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Museums as a Means to (Re)Make Regional Identities: The Oltenia Museum (Romania) as Case Study

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Abstract: In recent decades, ever more museums have begun to put a new emphasis on the education of the public, playing an important role in creating national or regional identities. This paper aims to assess the strategy chosen by the History Section of the Oltenia Museum in Craiova (Romania) to use knowledge, objects and narratives to create a sense of belonging and negotiate identities. Site visits, participant observations and discussions with museum curators, the analysis of texts and discourses were used in order to see if there is a master narrative related to regional identity and to determine the elements used to shape this identity. The results of this study point to the fact that there is an underlying master narrative of the exhibition, stressing the dominant understanding of Oltenia's identity stemming mainly from cultural markers such as religion and language, while acknowledging wider European influences on the national and regional identity.

Keywords: collective memory; heritage; post-communist representations; narrative

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1. Introduction

The diversity of religious, linguistic and ethnic cultures within the European Union is seen as the element that gives the European identity its originality. However, while the national identities of most of the Member States are well entrenched [1], other countries located 'too far in the East' have been struggling with asserting their identity on the international scene. The Romanian national identity was forged in close connection to the European one, over the last three centuries [2]. However, this has not been an easy process, since two representations of Romanian national identity have existed during this period. According to the Western representation, the county has been part of the European mainstream, while the Eastern position focuses on the importance of indigenous Romanian values [3–5]. On top of that, the country has been perceived as having 'struggled with a Balkan identity in a century of independence, not only due to its geographical position at the crossroads between eastern Europe and western Asia, where frontiers between different civilizations have shifted throughout history, but also due to 'strengthened aspects of political cultural inimical to democracy' [6] (p. 67) (Figure 1).

In the first decades following the fall of communism, Romania was eager to further reconstruct its identity by shifting its focus from the ideology of socialism and 'the bright future of the country' to that of a nation with Latin ancestors and cultural ties and common interests with Western European countries. Just like the other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, it sought to project this new identity to the wider world [3], 'knocking once again on the gates of Europe and attempting (our) second entry into the Western world' [7] (p. 2).

The current paper provides an overview of previous research related to the construction of identities and collective memory, and the role of museums as cultural public institutions in forging identities, followed by a brief discussion on the background of the Oltenia Museum, which is the case study presented; we focused on the exhibitions on display during and after the communist period, and on the selection of historical characters

and events. The main aim of the paper was to analyze how the History Section deals with the issue of regional identity. Furthermore, we set two objectives:

The first objective (O1) was to determine whether there was a master narrative at the Oltenia Museum.

The second objective (O2) was to assess the components of Oltenia's regional identity as portrayed in the museum.

Figure 1. Romania and the historical province of Oltenia.

2. Theoretical Background

Ethnicity and identity, as in 'collective identity' or 'identity groups', surfaced as concepts that gathered the attention of scholars and politicians alike in the 1960s [8]. Collective cultural identity refers to 'shared memories of earlier events and periods in the history of that unit and to notions entertained by each generation about the collective destiny of that unit and its culture' [9] (p. 25). National identity is just one of a range of collective identities, which are always relational, implying the existence of 'others' [8,10,11], alleged enemies of the nation [10] (p. 18), against which the nation is defined [11,12]; consequently, national identity becomes meaningful only through contrast with others [13]. Still, national identity is also defined from within, considering the common features of the group, which have important implications for group members as individuals and for the group as a whole.

Anthony Smith, one of the most prominent scholars focusing on nationalism studies, argued that 'national identity involves some sense of political community, history, territory, patria, citizenship, common values and traditions' [9] (p. 9). He portrayed a multi-dimensional concept, including five fundamental attributes: (i) historic territory or homeland; (ii) common myths and historical memories; (iii) a common, mass public culture; (iv) common legal rights and duties for all its members; and (v) common economy with territorial mobility for its members [9] (p. 14).

Considering that the past is what makes a nation [14], national identity has a historical dimension; the longer and the prouder the history, the better for nation-builders [15]. This idea causes many nations to search for their roots back in antiquity, a period seen as a source of legitimacy for a nation and its culture, since it stresses continuity, a key element of identity [10]. The cult of ancestors is legitimate as a heroic past provides the social capital upon which national ideas are built [14]. Hence, national narratives related to identity depend on 'the construction of great personalities [. . .] depicted as national heroes [. . .] who symbolized the achievements and characteristics of the nation' [16] (p. 22).

