34	43
8	23	27	23	20	19	24	71	97	61	49
9	24	34	22	18	16	14	56	50	92	81
10	7	17	28	15	12	12	31	36	66	93
TOTAL	360	360	360	360	360	360	360	360	360	360

The respondents validated (by listing them in the first places) those identity elements that have manifested themselves for a long time in their region, decisively marking its character and largely contributing to its transformation into an open geographical system (e.g. advanced specialization in logging and woodworking allowed the Oaş people to move and integrate easily in jobs related to this field found in other areas of Romania and abroad; the ethnography, folklore and traditional costumes individualized them nationally, and strawberry cultivation has strengthened commercial ties with other territories).

FIG. 2. RANKING OF THE ELEMENTS DEFINING THE REGIONAL IDENTITY OF OĂȘ LAND (IN THE LOCALS' VIEW)



The relationship with the forest and the high mobility of the Oaş people is perceived and claimed as the main identity element of Oaş Land by 99 respondents, thus rising to the first place in the ranking, while only 7 respondents think that this element should be

placed on the last place (fig. 3). Various respondents placed this element in other ranking positions, as follows: 48 answers place it (as the main option) in second position, 50 in third position, 33 in fourth position and so on. Based on the known territorial origin of the answers and the other data in the questionnaire, we can make a series of qualitative assessments, such as: the respondents who place this identity element in the first ranking positions come from all over the region; the most wooded areas in Oaş Land can be singled out as the source of the highest number of answers in this sense; the locals are grateful that, due to the presence of wooded areas, over time they have developed a vast experience in logging and woodworking; based on the experience acquired, they have been able to adapt easily to this field of work in other regions or states; the Oaş people are recognized as highly experienced workers and/or entrepreneurs in woodworking or related fields; their experience in the field has allowed massive movement abroad, for long periods of time, and the accumulation of solid financial capital for the families etc. In short, we can note that the identity element in question is placed in the first place by a large number of respondents, because they personally or their family or relatives benefited directly from a specialization in the field of logging and woodworking, from labor mobility abroad and from substantial financial gains over time. Most of the respondents who place this element in the last positions come from the plains areas of the region, where there are no forests and, thus, none of the related benefits and opportunities described above.

FIG. 3. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FOREST AND HIGH MOBILITY OF OĂŞ PEOPLE*

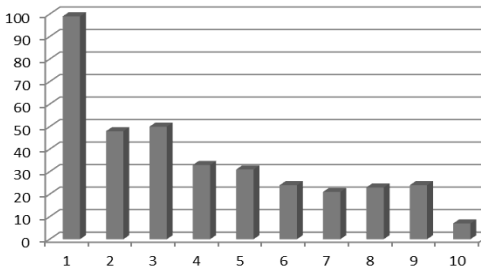
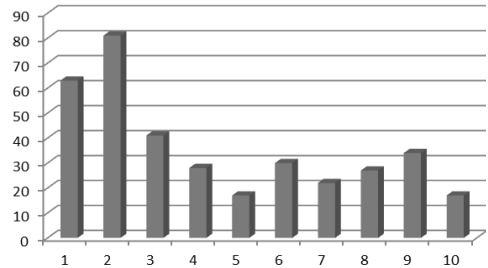


FIG. 4. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *OĂŞ ETHNOGRAPHY, FOLKLORE AND TRADITIONAL FOLK COSTUMES*



Oaş ethnography, folklore and traditional folk costumes—a very important identity element for defining the character of Oaş Land—holds the second place in the ranking of regional brands, based on the respondents’ view: a total of 81 answers place it in the second position, while other 63 respondents think it should hold the first place (fig. 4). On the other hand, 17 respondents place it in the last position—all these belong to the young age group and consider these regional values to be of little importance, if any. Most of the respondents who value this element before any other belong to the adult and the elderly population, for whom the identity expressed by traditional costumes, folklore and ethnographic elements is decisive. Moreover, a large part of the respondents sharing this view have a high school and/or university education and especially appreciate the

value of the traditional heritage. The territorial origin of the answers is irrelevant, the main differences in this respect being found in the degree of education and in the age group. In other words, young people, who embrace behavioral patterns that are different than the traditional, regional specificity-driven ones, do not understand the importance of traditional values and do not want to associate the image of the region with them.

