

«We shall bring you our vices»

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Shifting forms and meanings of European belonging in Romania and Italy

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The fruit of a criss-crossed research path between Italy and Romania, Poland and Ireland, Serbia and Sweden, this project follows the less obvious trails of European integration, beneath the engineering of European and national institutions. Thus it outlines new transnational spaces which have emerged with the EU enlargement to the East, and throws light on the hopes and tensions which diffuse them. It also raises the question of the novel forms of belonging which are percolating in Europe in the aftermath of the collapse of ideologies, and in the more open and unstable context created by globalisation.

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“Much has been said about Europe already, much has been written; the original nucleus has been enlarged. Now, whatever happens, there will be a break before the next enlargement, if it takes place. Under these circumstances, an exercise in silence might help.

Besides, what has been said was not terribly imaginative. Some words appear too often (...)

Firstly, of course, we find the famous ‘values’. Ah! Values! Culture! Heritage! They never fail to adorn the end of speeches, but you can’t help feeling that they are not at the heart of the matter – rather some kind of flourish, so to speak, the rococo of political discourse (...)

The second required theme: the well rehearsed ‘What can the East bring to the West?’ You have now joined the Club and we, Westerners, wonder – in the friendliest possible way, but no less persistent for that – what you could bring to our organisation. And then, everybody chimes in: values! Local traditions! Culture!

I am sick and tired of this discourse. If you want my opinion on values and on what the East has to offer, here it is: in any case we shall bring you our vices!”¹

Should this statement of Andrei Pleșu be attributed to the Socratic instincts of the older philosopher mischievously putting to the test the temper for dialogue of the young Westerner arrived that day in Bucharest to gauge his views on European identity? Or should it be taken more seriously? His last few words would anyhow not be refuted by a certain cohort of Italian politicians who are hasty to liken the Romanians living in Italy to thieves and criminals, responsible for a deterioration of public security and deserving only of deportation. These words might also have devastating effects if they

¹ Interview with Andrei Pleșu conducted by Alexandre Mirlesse in July 2007. A philosopher and former student of Constantine Noica, Andrei Pleșu served as Romania’s Minister of Culture (1990-91) and Foreign Minister (1997-99). The full text of the interview can be downloaded at: <http://www.notre-europe.eu/fileadmin/IMG/pdf/RE6-APlesu-en.pdf>

fell into the hands of the British tabloids which recently carried out vicious campaigns against the greedy Eastern Europeans² who, not content with the swiping of “our jobs” and social benefits, also denude the forests of wild mushrooms, treat the carp as a food source rather than the object of harmless sport, and even on occasion go so far as to pluck the immaculate feathers of the Queen’s swans in order to roast them in their suburban camps³. Such portrayals of “Eastern customs”, as well as Pleșu’s provocative endorsement of the stance of the disruptive Eastern barbarian, lead us to the heart of the issue tackled in the following pages – that of the new encounters fostered by the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the subsequent enlargement of the EU to the East.

The break-up of the Eastern bloc entailed a dismantling of the iron ringed border between the sphere of real socialism and that of the “Free World”. With it also went the repressive regimes of severe mobility restrictions, aimed at keeping the communist citizens inside closely guarded national boundaries. The images of concrete walls being knocked down, of barbed wire and border checkpoints being ripped up, are potent symbols of the advent of a new freedom of movement – the great promise of the 1990s. Ever since those heady days of opening, all kinds of connections have proliferated, from East to West, North to South. Some of these links seem to follow the furrows of ancient networks, temporarily forgotten: the thaw in the relations between the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea has made it possible for Poles, Latvians or Lithuanians to find jobs in Sweden⁴; the Finnish hop over to Tallinn for shopping. Far more dramatic circumstances have led a significant number of Albanians to walk across the mountainous border into Greece, or to embark for the Adriatic ports of Italy on makeshift boats. Some other connections seem to defy the laws of History: the arrival

² Some British tabloids tend not to distinguish between various East European nationalities. Eastern Europeans can alternatively be referred to as “Poles” (the biggest contingent).

³ On certain waterways in Britain swans are decreed under ancient charter to be the rightful property of Her Royal Majesty.

⁴ Alongside Ireland and Britain, Sweden is amongst the three only European countries to have fully opened its labour market to nationals of the states which entered the EU in 2004.

of Ukrainians in Portugal, and tens of thousands of Poles in Ireland, would have been unimaginable in the 1980s, when the Portuguese and the Irish were the ones emigrating in droves. As the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall approaches, it might be timely to ponder how close we are coming to consummating the old dream of European Concordia. Two decades is a significant time span. One whole generation. How far have we ventured into the territory of the Other? Can we look into the face of the Barbarian? In what ways have the now habitual encounters with the other Europeans affected our senses of identity? To what extent do they alter our views of the past, and our vision for the future?

The aim of this paper is precisely this: to investigate how the new frames posed by the unification of Europe have allowed for the laying down of novel links, the outlining of unexpected spaces, the projection of new senses of belonging. I will do so by presenting some intermediary findings arising from ethnographic research conducted alongside anthropologist Lynda Dematteo and *Notre Europe* team members Ute Guder and Cristina Stănculescu⁵ in the North of Italy and in the Western Romanian region of the Banat (more specifically in the Timișoara area). Thus I intend to uncover the complex movements and exchanges, but also the tensions and asymmetries which diffuse the transnational space that has emerged over the last decade as a result of the intense relations between the Romanian Banat and Italy's North-East. Nicknamed "Trevișoara" (a contraction of Treviso and Timișoara), this is a space within which Romanian emigrants who move over into Italy cross paths with the small Italian entrepreneurs now operating in the west of Romania. Although it does not feature on any official map of the EU, this new territory is a true laboratory of Europe, and a fertile ground to help grasp the less obvious trails of European integration. Hence I propose to look beneath the engineering of European and

⁵ Lynda Dematteo is a researcher at the *Laboratoire d'anthropologie des institutions et des organisations sociales* (LAIOS), CNRS-EHESS, Paris. Trained in urban planning, Ute Guder joined *Notre Europe* in 2001. A former intern at *Notre Europe*, Cristina Stănculescu is now a lecturer at the ULB and researcher at the *Centre d'étude de la vie politique* (CEVIPOL), ULB, Brussels.

national institutions, to reveal how Europe is being made, day by day, at the scale of people's hopes and everyday lives. For doing so, a reconnection to the field is crucial.

