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# INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS AND TOLERANCE IN THE BANAT COUNTY

Case Study

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## **Keywords**

tolerance  
multicultural  
cooperation  
multilingualism

## **JEL Classification**

Y80

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to present the outcome of our researches regarding the spirit of tolerance in the Banat County. It is a personal overview (based on official documents and other bibliographical sources) of those aspects of the history of multicultural environment in Banat, which may be an explanation for the spirit of tolerance, cooperation, good relations. This attitude could be an inspiration for the rest of this country.

The article describes the situation before 1989, when, according to the census, besides the local Romanians, there were also lots of Germans (Schwabens), Hungarians, Serbians, Italians, and Jews. After the events of 1989, the ethnic structure of the Banat County has changed – most of the Germans, Italians, and Jews have left the country, and so did a lot of highly-skilled Romanians, who emigrated to Germany, Austria, the U.S.A., Australia, and mainly Canada.

Motto: “There is no other part in Europe like the Banat County, the inhabitants living there are so different from the point of view of their nationality.” (Watson, 1919: 138)

In a broad sense, one of the aims of the European Union is the cultural unification, i.e. “unity in diversity”. It starts from the shared cultural heritage, but at the same time, it is also based on political interests. The European Union will only be a successful project if the national selfishness is overcome (this selfishness is sometimes more than obvious) and if the nations call upon the feeling of belonging to Europe, which should rise above the national one. The national selfishness, as it is sometimes obvious at E.U. meetings and at negotiations among governments is, according to the Polish historian Bronislaw Geremek, “a catastrophe for Europe”. According to him, the future of Europe is only possible if all the citizens of European tradition will be under the same umbrella, which makes possible the existence of some communities that honour and protect shared values. Shared values need time to develop within a clear frame, but at this time, we cannot speak about such things if we refer to the E.U. According to Ales Debeljak (2003:62) “Europeanism is nothing but an invented tradition and very little has been done so far to build a collective history”.

From the geographical point of view, the project seems to be very promising; however it is still unconnected from the cultural point of view.

Economic stability, ensuring the freedom of all citizens and mainly cultural tolerance, are the three fundamental prerequisites for the stability of the European Union. Hence, we can speak about the birth of shared values which may ensure and preserve the unity of the European Union.

From this prospective, the Banat County is in its own way a model of European cohabitation on a small scale, a model

created and consolidated in time, starting from a kind of Enlightened social experiment promoted by the Austrian authorities.

The term "banat" or "banate" initially referred to as a frontier region run by a military governor (or *ban*, in old South Slavic languages). There used to be three banates that partially, or entirely were included in the territory of today's Banat region: the Banat of Severin, the Banat of Lugoj and Caransebes, and the Banat of Temeswar. When the term "Banat" occurs without any other qualification, it indicates the territory of historical Banat of Temeswar, which officially acquired this title after the 1718 Treaty of Passarowitz, though it was never governed by a *ban*. (Victor Neuman, 1997:78)

The name of *Banat* is similar in the languages spoken in the region; Romanian: *Banat*, Serbian: Banat or , Hungarian: *Bánát* or *Bánság*, Bulgarian: , German: *Banat*, Ukrainian: Turkish: *Banat*, Slovak: *Banát*, Czech: *Banát*, Croatian: *Banat*, Greek: , *Vănaaton*.

In an article dedicated to the name of this region, Victor Neuman (2009) quotes Martin Rady, from the School of Slavonic and East-European Studies, University College of London, who „shows that the origins of the so-called Banat of Temeswar (Timisoara), dates back to the beginning of the 18th century, when the territory within the Mures, the Tisa, and the Danube was claimed both by the Ottoman and Habsburgic Empires. The name Banat (in all languages) was used only after Eugeniu de Savoya's conquest, in 1716”. One of the first monographies dedicated to this region was published in 1780 (the book was only translated in Romanian and published in 1984 at Facla, Timisoara) by Francesco Grisellini; according to him, at that time the region was populated by 78.780 Serbians, 8.683

Bulgarians, 5.272 Gipsies, 43.201 German, Italian and French colonists, 353 Jews, 181.639 Romanians.

