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**CONFESSIONAL PROPAGANDA AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION.
THE CASE OF ROMANIANS IN THE HIGHLAND BANAT
(16th–17th CENTURIES)**

In 1674, a person originated from Caransebeș signed as: *Michael Halits nobilis romanus, civis de Karansebes*, a poem dedicated to a friend of him¹. The signature is a triple stance of his identity: a geographic one – the nowadays Banat and the city of Caransebeș –, an ethnic one – *romanus*/Romanian, and a social one as belonging to social élite (nobility).

That clear assertion on the Romanian identity was the reason to try to explore the ethnic and national sensibility of the Romanians from Banat along the 16th–17th centuries. Such a demarche seemed much more interesting to me as Mihail Halici (Halics) jr. had come from a Calvinist family, while a series of clichés regarding the developing of national feeling within the Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities exclusively, and only in the first half of the 18th century, protruded the Romanian historiography. More than this, the Romanians who had chosen the Roman Catholic Church, or those who had been attached to the Calvinist Church were entirely excluded from the national corpus as being considered that they lost their ethnic colouring and were absorbed by the Hungarian communities once they had renounced to the Orthodox Church values².

The present day Banat is a province of about 30,000 km², bordered by river Mureș to the north, river Tisza to the east, Danube in the south and Carpathians in the east, divided between Romania (60%), Serbia (39%) and Hungary (1%). In the middle ages this area was known as Lower parts of the Hungarian kingdom (*partes inferiores regni Hungarie*) and divided in the counties of Timiș (Temes), Arad, Cenad (Csanád), Torontal, Caraș (Krassó) and the Banate of Severin (Szörény). In 1552, following two brutal campaigns, the towns of Timișoara and Lipova were occupied by the Ottomans. The eastern parts of nowadays Banat, the mountain areas surrounding the towns of Caransebeș and Lugoj were integrated in the autonomous Principality of Transylvania. In the 16th and 17th centuries, this territory was organized as Banate of Caransebeș and Lugoj, a frontier structure, superimposed over county of Severin and the district of Caransebeș³.

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¹ Nicolae Drăganu, *Mihail Halici. Contribuție la istoria culturală românească din sec. XVII*, “Dacoromania”, IV (1924–1926), p. 84.

² Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Cititori și biserici din Țara Hațegului până la 1700*, Satu Mare, Editura Muzeului Sătmărean, 1997, p. 32–33, 43–44.

³ Adrian Magina, *At the Border of Transylvania: the County of Severin/ the District of Caransebeș in the 16th–17th Centuries*, “Transylvanian Review”, supl. 4 (2013), p. 295–306.

Since the Middle Age the Romanian population was mainly situated in the mountainous area of the territory, a zone gravitating towards two small urban centres (*oppida*), Caransebeş and Lugoj namely⁴. Both of them gathered the local noble élite, the city of Caransebeş being named a *rezidenza di nobili* by a Jesuit in the 16th century⁵. It is worth lingering over the local confessional estate as it influenced a certain identity construction. Beginning with the 14th century, under the legislation of the Hungarian king Louis of Anjou, the Romanian aristocracy chose the Roman Catholic Church in order to keep their estate and privileges. The converting to Catholic Church process of the nobles and urban citizens of Caransebeş and Lugoj ended sometimes in the 15th century, and they formed two of the few compact Catholic communities of a Romanian origin⁶. Obviously, it had that the religious service develop in Latin, but the high society didn't renounce entirely to certain cultural Slavonic formulae, as proved by some notes on old documents⁷. The Roman confession didn't lead at all to ethnic and linguistic identity losing. A Jesuit testimony from 1586 comes to confirm that only a few people within Caransebeş Catholic community spoke Hungarian, so that the respective missionary might preach into Romanian⁸. Important indicators on the fact that the Romanians became aware of their Latin origin and affiliation with the values of Rome are the testimonies registered beginning with the 16th century. And what could be more significant than the answer received by the Jesuit missionary, Marino de Bonis, when asking the inhabitants of the Secăşeni village about their origin: *Yos de Roma* [I'm from Rome]⁹. The Protestant ideas promoted in Caransebeş since 1560's overlapped that already existing consciousness of the Latin origin. The Calvinist offer came as a counterproposal to the Catholic one, as the main direction was usage of the Romanian language within the religious ceremonies. The local Reformed community tried to draw her own identity, capable to irrevocably dissociate her from the Catholic tradition. Under such circumstances, the community allayed to the existing standards, laid stress upon the congregation members' teaching to read and write by school means, and followed a cultural programme concerning the confessional books editing (the most notable example is that of the 1648 Catechism publishing, work of a deep impact on the identity construction of the local community)¹⁰. The ethnic identity preserving by language stressed in Caransebeş when initiating the Jesuit mission led by George Buitul, a missionary of a Romanian origin¹¹. He strongly sustained in his first letter to Curia, in 1626, that he needed to renew his

