

## **Attitudes and Prerequisites for the Establishment of an Integrated Cultural Identity within Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region along the Danube River**

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**Abstract: Objectives:** On the basis of the results from an empirical study this research aims at exploration of the prerequisites for the establishment of an integrated cultural identity within Romanian-Bulgarian Cross-Border Region along the Danube River (RBCBR). **Prior Work:** The paper is trying to prove the necessity of identity re-negotiation process within RBCBR. The theoretical background of the research is related to some of the most topical considerations in this scientific field. **Approach:** The research uses an interdisciplinary approach and combines the perspectives of regional studies, cross-cultural psychology and intercultural communication. A representative survey is the main instrument of the research. **Results:** Among the citizens of the RBCBR there exist favourable attitudes towards closer relations with their neighbours which can serve as a key element of the identity re-negotiation process within the region. **Implications:** The research results can be used by policy makers and regional authorities in the process of establishment of a new policy for territorial cooperation as well as by researchers in further development of this topic area. **Value:** the importance of the research is in its new approach towards the establishment of integrated regional identity as well as in the comparison of the Romanian and Bulgarian attitudes towards cooperation in the neighbourhood area.

**Keywords:** identity re-negotiation; regional identity; cultural identity

### **1 Introduction**

In parallel with the overall dynamics of the societal processes, in the era of globalization we came to a new understanding of numerous concepts, including the notion of identity. We cannot still perceive it as an unchangeable phenomenon, connected with social integration of individuals and groups, but as a construct open to transformations, which draws resources for its redefinition from the local social and cultural systems.

On the other hand, the increasing importance of the regionalism and regionalization in Europe and worldwide with the aim to overcome the socio-economic disproportions, highlights the discussion about the establishment of a regional

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identity as a driving force for the development of concrete territorial units, as well as a tool for mobilization of their resources.

The current paper presents an interpretation of the issue for the establishment of an integrated regional identity within the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region along the Danube River. The same issue was put as a strategic goal of the research project BRAINS/Bulgarian-Romanian Area Identities: Neighbourhood Study/, implemented in 2011-2012 by the University of Ruse and the Academy of Economic Studies-Bucharest under the Romania-Bulgaria Cross-Border Programme 2007-2013.

A specific objective of the paper is to discuss the potential for the establishment of an integrated cultural identity in the light of the empirical data from a representative study carried out in the region.

## 2 Theoretical Considerations

The establishment of regional identity within the frames of a territory crossing national borders, as in the case with the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region along the Danube River, is a complex process aiming at both stabilization and transformation of the region. Acquiring regional identity, the individuals achieve identification with the social, political and cultural system of a given region (Häuszer & Frey, 1987) – with its people, traditions and environment. In his model Paasi (Paasi, 1986, p. 105-146) presents 4 stages in the formation of the regional identity: establishment of territorial shape; establishment of symbolic shape; establishment of institutional shape; appearance of socio-spatial consciousness among the regional citizens.

Through the *territorial shape* the region outlines its boundaries and identifies itself as a territorial unit in the space. (Paasi, 1986) The existence of borders of some kind is a fundamental requirement for the appearance of regional consciousness among the citizens. (Kosonen, 1996) *The symbolic or conceptual shape* is established on the territorial basis. Here the most important symbols of the region should be considered, i.e. name, languages, sights, holidays, etc. (Paasi, 1986) *The institutional shape* encompasses the established practices and formal organizations in the region: public administrations, business organizations, NGOs, schools, social networks, etc. The institutional sphere is responsible for maintaining the regional image and for determining the criteria of citizens' identification with it, e.g. establishment of common values, formation of social capital, establishment of trust, etc.

