Rural Landscapes as Cultural Heritage and Identity along a Romanian River

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Abstract: In contemporary narratives, rural landscapes and identities, as judged by the inhabitants’ sense of belonging, continue to be important points that need to be (re)considered when discussing places as instruments for local development. This paper pushes forward these debates and explores the construction of rural and regional identity in Romania with the help of a case study that focuses on perceptions of rural landscapes as cultural heritage in two rural communities situated on opposite sides of the river Mures. Based on participant and ethnographic observation and making use of a survey and a qualitative analysis, this paper highlights the most significant features of the local cultural identities and their rural landscape heritage expressed by the two sets of people, which often coincide with the most important characteristics attributed to the regions separated by the river Mures. The results of this study underline the dividing role of the river in the preservation of rural identity and cultural heritage. They also demonstrate that rural landscapes and the construction of identities along the river have generated both development opportunities and various risks.

Keywords: rural landscapes; cultural heritage; identity; river Mures; Romania

1. Introduction

Contemporary narratives on rural landscapes as cultural heritage and the identity of a place have generally shown that these issues continue to be important when it comes to spatially analyzing the construction of these communities, their reproduction in time and space, and the related aspect of their representations as seen in people’s perceptions in response to the key question of where they belong, ranging from social and economic perspectives to cultural and political ones [1–3]. Furthermore, there is scope for the territorial identity of a rural place to be successfully used as an instrument in local decision-making by the structures of regional and national government with a view to fostering social and economic development, since territorial identity representations have relevance for local communities and for social and cultural aspects of their sense of belonging [2,3].

Rural landscapes as cultural heritage and their broader regional identity represent the best analytical accounts for understanding place attachment and the sense of belonging [2], the cultural distinctiveness and standard features of a place [3], and the spatial representation of us and the other as expressions of power geometries on different spatial scales [4]. Rural identity refers to a thing’s property of preserving its fundamental characteristics over a long period, while ‘territory’ refers to the area of land delimited by the boundaries of a state or administrative unit and subject to the sovereignty of that state. While many studies have covered these general aspects on a variety of spatial scales, work on defining the cultural identity of a place or region, particularly in rural areas, is still needed, especially with regard to communities and people’s connection with/affection for specific aspects of a place (natural features, landscape, and local cultures), as argued by Paasi [5]. Communities and people construct significant affection towards various natural and cultural features of the places where they live, generating places and spaces of unicity and authenticity that
need to be understood largely through the lens of local and regional identity, and through the cultural representation of the places where the people concerned live.

On the other hand, regional identities are social processes with multiple dimensions known for contributing to the construction of rural spaces, affirming the cultural identity of a place, and representation in everything from discourses to practices. “The idea of regional identity has been implicit in geography for a long time, since traditional approaches to regions and regionalism often celebrated the primordial nature of regions, accentuating their ‘personality’ and the harmony/unity between a region and its inhabitants” [5]. In this context, it is widely argued that regional identity has become an important category in the ‘Europe of the regions’, and one that is often taken as self-evident in the relations between a group of people and a bounded region [5]. Narratives of regional identity are based on such specific elements as “the ideas on nature, landscape, the built environment, the culture/ethnicity, dialects, economic success/recession, periphery/center relations, marginalization, stereotypic images of a people/community, both of ‘us’ and ‘them’, actual/invented histories, utopias and diverging arguments on the identification of people” [5]. Furthermore, identity is usually connected to territorial competitiveness and even resilience. The concept of spatial competitiveness is contingent upon the availability of natural resources, the level of human capital, and the cultural construction of place. These factors play a pivotal role in the local development of communities [6]. In contrast, the resilience of a territory is shaped by its environmental attributes, which serve to foster local progress and community development [5–8]. In the event that a rural area is unable to compete, it is necessary to implement new and innovative strategies for regeneration.

In line with these arguments, this paper explores rural landscapes and local rural identity and its relationship to broader regional identity, more specifically the question of us and the other, as exemplified by territorial rural identity representation in a particular part of Romania that is divided by the river Mures. Our selected case study sets out to portray the role of water/the river and its related cultures in the social and cultural construction of this region and its specific rural places, arguing that the culture of water [9,10] and the local cultures closely connected to the natural features of a place are responsible for the construction of the local and regional identities of specific places and regions. The Mureș, one of Romania’s major rivers and the largest tributary of the river Tisa, into which it flows after crossing the border into Hungary. With its main course of 789 km (of which 761 km are in Romania), it is one of the most significant flowing waters in the Carpathian basin. Furthermore, the river has been a boundary throughout history, serving as a border between various countries and even empires (the Kingdom of Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and the Habsburg Empire). It is a natural element functioning both as a boundary and as a highway linking different cultures, communities, and people. Of the countless rural settlements lying along this river, Vâradia de Mureș and Birchis represent two small, interesting communities with specific rural identities. Vâradia de Mureș is located on the northern side of the Mureș and is part of the historical region of Crișana, while Birchis lies to the south of the Mureș and is part of the historical region of Banat.

The present study aims to explore, through the lenses of quantitative and qualitative research, the sense of rural identity felt by the inhabitants of these two villages. We are also interested in how local inhabitants relate to the river as a symbol of opportunity, limit/boundary, and danger/risk issues. Our research questions are as follows:

1. How are rural landscape and rural identity constructed at the local level?
2. What role does the river Mureș play in shaping the rural and regional belonging of the country people in the area?

This study contributes to the existing international studies on rural landscapes and cultural identity [11,12] as well as their connection to the cultural role of water [13–16] in regional belonging [5]. At the same time, it complements recent debates in Romanian social science literature regarding the rural and regional identity of people belonging to the Banat and Crișana regions [17]. Moreover, the study reinforces the role of spatial vicinity and the
strong regional identity of local Romanian Banat people [18,19] by shedding light on the role of the river Mureș in dividing, in cultural terms, the two regions of Banat and Crișana.