The historical region of Banat, which includes nowadays parts of three countries (approx. 20.000 square km in Romania, 10.000 square km in Serbia, and about 300 square km in Hungary), was conquered from the Turks by the Austrian Imperial Army in 1716. From that moment on, the Austro-Hungarian administration took over the Banat County, which “became a province with a special status, a laboratory where an efficient and rational colonisation was experimented, and a place where modern technologies were implemented in rural and urban areas” (Babeti, 2007).

The result of this policy and mainly its perpetuation in time may surprise even nowadays. The acknowledgement of multiple identities is in a way the essence of Europeanization. This project was, in a way achieved, “avant la letter” in Banat, due to the safety and welfare, which were superior, in comparison with other regions of Romania, and mainly because of the peaceful cohabitation of its mixed nationalities and religious confessions; hence it was also called “little America”.

First of all, this colonisation had as its main goal an economic one. Several economic, social and technological advancements were experimented in this area. Colonists from the furthest parts of the Austrian Empire have been relocated here (Saxons, Pems, Alsaciens, Lotharingiens, Jews, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Spaniards, Bulgarians, Hungarians, etc.); their settlement has been encouraged alongside the Romanian and Serbian majority. No doubt the environment is decisive in the population turnover, be it spontaneous, or conducted. In the case of the Banat colonisations, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the population was relocated from all provinces of the Empire. They were relocated from Alsace, Lorraine, Saar,

Rheinland-Pfallz, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Transylvania, Galitia, Prussia, Slovenia, Turingia, Tyrol, Westphalia, and even from Italy. Although compulsory, these relocations were in a way attractive to the colonists, as the Empire offered favourable conditions, such as tax exemptions, free services, and other advantages, which in most cases were to the prejudice of the native population, a mixture of Romanians, Hungarians and Serbians. They were granted equal opportunities, status, education and social ascension, based on meritocracy. The economic status of the population improved gradually, both in rural and urban areas, in all Romanian, Serbian, Schabwen, Hungarian, Croatian, etc. communities. Some reasons for the colonisation of Banat were, according to Buzarnescu and Pribac (2003:166), the following:

- The Austrian authorities tried to solve the problem of the overpopulated areas in the Habsburgic Empire;
- They tried to create a buffer zone between the Central-European world and the Balkan one, which was to stop the possible attacks on the Empire. The Banat County offered extraordinary benefits to the newcomers;
- The resources the Banat Region had to offer, which were to re-establish the economic potential of the area.

It is worth mentioning the consequences in the social and cultural life of the population, brought about by this colonisation and the controlled modernisation of the region. This colonisation was planned in such a way that people had to cooperate and communicate. Regardless their nationality, the inhabitants of those communities had to come into contact, go to market, or on fairs, passing through different communities. So they had to cooperate, communicate, and become

interdependent of each other. These inter-ethnic contacts were not only possible, but also impossible to avoid; the newcomers tried to re-build in Banat the world they came from. They have brought over the European efficient models from architecture to economy and agriculture. The native population took over all the expertise of the colonists and, influenced by them, the Romanians and the Serbs have started to re-evaluate their way of life; being part of the same community, or neighbouring ones, they influenced each other and the outcome was a cultural exchange of ideas. This influence initially developed by imitating, and in time, finally led to *the Banat culture*, which changed first of all the architecture of the place. Most of the colonists were skilled people, craftsmen, who started to build in their own way, according to the German tradition.