The establishment of *consciousness of identity* among the regional citizens is a result of continuous process of institutionalization and transformation. Paasi (1996) underlines the importance of the historical and social processes, which form the

past experience of the region and have an impact on its contemporary development. This part of the regional identity can be determined as its individuality or its spiritual space. It is the deepest layer of the self-consciousness of the regional citizens. (Crang, 1998)

The establishment of an integrated regional cultural identity is related directly to the formation of the symbolic shape of the region and the consciousness of identity from the model above. The cultural identity is a multilayer entity consisting of some components on group level/shared culture-specific beliefs, attitudes and values/, as well as components on individual level/culture-specific behavior/. This type of identity always includes a historical perspective since it is formed through transmission of values from generation to generation. In contrast, the social identity is connected with a concrete moment in the time. (Schwartz et al., 2008, p. 635–651)

Cultural identity is formed and maintained in the process of interaction with individuals from our own cultural group and other cultural groups where we unconsciously establish our self-perception generated from the mirror image of the Other. (Usunier, 1996, p. 386).

Cultural identity is a specific sense of “we” instead of “you and me” in a concrete relationship. In order to achieve such a sensation within the frames of a territorial unit, as in the case with the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region along the Danube, it is necessary to do a re-negotiation of identities in compliance with the theory for identity management (Cupach & Imahori, 1993), i.e. it is necessary to achieve a collective identity which satisfies all citizens of the region.

In order to participate in a conscious re-negotiation of cultural identity, it is necessary to increase our basic knowledge about our own identity and the identities of the other participants in the regional communication process. The theory for re-negotiation of identities offers 10 starting points linked with the development of knowledge which is sensitive to the culture and identity. (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 211-233) These benchmarks can be applied to the process of re-negotiation of identities in the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region along the Danube and respectively to the establishment of a regional cultural identity in its framework:

1. Cultural identity is formed on the basis of communication and social interaction accomplished through symbols, i.e. **the first necessary condition for the establishment of a regional cultural identity is the highlighting of a set of shared symbols.**
2. The identity formation is based on the fundamental motivational needs of individuals such as security, predictability, belonging and sustainability. In connection with the regional cultural identity these needs would mean: **security for protection of own identity, predictability of the behavior of the Others, feeling of belonging to the territory and territorial communities, perpetuation of own**

**culture and its traditions.** We should point out that too large emotional security can lead to strong ethnocentrism and encapsulation within the boundaries of the own community and vice versa, an emotional uncertainty will lead to avoiding Others. That's why it is necessary to seek an optimal level of this characteristic in the process of identity re-negotiation.

3. The individuals are experiencing an emotional security in relation to their identities in a familiar cultural environment and vice versa – emotional insecurity in unfamiliar environment, i.e. **acquiring knowledge about the shared territory is the other necessary condition for the establishment of regional cultural identity.**

4. The individuals feel connectivity when their group membership is affirmed in positive situations of inter-group contact and vice versa they experience differentiation when their identity is stigmatized, i.e. **a continuous affirmation and encouragement of the positive experience from the shared existence in the region is needed.**

5. The individuals feel predictability in interactions when they communicate with familiar Others. In this case, the predictability of identity leads to building trust while unpredictability results in distrust. This means that the establishment of regional cultural identity **should be based on awareness about the basic identification features of the communities within the region.**

6. The individuals feel connectivity with a given community when they have established closer interpersonal relations in its framework, i.e. the establishment of regional cultural identity **should include the process of familiarizing with the Other as well as intensification of interpersonal and intergroup contacts.**

7. The individuals experience a sustainability of identity in routine situations in a familiar cultural environment and vice versa, they experience identity crisis and transformation of identity in an unknown environment, i.e. the regional cultural identity **should be based on shared and briefly communicated cultural practices.**

8. The cultural, personal and situational variability has influence on the meanings, interpretations and assessments of the issues, connected with the identity, i.e. the establishment of regional cultural identity **should consider the inter-individual and inter-group peculiarities of the social interactions within the region as well as the situational characteristics of the environment.**

9. The process of competent and successful re-negotiation of identity puts emphasis on the intercultural knowledge, based on identity, i.e. the establishment of regional cultural identity **requires development of specific intercultural competences, as respect and sensitivity towards the otherness, ability for empathy and change of the perspective.**

