

Unruly Borderlands: Border-making, Peripheralization, and Layered Regionalism in Post-WWI Maramureş and the Banat

The Maramureş (Máramaros) and Banat (Bánság) regions of dualist Hungary were classic borderlands with markedly different characteristics. While both zones were multiethnic, the former was a mountainous, backward, and agricultural area. The latter was one of the richest and most industrialized of the country, with thriving cities and a developed economy. While social life in Maramureş was dominated by interethnic and trans-religious noble kins, who ruled over Ruthenian- and Romanian-speaking peasants and Orthodox Jews, the Banat had a diverse yet stratified society defined by a landowning aristocracy, urban bourgeoisie, families of military descent, immigrant worker groups, and a multiethnic peasantry. These regions had very different roles and positions within Austria-Hungary and were ruled in a differentiated way. The new boundaries that were drawn after the First World War resituated these areas: new centres emerged, new elites came to dominate in the successor states, and the new state borders cut previously existing economic and social ties. Both Maramureş and the (Romanian) Banat were relocated in terms of space, economy, and society. The once economically central and self-supporting Banat became dependent on a central government that aimed at its political subordination, which generated strong regionalist political currents. Maramureş became the most peripheral area of the new state, and the local elites had to rely on resources provided by the centre. Divided among themselves, Maramureş regionalists, Transylvanian regionalists, and centralizers competed for favour in Bucharest, creating unexpected alignments within the framework of a layered type of regionalism, and offering diverging visions of the regions' futures.

Keywords: Austria-Hungary, imperial rule, regionalism, centre-periphery relations, interwar Romania

From the perspective of statehood, the most defining characteristic of the end of the First World War in East-Central Europe was disintegration. While the new borders drawn at the Paris Peace Conferences sanctioned the territorial extents of successor states that faced the challenges of (re)integrating people, institutions, and often disparate lands, for those living in these areas the primary experience was one of the loss of almost all integrating features of an imperial form of statehood. The most prominent manifestation of this unexpected “release” from the “chains” of empire was the sudden appearance of all kind of small republics in areas where people had not been considered mature enough for political participation by the previous imperial elites. Subsequent state-building efforts were therefore not just attempts at reform within a gradual process of transformation based on the principle of nation-statehood. They represented rather significant—one may even say radical—breaks from a past marked by centuries-old institutional traditions.

Part of this break was—besides the importance of the new guiding principle of nation-statehood—the effect that the new borders had on local and regional societies. With all their divisive consequences, with the generation of new borderland spaces on both sides of the new border, and with all the new forms of trans-border connections that emerged, they resulted in a relocation of these areas in a reconfigured space defined by the institutions of the new states. But however significant this break with the imperial past seemed, the practical outcomes of such depended on the legacies of the past.¹ Regional societies were not washed clean of their pasts, no matter the pretensions of the new ruling national elites. Additionally, both what these societies lost and what they preserved influenced their future positions in economic, social, cultural, political, and

¹ See Hirschhausen, “A New Imperial History?” Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*. Egry, “Negotiating Post-Imperial”.

symbolic terms. The impact of imperial legacies was often not direct or easily discernible. The goal of this article is to reveal at least one of its aspects: the consequences of peripheralization processes before and after the new boundaries were set, with special attention given to how the border changes affected political regionalism(s).

The argument starts with the imperial characteristics of dualist Hungary. The Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy is often seen simply as a nationalizing state that differed significantly from the truly imperial Cisleithania. Contrary to this assumption, Hungary was ruled via a system that resembled imperial rule² and was reflected in the variety of relations between the centre and its multiple peripheries. Thus, it was not primarily the economy, culture, or the gradually unified institutional setting of the country that defined the peripheries within it, but rather local and national politics, which were still influenced by the pre-1848 and pre-1867 regimes. From this perspective, the thriving Banat was just as much a periphery as backward Maramureş (Máramaros) or Subcarpathian Rus.

Seen from a similarly broad angle, not much changed after 1918. Greater Romania, although nominally a unitary nation-state, struggled to bring together its disparate provinces. The energetic centralizing measures preferred by the National Liberal governments met with opposition from (at least some) regional elites with markedly different socializations. Regionalism at the level of the new provinces (Transylvania taken together with the Banat, Maramureş, Crişana, Bessarabia, and Bucovina) became the order of the day and fuelled strong political currents. However, the conflicts

² It was differentiated rule, based on the co-optation of various local and regional elites. See Hirschhausen, "A New Imperial History?" 741–742. Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 8–10.

that such regionalisms generated were more conditioned by the relationship between Bucharest and the acquired territories as a whole and less by local circumstances.³

Nevertheless, the actual political, social, and cultural circumstances contained within a smaller area were not insignificant, especially in terms of how these smaller regions fared after 1918. The social fabrics and the resulting social hierarchies, habits, and customs were part of the very legacies that conditioned reactions to the new state-building developments, a new turn in peripheralization. While the Romanian Maramureş remained a backward periphery, the Banat, prior to 1918 an economically and culturally developed area, lost its relatively favourable status—a change that had broad consequences. Thus, when looking at the politics and the symbolic roles and positions of these areas, the impact of the new borders on their societies and economies (including the fate of ethnic minorities) is considered as a significant factor *together* with the legacies of dualist Hungary.

The comparison of two zones disparate in economic and social terms is essential for my analysis. I argue that, despite both of these regions being political peripheries, the trajectories of the Banat and Maramureş differed greatly. In and after 1918 they were relocated in an abstract sense and exposed to further peripheralization. Furthermore, dualist and imperial legacies had a significant impact on both this process and the reaction of local elites. As both regions had been and remained peripheries in political terms, ruled or managed in a similar manner from Budapest, the differences and similarities of their trajectories in Greater Romania offer clues to understanding the role of the new boundaries (including how they shaped new state architectures) and their legacies.

³ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics*; Kühner-Wielach, *Siebenbürgen ohne Siebenbürger?*; Hirschhausen et al., *Phantomgrenzen*; Cusco, *A Contested Bordeland.*; Suveica, *Basarabia în primul deceniu interbelic.*

Two (Sub-)Imperial Peripheries?

Dualist Hungary was a “problematic” part of the Habsburg Monarchy, and the Compromise (Ausgleich) of 1867 only aggravated the situation. While the Austrian half of the empire remained a conglomerate of institutionally separated provinces with provincial legislations, Hungary, with the exception of Croatia, became a unified state after 1872, the elimination of the territorial separation of the border regiments, the militarized territorial units along the Ottoman border under direct control of the Viennese authorities. Meanwhile, the Hungarian parliament passed a series of laws aiming at the unification of the judiciary and the public administration, effectively creating the framework of a uniform nation-state. Thus, it is customary to see Austria-Hungary as a composite empire of two different states, one properly imperial and the other a nation-state (or would-be nation state).