Strawberry production is ranked third in importance in the ranking of identity elements of Oaş Land; 90 answers placed it in this position, while 41 respondents believe that it should be ranked second, and 44 respondents rank it first (fig. 5). At the opposite end, 28 respondents attach minimal importance to it. This is the element that reveals the most clearly-cut territorial distribution of the answers: it was given maximum importance by respondents living in municipalities where this agricultural activity is a priority (e.g. Prilog, Turț, Cămârzana etc.), but it was assessed as not important by people who live in municipalities where strawberries are not grown for sale. We can infer a financial interest of the respondents in this regard, those involved in this sector being directly interested in promoting strawberry culture, as they associate this fact with an increase in income, while the rest are either not interested in the activity or jealous. No distinction can be made on the basis of sex, age, educational level or ethnicity in municipalities where strawberries are grown on a large scale: all these statistical categories are involved in the activity in question.

FIG. 5. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *STRAWBERRY PRODUCTION*

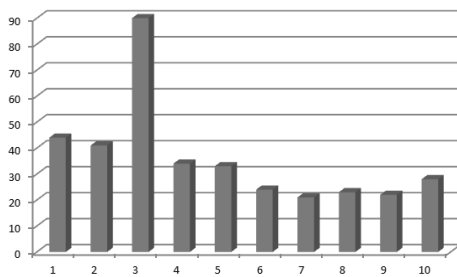
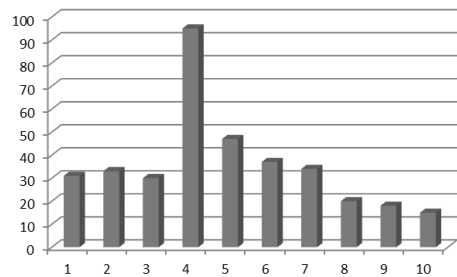


FIG. 6. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS*



Traditional occupations, numerous and varied, contribute to a certain extent to the identity basis of Oaş Land, but lately they have lost some of their impact and importance, being replaced by other, more modern activities. In the respondents' overall perception, they are fourth in the ranking (fig. 6): a total of 95 people attributed this position to them. 31 respondents consider this element to be the main regional identity-carrying vector, while 15 people rank it last. Most of the respondents who place them in the first position are either people over 50 years old, who have worked in these fields in the past, or people with a higher degree of education who understand their cultural value and the opportunities arising from their promotion and revival. The respondents who consider them unimportant are young people and adults who have left the region for a long time and who have lost touch with them or no longer take them into account. Many of these occupations have disappeared or they are only practiced today by very few people, at

the cost of great efforts (e.g. transportation by traditional means (horse-drawn carts), leather manufacturing, spinning, weaving etc.).

The fifth place in the ranking is held by the element called “mentality of the Oaş people as evidenced in the architecture of new houses,” especially those built after 1990 (fig. 7); a total of 88 respondents assigned the fifth position to this element. It is considered to be the main identity element of Oaş Land by 23 respondents, while another 12 respondents think it is the most irrelevant one. In this case, the explanations are many: the high mobility of the people of Oaş Land has contributed to a change in the mentality of a good part of the population; the people who have long been working abroad have adopted a modern lifestyle, possibly due to high incomes; a widespread phenomenon of competition between locals has appeared, especially illustrated by the size of the houses and their outfitting; a number of municipalities have gained national fame for this trait (e.g. Certeze, Cămârzana etc.); the size of the houses and the foreign architecture displayed are directly related to income and inspired by the places where the Oaş people had worked; the respondents who rank this element first are owners of such houses and households (or relatives of theirs) and they take pride in the size and modern facilities of the buildings, because they associate them with personal success; the respondents who place them in the last positions are either older or they have not worked abroad and thus could not afford to build them or, alternatively, they belong to the best educated category, who consider these houses to be gaudy constructions, not at all in harmony with the style of the region etc.

In other words, the owners of these houses are proud of them and promote them because they have worked hard in order to afford them, while the others reject them as an assault on the traditional architecture of Oaş Land.

FIG. 7. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *MENTALITY OF OĂȘ PEOPLE AS EVIDENCED IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF NEW HOUSES*

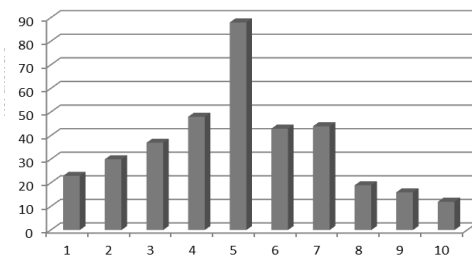
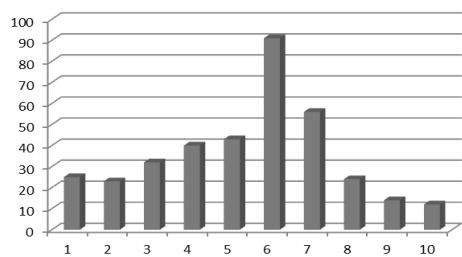