10. A successful result from the process of identity re-negotiation is the achievement of individuals feeling that they are understood, respected and positively evaluated; i.e. the establishment of regional cultural identity is **a complex process of mutual adaptation of the motivational structures and value orientations of the individuals which can serve as a catalyst for the personal development of the people from the region.**

### **3 Empirical Study**

The above-mentioned theoretical considerations can be perceived as a possible algorithm for the establishment of an integrated regional cultural identity within the frames of the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region along the Danube River. The potential for the development of such kind of identity is explored by means of a representative survey carried out among 2005 citizens of the region – 990 inhabitants of the 9 Bulgarian districts and 1015 inhabitants of the 7 Romanian counties. The data are collected in the period November- December 2012. The survey and its data are the main result of the cross-border research project BRAINS cited above.

The demographic characteristics of the sample are, as follows:

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

	<b>Bulgarian side</b>	<b>Romanian side</b>
Distribution by sex	51,41 % females; 48, 59 % males	55,6% females; 44,4 % males
Distribution by age	33,64 % /the biggest percent/are the people over 60	44,9 % of the respondents are close to middle age (31-49 y.o); 37,6% are over 50; only 17,4% are young, aged below 30 years.
Distribution by education	22,53 % have higher education, 60,10 % have medium level of education	21.3 % have higher education, most of the respondents have at least medium level of education
Distribution by households	32,42 % /the biggest percent/- families, consisting of 2 members; 26,77 % - families with 3 members which means a family with one child	66,4% are living in households with at least 3 persons, which means a family with at least one child
Distribution by employment	52,63 % are employed, 29,70 % are pensioners, 17,68 % are unemployed	47% of the respondents are employed, 33% are unemployed and the remaining 20% are pensioners

There are many similarities in the presented demographic data for the respondents from the Bulgarian and the Romanian side, e.g. in the age and educational structure of the population. For the demographic situation in the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region we can observe the following trends:

1. Unfavourable age structure in relation to the indicator “Economically active population on the labour market”. This conclusion is proved by the significant percent of the aging population of the region.
2. Despite the favourable educational structure /the percentage of well-educated people/, a significant percentage of unemployed people is registered in the region, stemming probably from the consequences of the economic crisis as well as from the decreasing share of the industrial sector.

The main instrument of the survey was the especially designed questionnaire aiming to explore the potential for the development of an integrated identity in ROBULNA – the name given to the Romanian-Bulgarian Neighbourhood Area along the Danube River. In this questionnaire were differentiated several groups of questions aiming at drawing data for political identity, socio-economic identity, cultural identity and also a group of questions for the potential branding of the region. Here the object of analysis will be the questions dedicated to the establishment of regional cultural identity.

One of these questions is **“What would you say about yourself, who are you, how do you identify yourself ?”**. It aims at finding out the self-determination of the ROBULNA citizens and their identification with a concrete living space. The most significant self-categorizations of the respondents can be seen in the table below:

**Table 2. The Most Significant Self-Categorizations of the Respondents**

Identification	Bulgarian side	Romanian side
a citizen of my county	86,77 %	91,0%
a citizen of the town/village where I live	82,73 %.	93,5 %

The insignificant percent of respondents who identify with the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region /as citizens of ROBULNA/means that this concept is not topical yet and doesn’t live in their minds as a territorial unit. If we come back to the theoretical model of Paasi above, we would say that the construction of the territorial shape of the region is a task for the future.