But despite the palpable processes of unification and nationalizing,⁴ a closer look reveals that even at the beginning of the twentieth century Hungary retained characteristics that are familiar from the imperial setup. What are these characteristics of imperial polities that are crucial for the argument of this article? First, empires are composite states, the result of acquiring territories with diverse legal and political traditions that are not transformed into a uniform state. Furthermore, empires typically employ differentiated rule, a method of exerting the power of the metropolitan centre over the peripheries according to the local circumstances. Differentiated rule often entails the co-optation of local and regional elites, who are ready to align with the central power in

⁴ Brubaker, “National Minorities, Nationalizing States”

exchange for retaining their influence at the local level (and sometimes also gaining power at the centre). And empires often use imperial figures, whose loyalty and knowledge makes them suitable for connecting the empire's distant spaces and adjusting the means of the central power to the local context.⁵

Although in 1914 Hungary had only two separate composite parts with some form of administrative separation—Croatia and the *corpus separatum* Fiume—that are rarely taken for being indicative of the state's composite nature, it was a country whose parts were sewn together relatively recently. The Banat was annexed to Hungary in 1778 after serving for six decades as a model of enlightened development policies, including colonization. However, the southern areas of the region between the Maros, Tisza, and Danube rivers remained under direct Viennese military control until 1872. Meanwhile, Transylvania was merged with Hungary in 1867—though some of its legal peculiarities were not eliminated until the Communist period—and the privileged territories of feudal Hungary (like the Szepes/Spis, Jász-Kun district, and the Saxon *Königsboden*) were only gradually eliminated by a series of administrative laws issued through 1876. Some of these bodies were transformed into legally incorporated public communities that administered the resources drawn from vast properties. For instance, the former Romanian border regiments in the Banat, with their seat in the town of Karánsebes/Caransebes, had possessions worth around 40 million Crowns. All these legacies still had an impact on the country four decades after the nominal unification.

The case of Maramureş was more straightforward, the county (and the adjacent ones in the Subcarpathian Rus) having been fully incorporated into the traditional Hungarian county system

⁵ Hirschhausen, "A New Imperial History?"; Hirschhausen and Leonhard, *Empires und Nationalstaaten*; Rolf, "Einführung, Imperiale Biographien"

since the seventeenth century. But it was situated at the very edge of the country, along a road leading to Bukovina and Galicia, just like the Banat was on the border of the Ottoman Empire and its Balkan successor states. Due to its smaller size and more homogeneous natural environment of mountains and river valleys, its economy and society was more uniform than the Banat. But it was a peculiar place, with an unusually high percentage of people with noble origins, among whom the largest number were adherents of the Greek Catholic religion (who spoke Ruthenian and Romanian), and most of its inhabitants, the Jewish population included, were active in agriculture.⁶

By contrast, the Banat was a mini-empire in itself, a kind of “Belgium” of the monarchy, with diverse natural zones, divided into fertile plains in the west and north and mountains in the east and southeast. Because of its composite character, it was defined as a region more by history and politics than by its economic or social features. The fertile plains of Torontál/Torontal and Temes/Timiş counties, dominated by *latifundia*, were complemented by the mining and industrial areas in the south, around Resica/Reșița and Oravica/Oravita, an industrial hub that was born out of the imperial past, owing to the efforts and investments of Viennese companies (such as the *Erste Donau-Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft* and the *Österreichisch-Ungarische Staatseisenbahngesellschaft* [StEG]), which were in need of coal and steel.⁷

The professional distribution of labour reflected the differences in these areas. In the Subcarpathian Rus agriculture dominated, with around 80 per cent of all economically active people in this sector in 1910.⁸ However, Maramureş differed markedly from Bereg and Ung counties, with a lower overall share of industrial labour (10 versus 14 per cent) but a higher proportion of miners (over 1 per cent). Still, Maramureş’s share of the agrarian population was the highest among the three

⁶ See *A magyar szent korona országainak 1910 évi népszámlálása*. vol. 3, 206–7, 218–9, 232–3, 242–3.

⁷ Demeter and Szulovszky, *Területi egyenlőtlenségek* 15–84.

⁸ See *1910 évi népszámlálás* vol. 3, 206–7, 218–9, 232–3, 242–3.

counties. Within the small industrial sector, clothing manufacturing, dominated by home industry, was the largest everywhere. Forestry was second largest in Ung and Maramureş, but only third in Bereg behind food.⁹ Large works operated in the forestry and food processing sectors.

Outside its cities the Banat was very similar. Around or over 80 per cent of the economically active lived from agriculture, while various industries—mining excluded—employed 13 to 15 per cent of the workforce, and in the only county where mining was important, Caraş-Severin/Krassó-Szörény, mining employees made up about 2.5 per cent of the economically active population.¹⁰ But aggregate numbers obscured a different economic structure, in which all sectors of industry were dominated by large and mid-size outfits, with several large factories among them. Torontal County had an important base in its stone, ceramics, and glass industries, with twelve companies employing more than 1,400 workers.¹¹ The iron- and steelworks in Caraş-Severin belonged to the largest in Hungary, and the fourteen works that employed more than 20 people had together around 5,300 employees.¹²

Temesvár/Timişoara,/Temeschwar was the industrial capital of the region, with 15,000 employees (almost 70 per cent of a workforce of around 22,000) busy in its factories. Large companies thrived here at the intersection of all regional supply chains, mainly providing food, clothing, and machinery. The five largest clothing factories employed more than 1,300 workers; the ten largest food factories, more than 2,300; and the five largest machinery producers, nearly 900.

With the thriving city of Timisoara—with its electric street lightning and streetcars, an operable port, a modern theatre, and a goods exchange—at its centre (and the similarly dynamic Arad on

⁹ *1910 évi népszámlálás* vol. 3, 206–7, 218–9, 232–3, 242–3.

¹⁰ *1910 évi népszámlálás* vol. 3, 250–2, 258–9.

¹¹ *1910 évi népszámlálás* vol. 3, 1049.

¹² *1910 évi népszámlálás* vol. 3, 1048.

its natural border, the river Maros),¹³ the Banat had exceptionally strong urban features, a result of the accumulation of capital at an accelerating pace. It was an economic centre in its own right, but well integrated into the commercial and production chains of the monarchy. Its banks operated in partnership with Budapest and Viennese banks, and its industrial companies were aligned with Budapest banks and industrial groups on equal terms. Part of the iron- and steelworks in the south were owned by companies of European significance, such as the Paris- and Vienna-based *Österreichisch-Ungarische Staatseisenbahngesellschaft AG* (StEG). Thus, even a certain internal periphery was created within the Banat, with the north and west dominating the mountainous east and partly exploiting the resources of the industrial south.

In Maramureş (and in the whole Subcarpathian Rus) cities of secondary importance, most notably Sighetul Marmatiei/Máramarossziget, were not capable of acting as drivers of rural modernization. The cities in the river valleys and on the edge of the Great Plains were natural centres of the mountain areas as marketplaces and administrative and educational hubs, but the persisting traditional forms of agriculture and the state-owned mines (for salt and precious metals) were not conducive to the greater accumulation of capital.¹⁴

Regional Societies

As a result of these markedly distinct economies and their different histories, the social fabrics in the regions were also dissimilar, and not just in terms of the above-mentioned professional

¹³ Gál, “A helyi bankok aranykora”; Gál, *The Golden Age of Local Banking*

¹⁴ Balaton, “The Role of the Hungarian Government”; Demeter and Szulovszky, *Területi egyenlőtlenségek* 85–116; Oroszi, “A magyar kormány”.

distribution of the workforce. With agriculture still the most important economic sector, the distribution of land was key to social stratification and relations in all geographic areas. All land had once been noble or royal property, but since 1848 noblemen (including *latifundia*-owning aristocrats) retained only a part of their estates and the weight of the large landed properties gradually declined. Still, around the turn of the twentieth century it remained the dominant form of ownership. According to the official statistics from 1900, the share of large landed property (over 1000 cadastral acres) from the land used for agriculture varied from 20 (Caraş-Severin) to 48 per cent (Bereg). The share of the other sizable category, property between 5 and 100 cadastral acres, varied from 61 (Timiş, Torontal) to 17 per cent (Caraş-Severin).¹⁵ Most people living from agriculture had to contend with a minuscule plot.

