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Posted Date: 21 June 2024

doi: 10.20944/preprints202406.1477.v1

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Article

Culturally Divided by a River: Rural Identity and Regional belonging of Two Rural Communities in Romania

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Abstract: In contemporary narratives, the rural and regional identities of a place, as judged by its inhabitants' sense of belonging, continue to be important points that need to be (re)considered when discussing places as instruments for local development. This paper pushes forward these debated and explores the construction of rural and regional identity in Romania with the help of a case study that focuses on two rural communities situated on opposite sides of the river Mureș. Based on participant and ethnographic observation and making use of a qualitative analysis, this paper highlights the most significant features of the local cultural identities expressed by the two sets of people, which often coincide with the most important characteristics attributed to the regions separated by the river Mureș. The results of this study underline the dividing role of a river in the preservation of rural and regional identity. They also demonstrate that rural identity construction along the river has generated both rural development opportunities and various risks.

Keywords: rural and regional cultural identity; rural identity construction; river Mureș; Romania

1. Introduction

Contemporary narratives on the issue of the rural identity of a place have generally shown that this question remains an important one when it comes to the spatial analysis of these communities' construction, their reproduction in time and space, and the related aspect of their representations as seen in people's perceptions in response to the key question of where they belong, ranging from social and economic perspectives to cultural and political ones. Furthermore, there is scope for the territorial identity of a rural place to be successfully used as an instrument in local decision-making by the structures of regional and national government with a view to fostering social and economic development, since territorial identity representations have relevance for local communities and for social and cultural aspects of their sense of belonging [1].

Rural and regional identity represent the best analytical accounts for understanding place attachment and the sense of belonging [2], the cultural distinctives and standard features of a place [3], and the spatial representation of *us* and *the other* as expressions of power geometries on different spatial scales [4]. Regional identity are social processes with multiple dimensions for the construction of rural space, for the complex processes of the cultural identity affirmation of a place, and for its representations in everything from discourses to practices. "The idea of regional identity has been implicit in geography for a long time, since traditional approaches to regions and regionalism often celebrated the primordial nature of regions, accentuating their 'personality' and the harmony/unity between a region and its inhabitants" [5]. In this context, it is widely argued that regional identity has become an important category in the 'Europe of the regions', and one that is often taken as self-evident in the relations between a group of people and a bounded region [5]. Narratives of regional identity are based on such specific elements as "the ideas on nature, landscape, the built environment, the culture/ethnicity, dialects, economic success/recession, periphery/center relations, marginalization, stereotypic images of a people/community, both of 'us' and 'them', actual/invented histories, utopias and diverging arguments on the identification of people" [5]. Rural identity refers

to a thing's property of preserving its fundamental characteristics over a long period, while 'territory' refers to the area of land delimited by the boundaries of a state or administrative unit and subject to the sovereignty of that state. While many studies have covered these general aspects on a variety of spatial scales, work on defining the cultural identity of a place or region, particularly in rural areas, is still needed, especially as regards communities' and people's connection with/affection for specific aspects of a place (natural features, landscape, local cultures), as argued by Paasi [5]. Communities and people construct significant affection towards various natural and cultural features of the places where they live, generating places and spaces of unicity and authenticity which require to be understood largely through the lens of local and regional identity, through the cultural representation of the places where the people concerned live.

In line with these arguments, this paper explores local rural identity and its relationship to broader regional identity, more specifically the question of *us* and *the other*, as exemplified by territorial rural identity representation in a particular part of Romania that is divided by the river Mureş. Our selected case study sets out to portray the role of water/the river and its related cultures in the social and cultural construction of this region and of its specific rural places, arguing that the culture of water [6,7]. and the local cultures closely connected to the natural features of a place are responsible for the construction of the local and regional identity of, and in, specific places and regions. The Mureş is one of Romania's major rivers and the largest tributary of the river Tisa, into which it flows after crossing the border into Hungary. With its main course of 789 km (of which 761 km are in Romania), it is one of the most significant flowing waters in the Carpathian basin. Furthermore, the river has been a boundary throughout history, serving as a border between various countries and even empires (Kingdom of Hungary, Ottoman Empire, Habsburg Empire). It is a natural element functioning both as a boundary and as a highway linking different cultures, communities, and people. Of the countless rural settlements lying along this river, Vărădia de Mureş and Birchiş represent two small, interesting communities with specific rural identities. Vărădia de Mureş is located on the northern side of the Mureş and is part of the historical region of Crişana, while Birchiş lies to the south of the Mureş and is part of the historical region of Banat.