The manner in which identities are forged and reproduced across time and space is inextricably linked with myths and symbols which people seize upon to denote their

national allegiance [17], allowing for nationalist narratives to be a (re)-written, perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past to serve the present, its representation largely depending on factors such as ethnicity, class, gender and age [18]. That is why, quite often, the myth of the nation is contested continuously [17–19].

The cultural elements of the national identity include values, beliefs, customs, conventions, habits, language and practices 'that bind the population together in their homeland' [9] (p. 11) [10,20]. All classical studies on nationalism emphasize the importance of language to express and symbolize ethnicity [20,21]. The focus is on the emergence and dissemination of the language and its relation to the nation.

Identities are constituted within representation [22] and discourse in specific historical and institutional sites using the resources of history, the natural environment, language, culture and economic success or recession [23], focusing not so much on the past and 'who we are' but rather on what we might become [22]. Identities are not only defined, but also 'contested, and at times naturalized, through representational practices and individual performances' [24] (p. 24).

The concept of regional identity has been seen as a complex expression of the society and its spatial structure, since the region as an entity can only be represented by symbolic means through political, economic and legal institutions [25]. This concept mainly points to the regional consciousness of individuals and is based on 'collective narratives on who and what 'we' and 'our region' are and how these differ from the others' [26] (p. 146). Images, together with representations and discourses, lead to opinions and attitudes and thus are of the utmost importance for the construction of a territorial identity [27,28].

It has been argued that individuals and communities conceive their identity based on collective memory [29], which 'refers to the distribution throughout society of what individuals know, believe, and feel about past events and persons, how they morally judge them, how closely they identify with them, and how much they are inspired by them as models for their conduct and identity' [30] (p. 1). This is to say that collective memory is not strictly related to what actually happened in the past, but rather to the way people perceive the events [29], since collective memories are shared individual memories that shape collective identities [31]. Thus, collective memory draws upon historical sources in a selective and creative way, continuously negotiating between available historical records and current social and political agendas [32] (p. 5); it can be seen as an active past that constitutes and maintains identities [33], as members of a group share the same narrative resources, memory being part of the negotiation of group identity process [34]. Collective memory can be seen as subjective, having a single committed perspective, linking the past with the present, promoting unquestionable heroic narratives [35] while serving the interests of the present [36]. It is aimed at rendering the past comprehensible and compatible with the social identity of the group, i.e., the image that the group wants to maintain (the first anchor of a collective memory) [37].

There is always a 'deliberate attempt to shape collective memories by means of particular kinds of communicative messages' [36] (p. 56). A master commemorative narrative emphasising the common past of a community and its aspirations is an important mechanism by which a nation constructs a collective identity, through a highly selective attitude towards the available historical knowledge [32]. Moreover, narrated collective identities are often 'ideal identities' laden with cultural or political interests [38].

Among the various means used for the construction of national or regional identities, museums have been seen as a strategic identity-building element [39–44] since they have great power as an inculcating force because audiences generally trust their objectivity [40]. Due to the authority they are granted, they shape identities through collective memory making [33] and the selective and systematic reconstruction [45] and presentation of heritage objects to be displayed, stories to be told and characters to be forgotten [33,40,46,47] within a conceptual structure that engages the viewer [48]. Hence, the major role of the museum is in 'accessing, ignoring, confronting, re-affirming and forging identities' [49]. Museums have always been about identity, whether the private identities of the elites as it

was the case with the very first museums in Renaissance Europe, the identity of 'polyglot populace in cities transformed by migrants' during the Progressive Era in the U.S., or the 'custom identity business' of history museums nowadays, where visitors explore and foster their sense of themselves [50]. Within museums, identities are negotiated at three different layers: 'the identities of those encoding the representations; the identities of those decoding the representations; and the identities of those being represented' [49] (p. 294).

Museums and the heritage they display are considered human products of different times and places, representing cultural identities, and are seen as political in all senses [51,52]. As museums currently encourage local communities to investigate their own past and share their experiences, they are considered centres for civil engagement, as well as repositories for community memory [47]. Focusing on heritage display and interpretation and underlying master narratives, this paper analyses the ways in which the post-communist identity is (re)constructed through a master narrative in the exhibitions of the History Section of the Oltenia Museum.

3. The Context: National Identity and Master Narrative in Romania

3.1. Romania's National Identity

Until the 19th century, Romanians were integrated in the Eastern cultural space, dominated by the Orthodox idea and not the national one [7]. Regional identity was the main hindrance for adopting national identity, since it created a community of transnational faith, that disregarded both ethnic and linguistic borders [53].