We have devoted the next section to a theoretical approach in order to make a link between our selected case studies and study area and international theoretical models regarding regional identities in rural areas. This will help us provide a critical and objective account of questions of local rural identity in cases in which it gravitates to a specific natural feature that over time generates specific cultures and particular communities with unique cultural identities.

2. Theoretical Background

Regardless of their sizes, locations, and cultural features, all communities have the power to construct their own specific identities. These are closely connected to the features of the local landscapes—from the natural environment to the cultural and historical background. This is a means through which communities define their individual cultures as specific attributes in a world that is increasingly tending towards a shared universality. Regional identity can be conceptualized as a social process [20], as evidenced by the assertion that it is “an interpretation of the process through which a region becomes institutionalized, […] consisting of the production of territorial boundaries, symbolism, and institutions. This process concomitantly gives rise to and is conditioned by, the discourses/practices/rituals that draw on boundaries, symbols, and institutional practices” and involve two intertwined backgrounds: a cultural-historical one and a political-economic context [5,21].

Numerous writers have studied rural and regional heritage from the perspective of the geographic construction of spaces and have argued for the significance of local identities and the importance of this process in our contemporary world [22–25]. Different from national belonging and nationalist identities [26], multiple issues of regional identity have been discussed, including regarding regions and places, the situation of bounded places in a mobile world in which identity is closely connected to the construction and deconstruction of spaces, and in the context of regional reconstruction and devolution [27–31]. It is widely acknowledged that regions represent institutionalized places and spaces, with their emergence and development being framed by political and economic factors that are responsible for the creation of their regional identity [32]. This means that the issue of identity—connected to regional planning, regional resurgence, and the construction of regional identity from the viewpoint of power and politics—is an important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration in the representation of the territorial identity of a place or region [33,34].

On the other hand, territorial competitiveness and resilience appear in this context as major features, defining both the local identity construction and rootedness. Territorial competitiveness, based on natural resources, human capital, and the cultural construction of places, is a defining product of the present policies in the local development of communities [6]. It is a means through which communities and places have the strength to evolve in line with the main opportunities provided by the local backgrounds which frame the specific social, economic, and cultural aspects that are considered in the present policies of local development [35,36]. In this respect, the natural features of an area tend to be valuable resources that, through their physical and cultural attributes, construct specific identities and communities.

In light of these circumstances, rivers play an integral role in shaping the cultural and economic fabric of our societies [37]. They foster distinctive forms of water-based culture, which in turn influence the local economic development and the local identities of communities. This, in turn, gives rise to a variety of territorial competitiveness patterns that align with the cultural and political backgrounds of the places in question [38]. Such an approach is meant to ensure local, sustainable development through social and economic competitiveness and changes because places and communities have the ability to adapt to different policies and economic strategies in local development.
The resilience of a community, particularly in terms of its ability to withstand external pressures and maintain its identity within a specific territory, is a crucial factor in ensuring local progress and community development [7,8]. New approaches to local development are based on the capitalization of natural features, new innovative trends in rural regeneration through local cultural assets, and a fair intersection between local identity and cultures. These approaches also incorporate global visions in rural development, which serve as vectors for the sustenance of local resilience in a given place [39]. The cultural location of a community represents a significant aspect in the definition of both the culture and the social relations of communities. These communities engage in local and regional competition to ensure their progress in terms of their social relations and economic and cultural development [40]. Rivers are, therefore, natural features that ground significant social and cultural relations, leading to the local development of communities [41] based on traditions and the cultural assets of places that are closely connected by environmental attributes such as rivers. In a multitude of cultural contexts, rivers serve as both conduits and demarcations between individuals and communities [42]. To fully comprehend the cultural construction of places and their potential for sustainable development, it is essential to critically examine these spatial roles [43].

The human affinity for rivers and all the things they provide was always a specific cultural trait enabling local development [44] and the cultural progress of a community. This is because rivers construct lives and identities, an integral part of a community and a culture that defines a certain community [45]. Rivers are an integral part of the lives of the communities and peoples that are closely connected to them. These natural attributes [46] shape the specific cultures, landscapes, social and economic development, and territorial models of the communities that rely on them. The role of rivers in the inter-community transmission of material traditions, cultural construction, and economic progress also has to be investigated to find new ways for local developments to preserve traditions and inherited cultural values. Different studies are highlighting this reality, legitimizing new research on specific case studies on how people and communities internalized rivers as a part of their lives, identities, and communities. Territorial competitiveness and resilience through the economic, social, and cultural benefits of rivers and their role in shaping local identities and cultural landscapes have to be geographically considered [47]. In this respect, rivers generate impressive cultures and identities through their cultural value [48] and through their related cultures of water which shape specific landscapes and communities, bridging peoples, cultures, and communities [49,50].

These approaches must be taken into account in any geographical analysis of regional identity, most especially against the contemporary background of social and economic development, in which collective identity and community identity have to be understood as vectors of the social and economic transformations taking place in reaction to the current challenges facing our world [5]. Local models of community development represent significant actions that aim to construct local identity in the various contexts of regional economic development. Under the new model of regionalization, in which local policies and decisions also have a part to play, both the complex factors that combine in the regional identity construction of a place on the one hand, and economic development and local planning on the other, contribute to the identity individualization of a place or region. This is the case whether we are thinking of local development based on local resources or economic practices. Such approaches turn regions and places into perceptual regions, places in which new kinds of identities can be imagined [51,52]. Local economic development and regional planning are important features of a region’s identity construction that must be borne in mind in the context of the construction of the local identities of places and regions, since they frame both people’s ordinary way of life and the cultural landscape of communities [53]. They must be understood if we are to grasp the chief mechanisms that define the cultural traits and values of a given area. In terms of the individual specificities of a landscape, multiple types of cultural landscapes have come into existence [54], all of them demonstrating the main cultural activities, practices, and actions that have built the cultural
identity of the people, represented over time and space in many different ways [51,55]. Furthermore, against this background, it is these social, cultural, economic, and political traits that operate as the main vectors which through the intermediary of local cultures and resources construct and establish the local identity of a community [56–59]. Rural communities are especially important to decode, for it is the rural space that best preserves its cultural features and values, its local ways of life, and its cultural landscapes, all on the foundation of its people, resources, and activities, and of its traditions and inherited cultures [12,60].