The present study aims to explore, through the lenses of quantitative and qualitative research, the sense of their rural identity felt by the inhabitants of these two villages. We are also interested in how local inhabitants relate to the river as a symbol of opportunity, limit/boundary, and danger/risk issues. Our research questions are as follows:

1. How is rural identity constructed at the local level?
2. What role does the river Mureş play in shaping the regional belonging of the country people in the area?

Besides contributing to existing international studies on rural identity [8,9] and its connection to the cultural role of water [10–13] and to studies on regional belonging [5], this study complements recent debates in Romanian social science literature on the rural and regional identity of people belonging to the Banat and Crişana regions [14] and the role of spatial vicinity and the strong regional identity of local Romanian Banat people [15,16] by shedding light on the role of the river Mureş in dividing, in cultural terms, the two regions of Banat and Crişana.

We have devoted the next section to a theoretical approach in order to make a link between our selected case-studies and study area and international theoretical models regarding regional identities in rural areas. This will help us provide a critical and objective account of questions of local rural identity in cases in which it gravitates to a specific natural feature that over time generates specific cultures and particular communities with unique cultural identities.

2. Theoretical Background

Regardless of their sizes, locations, and cultural features, all communities have the power to construct their own specific identities. These are closely connected to the features of the local natural environment, to the cultural and historical background. This is a means through which communities define their individual cultures as specific attributes in a world that is increasingly tending towards

a shared universality. Regional identity appears as a social process [17] and is "...an interpretation of the process through which a region becomes institutionalized, a process consisting of the production of territorial boundaries, symbolism, and institutions. This process concomitantly gives rise to, and is conditioned by, the discourses/practices/rituals that draw on boundaries, symbols and institutional practices" and involves two intertwined backgrounds: a cultural-historical one and a political-economic context [5,18].

Numerous writers have studied regional identity from the perspective of the geographic construction of spaces and have argued for the significance of local identities and the importance of this process in our contemporary world [19–22]. As different to national belonging and nationalist identities [23], multiple issues of regional identity have been discussed, including regarding regions and places, the situation of bounded places in a mobile world in which identity is closely connected to the construction and deconstruction of spaces, and in the context of regional reconstruction and devolution [24–28]. It is widely acknowledged that regions represent institutionalized places and spaces, with their emergence and development being framed by political and economic factors that are responsible for the creation of their regional identity [29], which means that the issue of identity – connected to regional planning, regional resurgence and the construction of regional identity from the viewpoint of power and politics – is an important aspect which needs to be taken into consideration in the representation of the territorial identity of a place or region [30,31]. These approaches must be taken into account in any geographical analysis of regional identity, most especially against the contemporary background of social and economic development, in which collective identity and community identity have to be understood as vectors of social and economic transformations taking place in reaction to current challenges facing our world [5]. Local models of community development represent significant actions that aim to construct local identity in the various contexts of regional economic development. Under the new model of regionalization, in which local policies and decisions also have a part to play, both the complex of factors that combine in the regional identity construction of a place on the one hand, and economic development and local planning on the other, contribute to the identity individualization of a place or region, whether we are thinking of local development based on local resources and economic practices or of that resulting from new strategies for regional economic progress directed by Romanian and international policies. With regard to the issue of local territorial identities, the economic development of places and regions continues to be something that needs to be studied when we seek to understand the place of identity construction in contemporary geographical analysis. Such approaches turn regions and places into perceptual regions, into places in which new kinds of identities can be imagined [32,33]. Local economic development and regional planning are important features of a region's identity construction that must be borne in mind in the context of the construction of the local identities of places and regions, since they frame both people's ordinary way of life and the cultural landscape of communities [34]. They must be understood if we are to grasp the chief mechanisms that define the cultural traits and values of a given area. In terms of the individual specificities of a landscape, multiple types of cultural landscape have come into existence [35], all of them demonstrating the main cultural activities, practices and actions which have built the cultural identity of the people, represented over time and space in many different ways [32,36]. Furthermore, against this background, it is these social, cultural, economic, and political traits that operate as the main vectors which through the intermediary of local cultures and resources construct and establish the local identity of a community [37–40]. Rural communities are especially important to decode, for it is the rural space that best preserves its cultural features and values, its local ways of life and its cultural landscapes, all on the foundation of its people, resources and activities and of its traditions and inherited cultures [9,41].