Towards the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the educated elite from Transylvania helped spread the Enlightenment ideas to the rest of the country, having a significant impact on the other Romanian provinces regarding the development of a national consciousness, focusing mainly on the Latin origins of the Romanian people. It thus began a process of Westernization, around the 1830s, following major cultural and ideological shifts, namely the replacement of the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin one, the spread of European clothing and notably the import of a Constitution, as well as financial and educational systems in accordance with Western models [7]. Forged during the 19th century and the first decades of the 1900s, the Romanian historical ideology focused on the national values and relationships between national culture and the Western model.

The development of national identity is seen as a long, laborious and troublesome process that challenged major resistance from subnational traditional identities (namely religious, regional or professional) which had to be dissolved in order to make room for national identity [53] (p. 21).

According to the 'German formula' generally applied by the Central European nations, 'Romanians are defined by their common origin (whether Roman/Dacian or Dacian–Roman), unitary language, shared history and specific spirituality' [7] (p. 74). Beginning in the 17th century, the Romanian historiography saw the Roman conquest and colonization of Dacia, which overlaps the current Romanian territory as its starting point. Thus, Roman origins made a strong mark on the individuality of the Romanian lands, giving them nobility and prestige [7] (p. 171). Romanian myths are part of the Romanian identity [54] (p.474). The myth of foundation, which is a general European one, has been continuously re-elaborated so as to fit the configuration of the current national organism. 'The excellence of the foundation myth guaranteed the excellence of the Romanian future, in spite of the mediocrity of the present. Through the Romans, the Romanians could present themselves to the West as the equals of anybody, and the phenomenon of acculturation no longer meant borrowing, but rather a return to the source, to a ground of civilization shared with the civilization of the West' [7] (p. 174). Even though Trajan, the Roman Emperor, is the central figure of the great founding myth and the emergence of the Romanian people, greater emphasis is placed on the voivodes Stephen the Great and Michael the Brave, who illustrated the history of the principalities in their age of glory (anti-Ottoman resistance, defense of their country and European Christendom), with little attention to the founders of Wallachia or Moldavia. Romanians have constructed their national identity by gradually

imaginatively discovering their past, a process led by the elites that very slowly percolated to the masses through the education system that allowed the 'nationalization' of the people [53] (p. 43).

For more than a century, the Romanian national identity shifted, in line with the 'central dilemma of Eastern European intellectual history' between the 'imitation of the West and its repudiation' [55] (p. 416). The main controversy stemmed from the share the two cultural sources—autochthonous tradition and Western values—should have [7] (p. 141).

There is a pervading idea throughout the research which focuses on the master narrative of the Romanian identity; this includes several directions, such as religious, linguistic, cultural and economic ones. Thus, orthodoxy is the element that preserves the Romanian culture and spirituality; language binds the ethnic identity and probably the only unquestionable dimension; and there is rich folklore and popular culture, which forms the basis of the Romanian nation. From the economic point of view, Romania is signally an agrarian and pastoral country, having difficulties adapting to industrialism and capitalism [54] (p. 474).

3.2. Background on the History Section of the Oltenia Museum

Since its early beginning in 1915, when it was named the Regional Museum for Antiquities and Ethnography, the Oltenia Museum has witnessed significant changes and benefited from private donations, public funding and the continuous work of dedicated researchers. Its patrimony includes more than 240,000 pieces and unique collections, half of them in the History Section (with some 700 pieces in the Treasure House category). For most of its existence, the activities carried on by the museum focused on the discovery, preservation and scientific and cultural capitalization of the pieces of heritage that testify for the historical evolution of the Romanian people in this part of the country [56].

During the communist period, the History Section acted as 'an institution that argued based on thorough authentic testimonies and old documents the truth about the history of the country and the people who carved it' [57] (p. 128). As with all Romanian museums, the entire exhibition space (including the theme, narrative, objects displayed and layout), covering more than 2000 sqm, was approved by the State Committee for Culture and Art (in 1976). Numerous 'researchers and historians' contributed to the remodeling of the past, and to the entire history of Oltenia being re-written; all the past events were reinterpreted so as to be used by the communist doctrine [3]. The 'colonization of the past' was one of the most urgent priorities of the political regime which ultimately created *historiae ex fiat*/history by decree, ordered by the Communist Party [58,59], museology being just another form of propaganda [60]. Similar to other countries from the Eastern Bloc, Romania developed a culture of 'socialist patriotism' focusing on long-term temporal identity and the socio-cultural homogenous nation of workers and peasants [42,61]. The desire to glorify the merits of the socialists and the Slavic influences which were quite strong until the 1960s was the main driving force behind the construction of the communist master narrative at the Oltenia Museum in the early 1970s. Apart from using a different terminology and chronology, the narrative of the History Section also suppressed Romanians' memory of almost a century of monarchy by simply erasing any mention of the royal family or its role in historic events, while also praising the achievements of the communists in the country and particularly in Oltenia. Lying by omission would become the norm in the communist historiography [58].