Therefore, while drawing on sociological and anthropological studies concerning Romanian immigration, and the economic and political "models" of North-East Italy, as well as upon literary works describing the world of Central Europe and the Balkans, our methodology is also based on direct observation and face-to-face interviews with intellectuals, local authorities, factory managers, and representatives of the Serbian, Jewish, Hungarian and Roma communities in Timișoara. Amongst the numerous people we interviewed, we deliberately chose to focus on the Italian entrepreneurs who relocated or subcontracted their production to Romania. We did so because these footloose entrepreneurs are important agents in the complex, globalized reality in which we live, but also because it allowed us to challenge the assumption that the loosening of national borders benefited primarily the East Europeans emigrating to the West. Furthermore, in a context characterized by intense mobility, it would make little sense to consider Romania and Italy in isolation. Therefore we cut our methodological cloth accordingly, and conducted multi-sited ethnographic research to better capture how the experiences of these Italian entrepreneurs in Romania, and their peculiar political behaviours back home, mutually feed and inform one another.

In the first section of this paper, I examine the new identity narratives being forged in the Romanian Banat since the demise of communism. These narratives, I argue, feed off tales of a pre-communist Golden Age, which enables the Banatians to project alternative maps and to renegotiate their region's position within an enlarged Europe. What does such realignment of the European symbolic geography entail in terms of inclusion and exclusion? Which elements of their past do the people of the Banat choose to revive?

What memory gaps do they have? How does all this come to give meaning and shape to their present and future? In the next section, I focus on the characteristics of the “productive archipelago” the Italians created in the Banat and on the visions of the world which underlay their “Rush to the East”. Indeed the small businessmen who operate in Romania are often the very same ones who adhere to the Northern League, a party which does not hide its aversion towards Italy’s Romanian immigrants. Why such a discrepancy between the actual level of economic interdependence between the two countries and the political awareness of these entrepreneurs? More generally, I wish to raise the question of the new forms of belonging in Europe, in the aftermath of the collapse of ideologies and in the more open and unstable context created by globalisation.

1. Locating El Dorado

Is the Banat located in the Balkans, or does it belong to Central Europe? I will leave it to the Banatians to answer, and merely observe that it is precisely its position as a land in-between – a borderland – that makes the Banat a fruitful starting point from which to reflect on European belonging. Where boundaries are blurred and affiliations uncertain is often where there is the most pressing urgency to articulate European credentials. On these Eastern borderlands is also felt a sense of historical frailty which is unfamiliar to the more comfortable and settled populations of Western Europe. “Thinking Europe is like drawing a map: you start with the outline. It is on the fringes of Europe that you find tension. That’s where the hand trembles, where corrections are made all the time.”⁶ Although Adam Globus is speaking from a far more marginal region of Europe than the Romanian Banat, the feeling he expresses holds for all those in-between lands whose inhabitants have been more than once at the mercy of a

⁶ Interview with Adam Globus, Belarusian writer and poet, April 2007. The full text of the interview can be downloaded at: <http://www.notre-europe.eu/fileadmin/IMG/pdf/RE4-AGlobus-en.pdf>

powerful neighbour. This is where “to be part of Europe” is a vital issue, where the questioning around European identity is tinged with a quality of unrest which takes us back to the fundamentals of the European promise.

Imperial designs and shifting frontiers

In order to understand how the people of the Banat envisage their place in Europe, it is necessary to say a few words on the singular history of the region, which is today split between Romania, Serbia and Hungary. Comprising of lands which belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary until the Ottoman conquest of 1552, this territory was moulded over the 18th century through the modernizing enterprises of the “enlightened” Austrian Empress Maria Theresa and her son and heir Emperor Joseph II. After Prince Eugène of Savoy reconquered it from the Turks, in 1716, the region was for a time a full Hapsburg province, with only its southern part remaining within the Military Frontier (“*Banat Krajina*”). In 1779, the province was incorporated “back” into the Kingdom of Hungary and divided up into three Hungarian counties, until – after the 1848 Revolutions – it became a part of the Austrian Crown Land of “Voivodship of Serbia and Tamiš Banat”, a Serbian autonomous duchy within the Hapsburg Monarchy (1849-1860). This Crown Land was abolished in 1860 and it passed once again into Hungarian rule following the 1867 Compromise, which ratified the creation of the Dual Monarchy. In November 1918, after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the ephemeral “Republic of Banat” (proclaimed from the balcony of Timișoara’s town hall by the socialist Dr. Roth⁸) was brought to an abrupt end by the arrival of Serbian troops, who dissolved the People’s Councils in February 1919. Following an agreement between Serbia and Romania, two thirds of the Banat became part of Romania, the southwestern part was incorporated in the newly formed Kingdom of the

⁷ This Frontier was abolished only in 1871.

⁸ This short-lived Republic was recognized by the Hungarian government of Béla Kun.

Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and a small area around Szeged became part of the new (and considerably diminished) Hungary. All these borders were subsequently confirmed by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.

The Banat's multicultural demographic fabric is not solely attributable to this turbulent history; it also owes a great deal to the numerous initiatives taken by Imperial Field Marshall Claude Florimont de Mercy⁹, appointed governor of the province after the reconquest from the Turks. Under Ottoman rule much of the area was under-populated marsh and heath, as many Hungarian inhabitants had fled during the years of warfare. Encouraged by Empress Maria-Theresa, Count Mercy invited settlers to repopulate and regenerate the region, drain the swamps beside the Danube and Tisza, cut canals, build roads, and exploit the mineral wealth of the mountains. Settlers arrived from many different parts of Europe: Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Bulgarians, and also the Serbs, whose epic trek across the Frontier of the Austrian Empire, forced by the advance of Turks into their own lands, has been poignantly depicted by Serbian poet and diplomat Miloš Crnjanski¹⁰. The largest contingent of colonists were German, who became known as the Danube Swabians, or *Donauschwabien*. A historic as well as a linguistic notion, the term "Swabian" applies not only to the people from present-day Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, but also to the German-speaking people of Alsace and Lorraine (some of whom, coming from linguistically mixed communes, maintained the French language and were thus later labeled as the "Banat French"). The 18th century was not yet an age of nationalism: the Hapsburg governor's policy was not so much an attempt to Germanize the Banat but rather a means to attract skilled peasants and artisans. As Italian writer Claudio Magris puts it, "they were tough, hard-working peasants who transformed unhealthy marshlands

⁹ Born in Longwy, Lorraine.

¹⁰ Crnjanski was born 1893 in Csongrad (Hungary) but spent his childhood in Timișoara, where his impoverished family had moved in 1896. He therefore grew up amongst the strongly patriotic Serbian community of Timișoara, in an atmosphere of national and religious fervor. As a result of anti-Serbian measures taken by Austria after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, he was sent to the Galician battle lines to fight against the Russians. His experience on the bloody war front significantly informed his later work.

into fertile soil. Swabia, one of the heartlands of old Germany, was thus transplanted into the Banat". Therefore, up until WWII, the Banat was "a mosaic of peoples, a superimposition and stratification of races, powers, jurisdictions. It is a land which has seen the encounter and the clash of the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg authorities, the stubborn will to independence – and later the dominion – of the Hungarians, and the rebirth of the Serbs and the Rumanians" (Magris 1989, 294).