In the construction of rural identity, the place itself matters, as well as all the actions and initiatives that ensure the social construction of a place [11]. In this context, the effects of rural identity are evident in the cultural landscapes of communities [61] because their cultural traits and all their social and economic practices are intended to provide particular landscape aesthetics and specific functionalities reflected in the local identity of rural communities [62–67]. In rural development, the marks of regional identity represent an important key to understanding how rural settlements have built their own cultural identity landscapes and how these are represented in current analyses, practices, and discourses. In the context of the development of rural communities, regional identity is shaped by local resources, by the modes of local production and construction of these places based on their inherited or borrowed cultural traits and practices as managed and administered via various types of local and regional governance, and by local community development policies [68]. Looking at the whole ensemble of environmental resources, water represents a feature that has always both contributed to community formation and guaranteed specific cultural identities through the individual modes of the local production and reproduction of a community. Water is perhaps the most important geographical attribute framing the spatiality, functionality, and symbolism of a place or a region, especially when we are speaking about traditional ways of life in different rural spaces. The local and regional significance and identity of a place are ensured by the presence of water and by all the opportunities it provides for people and communities [13–15,69]. Both a geographical feature that can divide places and spaces and one that connects people, cultures, and societies, water and its related cultural and political identities represent the main resource that determines communities. It provides key pathways for the local and socio-economic developments that frame specific cultural landscapes and particular cultural identities [70–74].

Human settlements along riversides, especially in rural areas, have been common throughout history as a consequence of people’s need to access water for drinking, irrigation, fishing, transportation, and other economic practices and activities. Rivers have also been seen as major sources of food and building materials. Some of the world’s earliest human settlements, such as those in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, and the Indus Valley, developed in areas near rivers because these provided fertile soil and a constant source of fresh water [75,76]. However, human settlements beside rivers may be vulnerable to flooding or other natural disasters, which means that careful planning and proper resource management are required [77].

A source of both opportunities and risks for the community, water has the potential to provide the premises for territorial identity construction, with people and communities always being strongly attached to the places where they live. Affective perspectives and performed practices combine to generate specific cultural landscapes. Territorial identities can impact people’s behaviors and decisions, while at the same time they can also be an important factor in promoting various kinds of economic development, including, in some areas, tourism. Contemporary geographies of territorial identity investigate not only spatial areas and arrangements but also the reasons why people interact with their local environmental features and the ways in which they do so [76].

The rural landscape has been the subject of study from a variety of perspectives. One particularly fruitful avenue of inquiry is the representation of cultural identity in rural areas. This approach offers insights into the functionalities and landscapes of these areas, as well as the data needed to inform new forms of spatial governance aimed at
maintaining and sustaining local cultural identities. In the context of cultural identity construction, case studies are widely recommended [68,78,79] as a method of obtaining new data that advances academic knowledge regarding the construction of rural identity. They are particularly useful for capturing significant information about the way of life in the countryside, the ways in which people feel and perceive their relationship with the lived rural space, and the ways that the local territorial identity is represented in the collective memory of a rural place.

3. Study Area, Materials and Methods

Vărădia de Mureș and Birchiș are situated in Western Romania, on the boundary between the historical regions of Banat and Crișana, marked by the river Mureș. Their location on this relatively closed corridor is reflected in their distance from towns and cities: 50 km from the nearest town (Lipova, with approximately 10,000 inhabitants [80]), 80 km from the county town (Arad), and over 100 km from the main regional city, Timisoara. The most important nearby locality is Sâvârsin, the main rural pole and the site of the Royal Castle, but even this has no more than 3000 inhabitants (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Positioning of Vărădia de Mureș and Birchiș in the national, regional, and local context.

The Vărădia de Mureș commune has 1587 inhabitants distributed among six small villages, while Birchiș has 1773 inhabitants distributed between four small villages [80]. Both communes have for over a century been on a trend of aging and demographic decline. The demographic peak was attained in both communes in 1910 when they had 4948 inhabitants. Even though Romania experienced significant demographic growth during the communist period [81], in our study area the absence of cities and investment in industry and services generated a massive emigration of young people, so that the area now ranks in the quartile of the oldest ones demographically in the country.

The Mureș valley is a connecting artery along which the plain extends into the mountain area in the form of depressional bays, which led in the past to the development of intensive agriculture. Connecting corridors were formed between settlements, strengthen-
ing the constant to-and-fro movement of population and material and cultural goods in this area.

Our first methodological step took the form of a literature review and bibliographical documentation. This entailed a review of the existing literature and a detailed examination of the relevant bibliography. This analysis was primarily focused on international publications that addressed pivotal concepts such as territorial identity, rural identity, place attachment, rural and regional heritage, and the emotional and risk-related dimensions associated with watercourses. Additionally, a review of Romanian publications was conducted, with a particular emphasis on local contexts.