In the construction of rural identity, the place itself matters, as well as all the actions and initiatives which ensure the social construction of a place [8]. In this context, the effects of rural identity are evident in the cultural landscapes of communities [42], because their cultural traits and all their social and economic practices are intended to provide particular landscape aesthetics and specific functionalities reflected in the local identity of rural communities [43–48]. In rural

development the marks of regional identity represent an important key to understanding how rural settlements have built their own cultural identity landscapes and how these are represented in current analyses, practices, and discourses. In the context of the development of rural communities, regional identity is shaped by local resources, by the modes of local production and construction of these places based on their inherited or borrowed cultural traits and practices as managed and administered via various types of local and regional governance, and by local community development policies [49]. Looking at the whole ensemble of environmental resources, water represents a feature that has always both contributed to community formation and guaranteed specific cultural identities through the individual modes of the local production and reproduction of a community. Water is perhaps the most important geographical attribute framing the spatiality, functionality and symbolism of a place or a region, especially when we are speaking about traditional ways of life in different rural spaces. The local and regional significance and identity of a place are ensured by the presence of water and by all the opportunities it provides for people and communities [10–12,50]. Both a geographical feature that can divide places and spaces and one which connects people, cultures and societies, water and its related cultural and political identities represent the main resource that determines and directs communities by providing key pathways for the local and socio-economic development that frames specific cultural landscapes and particular cultural identities [51–55].

Human settlements along riversides, especially in rural areas, have been common throughout history as a consequence of people's need to access water for drinking, irrigation, fishing, transportation, and other economic practices and activities in their various forms. Rivers have also been seen as major sources of food and building materials. Some of the world's earliest human settlements, such as those in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, and the Indus Valley, developed in areas near rivers because these provided fertile soil and a constant source of fresh water [56,57]. However, human settlements beside rivers may be vulnerable to flooding or other natural disasters, which means that careful planning and proper resource management are required [58].

A source of both opportunities and risks for the community, water has the potential to provide the premises for territorial identity construction, with people and communities always being strongly attached to the places where they live. Affective perspectives and performed practices combine to generate specific cultural landscapes. Territorial identities can impact people's behaviors and decisions, while at the same time they can also be an important factor in promoting various kinds of economic development, including, in some areas, tourism. Contemporary geographies of territorial identity investigate not only spatial areas and arrangements but also the reasons why people interact with their local environmental features and the ways in which they do so [57].

The rural landscape has up until now been studied in many ways and from a range of perspectives, with the subject of rural areas' representations of cultural identity being an interesting approach to gaining new understandings of their functionalities and landscapes and to gathering relevant data on the basis of which to design new forms of spatial governance aimed at maintaining and sustaining local cultural identities. In these cultural-identity construction contexts, case studies are widely recommended [49,59,60] as a method of obtaining new data that advances academic knowledge regarding the construction of rural identity and which captures significant information about the way of life in the countryside, the ways in which people feel and perceive their relationship with the lived rural space, and the ways that its local territorial identity is represented in the collective memory of a rural place.

3. Study Area, Materials and Methods

Vărădia de Mureș and Birchiș are situated in Western Romania, on the boundary between the historical regions of Banat and Crișana, marked by the river Mureș. Their location on this relatively closed corridor is reflected in their distance from towns and cities: 50 km from the nearest town (Lipova, with approximately 10 000 inhabitants [61]), 80 km from the county town (Arad), and over 100 km from the main regional city, Timișoara. The most important nearby locality is Săvârșin, the

main rural pole and the site of the Royal Castle, but even this has no more than 3 000 inhabitants (Figure 1).