Contemporary evocations of the Golden Age

The rediscovery and valorisation of this multicultural past, as well as an emphasis on the beneficial Hapsburg influence are two main motifs of the region's identity narratives ever since the collapse of the Ceaușescu regime. Amongst the numerous names of Timișoara – *Temeschburg*, *Temeswar*, or *Temeschwar* in German; *Temesvár* in Hungarian; *Temišvar* in Serbo-Croatian – also appears the moniker "Little Vienna" (*Mica Vienă*). Its inhabitants never fail to emphasize the once remarkable modernity of Timișoara, a town where many wondrous inventions were implemented *first*: the first beer factory in Banat and Transylvania; the first tobacco mill and the first navigable canal in today's Romania; the first public lighting using suet candles and lamps with oil and grease in the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the first electric street lamps in Europe, etc¹¹. Alike the Timișoara born poetess Ana Blandiana, the locals are fond of mentioning the multilingual skills of the old Banatians: "Even as peasants, my grandparents spoke not just Romanian, but also, fluently, German, Serbian and Hungarian, just like everybody else around them. And I will never forget the wonder of hearing Grandmother switch from one language to another, with her thin little girl's voice, when conversing with the women of the neighbourhood or with the passengers of the *firobus*, which we would take to go

¹¹ The city is also proud of having given birth to Tarzan, *alias* Johnny Weissmüller – who invented the ululating yell (still a signature of Tarzan films.)

to *Elisabetin* or *Iosefin*, those town-centre neighbourhoods which evoked in me respect, as if they were aristocratic places.”¹²

The apparently similar but far more ambivalent memory evoked by another interviewee – according to whom “to warn of a dangerous dog people would put a metal rectangle on their door with ‘*Dog that bites*’ written in all the languages” – comes to mitigate such images of multicultural Concordia. One thus understands that the daily management of diversity in the old Banat actually often came down to a mixed handling of prejudice and openness towards the neighbour’s distinctiveness. This complicated blend of resentment and respect is again very well captured in the account given by Claudio Magris of his journey through the Serbian Banat¹³ in the company of Grandma Anka, a Serbian lady of venerable age: “In all fraternal official statements, the various ethnic groups are constantly clapping each other on the back and declaiming each other’s best qualities. In Grandma Anka, who speaks all the languages, the different nationalities, on the other hand, overlap and clash. On our way to Bela Crkva, we pass through the Rumanian village of Straža, and that gives her an opportunity – forgetting her own beloved Rumanian grandmother – to call the Rumanians thieves and ragamuffins, without so much as a sandal between them, among whom her father drove his cart with a flaming torch in one hand and a pistol in the other. As she runs down the Rumanians she pays tribute to the orderly, hard-working Germans; but a little later, devoutly recalling the “Rumanian courtliness” of President Popescu, former Chief Justice of the court in Bela Crkva, she says that the fine conduct of the Germans frequently concealed pig-headedness and dishonest greed” (Magris 1989, 296). Not everybody daring such outspokenness, the people we interviewed generally tended to minimise the past tensions between the region’s different nationalities. They preferred rather to present the old Banat as the shared land of various

¹² Interview with Ana Blandiana, May 2008. The full text of the interview can be downloaded at: http://www.notre-europe.eu/fileadmin/IMG/pdf/REN_10-ABlandiana-fr.pdf

¹³ One of the three areas which today make up the Serbian autonomous region of the Vojvodina (the other two being Srem and Bačka).

peoples who all used to know a few words of the other one’s language – an “El Dorado” of fraternal coexistence¹⁴.

An intrinsic European vocation

These somewhat idealized visions of the past which animate the contemporary representations of the Banat can be partially attributed to the work of a number of local scholars who created a foundation called “The Third Europe” (“*A Treia Europa*”). In an underground manner pre-1989 and more openly afterwards, these people endeavoured to conceptualise the region’s unique experience of cultural mingling. They adopted the term “interculturality” – a concept supposed to render the specific nature of the relations between the different nationalities (made up of mutual influences, interactions, and cultural transfers) more accurately than the notion of “multiculturality” (which indicates a more passive and separate coexistence between various communities¹⁵). They also strive to capture the vanishing world of the German, Czech or Ukrainian villages by collecting life histories, oral testimonies, old photographs and traces of the villagers’ material life. Such enterprises should not be interpreted as sheer nostalgia. By reclaiming their intercultural past, the people of the Banat also emphasize their essential Europeanness and thus give shape and meaning to their present and future. Against the communist policy of “Romanization” and smoothing of the western Romanian regions’ distinct personalities, and in accordance with the dominant contemporary European discourses on cultural diversity as an asset, the Banatians are thus recasting their land as one with an intrinsic European vocation. In this respect, amongst the various peoples who mingled in the region, one in particular is seen as having played a decisive role.

¹⁴ The word El Dorado even features in the title of a recent French publication on the Banat: *Le Banat: un Eldorado aux confins* (Babeți, 2007).

¹⁵ These scholars hereby intend to introduce a distinction between the Banat and Transylvania (a region also characterized by a significant presence of Hungarians and Germans, but where the different nationalities lived more separately). The Banat Swabians are described as milder than the Transylvanian Saxons, who arrived in the 12th century in order to defend the southern border of the Kingdom of Hungary against the Tatar and then Turkish incursions.

In the middle of Timișoara's Victory Square (*Piata Victoriei*), which links up the "Mihail Eminescu National Theatre" and the Opera to the Orthodox Cathedral, stands a statue of the She-Wolf suckling Romulus and Remus. A gift bestowed by the fascist municipality of Rome in 1926, this statue symbolizes the Latin origins of the Romanian people. The re-evaluation of the Latin roots of Romanian culture and language was very much at the heart of the nation-building project of the country's 19th century intellectuals. These links were also played upon by the fascists of the two countries in the interwar-period¹⁶. In the stories of Timișoara's inhabitants however, the civilizing influence of the Germans trumps the legacy of Trajan's Roman legions. According to one local entrepreneur we interviewed, this influence has even been key to his success in business: "I was born in the east of the country, in Moldova. But my parents came here in the 1960s, so I grew up in a nearby village – a German village. That was my fortune: I grew up in two languages, and it brought me discipline." The locals thus tend to present neighbouring with the Germans as having infused their character with Western qualities. In their own words, "German standards" are often equated with "Western" or "European" ones. The Banat is therefore portrayed as a Westerly region, not only because of its geographical position in Romania, but also by virtue of the tolerant, diligent and industrious ways of its inhabitants. And in spite of the mystifications attached to the events of December 1989, the fact that the Revolution began in Timișoara only further reinforces this image.