But the overall numbers concealed important differences. In the mountain areas of both regions, forests were owned by *latifundia*, and in these zones ploughland and meadows were mainly divided among mid-sized farms hardly large enough to make a decent living from. Especially not in Maramureş, where the soil was mediocre at best. The significance of forests, on the other hand, lay not just in the profit potential they offered. For the traditional rural economy, they were a source of heating and building material, and the rights for pasture and grazing on these lands allowed people to practice husbandry. With the elimination of feudal rights, the latter became contested and a source of conflict and permanent grievance in the mountain regions.¹⁶ In the southern Banat, the domain of the former border regiments made these resources more accessible for all inhabitants through a governing public body composed of the elected delegates of all former

¹⁵ *A magyar korona országainak mezőgazdasági statisztikája*, vol. 3. Bereg is detailed on p. 47, Ung on p. 52, Máramaros on p. 59, Krassó-Szörény on p. 68, Temes on p. 69 and Torontál on p. 72.

¹⁶ For data on husbandry, see *ibid.* On the problems of traditional agricultural methods, see Oroszi, "A magyar kormány".

border communities, reducing social tensions in this regard.¹⁷ Some form of community property was customary in Maramureş too, but it was never organized into such huge holdings, leaving individual communities to deal with their own issues, including the conflicts that arose with the larger landowners.

The plains of the Banat were entirely different. Not only were large parcels of plough land profitably managed by their owners or renters, but owing to the legacy of the organized colonization, mid-sized farms were more numerous, larger, and more profitable here. In Torontál their average size was over 18 cadastral acres (including 17 cadastral acres of tillage), in Temes, over 16 cadastral acres (13 cadastral acres tillage).¹⁸ Such conditions produced a well-to-do peasantry that, together with the broadening urban society of Timișoara and the larger cities, including educated people who could work for the commercial or industrial companies, was the basis of a new type of middle class. In opposition to this was Subcarpathian Rus, dominated by the nobility, where financial services, for example, predominantly meant loans from Jewish moneylenders.

Once-privileged groups remained, however, important within society in both regions. In the northeast the local nobility retained its dominance over politics and the administration.¹⁹ In Maramureş the number of people with some form of title or privilege before 1848 was extremely high—around 20 per cent²⁰—and their ranks were not limited to Hungarians. Around 80 per cent of the Romanians who lived south of the Tisza were ennobled individually or collectively. North of the Tisza, Ruthenians, mostly former serfs, were the majority. During the era of neoabsolutism

¹⁷ Roşu, “Exploatarea”; Marin, *The Formation and Allegiance*; Marin, *Contested Frontiers*.

¹⁸ *A magyar korona országainak mezőgazdasági statisztikája*, vol. 3, 69, 72.

¹⁹ Cieger, “Érdekek és stratégiák”.

²⁰ Bélay, *Máramaros megye* 107.

and the transitional early 1860s, a group of educated Ruthenians held administrative offices, and their misrule facilitated an alliance of the Romanian and Hungarian nobility that lasted until the end of the First World War.²¹ But Ruthenian noblemen were not excluded from family relations, and the local noble kin were intricately connected with each other. These local nobles monopolized the county administration, where Greek Catholics of Romanian and Ruthenian mother tongue easily found employment.²² Even their education was firmly in local hands, as the Calvinist law college operating from the county seat, Sighetul Marmației, could issue the necessary degrees, and it was attended by a significant number of Greek Catholic students.²³ With no modern middle class challenging them, these noble families held on firmly to their dominant position.

The situation in Caraș-Severin was somewhat similar. In the south, the military organization of the border regiments exempted inhabitants from feudal rule, and compulsory education fostered the emergence of a small but not insignificant group of Romanian officers and educated intellectuals.²⁴ With the backing of the forest domains they could retain important positions within the county administration too,²⁵ while the presence of an Orthodox (Caransebeș) and a Greek Catholic (Lugoj/Lugos/Lugosch) bishopric, accompanied by the usual ecclesiastical institutions, further improved their material and intellectual position. Finally, some of the landowning aristocrats, such as the Mocioni/Mocsonyi family, were also of Romanian origins, while the growing number of non-Romanian workers without suffrage rights did not pose an immediate threat.

In the other counties of the Banat, the developing modern middle and working classes made deeper changes to the social structure more realistic. Nevertheless, upward mobility into the middle

²¹ Deák, “Vizsgálat egy megyei”; Filipascu, *Istoria Maramureșului*, 181–8.

²² Cieger, “Érdekek és stratégiák”.

²³ Balogh, *A máramaroszigeti református lyceum* 102–4.

²⁴ Marin, *The Formation*; Marin, *Contested Frontiers*.

²⁵ Jakabffy, “Krássó-Szörény vármegye” 382–93.

classes was conditioned on loyalty to Hungary and often entailed acculturation. The emerging political figures of the cities adhered to the Hungarian national idea, even though economic growth offered resources for rival groups too.²⁶ But until the early twentieth century these rival currents, including Romanian and Serbian nationalism, did not pose a credible threat to the supremacy of the Banat elite, and even prominent Romanians and Serbians were aligned with the parties that dominated Hungarian politics.²⁷

Regional Politics

This attraction to new political currents for a growing number of people who were not existentially dependent on the state represented perhaps the key difference in how the centre-periphery relationships of Maramureş and the Banat evolved in political terms on the eve of the First World War. The liberal governing party dominated politics and parliamentary elections in both regions until 1905. In the Banat it was the aristocratic landowners and the local nobility who dominated county congregations, acted on behalf of the government, and were most often elected to parliament, especially in Caraş-Severin.²⁸ In Maramureş the local nobility concluded an agreement with the government. The Romanian Mihali family retained one seat in the parliament, ultimately held by Petru (Péter) Mihali Jr., while the other five were reserved for candidates of national prominence, ministers, and state secretaries. In exchange, the government designated the lord

²⁶ Borsi-Kálmán, *Öt nemzedék*.

²⁷ Jakabffy, “Krássó-Szörény vármegye”, 382–93; Iudean, “Între sentiment naţional”.

²⁸ Iudean, “From Budapest to Bucharest”.

lieutenants (government representatives and increasingly the acting heads of the county administration) from Maramureş noble families.²⁹

The situation was upended by new political developments around the turn of the century. First, a new Romanian nationalist political activism challenged pro-Hungarian Romanian politicians.³⁰ Second, the liberals suffered their first and only electoral defeat in 1905 at the hands of the pro-independence opposition. In Maramureş the threat of Romanian nationalism and the loss of orientation led to the merger of all Hungarian parties with the justification that, unless all Hungarian parties offered a united front and showed tolerance of the other nationalities, the Romanian majority of voters would elect non-Hungarian members of parliaments (MPs).³¹

In the Banat the situation was more complicated and varied from county to county. In the 1905 elections, 21 of the elected MPs had local origins, and two MPs were born outside the Banat but had developed careers within the region. In Torontal most of the elected MPs held large domains, while in Timiş the group was divided between educated intellectuals and landowners, and in Caraş-Severin all of them were educated intellectuals, although two of them were also large landowners.³² The number of MPs of local origins fell to 14 in the next year, and six MPs came from outside the region but had a career at the local or county level in the Banat. The group of landowners shrank to four from eight. Four of the MPs of local origins were candidates of the Romanian National Party (RNP). Four years later, when the re-established liberal party returned

²⁹ Deák, “Vizsgálat egy megyei”, 174; Filipescu, *Istoria Maramureşului*, 181–8; Cieger, “Érdekek és stratégiák”

³⁰ Filipescu, *Istoria Maramureşului*, 181–8.