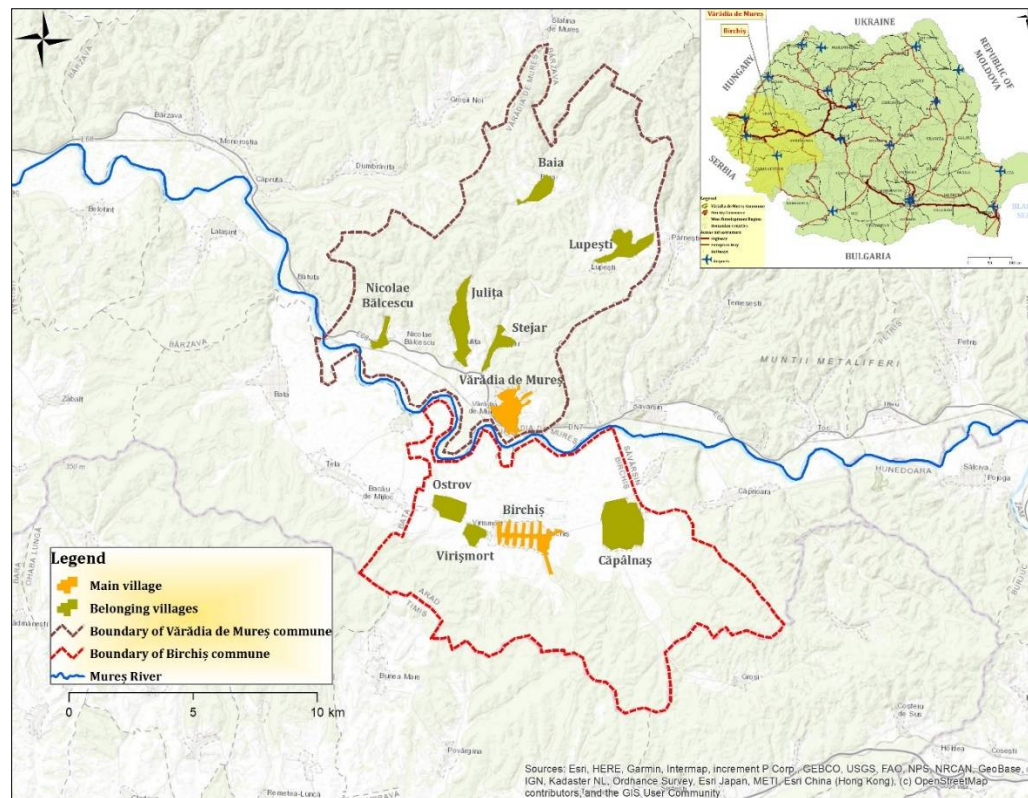


Figure 1. Positioning of Vărădia de Mureș and Birchis in the national, regional and local context.

Vărădia de Mureș commune has 1587 inhabitants distributed among six small villages, while Birchis has 1773 inhabitants distributed between four small villages [61]. Both communes have for over a century been on a trend of aging and demographic decline. The demographic peak was attained in both communes in 1910, when they had 4948 inhabitants. Even though Romania experienced significant demographic growth during the communist period [62], in our study area the absence of cities and of investment in industry and services generated a massive emigration of young people, so that the area now ranks in the quartile of the oldest ones demographically in the country.

The Mureș valley is a connecting artery along which the plain extends into the mountain area in the form of depressional bays, which led in the past to the development of intensive agriculture. Connecting corridors were formed between settlements, strengthening the constant to-and-fro movement of population and of material and cultural goods in this area.

Our first *methodological step* took the form of a literature review and of bibliographical documentation, focusing both on the concept of territorial identity and on the context of the study area. Next, in-field of participatory and empirical observation, as widely recommended, was a fruitful way of looking at the cultural landscapes of the communes being studied, providing important insights that helped us assess the cultural backgrounds of both rural settlements. The communes we took as case studies (a recommended method in academic research in this domain – see [49]) were carefully selected from an important region of Romania whose identity is shaped by the geographical and cultural significance of the river Mureș. Subsequently, we used the cartographic method (ArcGIS 10.4 software) for a comparative analysis of the two villages in terms of spatial organization and territorial polarization, including in relation to the river Mureș, using data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics and vectorized spatial data extracted from OpenStreetMap through the Geofabrik.de platform. The raster data is Copernicus Digital Elevation Model (GLO-30 DEM).