The Third Europe reinstated

It is significant that the above mentioned foundation is called "The Third Europe". This name takes us back to the old debate on the great divisions of the continent and, more specifically, to the influential essay of Jenő Szűcs, in which the Hungarian historian draws upon a study of civil society institu-

¹⁶ The Iron Guard's adherents called themselves "legionnaires" and greeted each other with the Roman salute.

tions (medieval public liberties, municipal charters, etc.) in order to distinguish between a Western, an Eastern, and a Central Europe (Szűcs 1983). The Banatians, much like their Transylvanian neighbours, rather see themselves as partaking in the third sphere. The projection of these alternative boundaries of belonging is to be envisaged against the backdrop of the resurgence, since 1989, of the fluctuating and complicated idea of Central Europe. Corresponding more or less, at the beginning of the 20th century, to the Germanic *Mitteleuropa* – an area which encompassed the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy and its coloured pattern of peoples – this space was drastically disrupted, in the aftermath of the Great War, by the creation of many small states, according to the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination. After the Second World War the notion of Central Europe disappeared with the incorporation into the Soviet orbit of what was henceforth called "Eastern Europe" or "the Eastern Bloc".

Central Europe nevertheless survived in the minds of a number of dissidents¹⁷, who struggled to maintain their "European consciousness" against the forced imposition of Russification (equated with de-Europeanization). As one of them told us, "Central Europe meant nostalgia for Europe. It was the dream of peoples who felt they had been cut off from their natural environment, from European culture and all that it represents (...). It was a dream of liberation."¹⁸ During the Cold War, Central Europe was thus portrayed, to quote Kundera's famous words, as a West which had been "kidnapped" by the East: a part of Europe "which lies geographically in the centre, culturally in the West and politically in the East" (Kundera 1983). Romania – a country with both an overwhelming Orthodox majority and a history which rather relate her to the Byzantine sphere – is usually not as a whole associated with *Mitteleuropa*. Thus, when emphasizing their Central European belonging, the Banatians explicitly differentiate themselves from the Southern and Eastern parts of Romania, more influenced by the

¹⁷ People such as Czesław Miłosz, Jan Patočka, István Bibó, etc.

¹⁸ Interview with Bronisław Geremek, April 2008. The full text of the interview can be downloaded at : <http://www.notre-europe.eu/fileadmin/IMG/pdf/RE9-BGeremek-en.pdf>

Turks and the Russians. In doing so, they at the same time distance themselves from a set of features attached to the Balkan character of the rest of the Romanians, seen as more primitive, disorganized, and irrational. Thus they dream of reviving old links and sketch for us the outline of another European cartography: “The most beautiful utopia would be if the Bega were to become navigable again. That way we could pass from the Bega to the Tisza, then on to the Danube and the rest of Europe...”¹⁹

The golden days of the pre-communist past on which the Banatians calibrate their current narrations cannot be resurrected for all that. The houses of the Czech or Swabian villages still retain the stamp of that era, but most of the descendants of the settlers from Bavaria, the Palatinate or Lorraine are gone for good. Moved by the story of the latter, Robert Schuman intervened to secure their repatriation to a depopulated village in the French Vaucluse, thus sparing them from the fate reserved by the communists for “Germans” in the first post-war decade – namely deportation to the Soviet camps or forced resettlement on the Bărăgan plain. Today one of the highest concentrations of these Swabians can be found in the German retirement homes of the region: the overwhelming majority of them, especially the young, left throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and then the remainder after Ceaușescu’s fall in 1989. Looking back, one can say that the Banat’s plural weave has been unravelled by the Second World War, and then by the communist policies of minority repression and internal population transfers. Therefore there is an obvious discrepancy between the level of positive re-evaluation of the region’s multicultural heritage and the actual scope of its revitalization. Furthermore, the portrayal of the migrations inside Romania as an “aberration” in having altered the region’s Western character has doubtful inclusive effects. Such pointing out of the exteriority of the Moldavians, South Oltenians or Roma (who, people complain, have taken over some of the finest streets of Timișoara’s historic centre)

¹⁹ Interview with Adriana Babeți, May 2008.

is out of kilter with the current demographic reality of the Banat, a region where currently only a minority of its population can claim long-standing roots.

This begrudging acceptance of the “last arrived” – especially those who originate from the most eastern and southern parts of Romania – should not lead us to hastily conclude that the Banatians are more willing to evoke the past Concordia than to re-enact it in the present. On the whole, the two decades since the fall of Ceaușescu have seen them moving away from the forced isolation, cultural homogenisation and creeping nationalism of the communist era to rediscover the multiple cultural strands which shaped their land. This diversity is now made a fulcrum of the Banat’s identity. And although the past cannot be revived, its evocation does serve a symbolic function and has educative virtues which fix the region’s present and future under the signs of tolerance and openness. To what extent is this new symbolic order one that is shared by the small Italian entrepreneurs who arrived in the Timișoara region throughout the 1990s? Does the loosening of national borders have the same meaning for the Romanians as for the Italians? Did the build up of economic links between the Romanian Banat and the Italian *Triveneto* favour the emergence of a transnational political awareness? All these questions I now wish to draw out.

2. Trevișoara: a global region

The relationship to the past, the dreams of a better future, cannot be reduced to mere instrumental strategies. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the reshaping of the Banatian identity as open, modern, international and European, helped legitimize the region’s new political and economic trajectory. It came to match the requirements of the dominant neo-liberal agenda and an actual – and very literal – process of “opening up”. The arrival of foreign investors, amongst whom the Italians rank first, has thus radically altered the pulse of Timișoara. Most of them are small or medium-

size entrepreneurs from the North-East of Italy (*Triveneto*) who relocated their production to the Banat, or who expanded their operations by opening a subsidiary plant there. Their perceptions of Romania are shaped not only by their experience in their new place of production, but also by the polemics surrounding the massive arrival of Romanian immigrants into Italy since 2002. As shall be shown in the very last pages of this section, their “flight to the East” is underpinned by a specific form of exclusivist, and anti-state, regionalism, which holds sway in the prosperous provinces of Italy’s North-East. Furthermore, the form of capitalism they exported to Romania is not of the mildest, nor most equitable, sort. Thus the rhetoric of ‘El Dorado’ expoused by the Banatians finds unexpected echoes in the behaviour and discourses of the Italian entrepreneurs – some of whom do indeed behave in the manner of “buffalo hunters” or “gold diggers”.