³¹ Dr. Gergely, *A hódmezővásárhelyen működőI*, 9. The initiator of the united party, László Nyegre (Vailse Neagru) later became lord lieutenant.

³² I took the data from the series *Országgyűlési Almanach*. See also Iudean, “From Budapest to Bucharest”.

to power in 1910, seventeen MPs with local roots were elected and only one of foreign provenance with a local career: Béla Tallián, who won his seat in 1905 and 1906 too.

It is thus plausible to say that the fall of the liberals was partly facilitated by the success of political personalities who came to the region and built successful careers. The RNP successfully captured Romanian voters in Caraş-Severin in 1906, but failed in Temes. In 1910 the liberal candidates were locally dominant figures from the landed elite (the number of landowner MPs rose to 13) and new Romanian figures with strong institutional positions and standing within the Romanian community.³³ They were so strongly embedded in the local Romanian community that prominent RNP figures from the county refused to run, being convinced that such competition would be futile. Finally, the RNP had to select Aurel Vlad, a national hero from Huniad/Hunyad County, for Caransebeş, who duly lost against the local pro-government Constantin Burdia, the chair of the Border Community funds. It is telling of Burdia's position within the local Romanian society that he even attempted to find a counter-candidate for another pro-government Romanian candidate, Géza Duka. Nicolae Ionescu, Burdia's prospective candidate of choice, would have run representing the RNP.³⁴ Thus, the liberals reclaimed political dominance with the help of the traditional elite and the aspiring new Romanian political figures against the educated and nationally minded middle classes that started to make waves in politics, minority and Hungarian alike. In Caraş-Severin this alliance with Budapest pointed to a self-colonizing relationship much like in Maramureş. Pro-government Romanians who promised the resolution of practical issues always emphasized that it could only happen with the government's support.³⁵

³³ Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye" 388–9.

³⁴ Iudean, "The Romanian Parliamentary Elite" 50-3.

³⁵ Iudean, "The Romanian Parliamentary Elite" 54.

The government sent different types of lord lieutenants to manage these counties. In Caraş-Severin, which had a sizable and politically influential Romanian population, the government usually installed lord lieutenants who did not have many local contacts or roots, whereas the representatives sent to Timiş mostly held strong local ties. The ones selected for Torontal, the county where electoral politics was dominated by large landowners, were almost always strongly connected with the county and often held domains there.³⁶

These patterns point to the most prominent imperial feature of dualist Hungary: differentiated rule. Governments of all colours needed to co-opt some of the local elites for handling the diverse country, but just whom to engage with and how depended on the actual local context. Torontal County was defined by modern and efficient agriculture that made local large landholders dominant, but the county lacked a modern urban centre like Timiş, where Timişoara's urban society and wealth offered the most favourable conditions for the emergence of a new middle class produced through modern education.³⁷ Finally, in Caraş-Severin the local nobility, armed with law degrees, pursued typical careers in the administration, while the considerable Romanian population was (until 1905, but again in 1910) mobilized with the help of Romanian figures of authority. Facing the threat of Romanian nationalist dominance in the region in 1910, István Tisza attempted to foster a compromise along the lines of the one made with the Maramureş Romanians, but it was rejected, compelling him to return to the proven method, namely to help the pro-government Romanian candidates with administrative support and deny representation for the Romanian nationalists.³⁸ However, his success failed to bring reconciliation with either of his political challengers.

³⁶ Balázs, "A középszintű közigazgatási apparátus" 121.

³⁷ See Pálffy, "The Dislocated Transylvanian".

³⁸ Jakabffy, "Krassó-Szörény vármegye" 388–9.

By contrast, the Maramureş elites accepted a self-colonizing relationship, providing political support and safe seats to whichever government was in power. In exchange, they received material support and a free hand in the local administration.³⁹ However, they lacked the incentive to pursue a more general developmental effort and the government had to intervene directly. The so-called “Mountain Action” (*Hegyvidéki Akció*) had dual goals: to modernize Ruthenian communities that were without plough land and under pressure from the rapidly industrializing forestry industry and Jewish middlemen, and to turn the nationally indifferent into loyal Hungarian subjects.⁴⁰ (Another obvious political undertone of the effort was antisemitism, as it mainly targeted the Jewish shopkeepers and moneylenders, and the head of the Action, Ede Egan explicitly connected it with the “Jewish question”.⁴¹) To achieve these ends, a permanent delegation of the Ministry of Agriculture started education programmes, initiated projects aimed at land amelioration, introduced new methods of husbandry to replace the traditional rural economy based on the mountain forests, and more. Thus, the government turned to a more explicit understanding of its role in a civilizational mission, one that was akin to that found in colonial contexts.

Peripheries in a Quasi-Empire?

During the First World War the loyalty of the majority of the non-Hungarian population generally held until the end of hostilities. Despite instances of revolution and violence, as well as attempts to establish small republics, the fate of both regions was decided at the peace conferences, not least

³⁹ For example for the Calvinist lyceum and law school. *A máramarosszigeti ref. lyceum, jogakadémia, főgimnázium.*

⁴⁰ Balaton, “The Role of the Hungarian”

⁴¹ Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés* 353-6

because they were contested by allied contenders. The Supreme Council had to figure out how to demarcate territory between the claims of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and Romania in the Banat, and between Czechoslovakia and Romania in Maramureş.⁴² However, while the struggle for the Banat was used to marshal public sentiment and conferred symbolic importance on the area,⁴³ the “Maramureş question” remained mainly a local concern.

Neither region remained politically whole, although the consequences of their division were different. In Maramureş a line drawn basically along the Tisza River left a few tens of thousands of Romanian speakers under Czechoslovak sovereignty, but the economic consequences of such border-drawing were more muted and rather indirect: traditional lines of communication and commerce were cut, which affected the small businesses often based on short-distance trade and services. But the region’s dependence on the centre’s resources was not changed. By contrast, the peace treaty dividing the Banat detached the larger part of the fertile agricultural lands from the Romanian Banat, while leaving the centre of the region, Timișoara, with Romania. Given that before 1918 the Banat’s broader economic and social integration was facilitated by multiple links with Budapest, Vienna, and further European markets, the reoriented centre-periphery relationship with the new capital of Bucharest was not the only significant realignment. Just as important were how many of these pre-1918 connections were severed.

With regards to politics in a nationalizing state, Maramureş became ethnically more homogeneous with the removal of the mainly Ruthenian northern parts, even though a sizable rural orthodox Jewish and a small, but not insignificant, German and Hungarian minority remained. The Banat retained its multiethnic character, except that the number of sizable minorities was reduced from

⁴² See Leuștean, *România, Ungaria și Tratatul de la Trianon* 51–9, 187–9; Moscovici, *La France et la Banat*.