FIG. 8. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *VAMA POTTERY*



In the sixth position of the ranking we find the element called “Vama pottery,” which dates back to the Bronze Age. While this was a landmark of regional identity for a long time, with well-known folk craftsmen carrying out this activity and exporting their craft to other areas outside the region, it has recently lost much of its importance. Therefore, 95 respondents assign the sixth position to it as regards its representativeness and importance, 25 respondents consider it to be the most important identity brand and another 12 people rank it last (fig. 8). The respondents who consider it to be an important part

of the regional identity equation are all in the high school or university education group; they tend to recognize the importance of such a traditional element in promoting the region, attracting tourists and ensuring potential benefits from its revitalization. The respondents from Vama also consider this brand to be very important. The opposing view is shared by respondents with lower education and by the elderly, living in municipalities that are furthest away from Vama, or by young respondents who have not even heard of this traditional occupation and thus fail to see its importance.

The quasi-generalized cultivation of fruit trees (especially plum trees) and the production of alcohol have created another regional identity element, namely “Oaş brandy,” with Turț as the main representative municipality for this occupation. Therefore, the element in question occupies the seventh position; 94 respondents assigned this place to it, while 15 people ranked it first and another 31 respondents placed it in the last position (fig. 9). It was placed in the first position by the surveyed inhabitants who live in the area of Turț municipality, for economic reasons, due to the fact that the production of alcohol and its marketing is one of their main sources of income. Most of these respondents are male, as the ones working in all stages of this activity are mostly men; moreover, in addition to the quantities intended for sale, men are also the main consumers of the brandy produced here.

FIG. 9. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT OĂȘ BRANDY (FROM TURȚ)

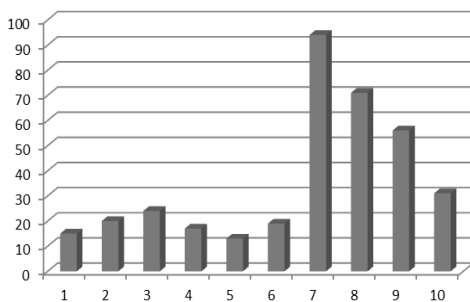
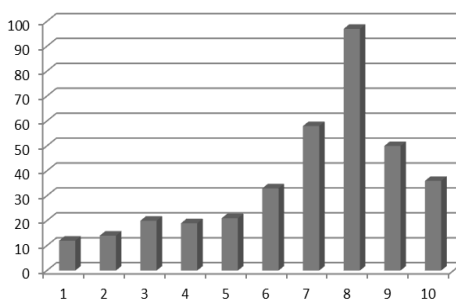


FIG. 10. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT VOLCANIC LANDSCAPE AND MINERAL WATERS



The women from the same municipalities attributed less importance to this element, stating that in addition to the benefits resulting from the production of brandy, the alcohol also has negative implications in daily life (e.g. alcohol-related violence, interruption of daily activities, quarrels within the community etc.). In municipalities where the climate is less favorable for fruit tree crops, the importance of this element is greatly diminished. Oăș Land is a region dominated by landforms of volcanic origin, which created distinct landscapes as a result of their evolution, with highly fertile soils and numerous mineral springs. However, the element in question is only placed in the eighth position, a total of 97 respondents among those surveyed favoring this ranking. Only 12 respondents place this natural treasure in the first position, while in the view of another



FIG. 11. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *LONG-STANDING ORGANIZATION IN COUNTIES*

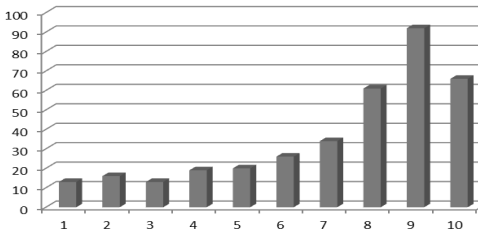
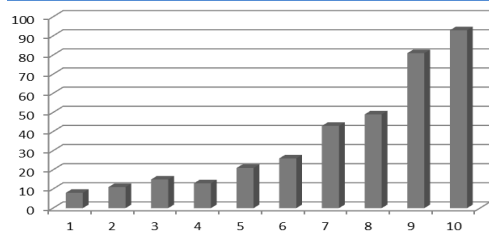


FIG. 12. DISTRIBUTION OF ANSWERS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENT *MULTICULTURAL REGIONAL CHARACTER*



36 people it should hold the last place (fig. 10). Almost all the respondents understand the importance of natural springs and their impact on the regional economy through the development of spas or the bottled water industry, but the resulting benefits are only perceived by a small number of inhabitants, as they tend to mostly profit private businesses.

The last two positions in the ranking based on the importance of regional identity elements (fig. 11 and fig. 12) are occupied by the elements called “long-standing organization in counties” (9<sup>th</sup> place) and “multicultural regional character” (10<sup>th</sup> place).