New links, old paths across Europe

The new dynamics set in motion by the coincidence of the collapse of communism in the East with the crossing of a new threshold in the process of economic globalization have had spectacular effects on the north-western part of the Banat (*i.e.* the Timișoara-Arad area). In this respect, it is significant that Timișoara was one of the places which came under the scrutiny of Suzanne Berger and her team of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) social scientists and engineers during the course of their study on the impact that globalization has had on companies’ strategies²⁰. As Berger puts it, “the global market makes it possible for firms to access resources like manufacturing, a low-cost semiskilled workforce, skilled technicians, and innovation around the world and to incorporate them in the home company in new ways” (Berger 2006, 20). This analysis applies also, if not more so, to the European market. Throughout the 1990s, a

20 In the course of a five-year long study (1999-2004), Berger’s team conducted over 600 interviews with company managers from all around the world in order to understand their strategies and practices: which part of the production process is carried out in the plants “at home”, which parts are outsourced, why, etc.

significant number of companies have shifted production from high-wage plants in Western Europe into low-cost sites in Slovakia, Poland, or Romania. Since the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, they can re-import the goods made there into their own home country without paying any tariff duties²¹. The Romanian Banat is a region where the effects of integration into the European production lines and trade networks became intensely felt well before the year 2007. After the Bucharest area, it stands out as the Romanian region which has undergone the most rapid economic growth and received the highest rate of foreign investment over the last fifteen years. New roads, a motorway project, daily flights to Vienna, Verona and Munich – links with the rest of Europe have been strengthening day after day.

The globalisation of the economy has also quite radically altered the Italian Alpine valleys’ system of chain-subcontracting, often referred to as Veneto’s “industrial districts” (or “clusters”). Recent studies emphasize that these Italian industrial districts are nowadays embedded into ever more complex global chains of production – which led sociologist Daniele Marini to talk about “*dislargi*” rather than “*distretti*” (quoted in Dematteo 2009). The foreign operations of these “pocket multinationals” often run in tandem with those that remain in Italy: the parts made abroad at a lower cost eventually come to be re-incorporated into products finished in Italy (a process known as “outward processing trade”). Thus, the “*Made in Italy*” production system has become transnational, maybe even post-national, and the Romanian Banat is today one of the main foreign extensions of this system. In terms of their numbers (but not in terms of the volume of their investments), the Italians are the main foreign investors in Timișoara²². How do these entrepreneurs circulate between Italy and Romania and, first of all, why did they choose to relocate in this region specifically?

21 Already on 1st, February 1993 a “Europe Agreement” establishing an association between the European Communities and Romania was signed. One of its main aims was to establish a free trade area between the two parties [OJ L 347, 31.12.1994, pp.2-189].

22 The locals like to mention that the Italians today constitute the largest “national minority” in their town.

“Cuneo’s businesses are established mainly in the Banat because the rest of Romania still has somewhat backward transport links. We needed a town which was already developed. Timișoara is a university town; it has good engineers and good technicians. And our trucks have only 40 kilometres to go in order to get to the Hungarian border. I don’t know if you have an idea of this already, but it takes 12 hours to cover the 1,200 kilometres between Cuneo and Timișoara, and another 12 hours to cover only the 400 kilometres going to the east of Romania.”²³ A favourable geographical position, a relatively well-developed road network, the availability of a skilled (and cheap) labour-force – these are, according to the President of Cuneo’s employers’ association, the “hard factors” which explain why a majority of the Italian entrepreneurs operating today in Romania chose to locate in the Timișoara area. These entrepreneurs usually fly weekly to Timișoara or Arad in order to meet with their local partners or suppliers, make deals, supervise their plant or that of their subcontractors, etc. and then they fly back to Cuneo, Verona or Treviso so as to spend the week-end with their family (unless they are married to a Romanian woman and have established permanently in the Banat). On the other hand, the Romanians who emigrate to Italy do so with middle-term life projects in mind (two-three years, which can be renegotiated according to circumstances), and usually with the perspective of returning home after having eventually earned enough money abroad. Although a majority of these Romanian immigrants do not hail from the Timișoara region, but rather from the eastern parts of the country (Bacău, Iași), their presence in Italy significantly informs the representations and discourses of the Italian entrepreneurs working in the Banat. Thus, through this double movement of criss-crossed trajectories, we observe two pivotal regions coming closer: one situated at the crossroads of the Latin, Germanic and Slav worlds; the other at the junction of the Balkans and Central Europe.

23 Interview with Enrico Grieco, President of API Cuneo (*Associazione Piccole e Medie Imprese Cuneo*), March 2008. Although the Cuneo and Biella districts belong to Piedmont, they are characterized by a socio-economic fabric which is very similar to that of North-East Italy.

In fact it is not the first time that the Italians have come to Romania. Some of them had started operating in the country even before 1989. In her novel entitled *The Summoning*, Herta Müller – a Romanian writing in the German language – describes how she got persecuted by the *Securitate* after they found an SOS message she had slipped into the pocket of a pair of trousers she was sewing for an Italian clothing firm²⁴ (Müller 2001). Going further back in history, to the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, many Italian engineers, road builders, architects, and other professionals, had already arrived to work in the Banat. As one local historian recalls, “all the old bridges which were dynamited in the 1960s had been built by the Italians in the 18th and 19th century. After 1722, Italians came to manage Timișoara’s silk mill and Lugoj’s also. Others came to grow rice, and there were also artists and musicians.”²⁵ Many of these people originated from the Italian North-East provinces which remained under the control of Austria until the end of WWI. According to the historians’ estimates, there were about 60,000 Italians in Romania in the interwar period, most of them descendants of the previous century’s immigrants. In 1951, 40,000 Italians were expelled to Italy; the 8,000 who remained were compelled to naturalise, and often had to change their names. Thus, beyond the contemporary “hard factors” put forward by API Cuneo’s President, the transnational space which is taking shape as a result of the new economic links between Italy’s North-East and the Romanian Banat brings together two former Hapsburg regions, whose relations were obscured after the two World Wars. Although they seem not to remember that history, it is surprising to note how fast the people from Veneto re-established their old ties with Romania after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

24 Herta Müller emigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany in the late 1980s.

25 Similarly, after independence from the Ottoman Empire (1877), many professionals from Western Europe, including Italy, arrived in what was then Romania (at the time officially comprising only of Moldavia and Wallachia) in order to help build a modern nation.