⁴³ Novacescu, “Chestiunea Banatului”.

three (Serb, German, and Romanian) to two (Hungarian and German). In political terms, such changes did not make much difference. The German-speaking population and its elite were before 1918 either relatively passive or had aligned themselves with the pro-settlement parties, while with the “dawn of national councils” Banat Swabian politicians had also organized their own political movement, which participated henceforth in politics in its own right.⁴⁴ For Hungarian politicians in both regions, inclusion in the new Romanian state meant the loss of their influence. Some of the non-traditional parties, such as the Social Democrats and peasant parties, had successes in the Banat during the early years of transition, but with the consolidation and institutionalization of Romania’s system of two large parties and many minor ones (the National Liberal and the National Peasant parties being the two largest) around 1926/27, these were sidelined.⁴⁵

As a result, the place of both regions changed significantly in the framework of the new state. Maramureş remained a periphery, but it had lost most of its connected hinterland and was even harder to access from the new capitals. Its economy stalled and the county (just like the Czechoslovak Subcarpathian Rus) remained tethered to mountain agriculture and mineral and timber extraction industries. The development programmes initiated under the Hungarian government did not continue as agrarian reform was supposed to remedy existing problems. The Czechoslovak government later started an energetic development programme that was defined more along the lines of colonization—a civilizing mission in a barbarian world prone to fall to communism.⁴⁶ Backwardness in general was not rolled back, but islands of modernization

⁴⁴ Roth, *Politische Strukturen*.

⁴⁵ On Romanian politics, see Ciuperca, *Opoziția și putere*; Maner, *Parlamentarismus im Rumänien*.

⁴⁶ Fedinec and Vehes, *Kárpátalja, 1919–2009*. 48–90; Paul, “Clash of claims”.

emerged within the region. Without similar measures, Romanian Maramureş remained one of the most underdeveloped areas of the country.⁴⁷

The loss of certain agricultural areas of the Banat was hardly catastrophic for a regional economy based on the export of its manufactured products. More harmful, rather, were the new obstacles for trade with traditional partners in the former Austria-Hungary. Furthermore, the war and the subsequent currency exchange⁴⁸ drained available capital and the new centre was not able to provide a replacement comparable to what had been easy to draw on at the pre-WWI Viennese or Budapest markets. The alleviation of these problems was not helped when the new state and its politicians revealed their intention to take most of the economy into Romanian hands.⁴⁹ In contrast to Maramureş, however, the Banat seemed to be a favourable place for new business, as shown by the difference in the number and stock capital of banks established in both areas between 1919 and 1924 (only one in Maramureş with 566,000 lei; 14 in the Romanian Banat with 25.55 million lei).⁵⁰ Despite these positive signs, a negative tendency was still clear: the Banat turned from an economic centre that enjoyed the benefits of multiple connections within an empire into a periphery of a rather poor new state. The new borders brought a new position too, and a region that was among the most developed of dualist Hungary became backward in comparison to other Central European regions by 1930.⁵¹

But these broad developments indicating decline or standstill again hid a wide range of practical processes in these regions. The agrarian reform that was supposed to deliver justice to millions of

⁴⁷ Demeter and Szulovszky, *Területi egyenlőtlenségek*, 219–54.

⁴⁸ Rigó, “The Long First World War”.

⁴⁹ Bátor, “Dezvoltarea exploatărilor carbonifere”; Rados and Székely, *Közgazdasági évkönyv*; Nemoianu, *Ardeal și Banatul* 15–16.

⁵⁰ Rados and Székely, *Közgazdasági évkönyv* 342–3, 365–83.

⁵¹ Demeter and Szulovszky, *Területi egyenlőtlenségek*, 219–54.

land-hungry peasants soon turned out to be the source of serious political and social conflict. The average lot accorded to peasants was small and most of the new owners lacked the necessary resources to work their fields profitably.⁵² But this hard reality came to bear only gradually, and in the meantime successful attempts by the previous owners to salvage their confiscated property⁵³—often with the complicity of the state—generated scandals and uproar. As for the forests and mountain pastures, crucial in areas like Maramureș, the state was generally reluctant to rescind long-term lease contracts with private companies. It also refused to relinquish state management over forests taken by the Hungarian state from local communities, even in the face of protests by Romanians.⁵⁴

With a large part of Banat forests managed by the border community and fostering a sense of ownership despite the lower quality management than the neighbouring Resița domains, it was less of a political problem than in Maramureș,⁵⁵ where the old enmity between Romanian activists and pro-Hungarian nobility reappeared in debates and mutual accusations over the mismanagement and improper distribution of forests and mountain pastures.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the presence of large industrial works in the Banat was at least as important for reducing social tensions, as people were able to find employment in menial jobs.⁵⁷ Banat society was also affected by the expropriation of *latifundia* and the subsequent loss of social status of the landed nobility and aristocracy, the social group that was crucial to the rule of Hungarian liberals. The Maramureș nobility, which had much smaller holdings, more or less evaded this fate.

⁵² Hausleitner, *Die Rumänisierung*.

⁵³ János, “Hontalanul”.

⁵⁴ Micu, “Viața politică”.

⁵⁵ Roșu, “Exploatarea”.

⁵⁶ See Scrisori din Maramureș.

⁵⁷ Roșu, “Exploatarea”; Nemoianu, “Probleme bănațene” 1159.

The nationalization of “foreign” businesses, a straightforward and neatly executable process in politicians’ imaginations, turned out to be almost impossible in practical terms. Romania was poor in capital even before 1916 (it is telling that within the financial sector it was Transylvanian capital that flowed to Bucharest and not the other way, despite all the alarmist speeches of Hungarian politicians claiming that Romanians were buying up Transylvania) and the war and heavy-handed occupation made things much worse. Romania needed foreign currency reserves to support its leu and banks so badly that the National Bank applied a forced fixed exchange rate on all humanitarian transfers facilitated by the American Relief Administration. It practically meant the expropriation of around one-tenth of every dollar sent by worried émigrés to their relatives.⁵⁸ The Romanian government also refused to hand over a 50 billion USD government bond that it had received as security for war loans after the U.S. entered the war.

Thus, even though the peace treaties enabled the expropriation of enemy individuals, what actually occurred was more restrained and reflected the hard realities of the times: the Bucharest business elite could exert pressure on and gain influence over Transylvanian and Banat companies, but was in no position to overtake and manage them. On the contrary, some of these companies, which grew substantially during the war as strategic companies of war industries, profited from quasi-monopolizing certain production sectors.⁵⁹ The result was more of a gradual co-optation of

⁵⁸ In this scheme the ARA facilitated the collection of donations and money for food packages that were delivered to their addressees in Romania. The money was transferred to the Romanian National Bank in US dollars and disbursed in Romanian lei to the respective individuals or the food warehouses supplying the packages. The fixed exchange rate was lower than the actual market rate and the difference meant net profit – and accumulation of foreign currency reserves. See Archives of the Hoover Institution, American Relief Organization European Operations, box 374., folder 11. contract between the ARA and Romania from February 28, 1919; folder 19. Haskell to Peden May 12, 1919, and May 13, 1919, Haskell to Minister Ferichide May 2, 1919, and Haskell to Paris May 23, 1919, Paris 289 folder 2, Memorandum to Mr Hyslop, October 1, 1919; box 375., folder 7. Memorandum to Herbert Hoover, Paris, April 23, 1919; folder 8. Woodruffe to Sir William Goode, May 4, 1919.