⁴ About the two towns and their role see: Pesty Frigyes, *A szörényi bánág és Szörény vármegye története*, vol. II, Budapest, 1878, p. 115–269, and *Krassó vármegye története*, vol. I, Budapest, 1884, p. 315–409.

⁵ *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. II, ed. Maria Holban, M. M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu, Bucureşti, Ed. Ştiinţifică, 1970, p. 557.

⁶ Viorel Achim, *Catolicismul la românii din Banat în Evul Mediu*, RI, s.n., VII, nr. 1–2 (1996), p. 41–55.

⁷ One example is the name of Stephen Gârlişte (Грالیште Стефан) written with Cyrillic script on the back of a document at the end of the 16th century: Costin Feneşan, *Documente medievale bănăţene (1440–1653)*, Timişoara, Facla, 1981, p. 103.

⁸ *Călători străini despre Țările Române*, vol. III, ed. Maria Holban, M. M. Alexandrescu-Dersca Bulgaru, Paul Cernovodeanu, Bucureşti, Ed. Ştiinţifică, 1971, p. 121.

⁹ *Erdélyi és hódoltsági jezsuita missziók*, vol. I/2 (1616–1625), ed. Mihály Balázs, Ádám Fricsy, László Lukács, István Monok, Szeged, 1990, p. 367: “Professano di esser discesi dagi' antichi Romani, come credo che sia stata anticamente una colonia de Romani. Quando gli si domanda di che paese sono, rispondono: yos de Roma. Il parlar loro chiamano lingua romagnasca. La fede loro dicono essere del Papa di Roma. La verità é che hanno assai parole latine e italiane, ma sono gente fierissima”.

¹⁰ Adrian Magina, *De la excludere la coabitare. Biserici tradi'ionale, Reformă și Islam în Banat (1500–1700)*, Cluj-Napoca, Academia Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2011, p. 82–115.

¹¹ For the role of Jesuits in Caransebeş, see: Antal Molnár, *Jesuita misszió Karánsebesen (1625–1642)*, “Történelmi Szemle”, 41 (1999), p. 127–156.

Romanian acknowledges in order to complete his missionary purpose¹². The linguistic element was essential in the Catholic Church re-positioning in the town. The companion of George Buitul, priest Ștephen Mako, who had no acknowledges *di lingua valacha*, for instance, was obliged to limit himself to domestic questions and not to involve in pastoral activity¹³. In order to fulfill a vacuum and to counteract the Calvinist propaganda, Buitul translated Peter Canisius' Catechism in Romanian, a necessary step to promote the confessional identity using the catechetic writings¹⁴. Those two rival churches existence stimulated them in definite their own confessional identity. Even if at the dogma level there were visible differences between the Roman Catholic Church adepts and those ones of the Calvinist Church, a common element still existed to allow dialogue and cohabitation. And that was usage of the Romanian language in church. The mission failure was put out when some missionaries who didn't know the vernacular came to replace Buitul and Ioan Sebesi, both of them originated from Caransebeș. In 1642, two years after Sebesi's death, the Jesuit mission ended, the linguistic hindrance between community and missionaries being one of the reasons of its end¹⁵. On the other side, the Reformed community called on preachers from the Principality of Transylvania, able to celebrate in Romanian and to intensify the Protestant propaganda in town. What recommended the preachers were their linguistic competences, so that their installation in Caransebeș and Lugoj was not at all a fortuitous one. Between 1642, the year of Jesuit mission abolishment, and 1658 when the highland area of the Banat was occupied by Ottomans, the local community succeeded to compel recognition as an exemplary one for all the Calvinist Romanians in the Principality of Transylvania¹⁶.