In order to round off the study by including a reflexive-explanatory dimension, in August 2023 we conducted 36 interviews with locals (20 from Vărădia de Mureș and 16 from Birchiș), applying 10 open questions that complemented those in the questionnaire (Table 1). For this stage we set up face-to-face meetings with those willing to be interviewed, ensuring that everyone was at their ease during the discussions. All survey interviewees provided their consent and have been anonymized. The study was approved by the Scientific Council of University Research and Creation from West University of Timisoara (no. 33282).

The questions were about unique features of their home commune, the advantages that the Royal Castle in the neighboring commune of Săvârșin brings to the area, and how exactly they would describe the way their local government functioned. The interview also included questions about the future, whether interviewees were hoping to leave the commune in a few years' time, and the importance of the river Mureș to the community. Inhabitants also explored the issue of which historical region they saw themselves as belonging to. The interviews were accurately transcribed, then thematically and chromatically coded following the methodology proposed by Bryman [63]. Demographic data for the respondents is shown below (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviewee statistics.

Interview code	Gender	Age group	Occupation	Educational level
<i>I1</i>	F	60-65	Industrial worker	Secondary school
<i>I2</i>	F	60-65	Teacher	High school
<i>I3</i>	M	60-65	Retired army officer	High school
<i>I4</i>	M	35-40	Economist	University
<i>I5</i>	F	35-40	Nurse	High school
<i>I6</i>	F	60-65	Carer	Secondary school
<i>I7</i>	M	55-60	Social worker	High school
<i>I8</i>	F	50-55	Social worker	High school
<i>I9</i>	F	35-40	Carer	Secondary school
<i>I10</i>	F	60-65	Industrial worker	Secondary school
<i>I11</i>	F	35-40	Economist	University
<i>I12</i>	F	55-60	Meteorologist	University
<i>I13</i>	F	40-45	Economist	University
<i>I14</i>	F	50-55	Farmer	High school
<i>I15</i>	M	50-55	Industrial worker	University
<i>I16</i>	F	>80	Shop manager	Secondary school
<i>I17</i>	F	20-25	Student	University
<i>I18</i>	M	70-75	Driver	Secondary school
<i>I19</i>	F	45-50	Hydrologist	High school
<i>I20</i>	M	50-55	Electro-mechanical engineer	High school
<i>I21</i>	F	45-50	Teacher	University
<i>I22</i>	F	35-40	Farmer	High school
<i>I23</i>	F	>80	Farmer	Secondary school
<i>I24</i>	M	20-25	Farmer	High school
<i>I25</i>	M	>80	Forestry worker	Secondary school
<i>I26</i>	F	>80	Farmer	Primary school

I27	M	55-60	Forestry worker	High school
I28	M	20-25	Student	University
I29	F	40-45	Biologist	University
I30	M	45-50	Builder	High school
I31	M	55-60	Teacher	University
I32	M	70-75	Carer	High school
I33	F	25-30	Nurse	University
I34	F	>80	Cook	Primary school
I35	M	20-25	Student	University
I36	M	66-70	Veterinarian	High school

4. Results: A Qualitative Analysis of Territorial Identity

Our qualitative analysis of the territorial identity points to four major frames: a broader perspective on the rural lived space; how the river Mureş has brought a balance between benefits and risks at the local rural level; the imagery of regional belonging at the border between the Banat and Crişana regions; and the voice of local residents –their specific ideas, visions, beliefs and suggestions for local authorities.