⁵⁹ See the case of the Renner tannery in Cluj. Rigó, “The Long First World War”.

influential politicians and Bucharest capitalists onto the boards of these companies, followed later by co-operation between the original owners and some Romanian business groups.⁶⁰ The most peculiar form of such arrangements was the nominal nationalization of strategic companies, such as coal mine operators in the Jiu Valley and in the Banat, which in reality meant secret arrangements to pay out to the original owners from the real profit of the companies hidden in the falsified accounts after more than a decade—until which point they could, of course, retain the management.⁶¹ Such arrangements prevailed with the important Banat industrial companies without affecting factory management or the labour force. It is hardly surprising that local Romanian nationalist complained that the state was not stopping the influence of “foreign” capital, but instead strengthening its position through the investment of Romanian firms.⁶²

Moreover, the failure to deliver on this important nationalizing promise happened against the backdrop of a rapid decline in the quality of state administration. County autonomy was gradually eliminated and subordinated to the central government, but the central institutions were often oblivious to the existing laws, regulations, customs, and practices in the new territories. Although the continuity of the administrative personnel was significant, the state lacked the necessary resources to staff the new administrative organs and replace Hungarian repatriates. The result was the employment of hastily recruited and trained officials, often without the necessary education and qualifications. Furthermore, the state saw these administrative jobs as an appropriate reward for military officers who left service.⁶³

⁶⁰ Nemoianu, *Ardealul și Banatul* 15–6.

⁶¹ Bátor, “Dezvoltarea exploatărilor carbonifere”. In reality some of these companies were never nationalized, only taken into Romanian ownership by the post-WWII Commission for Administration of Enemy Property (CASBI) and subsequent nationalization.

⁶² Nemoianu, *Ardealul și Banat* 15–9; Neumann, 50–2.

⁶³ Egry, “Unholy Alliances?”. Sora, “Être fonctionnaire ‘minoritaire’”.

Owing to the role Romanian noble families played in the county administration before 1918, Maramureş was less affected by these circumstances. Continuity with the pre-1918 administrative personnel was more than apparent, as key figures of the Hungarian administration were often appointed to the most important roles in the county. Sub-prefects and prefects like Gheorghe Dan, Victor Hodor, or Gavriła Mihali held important positions, such as secretary of the lord lieutenant (a kind of chief of cabinet) and district chiefs (the much-dreaded “főszolgabíró” of Romanian history), respectively, before 1918. But the rapidly expanding Romanian language primary and secondary educational institutions permanently struggled with the shortage of qualified teachers and their peripheral situation. Practically no one wanted to be assigned to a school in the region, and those who were transferred there through emergency measures often left overnight, not least because what they found there was astonishing: a region that appeared more Hungarian than Romanian. Even Maramureş Romanians with proper nationalist credentials behaved like Hungarians!⁶⁴ They attended Hungarian balls and charity events, used Hungarian language in a wide variety of situations, enjoyed Hungarian theatre and music, taught their children Hungarian.

The Banat was somewhat different, although at its internal periphery, in Caraş-Severin, the situation often resembled that in Maramureş, Hungarian, German, and Romanian officials from the dualist administration were carried over at the local level.⁶⁵ Hungarian and German cultural

⁶⁴ Arhivele Naţionale Secţia Judeţeană (ANSJ) Maramureş (MM) Liceul de Fete Domniţa Ileana 2/1921. f. 100; Gazeta Maramureşană, November 2, 1923. 4; Gazeta Maramureşană. October 19, 1923, 3.; Gazeta Maramureşană, no. 18. 1924. p. 3.; ANSJ MM dosar 2/1921, f. 32.; Însemnari cu prilejul şerbărei “Revelionului” în Sighetul Marmaţiei. Gazeta Maramureşană, 18 January, 1924. 3.; For the use of Hungarian within the postal service in the first years of Romanian rule, see also the bilingual address from the Regional Directorate of the Post Office in Oradea to the Administrative Committee of Maramureş county from October 25, 1921. ANSJ MM Prefectura Judeţului Maramureş, inventar 1005. 24/VII/39/1923. f. 2. Barbulescu C[onstan]tin: Atentiune. Gazeta Maramureşană December 28, 1923. 2.; Arhivele Naţionale Istorice Centrale Direcţia Generală a Poliţiei, Arhivele Naţionale Istorice Centrale Bucureşti (ANIC) Direcţia Generală a Poliţiei (DGP) 3/1919-1920. f. 113.

⁶⁵ Egry, “Navigating the Straits”.

traditions dominated in the Banat's cities too,⁶⁶ which led Romanian politicians and intellectuals to try to establish a cultural foothold via new cultural associations and institutions.⁶⁷

However, probably because of its economic significance to the new state and its elites, and the symbolic value of the region after popular passions were whipped up during the diplomatic struggle over the border in 1919, the Banat was more affected by the arrival of new personnel. For the locals, accustomed to the bureaucratic but relatively efficient Hungarian administration, such a shift was akin to a natural catastrophe. In one instance, local notables claimed that the state administration had collapsed in the region because Bucharest's presence and influence led to incredible corruption and negligence. The former—now prevalent among local dignitaries too—was simply justified by reference to the general corruption that reigned within Romania.⁶⁸

Models of Regionalist Politics on the Peripheries of Greater Romania

As demonstrated, Maramureş thus remained a periphery whereas the Banat experienced peripheralization within Greater Romania. For the former, this meant not only the permanent lack of access to resources and the severing of ties with the nearby regions that formed the basis of the local service economy. Being located on the periphery and considered an alien “wilderness” by many Transylvanian and Old Kingdom Romanians meant that not even the necessary human resources were easy for the state to come by. For the Banat, the new position meant being caught

⁶⁶ The *Gazeta Lugoşului* published the statistics of borrowed books in Timişoara from November 1922. Only 594 of the 2,107 books borrowed were Romanian, 430 German and 896 Hungarian. See 28 January, 1923, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Gazeta Lugoşului*, January 28, 1923. 3, February 25, 1923. 3.

⁶⁸ Egry, “Crowding Out” 215.

between the former imperial centres and the new capital, Bucharest, a fact exemplified by the composition of the boards of the largest industrial companies. Important politicians of all colours from the Romanian parties were co-opted, while the arrangements for nationalization effectively meant co-operation between Budapest and Bucharest industrialists and bankers. Some companies could have profited from the new markets, but for the large steel works that previously operated as suppliers for the railway and machinery producers of the monarchy, keeping ties with as many of the successor states as possible was vital for survival. Thus, the Banat could only preserve some of its vitality by avoiding the nationalization of its economy, pursued by most of the Romanian politicians.

It is therefore hardly surprising that apart from the loss of dominance of the Hungarians, whose party henceforth focused on achieving concessions regarding minority rights, the divisions that appeared within the Romanian elite and the emergence of Romanian regionalist tendencies were the most important consequences of the new boundaries. But at the regional and local levels the picture was blurrier, and the different characteristics of peripheral positions together with pre-1918 legacies shaped the specific forms of regionalism present in these zones.