As the Banat County was a huge land of marshes, the colonists started ample drainages, cleaning, innig works, and they built dams, and roads, and opened mines in the mountain areas. They also included the local population to join them in their projects; however it was not only the Germans who brought their contribution in this area. Anyone who wanted to start a new life in this new world, such as the Italians, French and Spaniards, brought their expertise in; architecture (these architects have built numerous monuments, cathedrals, churches, army headquarters, hospitals, schools, administrative buildings, and town halls; most of them were designed by Italian engineers), sculpture, drainage, army, technology, cuisine, silk industry, rice crops and fruit trees. It is worth mentioning the fact that the Italian colonists organized a network of running water and drainage sewage. Maybe the most important achievement was the Timis – Bega canal, which was turned into a useful and cheap means of transport.

This new and mixed population, which overlapped the local one, made an exhausting effort, which left for the generation to come, the belief that modern Banat was built together by all the nations living in this part of the world. Even nowadays there is here, a kind of *local pride* for their achievements, a kind of patriotism based on their work, which crossed the boundaries of their national identity and it is expressed through a trans-ethnic and trans-confessional solidarity.

According to the 2002 Census, the population from the Banat region consisted of the information from Table 1 (see the annex).

As for their religion, the Empire did not impose conversion to a particular one; a tolerant policy guaranteed equal rights to the citizens belonging to any religion (Orthodox, Mosaic, Protestant, Muslim, Lutheran, Roman-Catholic, or Greek Catholic).

Owing to this century old cohabitation of about 20 different ethnic groups belonging to over ten religious confessions, most of the inhabitants started to speak two, three, four, even five languages that were currently spoken in the area. Multilingualism, mixed and inter-confessional marriages, tolerance, as well as the feeling of a special transnational and trans-confessional identity have generated what we call today the European spirit and the European citizen.

According to Anca Tomescu (1988), the Census of the mixed marriages in Banat (pp.32-33), at the time the book was published, was the one you can find in Table 2 (see the annex).

From Table 2, one can notice that most mixed marriages are among minorities (13.979), followed by families made up from Romanians and Hungarians (94.413), Romanians and Germans (23.836), and Romanians and Gipsies (7.073). 76.4% of

the mixed marriages come from urban area and 23.6% from rural areas.

Ethnic and religious tolerance is a fundamental human value, characteristic to the area which is a multicultural one. There were no inter-ethnic or confessional conflicts, given the already existing circumstances – the impressive number of mixed marriages, the cohabitation for over two centuries of these ethnic and confessional communities, which resulted in a local identity assimilating all the inhabitants of the area and ignoring other differences (unlike other cases, such as Kosovo). This spirit of tolerance is still very obvious nowadays in Vojvodina, which is the most peaceful region of the former Yugoslavia.

The Banat County may offer a model of cohabitation, so as to avoid any conflict or misunderstandings, by perceiving “the other” as being different. Being different, and being accepted as such leads to the progress of creativity and, in this respect, the population of Banat, whatever its nationality, or religious confession, offers a model of cooperation to be followed.

It is natural for a local person to hear people speaking in Serbian, German, Hungarian, or Romanian at the same time in Banat. Equally natural for him/her is that in the heart of the city of Timisoara one can see the roof of an Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran church, or of a Synagogue. The orthodox congregations from Banat, following the example of their catholic neighbours, have built in the countryside, pretty Orthodox churches, painted in warm colours, in Baroque style, with one bell tower, like those that can be seen at the border of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

As mentioned before, the spirit of tolerance in this area also manifested itself in the religious life. Even the Austrian Emperor was tolerant with all the religious

confessions and did not impose a change in religion. The local population was, in general, Orthodox – both the Romanians and the Serbs. The Serbian Church was stronger and had jurisdiction over the Romanian one; it lasted until 1865 – the year of hierarchical separation.

In 1848, the Romanians of Banat wanted religious autonomy and held an assembly, where they dismissed the Serbian Bishop from Timisoara and proclaimed the National Romanian Orthodox Church, under a Romanian Bishop. In order for the posterity to see their contribution they organized a strong parish in Timisoara. They started in 1936, the construction of the monumental Cathedral of today, the symbol of the city.