4.1. A Broader Perspective on the Rural Lived Space

Local people are nostalgic when it comes to the past and the present. They always see differences between the lives they lived many years ago and the days they are enjoying now. Both periods have their pleasant and less pleasant sides. One of the memories mentioned by I2 originates from years ago: *"we have local customs... we tried to do something cultural at least. It's a beautiful area, someone even came from the south of Romania, bought a house, and said we don't even realize what it means to have the hill, the Mureş valley, the road and the railway. Until then I hadn't even thought about it. We have everything... a picturesque place, foreigners like it."* The same respondent also pointed out that the city no longer defines him, now, in his old age: *"my dream in my youth was that I would go to the city, ... but now I don't seem to find myself there anymore. Now everything is more complicated and tiring there, but I would like to go to shows, to the opera, to the theatre, I miss that so much here"*. He also remembers the way the commune was managed in the past, when, it seems, the locals were more concerned with the various aspects of running the place: *"the administrative side of life is less good now than in the past, when everyone who worked for the Town Hall was interested in the proper running of the commune, following the lead given by the Mayor"* (I16), and also the close link the people in Vărădia de Mureş had with the royal family's possessions: *"Vărădia derives no benefit from the Castle, even though it is the neighbouring commune, there is a lack of interest in the airport where the king landed when he came here. He had a hangar and a house near the airport"* (I16). Another interviewee told us that he worked in the construction industry in Spain for about 10 years, learned a lot from there, but has now returned home to be near his family and is currently working in the same field, but in Romania, close to his commune.

4.2. The Mureş: The Balance between Benefits and Risks at the Local Rural Level

By collating the responses of interviewees from the two communes in our study, we were able to identify two categories of considerations related to the river Mureş and two types of reaction that the locals had: positive ones that highlighted nostalgia, enthusiasm, and satisfaction about the river, and negative ones that betrayed fear, rejection, or even denial. The first set of factors observed, the favourable one, shows the advantages that the Mureş brings to the area: *"it is as if we could not conceive of the place without the Mureş, it is part of our life. It's very beneficial for crops, all the maize fields near the Mureş have produced a harvest, the water probably keeps the ground moist"* (I2), *"the Mureş is a lifesaver, especially for those who have maize in the countryside, alongside the Mureş. It's also advantageous for fishing, children take a dip"* (I3), *"it's a great advantage for agriculture, for fishermen, it's close by"* (I7), *"the Mureş*

can bring benefits for tourism, with recreational areas" (I19), "from the Mureş I took sand and gravel when I built my house 60 years ago. A benefit" (I23), "it is an opportunity for relaxation, fishing. It would have been nice for it to have been properly exploited" (I28).

Reviewing all these benefits enjoyed by the locals, one can certainly conclude that this river has its positive side, but with other interviewees their primary reaction is that the Mureş creates many problems and is dangerous. Statements such as "there is a risk of drowning" (I3), "many years ago the Mureş flooded up to the railway line at the edge of the village. When it bursts its banks, it destroys everything. No dykes have been built to reinforce it" (I10), "a danger. Many people have drowned there" (I16), "a peril responsible, in the past, for the deaths of several young people" (I21), "the Mureş comes up to our village" (I26), "disadvantage, due to flooding" (I27), and "disadvantage when the Mureş rises and floods our agricultural plots" (I32) all point to the fear that has taken root in the minds of some people. A double tragedy that took place years ago, the drowning of two members of the same Birchiş family, has left the bereaved survivor unwilling to hear or talk about anything related to this river: "I don't want to talk about the Mureş, it is a great danger. That's where my child drowned first and after a few years my husband did too. They both died...".