Interwar Romanian regionalism was generally a political idea based on the difference between the Old Kingdom and the new provinces.⁶⁹ It fuelled, in its various forms, political demands for a distinct treatment of these regions, to be maintained either until social coherence was established across the Carpathians, or on a more permanent basis, in the form of separate provincial administrations or even autonomy. Thus, regionalism contested the central role of Bucharest and the primacy of the central government, not to speak of the Old Kingdom elites, which were

⁶⁹ Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics*; Kühner-Wielach, *Siebenbürgen ohne Siebenbürger?*; Hirschhausen et al., *Phantomgrenzen*.

somewhat offhand identified with the National Liberal Party. Proponents of regionalism usually argued that the new provinces had different traditions, were more democratic, and were home to a more authentic Romanianness, and that these political traditions and local circumstances were neglected by Bucharest governments that simply wanted to colonize these lands. From the perspective of Bucharest, such claims were not necessarily false, but these very regional and local specificities were taken not as something worth preserving, but rather as signs of the dubious national character of the area. Therefore, centralization and rapid Romanianization by Old Kingdom Romanians were justified.⁷⁰

Before 1918 both Maramureș and the Banat were distinct regions where social and political accommodation of Hungarian and minority elites, including the local Romanians, helped to stabilize the country. A significant part of the Romanian population of all social strata in these geographic peripheries was co-opted through local and regional institutions into national politics by the governing liberal parties. In the new, staunchly anti-Hungarian Romania, the memory of such commonplace local and regional political arrangements was either decried or suppressed,⁷¹ and all Romanian parties championed some form of ethnic Romanian dominance. Even so, it was not easy to wipe out these traditions overnight. Together with the changing positions of these two regions, these legacies brought about different forms of Romanian regionalism.

After a short interlude between 1919 and 1921, the dominance of the traditional Romanian, Greek Catholic noble families was re-established in Maramureș, palpably demonstrated by the return of the Mihalis to (local) power. Gavrița and Petru Mihali were prefects of the county and MPs in the

⁷⁰ Egry, “An Obscure Object of Desire”.

⁷¹ Octavian, *Biserica catolică și naționalismul. Un răspuns. Gazeta Lugoșului*, January 21, 1923. 1–2, *Preotul Paica, Comunitate de avere. Reflecții*. Ibid. p. 4.

parliament throughout the 1920s and 1930s,⁷² while at the same time they admittedly sought to defend regional interests within the county.⁷³ Astonishingly, they were able to do so as representatives of the centralizing National Liberal Party (PNL) in opposition to the regionalist Romanian National Party (after 1926, the National Peasant Party).

One example concerning primary schools and schoolboards offers a clue as to how they could conclude this paradoxical alliance. In Maramureș County the Greek Catholic Church had a large number of primary schools before 1918 and further church-owned facilities were rented by the state. When Greek Catholic (and Orthodox) schools were nationalized, the church was reluctant to hand them over, and in Maramureș the local elite also intervened in trying to salvage the church's influence. The county schoolboard, which was presided over by the prefect Gavrița Mihali, had a covert account to finance the upkeep of Greek Catholic property, and they also tried to maintain the existing practice of renting church property for state purposes.⁷⁴

But in a region where the Romanian elite was suspected to have been magyarized, and which was treated as culturally foreign,⁷⁵ such aspirations were suspicious to many, among them county school inspector Teodor Stoia. Stoia was a Transylvanian regionalist who derided Bucharest as a colonizer, but he also openly promoted the idea that Maramureș should be renationalized through education. The pushback to his plans was immediate and effective. After the county schoolboard resigned citing Stoia's conduct, and a smear campaign in the sole Romanian newspaper accused

⁷² Filipovici, *Istoria Maramureșului*.

⁷³ Kelen György, A nevezetes Mihályi-család búcsút mondott a közszerelés színpadának. Brassói Lapok, 16 June 1937. p. 4.

⁷⁴ For the establishment and role of schoolboards, see Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics* 37–8.; ANSJ MM Prefectura Județului Maramureș Pachetul I/13, 1/1923, f. 50–51; T. Stoia: Reflexii la articol de sus. October 12, 1923. 2.

⁷⁵ ANIC Ministerul Instrucțiunii 1922. Div. I. 128/1922, f. 54–55. Gazeta Maramureșană, December 7, 1923. IV/50, 2.; December 14, 1923, IV/50, 1-2; December 21, 1923. IV/51. 1-2.

him of incompetence and violence against his subordinates, he was soon transferred.⁷⁶ His successor, Petru Didicescu, saw Stoia's views on the suspect national character of Maramureș confirmed in his first visit to Gavrița Mihali. The prefect allegedly told him with condescension that he could try to do things as he wished, but that locals had their own, Maramureș ways. Didicescu, who shared Stoia's ideas about renationalization through education, quickly ran into trouble as well. He was accused of attempting to rape a schoolteacher and also promptly transferred.⁷⁷

The alliance with the liberals secured the rule of the traditional elite in Maramureș for most of the interwar era.⁷⁸ Their political opponents regularly accused the Mihalis and their relatives of nurturing Hungarian cultural customs—even of occasionally signing the Hungarian national anthem—and they truly seemed to continue certain cultural practices of pre-1918 society.⁷⁹ Thus, in this region a more local, Maramureș regionalism was pitted against the Transylvanian Romanian regionalism, through which the representatives of the traditional elite made use of their pre-1918 experience to foster an agreement with the centralizing government. In exchange for political support at the national level, they were allowed to maintain not just their dominance, but also their otherwise dubious practices at the local level.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ ANIC Ministerul Instrucțiunii, 24/1925. f. 1–2.; Din activitate Dlui revizor școlar al Maramureș T. Stoia I-III. *Gazeta Maramureșană*, January 19, 1923.; February 2., 1923; February 9, 1923.; V. Filipciuc, Prietenul Teodor Stoia and T. Stoia, *Reflexii la articol de sus. Gazeta Maramureșană*, October 12, 1923. 2.

⁷⁷ ANIC Ministerul Instrucțiunii, 24/1925. f. 3–15.

⁷⁸ See Kelen György, *A nevezetes, Lazăr, Amintirii*.

⁷⁹ Egry, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika*.

⁸⁰ It was probably the reason why the returning Hungarian administration in 1940 installed a Romanian prefect, Flavius Iurca, who was a district chief before 1918, county prefect in 1931–1932, and an alleged follower of the Mihalis. Ablonczy, *A visszatért Erdély*.

Such an arrangement was fruitful for both sides. The PNL enjoyed otherwise impossible electoral successes. The Mihali's had an extremely effective political machine, exemplified by the results in 1927. In this year the liberals won the elections with 61 per cent of the votes. In Transylvania, however, the party gained more than 50 per cent in only three counties: it won more than 70 per cent in Trei Scaune/Háromszék and Odorheiu/Udvarhely in the Hungarian populated Székelyland (obviously achieved via violence and repression), and 59 per cent in Maramureş. Its main opponent, the National Peasant Party, achieved this majority in six Transylvanian counties, despite drawing only 22 per cent of the vote at the national level.⁸¹ The county was also used to offer safe seats for important liberal politicians, much as was done before 1918, one of these being Valer Pop in 1937. Therefore, in this region, segregated from the centre and affected by subsequent, one can even say cumulative forms of peripheralization, regionalism had at least two, different layers: a more traditional micro-regional variant and a more modern Transylvanian one.