The Serbian – Orthodox church was built in 1748 and it was placed just opposite the Catholic Dome in the Union Square, where the old city-hall was, during the Empire. The Greek-Catholic church was built in 1770 and to this end a united vicariate was established in 1777. The Roman – Catholic church (the Dome in Union Square) was built between 1736 -1773, in Baroque style, according to the design of the Austrian architect, Emanuel Fischer. The Lutheran confession also had its own church in the city centre, built between 1837-1839. The Jewish community of Timisoara has its own Synagogues (four), and is nowadays much smaller, especially as a result of the mass emigrations after the II World War.

According to the 2002 Census, the population of the Banat County is represented, from the point of view of their religious faith in Table 3 (see the annex).

The current range of religious denominations in the city of Timisoara is represented as follows: Orthodox 24.2918, Roman-Catholic 22.611, Greek-Catholic 3.350, Protestant 4.107, Baptist 4.264, Pentecostal 6.684, Adventist 689, other religions 783, atheists 1.011, no religion

783, unspecified religion 12.197 (source: the 2012 Census).

The neo-protestant denominations are mainly represented by the Baptist Church and the Pentecostal Church. Christian seventh day Adventist Church, the Christian evangelical Church, the Unitarian Church, Christian Centre and the Mormon Church (which works through missionaries) have a lower level of activity and a smaller number of adherents in Timisoara.

Lately, the Muslims who settled in Timisoara have also set up a religious centre in a private home, as they do not have the official approval for building a mosque, yet. The building of churches has increased in recent years, several orthodox churches are under construction, in different areas of the city.

The neo-protestant denominations, with considerable financial help from abroad, have also built many churches, such as: Logos, Vox Domini (Baptist), Althea (Pentecostal) and the Agape church (Independent and charismatic). (Iliesu, 2004:184)

Education in the Banat region was, is and will always be very important, especially after 1829, when compulsory education was introduced, and attendance was expected to be of 100%. This situation is a special one, in comparison with the other Romanian provinces, or other parts of Europe. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century for instance, in Timisoara there was a laic and confessional school network in German, Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian, Greek and Yiddish. According to the statistics of the time, there was one school for about 1.200 inhabitants of Timisoara.

This kind of education allowed the population to understand meritocracy and because the Austrian authorities encouraged education in German, it offered all the inhabitants the chance of a good career in life. When German schools opened, many Romanians, even adults, volunteer to learn

this language, a very significant fact for the evolution of education in Banat. German was so popular that at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the Romanian church books have notes on their pages, not only in Romanian, but also in German, meaning that the language was spoken by most of the inhabitants. Children could speak two or three languages, because they used to play together, no matter their nationality, or religion (Jews, Hungarians, Germans, Romanians, Serbians, or Gipsies).

According to a Hungarian statistics, (1869: 138-139), the only available one, for the year 1869, there were 296 elementary schools. According to their denomination, they were structured as follows: 153 Orthodox schools, 96 Catholic, 21 Greek-Catholic, 26 belonging to other religions.

Starting from 1768, a characteristic of the cultural specificity in Banat, is the multilingualism of the intellectuals, but also the majority of the population could speak at least two, if not four languages. This multilingualism worked as a communication channel between the ethnic communities.

Any inhabitant of Banat is proud of his/her linguistic skills and it gave him/her the spirit of cosmopolitanism and has a tolerant spirit too. This continuous interaction between nationalities has influenced not only their philosophy of life, but also their cuisine, social life, manners, and they used to celebrate all the important events together (e.g. Christmas, Fasang, Kirkwei, ruga, hram, Orthodox/ Catholic Easter, Hannuka, etc.).