4.3. Imagery of Regional Belonging at the Border between the Banat and Crişana Regions

Whether from Crişana or Banat, whether from one side of the Mureş or the other, respondents had thoughts, stories, and tales to tell: "Tourists come to Săvârşin, they are curious, in a way this is how our area is known. When I'm away somewhere and someone asks me where I'm from, I always say I'm from Săvârşin, never from Vărădia, because my commune is not so well known. We are somehow proud of Săvârşin and people immediately know what we are talking about" (I2). These sentences exemplify the respondent's belonging to the area where he lives and works. When he is outside his commune, he chooses to mention Săvârşin to direct his interlocutor to the area he comes from, and only then to say something about his home village. The same interviewee takes a positive view of the inhabitants of the other region, saying "I really like the people from across the Mureş, they are very friendly, you feel so good there... they are more welcoming than we are, they are more attached to their customs. The people there are first-rate. At first, I was very surprised at how they even take care of their graves, we are more laid back". Moreover, one interviewee (I3) makes a direct comparison between the inhabitants of Crişana and Banat: "Here people are more reserved, they are not so "warm". Over there, across the Mureş, there is a different feel to things. If I go to someone's house, the hostess offers a glass of brandy and my wife is greeted by relatives who show her what they have done, what they have sewn, what they have renovated. They are more open, at the village festival they invite you to their home for a meal. That's what Banat feels like. They are "proud" of how many "guests" they have had at the table". "The people across the Mureş are good householders, more energetic than us" (I19) is another statement from an inhabitant of Vărădia de Mureş. "The people in Banat are different, they are people who still keep animals that used to be raised here, they have more cows than us, they have more horses, we still have 4 horses in the commune and before there were hundreds of horses". This comparison regarding the livestock sector comes from I12, who remembers how flourishing the commune was years ago, when herds of livestock were much larger, and people put much more emphasis on the growth of the agricultural and livestock sector. The inhabitants of Birchiş mention that the people on the other side of the Mureş are "tidier, more tidy, perhaps even better at housekeeping...it depends from person to person" (I22), "they are more gentle, more civilised than us, we are a bit rough" (I23), "decent people, they also use the Mureş, they have a series of streams that flow into the Mureş, they have woods, they have greenery, you can find everything you want, it's a beautiful, picturesque area", "they are all hard-working people, they just need to have somewhere to work and to be strong" (I26), "simple people, but dedicated. The area is beautiful, but people are less united than here" (I31), "they are like us, impulsive" (I35), 'they are richer than us, the main trunk road passes through there' (I36).

4.4. The Voice of Local Residents: Ideas, Visions, Beliefs, Suggestions

One idea put advanced as an opinion by locals wishing to improve the status of the communes where they live is the continuing of work on the King's Tourist Road, which was originally built at the request of King Michael I to facilitate the journey from the royal property in Săvârşin to the spa

resort on the other side of the mountain. Another suggestion, put forward by several people, is that the makeup of the local administration needs to be changed. They say that there is a great need for people who are competent, involved, interested, and committed, with innovative visions and ideas, younger and full of positive energy. They also highlight the need for investors and for well-thought-out and well-planned projects. For older people, a primary solution would be to stop young people leaving, to try to make a difference and raise living standards by their own efforts. An example of this is I17, who would like to open a hairdressing salon in the commune at the request of fellow residents who have said they need this service from someone with specialist qualifications. I17 has taken relevant courses, so in the future she wants to open her own business in her home village: *"my future is in the city. In the immediate future, I want to open a hairdressing salon at home, but the aim is not to stay here. I intend to work in the city so that I can develop at all levels. At the request of my fellow commune residents, who say they need such services, I have decided to take this step."* In addition to all these proposals, several others were put forward, such as the development of the banks of the river Mureş, improvements to the gravel and stone quarry, and the attraction of projects to support the development of road infrastructure.

Among residents of the two communes, there is little hope that anything good will appear on the scene to change things in their villages. Most agree that they are struggling against too many obstacles, so very few interviewees mention factors that might lead to progress and development. I2 pins their hopes on the finalisation of the refurbishment of the Vărădia de Mureş village hall: *"We had both roads and a village hall... let's hope that measures are taken and that the work started is completed"*, and in the creation of jobs to cater for as many people as possible who currently commute or have moved elsewhere precisely for this reason: *"if jobs appeared, young people would not leave, some of those who have left would return. If only some investors could come, I don't know how, I don't know where from, to give life to the area"* (I2).

Consequently, the local administration of these two villages has to consider this aspect in the future policy agendas in order to sustain both the social, cultural and environmental resources as well as the residents' voices.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has examined the issue of regional and cultural identity in the rural environment by taking as a case study two Romanian villages that are closely connected to each other by a geographical feature of their region, the river Mureş, which acts as a cultural spine in the formation of rural communities in this region of Romania. In addition, both villages are enriched by social and cultural features and aspects that characterise Romanian rural settlements and illustrate a common identity which is both spatially and mentally represented and is deeply rooted in the local collective memory. The shaping of cultural identity in the sites we studied follows the Romanian and Eastern European model of cultural identity formation, which is founded on the geographical/environmental, social, economic and cultural attributes of places and communities under both constant and changing kinds of political governance. The most important feature defining the specific cultural identity of these two sites is water, which, as their most relevant geographical resource, provides the most distinctive directions for community dynamics and development, giving specific contexts and opportunities for local people, for their social and economic practices and for their way of life, all of which contribute to the construction of a cultural landscape with an identity of its own.