The conquest of the Highland Banat by Ottomans in 1658 led to the Catholic or Calvinist nobles and urban citizens' migration to the other areas of the Principality of Transylvania, especially Hunedoara County. But the fatherland leaving meant not in the least a destruction of the former identity construction. Mirage of the lost country was the mean reason that determined the refugees to keep their ethnic and linguistic estate when referring to other Transylvanian inhabitants¹⁷. So we could explain why the Hungarian nobleman Miklós Bethlen, when meeting Mihail Halici jr. in Netherlands, treated him for a wild Wallachian, who kept from Hungarians as from poison¹⁸. Besides his poem I've spoken about, the same Halici did not hesitate to sign different acts using the triple formula: *nobilis* (for his social estate), *valachus/romanus* (for his ethnic affiliation), *de Karansebes* or *in Banatu Severinensi* (for his geographic origin, even if the city was since long in the Ottomans hands, as he used to say eloquently)¹⁹. His case is far from being a particular one as a similar situation can be find within numerous

¹² This letter, still unpublished, is preserved in Arhivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Roma, Austria, vol. 20, 397–398; comments and excerpts of that in: Livia Magina, *Imprimări religioase la frontiere instabile: George Buitul și orașele din sudul Transilvaniei (sec. XVII)*, "Banatica", 25 (2015), p. 98: "iam enim sat commode linguam vallachicam recuperavi in qua addisceada iam parva temporis ac laboris consumpti".

¹³ Molnár, *Jezuita misszió*, p. 143; Adrian Magina, *In Karansebes patres Societatis Iesu evangelizant. Misionarii*, în "Studii bănețene", Timișoara/Reșița, Ed. Mirton, 2007, p. 163–164.

¹⁴ Doru Radosav, *Cultură și umanism în Banat: secolul XVII*, Timișoara, Ed. de Vest, 2003, p. 129.

¹⁵ A. Magina, *De la excludere*, p. 105–106; Molnár, *Jezuita misszió*, p. 152–155; L. Magina, *Imprimări religioase*, p. 100–102.

¹⁶ Magina, *De la excludere*, p. 107–112.

¹⁷ Adrian Magina, *Mirajul patriei pierdute. Ocuparea Caransebeșului de către otomani în memoria locuitorilor săi*, în *SMIM*, 37 (2019), p. 185–194.

¹⁸ Levente Nagy, *Confluente lexicografice româno-maghiare din secolul al XVII-lea (Lexicon Marsilianum și contele Miklós Bethlen)*, "Dacoromania", 5–6 (2000–2001), p. 255.

¹⁹ Károly Köllő, *Szemponok ifjú Halici Mihály 1674 utáni életútjának, Németsalföldi és Anglia munkásságának felderítéséhez*, "Nyelv- és irodalomtudományi közlemények", XXII, nr. 2 (1978), p. 192–193.