The next group of questions refers to the frequency of interpersonal formal and informal contacts between the citizens of the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region in relation to the current situation and its prognosis for the future **Do you maintain/intend to establish formal/informal relations with persons from ....**

**Romanian/Bulgarian districts of ROBULNA, Bulgaria/Romania as a whole, other EU countries, outside EU**

**Table 3. Current State of Formal and Informal Relations in ROBULNA**

Direction of relations	Formal relations		Informal relations	
	Current	Intention	Current	Intention
Bulgarian districts of ROBULNA	5,4%	12,00%	8,80%	16,30%
Romanian counties of ROBULNA	9,6 %	17,45 %	21,01 %	38,29 %

The data presented allow us to draw the following conclusions:

- The capacity of the current formal relations between Romanian and Bulgarian citizens of the region is small - only 5,4% Romanians, respectively 9,6 Bulgarians have formal relations with persons from neighbour districts/counties.
- The situation with informal contacts is better, especially among the Bulgarian citizens.
- The declared intention for formal and informal contacts in the future, registered in both sides of the region is very optimistic. More than double percentage of people (compared to current) have intention to develop relations in each direction and this attitude is one of the positive prerequisites for the establishment of an integrated identity.

The discussed results are very favourable in relation to the so called relational layer of cultural identity /Hecht et al., 2005: 257-278/, which refers to the opportunities for identity re-negotiation through intensification of formal and informal interpersonal contacts. The data about the future intentions of the respondents indicate the existence of positive attitudes, trust and interest towards the neighbours in the region, especially on an informal level, which can contribute to the process of building integrated identity.

Another question, which is very indicative about the potential for the establishment of an integrated cultural identity is: **To what extent could the following factors be an obstacle for your relations with your Romanian/Bulgarian neighbours.**

The obstacles, identified by the respondents, are, as follows:

Table 4. Obstacles for Relations within ROBULNA

Factors	Bulgarian side	Romanian side
My access across the border is costly, I have to pay in order to cross the border	51,6 %	61,4 %
I don't know the neighbour language	71,4 %	56,9 %
I have no common language with my Bulgarian neighbours	68,3 %	56,8 %
Shopping opportunities across the border are not promoted here	47,7 %	56,9 %
Tourism opportunities across the border are not promoted here	48,0 %	52,7 %
Entertainment opportunities across the border are not promoted here	41,6 %	49,8 %
I don't know how to find relevant information	42,2	48,1
Health care opportunities across the border are not promoted here	49,3 %	48,0 %
Job opportunities across the border are not promoted here	47,2 %	43,3 %
Business opportunities across the border are not promoted here	43,5 %	41,9 %

Looking at the data for the Romanian citizens, it seems that the most important barrier against collaboration between Romanian and Bulgarians from ROBULNA is the cost of passing the bridge. Another important factor is the language barrier. Also the insufficient publicity of Bulgarian attractiveness /shopping and tourism/is mentioned by more than half of the respondents.

For Bulgarians the most significant obstacle for communication with the neighbor is the language barrier. It is difficult to overcome this obstacle but there are positive trends concerning the interest of studying the neighbor language among ROBULNA citizens.

The price for crossing the bridge, indicated by Bulgarians, is also a serious obstacle for the frequency of contacts. In relation to this we can mention the so called “contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954), according to which if some individuals have the opportunity to communicate with other individuals, their bias to use stereotypes will decrease and as a result the level of mutual understanding between the two sides will increase.

The other barriers, indicated by the respondents, require more special attention, because all of them are connected with the lack of sufficient information about the other side in the cross-border region. In this case we can speak about the deficit of a special policy for opening one to another of the Bulgarian and Romanian communities, for bridging the differences and intensifying the interactions. Despite the European support for the region through the Programme for cross-border cooperation 2007-2013, as well as the successful project partnerships, the achieved results are connected with solving isolated problems, without a synergic effect for the whole region.

Through its goals, one of which is the achievement of a better awareness about the cross-border neighbor, the project BRAINS tries to minimize the information deficit as well as to attract the attention of the political elite, public administrations and ordinary citizens to the necessity of an overall policy for building integrated regional identity as the most important condition for the development of the region. If we come back to the Paasi model of regional identity mentioned above, we would say that a lot of efforts are needed for the establishment of the institutional framework of the region. The latter is responsible for providing access to socially-significant information among the regional citizens and for generating motivation for interactions and long-term relationships.