Next, in-field participatory and empirical observation, as widely recommended, was a fruitful way of looking at the cultural landscapes of the communes being studied, providing important insights that helped us assess the cultural backgrounds of both rural settlements. The communes we took as case studies (a recommended method in academic research in this domain—see [68]) were carefully selected from an important region of Romania whose identity is shaped by the geographical and cultural significance of the river Mures. Subsequently, we used the cartographic method (ArcGis 10.4 software) for a comparative analysis of the two villages in terms of spatial organization and territorial polarization, including in relation to the river Mureș, using data from the Romanian National Institute of Statistics [80] and vectorized spatial data extracted from OpenStreetMap through the Geofabrik.de platform. The raster data is the Copernicus Digital Elevation Model (GLO-30 DEM).

To assess the local population’s perception of territorial identity, qualitative and quantitative methods were employed throughout this study, since surveys are relevant instruments in the analysis of issues of territorial identity. We used an 18-item questionnaire, applied between April and May 2023 to 220 inhabitants—110 from the Vârădia de Mureș commune and 110 from Birchis.

Among the 18 questions of the questionnaire, 3 were complex. These questions addressed the respondents’ attachment to the place, their perceptions of the Mureș river, and their daily relationship with the river and the people across it. The 3 questions collectively comprised 35 items, as will be evident in the subsequent results section. An additional 8 questions were identification questions, inquiring about the respondents’ locality, age, sex, level of education, length of residence in the village, and other demographic characteristics. These questions were employed for both the verification of the sample and the subsequent statistical analysis. An additional 7 questions pertained to the quality of life of the inhabitants, including infrastructure, facilities, the quality of their own lives, interactions with the community, and daily life. These seven questions will be the subject of a separate future study and thus have not been integrated into this analysis.

Respondents included people of all ages and levels of education. Sample quotas were also set in proportion to the demographic characteristics of the population, in particular age and gender. Demographic data (age, gender, occupation, and level of education) was collected from respondents and anonymized. A total of 56% of respondents were women, the largest age group was those aged 35–49, and the majority had been born in the communes and had a high school educational level. The largest number of respondents work in the public sector, followed by those employed in the private sector, retired people, and students. Data collection was carried out face-to-face using the QuestionPro platform, and data cleaning and analysis were completed in Microsoft Excel, version 365.

In order to round off the study by including a reflexive-explanatory dimension, in August 2023 we conducted 36 interviews with locals (20 from Vârădia de Mureș and 16 from Birchis), applying 10 open questions that complemented those in the questionnaire (Table 1). For this stage we set up face-to-face meetings with those willing to be interviewed, ensuring that everyone was at their ease during the discussions. All survey interviewees provided their consent and have been anonymized. The study was approved by the Scientific Council of University Research and Creation from West University of Timisoara (no. 33282).
Table 1. Interviewee statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Code</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Educational Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60–65</td>
<td>Industrial worker</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>60–65</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60–65</td>
<td>Retired army officer</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
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<td>I4</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Economist</td>
<td>University</td>
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<td>I5</td>
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<td>35–40</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
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<td>I7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55–60</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
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<td>I9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35–40</td>
<td>Carer</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I10</td>
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<td>60–65</td>
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<tr>
<td>I13</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>University</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>I15</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>I17</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20–25</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>University</td>
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<td>I18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>70–75</td>
<td>Driver</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>I26</td>
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<td>&gt;80</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
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<td>I27</td>
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<td>55–60</td>
<td>Forestry worker</td>
<td>High school</td>
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<td>I28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20–25</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40–45</td>
<td>Biologist</td>
<td>University</td>
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<td>I30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45–50</td>
<td>Builder</td>
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<td>I31</td>
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<td>University</td>
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<td>I34</td>
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<td>Primary school</td>
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<td>I35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20–25</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>University</td>
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<tr>
<td>I36</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>66–70</td>
<td>Veterinarian</td>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questions were about the unique features of their home commune, the advantages that the Royal Castle in the neighboring commune of Sâvârsin brings to the area, and how exactly they would describe the way their local government functioned. The interview also included questions about the future, whether interviewees were hoping to leave the
Heritage in a few years’ time, and the importance of the river Mureș to the community. Inhabitants also explored the issue of which historical region they saw themselves as belonging to. The interviews were accurately transcribed, and then thematically and chromatically coded following the methodology proposed by Bryman [82]. Demographic data for the respondents is shown below (Table 1).

A summary of the methodological approach is provided in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>National Statistical Institute of Romania</th>
<th>National Agency for Cadastr and Real Estate Advertising</th>
<th>220 Surveys (N = 110 in Vârâdia N = 110 in Birchiș)</th>
<th>36 Interviews (N = 20 in Vârâdia N = 16 in Birchiș)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OpenStreetMap (GeoFabrik.de)</td>
<td>GLO-30 DEM Copernicus</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tools/analysis</td>
<td>Microsoft Excel (quantitative data)</td>
<td>ArcGIS 10.4 (vector and raster data)</td>
<td>Microsoft Excel (quantitative data)</td>
<td>Thematic coding (qualitative data)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Socio-economic and demographic evolutions</td>
<td>Spatial organization of the study area</td>
<td>Local cultural differences</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of rural landscapes and territ. identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Schematic representation of the methodological approach.

4. Results

4.1. A Quantitative Approach to Local Cultural Heritage Differences

The major themes that emerged from the questionnaire are as follows: localism/rootedness, (regional) pride, authenticity, and different socio-economic uses of the Mureș river. Initial analysis of the questionnaires shows that respondents from Birchiș feel their deepest connection is with the village in which they live or where they come from. This shows the pride they take in their own settlement.