The local people, resources, social practices, symbolism, collective identity, history, and institutional governance of a place are the most important aspects that frame and define its cultural identity [64–66]. The people are important because they are the agents in the spatial construction of a place; the environment and physical resources frequently represent the key advantages that sustain local practices in the social, cultural and economic development of a community, which in turn contribute to the construction of local identity.

The quantitative analysis described in this paper has shown that people in Birchiş and Vărădia communes identify themselves with the river Mureş, viewing it as an environmental feature that has contributed to the formation both of these rural localities and of the local cultural identity widely

reflected in the cultural landscapes of their villages. They also identify with the entire river valley, since countless villages along the river have benefited from the same opportunities throughout their history, resulting in many similarities in local cultural landscapes and in the inhabitants' ways of life. The literature on the role of water in local communities has shown the importance of the presence of water and of all the opportunities rivers provide for people and communities [10–12,50]. In our case, the river Mureş represents, both for these rural communities and for the whole region, a significant opportunity for development, even though it is also perceived as a risk factor.

In terms of regional identity as seen through the lens of a sense of belonging, local people feel themselves to be part of the Crişana and Banat regions, which argues for the regional inter- and multiculturalism that frames these rural settlements. In addition, they identify with the rural localities in which they live and pursue their specific ways of life, drawing on all the resources provided by nature and by the cultural and historical heritage. Rural residents express their satisfaction with local social and cultural values and institutions, stressing the importance to them of the local church and religion, schools, and cultural and administrative institutions, with evident reservations as regards the current local authorities, who ought to be enhancing their efforts towards and involvement in local development by properly exploiting the local cultural background and the major environmental resource represented by the river. A change of attitude, policy, and agenda-setting here could undoubtedly aid local economic development, especially via the promotion of tourism and cultural activities. The local uniqueness of these places is illustrated by the historical background that has taken shape over the centuries and under changing political systems, by the local ethnicity and language, by the people themselves, who keep these communities alive, and by local traditions and specific practices of rural life. The local pride shown by people and communities, and the positive relationships between people and between different cultural groups, also make a direct contribution to the construction of the cultural identity of these places. Throughout this quantitative analysis, the cultural landscapes of the country area studied, clearly illustrating as they do the local cultures established over time, are viewed as the major spatial and geographical attribute of these communities.

The qualitative part of the research brings to light people's feelings and perceptions regarding their cultural traditions, local history, and cultural background, all underexploited in current local development initiatives. The nostalgia and regrets commune residents express flow from their perception that the local administration is insufficiently committed to developing these villages economically by turning their cultural, natural, and human capital to good use. Future policy agendas need to reflect this priority. In our days, the cultural regionality and identity of places and regions have been instrumentalized to become valuable assets that should be inspiring local authorities to make full use of them as means through which communities can be developed in the light of their cultural identity as places with significant cultural potential and resources. Regional identity is therefore connected to the construction and deconstruction of spaces [24–27,67]. Our two rural areas belong to different regions that represent institutionalized places and spaces, which means that their development has been shaped by political and economic factors which created their regional identity [see 29].

In conclusion, narratives, practices, and discourses regarding the cultural identity of places and regions must be given fuller consideration when we are rethinking the contemporary development of rural communities – places whose cultural identities, collective memories, and all their cultural landscapes are defined, in their uniqueness, by people and by their cultures, social practices, and ways of life.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.D. and R.C.; methodology, A.D. and R.C.; software, O.O.; validation, R.C. and S.J.; formal analysis, A.D. and O.O.; investigation, O.O. and A.D.; data curation, O.O. and A.D.; writing—original draft preparation, R.C., S.J. and A.D.; writing—review and editing, R.C. and S.J.; visualization, A.D.; supervision, A.D. and R.C.; funding acquisition, A.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript and contributed equally to this work.

Funding: This work was financially supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research: CNCS/CCCDI-UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-PD-2019-0274.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank the anonymous respondents for their positive feedback on this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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