They are considered insignificant for the description of the character of Oaş Land by the vast majority of respondents, with various justifications for this choice. As regards the long-standing organization of this region into counties—which was a defining feature during certain historical periods—the surveyed respondents know very little, except for those with studies in the field; this explains the fact that this element was placed in the next to last position of the ranking.

By contrast, the multicultural regional character is generally considered to be insignificant by the respondents living in the region in question, who think that the differences between the various ethnic groups are not particularly relevant, and, at any rate, all the other elements mentioned above are much more important. These ethnic groups have lived together for a long time and they benefit from the same strong points/they are impacted by the same limitations of the natural environment; moreover, they treat each other’s customs and individuality with respect.

Thus, in the case of the element called “long-standing organization in counties,” only 13 respondents (all university graduates) consider it to be defining for the region, while 92 respondents place it in the next to last position, and a total of 66 respondents rank it last. As regards the last element in the ranking, called “multicultural regional character,” a total of 93 people place it in the last position, and only 8 of the respondents assign the first place to it.

## Conclusions

**F**OLLOWING THIS comparative analytical approach, we can state that Oaş Land is a regional entity which boasts a special historical, ethnographic and functional heritage, its main identity elements being derived from these complementary fields.

The regional identity elements described, explained and argued above are recognized by the authors of the analyzed scientific papers, as well as by the regional community, this conclusion being supported by the analysis of the 360 sets of answers to the questionnaire.

The highlighting of the main identity elements of Oaş Land through our methodological approach is important for this region's development potential. In our opinion, by corroborating the two visions, we can state with conviction that the abovementioned elements really make up the main identity landmarks of the region and that their valorization and ranking must be an exclusive prerogative of the local communities, as these are the main beneficiaries of any interventions aimed at developing the region and reducing intraregional disparities.

Public authorities at the local, regional and county level must take into account the public perception of the importance of each identity element, as they are defining aspects of the region and drivers of development if the strategies are applied adequately and efficiently. The local people are well aware of the strong points of their region, in other words, they know which elements should be promoted and developed more efficiently so as to improve the living standard of the local communities.

Thus, the first places in the ranking of regional identity elements are occupied by those regional attributes whose notoriety and importance are beyond question, those elements that give a distinct character to this region and make it known at a national and European level (e.g. the experience of Oaş people in woodwork, their industriousness, their proverbial mobility, the strawberry crops, the ethnographic, folkloric and traditional costume elements, the mentality etc.).

Therefore, we would like our study to act as a plea for the national and European recognition of Oaş Land, as this desideratum is supported by strong arguments, and, at the same time, as an invitation for the public authorities to take into account, in any regional development project or strategy, these regional brand elements, as they hold the greatest capacity to help the development of the region. Moreover, they are considered as such by the direct beneficiaries of any such initiatives, namely, the inhabitants of the analyzed region.

Finally, we think that the analytical model we have proposed here is a complex and comprehensive one, and it can be transferred as an analytical approach to the study of any other region. Without comparing and contrasting the existing perceptions recorded in scholarly papers (about a certain region) to the perceptions of the inhabitants of said region, the objective of identifying and ranking its main identity elements shall remain but a partial one, riddled with various biases.



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### **Abstract**

#### **Perceptions Regarding the Identity Elements of Oaş Land**

Any territorial unit, regardless of its size and complexity, has a set of specific attributes granting its territorial character and distinguishing it from other entities located in its vicinity or further away. The identification, analysis and ranking of the identity elements of a region is a topical issue in regional geography, as the observance of the principle of unity in diversity is a priority, at least at the European Union level. Oaş Land is one of the 18 humanized “land” type regions in the Romanian territory; its defining elements grant it a unique and distinct character, and some of them have become well-known regional identity hallmarks in time. This paper aims to identify the main elements (of various natures) that underlie the construction of the identity of this region and rank them from a regional importance perspective. The identification and ranking of these identity elements of Oaş Land is based on a dual and comparative perception of the mentioned reality, derived from the analysis of specialized scientific works that are representative for the given region and, respectively, from the perceptions of the people living in the region, who take existential ownership of this territory. Thus, we have captured the main identity elements of the region and ranked them based on their importance, by comparing those which are recognized as such in the main literature on the subject to those recognized by representatives of the regional community (questioned on this topic) as defining the region. Our analytical approach pursues a double objective: (1) the complete identification and accurate ranking of the identity elements of Oaş Land and (2) their promotion at the national and European level as strong regional references based on which the region can increase its notoriety and can benefit from more effective development solutions and projects.

### **Keywords**

Oaş Land, identity elements, ranking, Certeze, Turt, strawberries