By contrast, those from Vârâdia de Mureș feel a greater attachment to Romania, their country of residence, than to their village. The patriotism exemplified here most likely has to do with an awareness of the true state of things in their village and the opportunity to choose a different allegiance as their primary personal one. Romania thus ranks first for the inhabitants of Vârâdia, second only, on the scale of emotional attachment, to the village where they live. Transylvania is ranked fourth by people from the commune of Vârâdia de Mureș, while for respondents from Birchiș, Banat is ranked third, followed by Europe, the commune where they live, and the area of Sârășin (the large neighboring commune that has the Royal Castle). The river Mureș is ranked last by people from both communes studied (Figure 3). The main positive aspects of living in the two communes, in the locals’ opinion, are the churches and the easy access to healthcare. In contrast, the water supply network, public transport, and the local public administration head the list of sources of dissatisfaction mentioned. A unique and authentic feature, different in each of the two communes studied, is represented, according to residents, by the traditions enshrined in their Christmas customs.

The statements recorded about the river Mureș and the people who live across the Mureș demonstrate that the inhabitants of Birchiș (in Banat) feel a greater pride in their village than do those living in Vârâdia (in Transylvania). The admission that it is dangerous to swim in the Mures, as witnessed by the incidents that have happened over the years and resulted in several people drowning, comes from both communes. Despite the old saying that people in the Banat are warmer, more hospitable, and more generous than Transylvanians, the inhabitants of Birchiș are of the opinion that those from the villages on
the northern side of the Mureș are more welcoming, wealthier, use different grammatical forms, and have different speech rhythms; nevertheless, they maintain close ties with relatives, friends, and acquaintances who own property there (Figure 4). The inhabitants of Vârâdia regard the easy accessibility of the main E68 road and the railway as a major benefit to the development and progress of their commune, with 60 people giving this part of the questionnaire the rating “totally agree”.

**Figure 3.** Respondents’ answers to the place attachment question.

![Figure 3](image_url)

**Figure 4.** Perceptions of the river Mureș and the people beyond it (to what extent do you agree with the following statements?).

Further to this, respondents were also given a list of 12 activities connected with the Mureș and the villages across the Mureș and were asked to state which of them they had participated in during the past year and how frequently. Their answers show clearly that people from Birchiş spent more time visiting or simply talking to their friends or relatives on the other side of the Mureș. It can also be seen that they went more often to parties held...
in villages across the river and to the food and clothes market that takes place in Sâvârsin every Thursday. Eating fish from the river was also a more regular feature of their lives. The inhabitants of Vărădia de Mureș made greater use of the Mureș in their leisure time, as evidenced by the statements about bathing, fishing, relaxing, and boating on the river (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Respondents’ daily relationship with the river Mureș and the people across it (if you think about the Mureș and the villages across the Mureș, in the last year how often have you ...?)](image)

4.2. A Qualitative Analysis of Rural Landscapes and Territorial Identity

Several themes emerged in the qualitative analysis: perspectives on the lived rural space, benefits, and risks at the local level, divided opinions on regional belonging, disadvantages of the rural areas, and visions and suggestions for preserving the rural heritage.

4.2.1. A Broader Perspective on the Rural Lived Rural Space

Local people are nostalgic when it comes to the past and the present. They always see differences between the lives they lived many years ago and the days they are enjoying now. Both periods have their pleasant and less pleasant sides. One of the memories mentioned by I2 originates from years ago: “we have local customs... we tried to do something cultural at least. It’s a beautiful area, someone even came from the south of Romania, bought a house, and said we don’t even realize what it means to have the hill, the Mureș valley, the road and the railway. Until then I hadn’t even thought about it. We have everything... a picturesque place, foreigners like it”. The same respondent also pointed out that the city no longer defines him, now, in his old age: “my dream in my youth was that I would go to the city, ... but now I don’t seem to find myself there anymore. Now everything is more complicated and tiring there, but I would like to go to shows, to the opera, to the theatre, I miss that so much here”. He also remembers the way the commune was managed in the past, when it seems the locals were more concerned with the various aspects of running the place: “the administrative side of life is less good now than in the past, when everyone who worked for the Town Hall was interested in the proper running of the commune, following the lead given by the Mayor” (I16). He also mentions the close link the people in Vărădia de Mureș had with the royal family’s possessions: “Vărădia derives no benefit from the Castle, even though it is the neighbouring commune, there is a lack of interest in the airport where the king landed when he came here. He had a hangar and a house near the airport” (I16).
Another interviewee told us that he worked in the construction industry in Spain for about 10 years and learned a lot there, but has now returned home to be near his family and is currently working in the same field, but in Romania, close to his commune.

4.2.2. The Mures: The Balance between Benefits and Risks at the Local Rural Level

By collating the responses of interviewees from the two communes in our study, we were able to identify two categories of considerations related to the river Mureș and two types of reactions that the locals had: positive ones that highlighted nostalgia, enthusiasm, and satisfaction about the river, and negative ones that betrayed fear, rejection, or even denial.

The first set of factors observed, the favorable one, shows the advantages that the Mureș brings to the area: “it is as if we could not conceive of the place without the Mures, it is part of our life. It’s very beneficial for crops, all the maize fields near the Mureș have produced a harvest, the water probably keeps the ground moist” (I2), “the Mureș is a lifesaver, especially for those who have maize in the countryside, alongside the Mureș. It’s also advantageous for fishing, children take a dip” (I3), “it’s a great advantage for agriculture, for fishermen, it’s close by” (I7), “the Mureș can bring benefits for tourism, with recreational areas” (I19), “from the Mureș I took sand and gravel when I built my house 60 years ago. A benefit” (I23), and “it is an opportunity for relaxation, fishing. It would have been nice for it to have been properly exploited” (I28).