This cosmopolitan education (parents sent their children to the nearest, or the best schools, even if they were not in their native language) is still continued nowadays. There still are several German secondary schools and Nicholas Lenau high school is the the best in town. The Hungarian educational system is based on a few elementary and secondary schools, while the Hungarian high

school has got the name of Bartok Bella, one of the most famous composers born in Banat. The Serbs also have their schools and the Dositei Obradovici high school opened in 1948. The importance of learning foreign languages has led to the setting up in the community of numerous kinder gardens in which children use the languages we have mentioned, as spoken languages, in addition to English, French and German included in the regular syllabuses. Besides the existing German, Hungarian and Serbian schools, the Arabs have also started the education for their children in Arabic.

As priorities change, two modern schools must also be mentioned: the English high school, *William Shakespeare*, and the French high school, *J.L. Calderon*. Moreover, students can attend courses in German, English, or French, at the Medical University, at the Polytechnic University, or at the West University of Timisoara.

The multicultural tradition in the Banat County is organically connected to its linguistic diversity. The four languages that have been historically spoken in Banat are: Romanian, Hungarian, German and Serbian. Recently, due to the large number of foreign investors, a lot of Arab, Italian, German, French, Hungarian, Chinese, Jewish investors have come to Timisoara. Besides the above-mentioned newcomers, many Arabs have also come here at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for academic studies. The Arab community of Timisoara represents the most important ethnic group of the western part of the country in the last 20 years. It is estimated that their community is about 2000 people, and it consists of Syrians, Palestinians, Iranians, Lebanese, Egyptians, and lately Moroccans and Tunisians.

Timisoara is the only European city which has a German, a Hungarian, a Serbian, and a Romanian Theatre. Due to its national diversity, with very few exceptions, “all inhabitants of Timisoara speak at least one

foreign language and understand a little in the other local languages as well” (Iliesu, 2004:170).

Nevertheless, the spirit of Banat, which existed before 1989, has somehow faded. Emigration has removed much of the native population of the Banat County. A large number of highly educated inhabitants of this area have chosen to settle in Germany, Canada, Australia, the U.S.A., France, and Italy, for financial and also for political reasons (brain drain). However, mainly in Timisoara, people have managed to preserve its cultural identity and heritage to a large extent.

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Annex:

Table no. 1

Total no.	649.777	100%	Urban %	Rural%
Romanian	555.752	85.53	61.9	38.1
Hungarian	35.294	5.43	65.9	34.1
Gipsy	14.534	2.24	33.2	66.8
German	8.497	1.31	72.1	27.9
Ukrainian	5.953	0.92	22.3	77.7
Turkish	133	0.02	88.7	11.3
Tatar	24	0.00	100.0	0.00
Russian	105	0.02	78.1	21.9
Others	17.967	2.77	53.6	46.4
Unspecified	11.518	1.77	92.9	7.1

Table no. 2

<b>Types of marriages</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Romanian-Hungarian	94.413	56.8
Romanian – Gipsy	7.073	4.3
Romanian – German	23.836	14.3
Romanian – Ukrainian	5.316	3.2
Romanian – Russian (Lipovian)	3.169	1.9
Romanian – Turkish	1.340	0.8
Romanian – Serbian	5.698	3.4
Romanian – Tatar	611	0.4
Romanian – Slovak	2.000	1.2
Romanian – Bulgarian	1.544	0.9
Romanian – Jewish	1.687	1.0
Romanian – Croatian	247	0.2
Romanian – Czech	749	0.4
Romanian – Polish	770	0.5
Romanian – Greek	1.400	0.8
Romanian – Armenian	580	0.3
Romanian – Other nationalities	1.865	1.1
Minorities among themselves	13.979	8.4
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>166.277</b>	<b>100</b>

Table no. 3

Total no. of inhabitants	677.926	100%
Orthodox	534.695	78.9%
Roman-Catholic	72.094	19.6%
Pentecostal	28.316	4.2%
Protestant	12.962	1.9%
Baptist	10.052	1.5%
Greek-Catholic	8.751	1.3%
Muslim	994	0.1%

Old Orthodox (Serbs, Russians)	888	0.1%
Others	8.577	1.3%
Unspecified	597	0.1%