Banat Romanians had more diverse traditions of centre-periphery relations and politics. The advanced development of the region made it easier for a broader Romanian elite varying in social background and status to establish themselves within the regional society. While one group behaved like the Maramureş elite, there were no close-knit kin networks like in Maramureş to dominate the Romanian society, and another group had established firm positions as anti-Hungarian nationalists. In 1905/6 the latter successfully drove out the pro-Hungarian group from its parliamentary positions and became dominant in Caraş-Severin County. Thus, for a significant part of the Romanian elite in the region, traditional politics meant the successful struggle against

⁸¹ Fritz, "Az 1927. évi választások".

Hungarians and not an alignment with their parties, and the change of sovereignty only further discredited pro-government politicians.

Post-1919 politics not only reflected this duality, but it also fostered further fragmentation. On the one hand, Romanian politicians were divided with regard to the future of their newly won provinces, and to whether to preserve some form of autonomy or to prefer gradual integration and unification. Surprisingly, it was in the Banat where the second option emerged in an organized form, as Avram Imbroane established his National Unity Party around the issue and won four seats in the region in the election of 1919.⁸² On the other hand, when the liberals came to power in 1922, their attempt to rapidly establish a new, centralized state ran counter to pre-1918 traditions and local actors regularly voiced their discontent. Instead of supporting new, unfamiliar institutions they wished to retain traditional administrative units (which included, for example, re-establishing the Severin County, which was abolished in 1880) or preserve the municipal autonomy of the Hungarian counties, an arrangement quickly superseded by the centralizing measures of subsequent governments.⁸³ Even though they always employed national arguments (Severin was actually the predominantly Romanian southern part of Caraș-Severin, the north being the ethnically more mixed zone), there was a palpable resentment against the Bucharest government here as well.

But politics was also more open here. In contrast with Maramureș, most of the parliamentary representatives of the Banat after 1919 were new to politics, and the majority of them now came from the region (78 per cent between 1919 and 1922 as opposed to the 50 per cent before 1919).⁸⁴

⁸² Nicolescu and Radu, "The Parliamentary Elite" 219.; Neagu, "Considerații privind viața" 566–8.

⁸³ ANIC Consiliul Dirigent Direcția Administrației Generale 5/1919. f. 45–46., Arhivele Naționale Secția Județeană Timiș (ANSJ TM), Fond Prefectura Județului Severin 47/1920 f. 39–40.

⁸⁴ Iudean, "From Budapest to Bucharest"; Răzvan-Mihai, "A Socio-Professional Analysis".

This was a new group of Romanian activists, teachers, priests, lawyers, and peasants. On the surface it was also more oppositional, at least until 1922, with only 56 per cent of MPs supporting the subsequent governments as opposed to 91 per cent before 1918.⁸⁵ Party competition among Romanians offered the possibility for everyone to enter the political arena. While in the early years some traditional forms of political dissent persisted (in 1919 Caraş-Severin was the only county where counter-candidates of RNP politicians who ran as alternate RNP candidates defeated their official opponents in single member constituencies),⁸⁶ the diversity of parties made such practices obsolete. But the pre-1918 practice of offering safe seats to important politicians from the centre faded away. Even the important Old Kingdom parties (NLP and People's Party [PP]) fielded candidates with local backgrounds in the Banat counties—albeit these were often high-profile candidates, such as Vasile Goldiș, who seceded from the RNP to the PP in 1926. That same year the RNP list in Timiș was led by Sever Bocu, a local grandee of the party; the PNL list by Aurel Cosma, the first Romanian prefect of the county appointed in 1919; and the PP lead candidate in Severin was Petru Nemoianu, who was of local origins and had been a volunteer in the Romanian army after 1916 to become the prefect of Caraş-Severin County in 1920/21.⁸⁷ While all of them claimed to represent regional, Banat interests—that was one rationale for their candidacy—they were also all national heroes. Their most important differences had to do less with how the Banat needed to be rearranged and more with their opinions about how the centre was failing the regions

⁸⁵ Iudean, “From Budapest to Bucharest”, 380–3. After 1922 the electoral law awarded all the seats in a county to the list that achieved more than 50% of the votes in the respective constituency, and the party that gained more than 40% of the votes at the national level was entitled to half of the seats and a proportional part of the other half, skewing the results.

⁸⁶ Nicolescu and Radu, “The Parliamentary Elite” 220.

⁸⁷ Iudean, “The Banat Political Elite”.

with its imperfect measures that ultimately hindered rather than helped the process of nationalizing these areas.⁸⁸

One reason for this regionalism, which aimed at the deficits of nationalism rather than at its homogenizing effects, was the local social and economic reality, which was still dominated by “strangers.” At least one of the rival Romanian elite groups found it continually favourable to attack the minorities and portray their rivals as weakling Romanians who courted the enemy.⁸⁹ Another important factor also contributed to making such nationalizing regionalism relatively effective and hindered the emergence of arrangements like the one established in Maramureş: the region’s symbolic resonance in nationalist politics, which made the region more suitable for national integration than for the Maramureş-type tacit accommodation.

The Banat was the most contested of all areas claimed by Greater Romania, and nationalist politicians attempted to mobilize the whole country to put pressure on the peace conference that was to decide its future. Thus, the Banat became a national cause and a symbol of the grievances that Romania suffered at this conference.⁹⁰ Not that such appeals could compel local politicians to renounce their claims to some form of regional separation, often justified with these experiences too. But it mitigated the effect of legacies similar to those present in Maramureş on politics. Furthermore, with the Banat’s relative peripheralization, local elites felt more dependent on the centre and its resources, and viewed their goal to be ensuring the dominance of the Romanians over the minorities. Political competition therefore revolved around who was more capable of delivering on this promise, and regionalism was more focused on why it was impossible for the

⁸⁸ Nemoianu, *Ardealul și Banatul*, Dr. Nestor Porumb, Comerțul de azi. Gazeta Lugojului, 25 February, 1923. 1-2.

⁸⁹ “Adunarea Partidului Popular în Sânnicolau Mare,” *Românul*, 16 May 1920, 2.

⁹⁰ Novacescu, “Chestiunea Banatului”

Old Kingdom elite to achieve anything in this regard. In this way the Banat was gradually transformed into a symbolic region that was primarily defined not by the differences that arose from its more developed status, which made it particular even compared with Transylvania, but rather as part of the generalized new province(s) that were distinct from the Old Kingdom because of their more authentic Romanianness. Together with the idea of the Banat's advanced status as the most developed Romanian province, it was used to justify regionalist claims.

Still, pre-1918 practices, customs, and habits survived here, sometimes for just as long as in Maramureș, and they were very often used to channel and express resentment against Old Kingdom Romanians. For example, such as when regional prefects revolted and stood up against the general staff of the army that wanted to dissolve the local voluntary firefighter associations, a precious common tradition of the Banat middle class. Or when a schoolteacher stormed into the office of the chief of the state security in Lugoj in November 1928 and told him to go home to his Old Kingdom polenta. Or, finally, when newly transferred gendarmes discovered that it was customary for local Hungarians not to work on the Hungarian national day, March 15.⁹¹ But these incidents remained manifestations of a dividing line between Romanians, proof of the civilizational superiority of the new provinces, and otherwise they no longer shaped politics as they had before.

Note on geographic names

⁹¹ Egry, *Etnicitás, identitás, politika*, 317, 405.

For the sake of simplicity, at the first occasion I give all relevant varieties of the names of administrative units and localities, and I use subsequently the Romanian form.

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