Reviewing all these benefits enjoyed by the locals, one can certainly conclude that this river has its positive side, but with other interviewees their primary reaction was that the Mureș creates many problems and is dangerous. Statements such as “there is a risk of drowning” (I3), “many years ago the Mureș flooded up to the railway line at the edge of the village. When it bursts its banks, it destroys everything. No dykes have been built to reinforce it” (I10), “a danger. Many people have drowned there” (I16), “a peril responsible, in the past, for the deaths of several young people” (I21), “the Mureș comes up to our village” (I26), a “disadvantage, due to flooding” (I27), and a “disadvantage when the Mureș rises and floods our agricultural plots” (I32) all point to the fear that has taken root in the minds of some people. A double tragedy that took place years ago, the drowning of two members of the same Birchis family, has left the bereaved survivor unwilling to hear or talk about anything related to this river: “I don’t want to talk about the Mureș, it is a great danger. That’s where my child drowned first and after a few years my husband did too. They both died…”.

4.2.3. Imagery of Regional Belonging at the Border between the Banat and Crișana Regions

Whether from Crișana or Banat, or from one side of the Mures or the other, respondents had thoughts, stories, and tales to tell: “Tourists come to Sâvârsin, they are curious, in a way this is how our area is known. When I’m away somewhere and someone asks me where I’m from, I always say I’m from Sâvârsin, never from Vâradia, because my commune is not so well known. We are somehow proud of Sâvârsin and people immediately know what we are talking about” (I2).

These sentences exemplify the respondent’s belonging to the area where he lives and works. When he is outside his commune, he chooses to mention Sâvârsin to direct his interlocutor to the area he comes from, and only then to say something about his home village.

The same interviewee takes a positive view of the inhabitants of the other region, saying “I really like the people from across the Mures, they are very friendly, you feel so good there. . . they are more welcoming than we are, they are more attached to their customs. The people there are first-rate. At first, I was very surprised at how they even take care of their graves, we are more laid back”. Moreover, one interviewee (I3) makes a direct comparison between the inhabitants of Crișana and Banat: “Here people are more reserved, they are not so “warm”. Over there, across the Mures, there is a different feel to things. If I go to someone’s house, the hostess offers a glass of brandy and my wife is
greeted by relatives who show her what they have done, what they have sewn, what they have renovated. They are more open, at the village festival they invite you to their home for a meal. That’s what Banat feels like. They are “proud” of how many “guests” they have had at the table”. “The people across the Mures are good householders, more energetic than us” (I19) is another statement from an inhabitant of Vârâdia de Mures. “The people in Banat are different, they are people who still keep animals that used to be raised here, they have more cows than us, they have more horses, we still have 4 horses in the commune and before there were hundreds of horses”.

This comparison regarding the livestock sector comes from I12, who remembers how flourishing the commune was years ago, when herds of livestock were much larger, and people put much more emphasis on the growth of the agricultural and livestock sectors.

The inhabitants of Birchis mention that the people on the other side of the Mures are “tidier, more tidy, perhaps even better at housekeeping... it depends from person to person” (I22), “they are more gentle, more civilised than us, we are a bit rough” (I23), “decent people, they also use the Mures, they have a series of streams that flow into the Mures, they have woods, they have greenery, you can find everything you want, it’s a beautiful, picturesque area”, “they are all hard-working people, they just need to have somewhere to work and to be strong” (I26), “simple people, but dedicated. The area is beautiful, but people are less united than here” (I31), “they are like us, impulsive” (I35), and “they are richer than us, the main trunk road passes through there” (I36).

4.2.4. Main Disadvantages of the Rural Areas Studied

Rural areas at a considerable distance from a city often face many difficulties. The rural settlements studied, interpreted, and analyzed from various angles in this study proved to contain some residents who were satisfied with the way they had chosen to live and with everything around them, but on the other hand, we also met local people who felt the need to voice their complaints about what was troubling them and what they termed problems that existed in their communes. We talked to both highly educated people and others without much education, but the majority described and highlighted substantially the same issues, leading us to conclude that all of these are genuine problems and are indeed the main obstacles to development in this area. As far as the commune of Vârâdia de Mures is concerned, the local people’s resigned attitude to the present situation is clear; many of them do not currently see any way for Vârâdia to progress from an administrative point of view.

Among the regrets of those past their second youth is the fact that young people are choosing to make a future far from the village they come from, with statements such as “the number of young people is decreasing because there are no jobs, what’s left behind is a sad place...” (I2) and “young people have children who have to eat, go to school, and there are no jobs” (I12) frequently being voiced. Across the river, in the Birchis commune, the same issue is apparent, with interviewees mentioning this drawback quite often: “There is no opportunity for people to work, there is nowhere to work.” (I25), and “population ageing is making the commune dull” (I28). A very obvious focus of dissatisfaction is the local administration. They say that this is the main reason that things are heading in the wrong direction: “nothing has really been done here... roads, unpaved streets...” (I1), “we had management, our village was very nice, we had roads and a village hall, now they are always being repaired” (I2), “dust, in Romanian, dust. There is no emphasis on the administrative side at all” (I4), “the leadership is the weakest it has been since the Revolution” (I7), “they don’t clean up a single alley...” (I12), “from a financial point of view it’s very difficult, because we don’t have a business environment here in the commune” (I10), “no Mayor or local forum has been found to take charge and fight harder to make the commune stand out, to show its best side. They have stayed as they were in the time of Ceausescu” (I14), and “the local administration leaves something to be desired. To the best of my knowledge, they don’t have many development projects for the commune, they don’t involve themselves in problems that affect local people...” (I19).
All these statements are, in fact, the unspoken words of the locals over the years and sum up what they have been thinking and feeling is wrong with the area where they live. Some comments are more cutting than others, but overall they convey a situation that troubles them. One interviewee compared Vărădia de Mureș with other places in the same county and judged it as being at a lower level: “the road infrastructure is pathetic; it destroys our cars. Nothing concrete is being done. Why can they do it and we can’t? Săvărșin has renovated its hostels from their own resources, they have built a sports hall from their own resources, without taking anything from anyone.” (I3).