“We teach them our Italian mentality”

As far as the post-war period is concerned, and although some Italian companies already worked with Romania prior to 1989, it is only in the first half of the 1990s that the Italian entrepreneurs started arriving in significant numbers. These people are sometimes referred to as “the pioneers”, because of the very unstable and somewhat anarchic economic context which characterized the first transition years in Romania. Since those years, the Romanian market has significantly developed and matured – and so has the Italian “productive archipelago” in the north-west Banat (Gambino and Sacchetto 2007). This outsourcing encompasses a much wider range of activities and services than merely manufacturing. Often, the very same people who run textile, leatherwork, or engineering production units did not fail to seize the other opportunities offered by the local environment and soon started investing in real estate or buying up agricultural land. Furthermore, together with the entrepreneurs, also moved a contingent of Italian lawyers, consultants, IT specialists, accountants and banks to help them manoeuvre through the maze of Romanian bureaucracy and obtain all the necessary authorizations. Several Italian businessmen we interviewed mentioned the difficulties they encountered in terms of access to credit, bureaucratic procedures, and also in mastering the “unwritten” local business codes. One of them explained to us that he got the idea to create an online service providing judicial advice to his compatriots planning to get started in Romania, after having himself experienced setbacks with his first Romanian business partner. Employers associations and regional chambers of commerce back home, as well as their local antennas active in Bucharest and Timișoara, also help the entrepreneurs in locating sites and selecting local suppliers. Local recruitment agencies assist them in finding workers and in organising their daily transportation from their residence to the factories (workforce shortages and high rates of employee turnover were two distinctive features of the Timișoara region’s labour market at the time we conducted our field research in Spring, 2008).

Thus, it looks like Romanians and Italians are working together for the mutual benefit of their two countries. A May 2004 conference organized by the OECD described the process of outsourcing from the Veneto region to Timișoara as a “win-win” for both Italy and fast developing Romania²⁶. The Italians have contributed significantly to the development of Timișoara, by providing jobs at a time when the domestic industries inherited from communist times were collapsing, through the building of roads and power lines connecting their plants to the main system, etc. One entrepreneur we met in Italy unrolled on the table an impressive-looking map featuring the brand new industrial zone (dotted with countless roundabouts, in accordance with the latest EU legislation) which he was in the process of constructing in the Arad region. The Italians also pride themselves on passing along their industrial know how to the Romanians. Interviewed by Suzanne Berger, the manager of one Italian apparel manufacturing company (with a subsidiary in Timișoara) even claimed to be passing on “the Italian mentality”: “We need to own and run the Romanian plant ourselves in order to get the quality we need. *We want to teach them our Italian system and our Italian mentality.* Sure, it would be easier to have agents and intermediaries or subcontractors and it would involve less investment. But we can’t get the results that way. Over the course of a few years, we have really created an Italian working environment here, and we’ve passed along our mentality” (Berger 2006, p122). Many entrepreneurs express a strong sense of familiarity when describing their daily life in Romania. Timișoara’s Union Square’s baroque palace is nowadays surrounded by Italian restaurants, where Romanians and Italians can be seen mingling and speaking a strange blend of their respective tongues. Beyond the proximity between the two Latin languages, another reason why the businessmen from Veneto feel at home in the Banat is because they get the impression of experiencing once again the economic conditions of the “Italian Miracle”, in the 1960s (when small firms from the North-East, such

²⁶ “Clusters of Enterprises and the Internationalisation of SMEs”, an OECD conference organized in Timișoara on May 24th, 2004.

as *Benetton* or *Diesel*, underwent a very spectacular commercial take off). A number of them even identify with the Romanians, whom they depict as being “like the Italians fifty years ago”.

When taking a closer look at what is occurring in the Banat, one has to admit that the transfer of riches may not be as unilateral as the Veneto entrepreneurs like to portray. As mentioned previously, the Italian investors rank first in terms of their numbers, but they lag behind the Germans, the Austrians, and even the French in terms of the volume of capital invested. A good proportion of the production plants we visited were barely refurbished factories dating back to communist times (some of them looking more like workshops than actual factories). Pointing to the extraordinary inventive genius of the people of Veneto, one might argue that many of the jewels of the North-East originated in artisans’ workshops, and that ideas, skills and entrepreneurial spirit is what really matters. But even in this respect the picture is not very heartening. Some of the Italians established in Timișoara are businessmen on their last legs, who – pressurized by the tough Asian competition – moved to Romania in order to recover a tight margin for manoeuvre by cutting down on costs. The transfer of skills claimed by the apparel company manager quoted in the above extract is a reality in only a minority of the Italian firms. In most cases, only the least valuable part of production is sent to Romania (cutting, sewing, etc.), while the marketing and quality end production remain in Italy.

Thus, the contribution of Romanian workers to the “*Made in Italy*” system often finds itself skipped over. And in the minds of many entrepreneurs, Italy continues to represent the pole of beauty, while Romania is perceived as the pole of ugliness – even though the items of a number of Italian trademarks (*Max Mara*, *Prada*, *Geox*, etc.) are made by Romanian hands. What is being sold is a concept, the image of Italian style. Furthermore, the dependence of many Romanian subcontractors on their foreign customers

is all the more worrying in the current context of global economic crisis – a crisis which is very severely affecting Italy’s North-East entrepreneurs. Another limit to Timișoara’s economic boom is related to its pace and scope. A labour force shortage and the inflation of real estate prices considerably diminish the incentives for small entrepreneurs to establish in the region. Today, only foreign investors with deep pockets can afford to set up in Timișoara. This rapid development model has therefore come to a saturation point, and there are many reasons to query its sustainability. In this respect, the massive land grab (for both construction and agriculture) has reached such heights that it dis-credits the very possibility of development. The unfolding economic crisis has already begun to deflate these speculative bubbles, and the Banatians now anxiously speculate whether the Italians will close down their Romanian plants. But even in the midst of the economic boom, a question was on everybody’s lips: “Will the Italians move further east? Will they go to Ukraine, Moldova, and maybe as far as China?”

Free riders

Although China exceeds by far the capacity of most of the small and medium-size entrepreneurs operating in the Timișoara region, the prospect of some of them moving to Ukraine or Moldova still seemed realistic one year ago. Indeed, as the EU enlarges, the frontier of European regulation and standards is also moving east, the wages and costs are simultaneously moving up – and for those entrepreneurs who can cope with the language barrier and the vaster geographical expanse, Ukraine could indeed represent the new El Dorado. This is not to say that Romania’s formal accession to the EU, in 2007, has exhausted all avenues for circumventing the law. As one Italian furniture maker confided to us: “The difficulties that we, businessmen, encounter in Romania are minor, absolutely insignificant. It’s a country where I feel great – and when I see the way things are

going here in Italy, I can tell you I would rather live there permanently. That's true in all respects, but especially in the political one, because I, like a majority of small entrepreneurs, have had more than enough of the clique who govern us, these MPs, all these people who suck our blood²⁷. Even the Romanian bureaucracy isn't too problematic because you can get over the difficulties quite easily. I must say Romania is a far less resistant country than Italy: taxes are much lower, the administration often controls our accounts, but I would say it's not really preoccupying... So it's a country I like, a place where I've done good business, and where I want to go on working." Thus, many such entrepreneurs, whose worst enemies are the tax officials from Rome, are only too grateful to be given a free rein in what they label the "Far East".