communities of refugees from the Highland Banat, which refused their integration to the structures of Transylvania as they did not like to renounce to the Romanian language use. The Calvinist Romanians from Highland Banat refugees in Deva sent in 1689 a letter to the prince asking deliberately for a preacher with Romanian competences, contrary they would be obliged to call on Catholic or Orthodox one, as those confessions offered their access to the divine ceremonies in their mother language²⁰. Other people from Caransebeș and Lugoj established at Bărăbași (village of *Borband* in Hungarian), county of Alba, had to face a similar dilemma. Irrespective of their confessional color (Catholic or Protestant, that community being a joint one), they intensively asked for a priest speaking Romanian, so that no desertion should interfere in support of the denomination ready to use the vernacular²¹. By the end of 17th century, the linguistic factor began having the precedence in deciding upon language or confession, and they preferred to convert themselves to another religion if using Romanian in church, than losing such a specific treasure. There is but a step from the linguistic factor to the ethnic one. Even they did not sustain it anywhere, by their consequent appealing to the language values, the people originating in the Highland Banat hugged in fact a certain ethnic specificity, which can be identified in a first moment just by the vernacular usage.

In conclusion, I think that the national feeling developed incipiently along the 17th century, due to the two confessions trying that their flock become aware of their confessional affiliation, first of all based on promoting the Romanian language in the church.

The refugees especially availed themselves of the linguistic factor beyond any religious option. They did prefer converting to another confession which officiated using the vernacular, exclusively in order to keep their ethnic and linguistic specificity. The two churches trying to build a confessional identity evolved towards prefiguring a national consciousness based on the local attachment to linguistic values. Mihai Halici jr. proved by his attitude and way to relate to language and ethnic group, that the idea of nationality – as an ethnic and linguistic corpus – began to appear incipiently within the elite society at least. The great achievement of the Romanian Catholic or Reformed communities living in the Banat was that they succeeded to transfer the concept of the national identity from that of a confessional identity.

No further on, in the 18th century the Romanian Greek Catholic master minds in Transylvania came to coagulate the idea of nation around linguistic, historic and confessional factors²², but saying nothing of those who had prefigured it, considering that they had been, due to their confessional options, some cases apart from the large Romanian community. The Greek Catholic and Orthodox intelligentsia, as assuming the identity construction under the circumstances of the national alternative, launched the idea of a long career in the Romanian historiography that it cannot be a Romanian national identity besides the two churches.

²⁰ The letter was published by George Bariț, *Părți alese din istoria Transilvaniei. Pe 200 de ani în urmă*, vol. I, 2nd edition, Brașov, 1993, p. 709–710.

²¹ Pavel Binder, *Contribuții la studierea factorilor interni în problema dezvoltării scrisului în limba română (secolele XVI–XVII) (Momente din istoria culturală a satului Bărăbași)*, “Apulum”, 20 (1982), p. 175–183.

²² The role of Greek-Catholic intelligentsia in coagulating Romanian national idea is analysed by Remus Câmpean, *Intelectualitatea română din Transilvania în veacul al XVIII-lea* (Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1999) and *Elitele românești din Transilvania veacului al XVIII-lea* (Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000).

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(16th–17th CENTURIES)
(Summary)

Keywords: Caransebeș, Romanians, Banat, Catholic Church, Reformation.

The author think that the national feeling developed incipiently along the 17th century, due to the two confessions trying that their flock become aware of their confessional affiliation, first of all based on promoting the Romanian language in the church. The refugees especially availed themselves of the linguistic factor beyond any religious option. They did prefer converting to another confession which officiated using the vernacular, exclusively in order to keep their ethnic and linguistic specificity. The two churches trying to build a confessional identity evolved towards prefiguring a national consciousness based on the local attachment to linguistic values. Mihai Halici jr. proved by his attitude and way to relate to language and ethnic group, that the idea of nationality – as an ethnic and linguistic corpus – began to appear incipiently within the elite society at least. The great achievement of the Romanian Catholic or Reformed communities living in the Banat was that they succeeded to transfer the concept of the national identity from that of a confessional identity. No further on, in the 18th century the Romanian Greek Catholic master minds in Transylvania came to coagulate the idea of nation around linguistic, historic and confessional factors, but saying nothing of those who had prefigured it, considering that they had been, due to their confessional options, some cases apart from the large Romanian community. The Greek Catholic and Orthodox intelligentsia, as assuming the identity construction under the circumstances of the national alternative, launched the idea of a long career in the Romanian historiography that it cannot be a Romanian national identity besides the two churches.