The citizens view nearby communes as oases of development and are frustrated that in their village things have remained as they were in “Ceausescu’s time” (I14). Apart from the problem of the local administration, other shortfalls mentioned by the inhabitants of Vărădia are the lack of a regular system of household waste collection and the non-existence of relaxation-focused tourist development in the area, even though the river Mureș and the Royal Castle of Săvărșin could be used as a draw: “Vărădia has no guesthouses, no restaurants, nothing that can be linked to tourism” (I5), and “The Mureș is an opportunity for the area, it’s a pity that nothing has been developed” (I17).

Furthermore, I20 mentions that there is a stone quarry on the road out of Vărădia de Mureș that is not being worked at present, which according to them shows a lack of interest on the part of the authorities: “the stone quarry has stayed closed because of the local administration”. As for Birchis, the problematic features are similar to those found in Vărădia de Mureș; here too they revolve around the administrative situation: “bad management by the local authorities” (I21), “there are some projects but not much change” (I28), and “it is an area with potential but one that has been forgotten. Nobody cares about the commune. A lot of improvements could be made at all levels” (I29). In addition, the distance from the city hampers local people, as access to some services is automatically made more difficult: “we are a very long way from the cities” (I23).

4.2.5. The Voice of Local Residents: Ideas, Visions, Beliefs, and Suggestions

One idea advanced as an opinion by locals wishing to improve the status of the communes where they live is the continuation of work on the King’s Tourist Road, which was originally built at the request of King Michael I to facilitate the journey from the royal property in Săvărșin to the spa resort on the other side of the mountain.

Another suggestion, put forward by several people, is that the makeup of the local administration needs to be changed. They say that there is a great need for people who are younger, competent, involved, interested, and committed, with innovative visions and ideas, and full of positive energy. They also highlight the need for investors and for well-thought-out and well-planned projects.

For older people, a primary solution would be to stop young people from leaving and to try to make a difference and raise living standards through their own efforts. An example of this is I17, who would like to open a hairdressing salon in the commune at the request of fellow residents who have said they need this service from someone with specialist qualifications. I17 has taken relevant courses, so in the future, she wants to open her own business in her home village: “my future is in the city. In the immediate future, I want to open a hairdressing salon at home, but the aim is not to stay here. I intend to work in the city so that I can develop at all levels. At the request of my fellow commune residents, who say they need such services, I have decided to take this step”. In addition to all these proposals, several others were put forward, such as the development of the banks of the river Mureș, improvements to the gravel and stone quarry, and the attraction of projects to support the development of road infrastructure.

Among residents of the two communes, there is little hope that anything good will appear on the scene to change things in their villages. Most agree that they are struggling against too many obstacles, so very few interviewees mention factors that might lead to progress and development. I2 pins their hopes on the finalization of the refurbishment of the Vărădia de Mureș village hall: “We had both roads and a village hall... let’s hope that
measures are taken and that the work started is completed”, and in the creation of jobs to
cater for as many people as possible who currently commute or have moved elsewhere
precisely for this reason: “if jobs appeared, young people would not leave, some of those
who have left would return. If only some investors could come, I don’t know how, I don’t
know where from, to give life to the area” (I2).

Consequently, the local administration of these two villages has to consider this aspect
in the future policy agendas in order to sustain the social, cultural, and environmental
resources, as well as the residents’ voices.

To conclude, we have summarized our results in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected Methods and Themes</th>
<th>Major Results</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The quantitative approach to local cultural heritage differences</td>
<td>The village is the primary locus of attachment for its inhabitants, extending beyond the conventional boundaries of attachment to country, region, or Europe. People living south of the Mures river are more attached to the historic region of Banat, while those to the north are more attached to Crisana region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>The relationship between the inhabitants and the Mures River is complex and multifaceted. The Mures River occupies the lowest position in the hierarchy of identity preferences. Conversely, the river is regarded as a multifaceted resource. Residents’ interactions (i.e., family visits, attending events/fairs) on either side of the river are rare.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A broader per-spective on the rural lived space</td>
<td>Local people have a sentiment of nostalgia for the past, holding the view that traditions and the prevailing modes of conduct in the present have undergone a decline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Mures: benefits and risks at the local rural level</td>
<td>The Mures river is a significant resource for the local population. It provides fertile agricultural land, moisture for plants, building materials, and drinking water for animals. However, it also poses a significant risk of flooding and drowning, with fatalities reported in both villages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Imagery of regional belonging at the border between the Banat and Crisana regions</td>
<td>Residents hold more favorable opinions of individuals residing across the river than they do of themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Disadvantages of the rural areas studied</td>
<td>The absence of a proximate urban center has precipitated an economic downturn and a migration of younger individuals. This is the primary rationale for the dearth of socio-economic and cultural vibrancy in the villages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The voice of local residents: visions and suggestions</td>
<td>The proximity of the King of Romania’s Castle (less than 10 km from both villages) and the existence of a European road and railroad present promising prospects for the area.</td>
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</table>

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has examined the issue of rural landscapes and local and regional cultural
heritage and identity by taking as a case study two Romanian villages that are closely
connected to each other by a geographical feature of their region, the river Mures, which
acts as a cultural spine in the formation of rural communities in this region of Romania. In
addition, both villages are enriched by social and cultural features and aspects that charac-
terize Romanian rural settlements and illustrate a common identity that is both spatially and
mentally represented and deeply rooted in the local collective memory. The shaping of cultural identity in the sites we studied follows the Romanian and Eastern European model of cultural identity formation, which is founded on the geographical/environmental, social, economic, and cultural attributes of places and communities under constant and
changing political governance. The most important feature defining the specific cultural identity of these two sites is water, which, as their most relevant geographical resource, provides the most distinctive directions for community dynamics and development, giving specific contexts and opportunities for local people, their social and economic practices, and their way of life, all of which contribute to the construction of a cultural landscape with an identity of its own. This is because rivers are part of people’s and communities’ lives [37,46], acting as bridges between cultures and societies and shaping new forms of identity and cultural heritage, which are means of ensuring local territorial competitiveness and resilience [6,35,44]. Collective identity is largely related to the river’s presence, and this local attribute could therefore be approached as a political instrument [44] in shaping future development. The most important aspects that frame and define its cultural identity are the local people, resources, social practices, symbolism, collective identity, history, and institutional governance of a place [83–85]. People are important because they are the agents in the spatial construction of a place. The environment and physical resources frequently represent the key advantages that sustain local practices in the social, cultural, and economic development of a community, which in turn contribute to the construction of local identity.