Furthermore, it is not just the corporate tax, the rents, the wages or the land, but also the environmental standards that are less exacting than back home. The staff of the "Inspectorate for Labour" (who got us mistaken for inspectors sent by the EU and were therefore almost standing to attention during our visit) and the small and feminine staff of the brand new "Inspectorate for the Environment", in answer to our queries, reported not the slightest irregularity in the functioning of the region's factories. But according to both the Prefect and the head of the Fire Brigade of the Timiș district, who on several occasions found themselves in the position of managing precarious situations, the waste management systems and the security standards of a significant proportion of the district's factories are far from exemplary. One security consultant we interviewed even described some of these factories as time bombs. Indeed, some of the "pioneers" who arrived in the Banat at the very beginning of the 1990s were true adventurers, eager to swoop on any of the easy opportunities arising in the context of the wild capitalism of the first transition years. A small number of them were desperados escaping a dubious past who went to Romania

²⁷ This interview was conducted at the time of the left-wing coalition government of Romano Prodi (May 2006 – May 2008).

in order to live a second life, and sometimes even a second youth – with a new wife. The Italian men could talk forever about the women of Timișoara, be it those of the town's many brothels (mostly from Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova) or the female factory workers. One Romanian businessman to whom I put the fateful question of what Romania has to offer to Europe, replied to me bluntly: "Women. Low-cost labour. And gipsies – two million!"

Thus, the exporting of vices might be more equitably distributed than Pleșu put it in the opening quote of this paper, and the El Dorado that the Italians have unearthed in the Banat of a somewhat different nature to that of the "*paradisul terestru*" ("earthly paradise") imagined by Adriana Babeți and her colleagues from "The Third Europe" foundation. Of course not all the Italian entrepreneurs we encountered in Timișoara are adventurers or desperados – far from it. Nevertheless, a majority of those we interviewed openly admitted that the freedom of action they were permitted in Romania constituted one of the major appeals of that country. This allied to the low level of trust they typically express towards their compatriots also operating in the Banat can be interpreted as indicative of the profound individualism of these entrepreneurs. Such individualism has deeper political implications than may be apparent at first sight. It must be considered in the light of the pervasive ideology which underlay the "flight to the East" of Veneto's economic actors. I will therefore draw upon the analyses developed by anthropologist Lynda Dematteo in her previous work on the Italian Northern League (Dematteo 2007), as well as upon the observations we drew together in the field, to show that the specific political forms which are gaining ground in the North-East of Italy can be interpreted as a result of the emancipation of the economy from the frame of the nation-state, and also hint at the new subjectivities which are percolating in Europe in the aftermath of the collapse of ideologies and in the more fluid context created by globalisation.

In a league of their own

For over fifteen years now, the North-East – that is Italy’s richest and most dynamic region – has been economically and politically distancing itself from the rest of the country. The region’s economic boom is the result of a specific type of capitalism: that of the provincial North and its small family-run companies, which underwent an extraordinary economic take-off in the 1960s. Different from that of the metropolitan North (Turin, Genoa, and Milan), the ultra-liberal, and the sometimes verging on the illegal, model of development of *Triveneto* is indistinguishable from the political emergence of the Northern League (*Lega Nord*). Indeed the discourses of the *Lega* contributed to “naturalising” the riches recently acquired by the people of Italy’s Northern peripheral provinces, and to redefining their hierarchical position within both Italy and Europe. Thus, the production centre of the “*Made in Italy*” goods has globalised itself, while at the same time untying its bonds to Rome. Convinced that they can do better without the political mediation of the centre, many in the North-East therefore reject the political game (in its traditional, national, form) and the Italian fiscal regime in order to dedicate themselves to private entrepreneurship and local enrichment. During the 1990s, the Northern League thus succeeded in mobilizing the people of the North-East’s economic interests and exclusive sense of local identity “against the Italian state”. According to the leaders of the movement, the discrepancy between the dynamism of the North and the ponderousness of the central bureaucracy, with its “unfair” tax redistribution system, had become so intolerable that they seriously had to consider secession. In fact, even before the emergence of the League, Veneto had distinguished itself by its outbursts of anti-state fevers: the region was, in the 1970s, one of the main centres of red – and black – terrorism. Just skirting the Iron Curtain²⁸, it was pivotal for NATO and for the West in general to keep this region out of communist

²⁸ Trieste, which was split in half between “the West” and the Yugoslav Army during the first post-war years, can even be described as having straddled the Iron Curtain.

clutches. In a sense, one could say that the Northern League has channelled the transition from the world of the Cold War into that of globalisation.

The North-East’s political culture is therefore characterized by a preponderance of economic pragmatism over political structures, of the private sphere over the public one, of the Pope over the Prince. Veneto has long been one of the hotbeds of Reaction in Europe²⁹ – and it should perhaps come as no surprise that a significant proportion of its inhabitants today favour a traditional, ethnicist conception of identity and openly proclaim their rejection of multiculturalism. Although these conceptions are often derided as being “pre-political”, they might actually already be “post-political” – as they facilitated the flourishing of the region in an open economy (Dematteo 2009). Indeed, it is their economic success on the global stage which informs the intolerance of Veneto’s entrepreneurs *vis-à-vis* the “intrusions” of the Italian state in their business. The fact that these entrepreneurs subscribe to the Northern League’s calls to fiscal and institutional rebellion, in spite of the party’s racist discourses and stance of “zero tolerance” towards the “Romanian criminal immigrants”, reveals a striking gap between the actual level of their interdependence with the exterior when it comes to business, and the scope of their political consciousness. They stand for a world in which solidarity mechanisms should not be extended further than the local community – that of the family, the *campanile*, or the region. Thus, the ability of North-East Italy’s economic actors to move beyond borders and to envisage their interests as lying within a transnational context is not matched by the emergence of a transnational – or European – political consciousness. Beyond the specific case of the relation between Italy and Romania, what it reveals to us is that despite the novel dynamics and the new economic links fostered by the

²⁹ Ever since the invasion of the Republic of Venice by Bonapartist troops, in 1797, these territories have been hostile to the political values propagated by the French Revolution. The area was a theatre of massacres perpetrated against the peasants, who were resisting the invader and the urbanites seduced by Republican ideas. This fostered a particular reactionary politically, much like that of Vendée, in France.

extension of the Common Market, Europeans still fall short in representing the new transcultural spaces emerging conjointly.