Except the data concerning culture-related topics, through the survey are collected data about the most important activities in the cross-border region which can change the regional environment. Here the opinions of Romanian and Bulgarian respondents are very similar.

As the highest priority in these activities the Bulgarians indicate the joint actions of the local and regional authorities in generating the policy for regional development. At the next places by order of importance, they have put the necessity for stimulation of business and revitalization of the labour market. In this way the existing problem with peripherality and marginalization of the region in the national framework can be solved. Another opportunity for the region is its development as a prospective territorial unit in the Danube space.

Since 33% of the Romanian respondents are unemployed it is normal to see that their main focus is concentrated on economic activities. Thus 62% mention that there should be done “joint business activities”, 58% - joint labor market activities. The third important activity refers to the regional policy which should contribute to

regional development, i.e. the people expect from the authorities measures which may facilitate collaborations and regional development.

The presented data are indicative for the direction in which the integrated regional identity could happen. At the first place, a joint regional policy is needed. It will lead to economic growth and thus the problems with unemployment will be solved. A regional environment, encouraging the development of the region, can serve as a catalyst of the consciousness of identity which is a key component of the regional cultural identity.

The data drawn from the answers to some other questions in the survey indicate that in the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region there exists a positive internal context for identity re-negotiation. The prevailing part of the respondents thinks that the similarities between Romanians and Bulgarians are more than the differences. As such similarities they point out the common religion, the similar customs and traditions and others. They also indicate a lot of symbols of similarity such as similar names of Romanian and Bulgarian towns, common words in the two languages, etc. According to the respondents, the differences in the mentality are not essential for the region. All this means that the identity re-negotiation process in the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region should be based on the similarity and inclusion of the Other in the close and familiar circle where people experience security, predictability and sustainability.

#### **4. Conclusions**

On the basis of the empirical data presented, some conclusions can be drawn about the potential for the establishment of an integrated regional cultural identity in the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region along the Danube River:

1. A necessary condition for the formation of such identity is the creation in the region of **favourable economic and social environment**, which encourages the development and satisfies the fundamental needs of the regional citizens.
2. The identification with the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region, registered at the moment among insignificant part of its inhabitants, is a result of a long process which includes the following parallel stages: **creation of a territorial and institutional shape of the region, negotiating a symbolic shape, formation of the consciousness of identity**. The last two stages are directly related to the development of regional identity.
3. The development of an integrated cultural identity is a result of identity re-negotiation in the region. This process aims at achieving a collective identity which satisfies the following individual needs: **security** /of own identity/, **belonging** /to a group with which the individual shares symbols and practices/, **predictability** /of

the behavior of the Others, linked with creation of mutual trust/, **sustainability** /transferability and perpetuation of the consciousness of identity/.

4. In the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border region there is a potential for the establishment of an integrated cultural identity, which consists of the following components: significant **relational potential**, concentrated in the positive attitudes for maintaining and developing of formal and informal relations with the cross-border neighbours; **motivational potential**, expressed in the desire and interest of sharing everyday practices; **potential of the common symbols**, values systems, traditions and past experience.

5. The establishment of an integrated regional cultural identity can be realized through **increasing the culture-specific knowledge about cross-border neighbour** which will shorten the cultural distance and will enhance the motivation for intercultural contacts. As was illustrated above, in the cross-border region there exists a serious deficit of information of interest for the citizens which reduces the possibilities for intercultural contacts.

6. Last but not least, the establishment of an integrated regional cultural identity is connected with **conscious acquisition** of some of its components, e.g. popularization of the study of neighbour language or acquiring intercultural skills and competences for successful communication with the neighbour through education.

7. The results of the project BRAINS show that **the achievement of an integrated regional cultural identity is a realistic goal** because there is a potential for its establishment in the region. What is needed is the joint policy of the local and regional authorities for the development of the region as territorial, social and cultural unit in the European Danube space.

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