Responding to our first research question (how are rural landscape and rural identity constructed at the local level?), we come to several interesting results. First, the quantitative analysis described in this paper has shown that people in the Birchiș and Vârâdia communes identify themselves with the river Mureș, viewing it as an environmental feature that has contributed to the formation both of these rural localities and of the local cultural identity widely reflected in the cultural landscapes of their villages. They also identify with the entire river valley, since countless villages along the river have benefited from the same opportunities throughout their history, resulting in many similarities in local cultural landscapes and in the inhabitants’ ways of life. If we compare our results to previous studies, the literature on the role of water in local communities has shown the importance of the presence of water and of all the opportunities rivers provide for people and communities [13–15,69].

Responding to our second research question (what role does the river Mureș play in shaping the rural and regional belonging of the country people in the area?), we noticed that the river Mureș represents a significant opportunity for development, both for these rural communities and for the whole region, even though it is also perceived as a risk factor. This finding triangulates that rivers and their related opportunities and resources are integral parts of communities that largely define themselves with them. In this respect, the Mureș river represents a natural feature that continuously contributed to the local cultural capital construction, reproducing certain cultures widely mirrored in the local social, economic, and cultural backgrounds of the investigated communities. People from here largely recognized their cultures and heritage in the Mureș river’s presence as well as in the specific cultural landscape that defines these communities. As the cultures of water have had a different influence on both the local economic development and the local identities of communities, patterns of territorial competitiveness have appeared between the two studied villages. This is in line with the existing cultural and political backgrounds of the places [38]. Through social and economic competitiveness, places and communities adapt to different economic strategies in local development. Moreover, the rural resilience and particularly the territorial resilience of the two communities are influenced by environmental attributes [7,8]. On the other hand, as Martuwar incredibly argued, rivers are places of healing, but they can also be bridges. For instance, Roth [43] and Schillinger and Lycett [42] showed how the Danube and the Amazon acted as intercultural bridges between people and nations throughout centuries. However, in our case, the river Mureș has acted more as a cultural fault. This phenomenon has been observed in other studies on other rivers. For example, Abbott et al. [86] demonstrated how the Zambezi River influences practices and perceptions, and even gives rise to resource conflicts. Furthermore, a comparison of two localities on opposite banks of the Oder River (Guben and Gubin)
revealed contrasting perceptions of the inhabitants about each other. While some referred to others with nostalgia, others associated them with threat [87].

In terms of regional heritage identity, as seen through the lens of a sense of belonging, local people feel themselves to be part of the Crișana and Banat regions, which argues for the regional inter- and multiculturalism that frames these rural settlements. In addition, they identify with the rural localities in which they live and pursue their specific ways of life, drawing on all the resources provided by nature and by the cultural and historical heritage. Rural residents express their satisfaction with local social and cultural values and institutions, stressing the importance to them of the local church and religion, schools, and cultural and administrative institutions, with evident reservations as regards the current local authorities, who ought to be enhancing their efforts towards and involvement in local development by properly exploiting the local cultural background and the major environmental resource represented by the river. A change of attitude, policy, and agenda-setting here could undoubtedly aid local economic development, especially via the promotion of tourism and cultural activities. The local uniqueness of these places is illustrated by the historical background that has taken shape over the centuries and under changing political systems; by the local ethnicity and language; by the people themselves, who keep these communities alive; and by local traditions and specific practices of rural life. The local pride shown by people and communities, and the positive relationships between people and between different cultural groups, also make a direct contribution to the construction of the cultural identity of these places. Throughout this quantitative analysis, the cultural landscapes of the country area studied, clearly illustrating as they do the local cultures established over time, are viewed as the major spatial and geographical attributes of these communities. Such arguments elucidate the river’s role in the construction of local identity within these communities [49,50]. The communities, situated along a riverine corridor, possess the potential to become more resilient to the present changes in local community development. Their cultures afford them the capacity to adapt and adjust their cultural capital and heritage in response to the present political strategies in local development based on cultural and identity resources closely related to an environmental feature such as the Mures river.

The qualitative part of the research brings to light people’s feelings and perceptions regarding their cultural landscapes, traditions, local history, and cultural background, all underexploited in current local development initiatives. The nostalgia and regrets commune residents express flow from their perception that the local administration is insufficiently committed to developing these villages economically by turning their cultural, natural, and human capital to good use. Future policy agendas need to reflect this priority. In our days, the cultural regionality and identity of places and regions have been instrumentalized to become valuable assets that should be inspiring local authorities to make full use of them as means through which communities can be developed in the light of their cultural identity as places with significant cultural potential and resources. Regional identity is, therefore, connected to the construction and deconstruction of spaces [27–30,88]. Our two rural areas belong to different regions that represent institutionalized places and spaces, which means that their development has been shaped by the political and economic factors that created their regional identity (see [32]).

In conclusion, narratives, practices, and discourses regarding the cultural identity of places and regions must be given fuller consideration when we rethink the contemporary development of rural communities—places whose cultural identities, collective memories, and cultural landscapes are defined by their unique peoples, cultures, social practices, and ways of life.

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