Conclusions

Romanian, Roman, Roma – the resemblance fascinates as much as it disturbs. Thus, the path towards cosmopolitanism may not be as smooth and linear as those attached to the European ideal wish it were. The re shuffling of the European cards over the last two decades has allowed for the learning of new languages, experimentation with novel, more complex, senses of identity – while at the same time fuelling fears and stereotypes, from the mythical Polish plumber to the Romanian thief. The position and function of borderlands is in fact highly ambiguous from the point of view of European integration. And so is the affirmation of new senses of regional belonging: the Banat's myth of origin – its tales of primeval intercultural mingling – has the power to inform its inhabitants' present visions and hopes for the future; on the other hand, Italy's north-eastern provinces – located at the junction of the Latin, Germanic, and Slavic spheres, with many connections to the west of Romania and people from all around the world working in their factories – oscillate between opening up and closure. Where boundaries are blurred is precisely where people can long for entrenchment. And the bringing together of two regions can kindle anxieties as much as it calls to explore the territory of the Other. The crossing of borders thus has a different meaning for the Romanians, who have suffered under the repressive grip of the Ceaușescu regime, than for the Italians, who may fear the changes it brings about. The Italian entrepreneurs' relationship to the Romanians involves both familiarity and rejection; in their experience, globalization means both opportunity and danger. These entrepreneurs, who operate in an international environment, feel pressurized by an intensifying Chinese competition and threatened by the ongoing economic recession. They are torn between the

necessity for mobility (de-territorialization) and the temptation of falling back on local boundaries (re-territorialization).

The specific case we drew on throughout this paper is only one instance amongst others of the new transnational spaces which have coalesced with the European integration process. Many such spaces can be found across the enlarged EU, not necessarily as elongated as the Trevișoara one. Not very far from Timișoara, the Saxon villages of Transylvania offer another fruitful field for investigation. Today, these villages appeal as much to their former dwellers (now resettled in Germany) and their descendants, as to the British aristocrats who are willing to spend a lot of money in order to preserve their unique architectural orderliness – even if it comes at the expense of seeing their fantasies of reconnection to an unspoilt rural landscape (and maybe even to their Saxon roots) disrupted by the tastes and improvement works inflicted on the medieval houses by their new inhabitants (amongst whom are the Roma, whose sense of law and order significantly diverges from that of the old German village guilds). Such places, where Europeans cross paths, where dreams meet and clash, seem to me to be fertile grounds from which to explore the making of contemporary European identity. Hence it might be interesting for future academic research into the field of European integration to endeavour to expose the outlines of other such network territories, where new senses of belonging are being tempered. Such research should in any case consider the contemporary dynamics unfolding across Europe against the backdrop of their historical depth. The resurgence of past links and networks – such as those which underpinned the old Hapsburg geography – is an unforeseen feature we turned up during the course of our own research. More generally, it is striking to note how many of the contemporary shifts on the geopolitical map of Europe seem to follow the trails of old alliances and division lines. In this respect, it suffices to point to the support lent a few years ago by Catholic Bavaria and Austria to Slovenia's EU accession, and now also to Croatia's. Furthermore, when turning to the past, we should

not be afraid of unearthing its more disturbing sides. The Banatians are not very forthcoming when it comes to discussing the origin of the statue of the She-Wolf which stands in the middle of Timișoara's Victory Square, or the fate of their Jewish and Roma compatriots during the war years. And yet these darker faces of European history must be confronted if we really wish to leave behind our old nightmares. Indeed the "dirty secrets" are precisely the undercurrents which populists know how to play upon. Whilst trying to imagine the future political forms in Europe, it is also crucial to examine closely the centrifugal dynamics which diffuse the regions constituting the spine of Europe. Italy might well prove to be a laboratory for new political forms – and again maybe not for the better. The success of the *Lega* in the North of Italy can be paralleled with the images of late-Jörg Haider publicly tearing up bilingual German-Slovene road-signs in Carinthia. From Lombardy to Flanders, the rebellion of the rich regions of Europe against the nation-states in which they are encompassed often goes along with a re-assertion of their essential identity, through a building up of the delimitation between "us" and "the others". It conceals a readjustment of the boundaries of solidarity and cohesion around the community of the "like us". It is not enough to dismiss such manifestations as being racist and selfish. We should also endeavour to comprehend the new subjectivities which they entail³⁰.

Finally, a few words must be said about the unfolding global economic crisis, as it has quite radically altered the situation we observed when conducting our field research, one year ago. Already, the Poles have begun leaving London and Dublin to return home; a significant number of the Italian plants in the Romanian Banat might well close their doors. At this stage, it is difficult to predict what will remain of the links established at a time of expansion. What is certain is that this crisis is severely shaking East European countries – most of which struggle with huge cur-

³⁰ In this respect, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's analyses on the lability of bonds in our "liquid" modernity, are quite enlightening.

rent-account deficits and foreign-currency borrowings. The collapse of any of these countries would have serious economic as well as political consequences for the whole of Europe. If they felt abandoned, or cheated, by the other European countries, populations could well leave it to local populists and protectionists to take their future in hand. There is also an obvious risk of backlash against immigrants and the Roma, as several recent ominous episodes in Hungary, Slovakia – and Italy – have already proved. Thus, insecurity only fuels populist movements, who stir up fears without seriously considering the ongoing transition at the continental and global scale. The challenge – not so much for future academic research, but first and foremost for the future of European unity – is to articulate complexity. Europe suffers from a lack of representations enabling us to grasp this complexity. Not that the raw material is missing: the whole history of our continent is one of cultural transfers and population movements. It is more a matter of remembering and rendering audible these stories of exchanges. This is precisely what the nationalists and xenophobes want us to forget – those who always tend to simplify reality. In the face of such processes of shrinkage, there is an ever greater urgency to try to articulate European identity as an essentially complex notion. So that our identity does not become tautology, we might follow the example of *Danube's* Reiter Róbert (avant-garde Hungarian poet), *alias* Franz Liebhard (conservative German writer), and learn "to think with the mentality of several peoples."

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Ana Blandiana, Romanian poet: http://www.notre-europe.eu/fileadmin/IMG/pdf/REN_10-ABlandiana-fr.pdf

Bronisław Geremek(t), Polish historian and MEP: <http://www.notre-europe.eu/fileadmin/IMG/pdf/RE9-BGeremek-en.pdf>

Adam Globus, Belarusian writer and poet: <http://www.notre-europe.eu/fileadmin/IMG/pdf/RE4-AGlobus-en.pdf>

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