For the period following the Independence War in 1877, numerous stories were fabricated to back up the communist reconstruction of the past. Thus, the creation of the Socialist Democrat Party of Workers in Romania in 1893 was described as 'a key historical moment', 'the socialists in this part of the country being highly preoccupied for assimilating the cutting edge ideas of the scientific socialism and for organizing the working class' [57] (p. 84). The creation of the Communist Party in Romania on May 8, 1921 was another moment 'of uttermost importance', as the party 'had to fight against the terrible bourgeois terror', and this was followed by another key moment, 23 August 1944, the national day for Romania during communist times, described as 'A Turning Point for the Historical Development

of Romania' following 'the national armed anti-fascist and anti-imperialist insurrection' that led to the 'creation of a democratic, free and happy country' [57] (p. 116). The communists had strict control over the information and persuasive propaganda that used lies and a flagrant bending of truth, while 'grossly counterfeiting national holidays' for purely propagandistic purposes [62]. The last halls of the exhibition, dedicated to agriculture cooperativization and industrialization, testified for the transformation of 'a region of illiterate peasants' into a 'huge building site and a plant with cutting edge technology'. The exhibition dealing with modern and contemporary eras displayed a lot of photographs, photographs of newspapers and extensive texts, so as not to allow the observer free interpretation [60], a common practice in all Romanian museums.

In the 1990s, the History Section was reorganized, but due to lack of funding, the curators had to be imaginative and scrape by with what they already had. So, the permanent exhibition focused on the fact that the region has been continuously inhabited by Romanians and that they had been Christians since the time of the ethnogenesis [56], the historical process that spread some nine centuries, at the end of which the Romanian people and language emerged. Beginning from 2009 until 2013, following major investments from the Dolj County Council and European programmes, the building that houses the History Section was restored and enlarged, currently offering an area of some 4000 sqm for display together with modern infrastructure including digital displays, a state-of-the art laboratory, efficient internet speed and access, which are important tools for providing a virtual tour of the entire exhibition. According to the museum's mission statement, it aims to collect, preserve, research, restore and exhibit the material and spiritual proofs regarding the history of Romanian society and civilization, so as to spread knowledge, educate and entertain the youth in particular and the wider public in general.

4. Materials and Methods

The research was undertaken in the Oltenia Museum, Craiova. Although the museum has three sections (Natural Sciences, History and Ethnography), our main focus was on the History Section and its narrative. Since both authors have been living in this region their entire lives, it can be assumed that they have insider knowledge appropriate for a citizen regarding the city of Craiova and Oltenia as well.

For O1, there were two steps: first, visits to the museum and checks for historical chronology, then visitor observations and interviews with museum staff. Site visits were taken between 2018 and 2021 in order to try to grasp the narrative for creating an identity story. We used participant observations for several guided tours during different periods and with various groups (children, university students, elderly persons), in order to observe visitors and if/to what extent they followed the trajectory set by the narrative, and to gauge their reactions towards the discourse and the exhibits. We only reviewed permanent exhibitions. Apart from analyzing the printed materials, exhibitions, objects and texts, we also had discussions with museum guides and security staff from the History Section about the exhibition structure (size, chosen theme/narrative, objects displayed), general considerations (target groups, facilities for particular groups), the information presented during the guided tours and visitor behavior (what are the main elements that capture their interests, do they discuss with each other, do they read the texts).

For the second objective of the study, we observed three major commonalities: strategic identity, cultural identity and functional identity [63]. Strategic identity referred to the strategic location of the region, major development axes and the relationship with other major political and economic centers. The cultural component included ethnicity, religion and setbacks during two different periods: before the 1990s, and the current decade. As Oltenia has been one of the most homogenous regions of Romania, from an ethnic and religious point of view, there should not be any dilemma of the narrative regarding the regional identity. The economic, political and social components identified in the narrative and exhibition as a whole were the main attributes for grasping the functional identity.

5. Results

Currently, there are three main themes displayed in the permanent exhibition: *Prehistoric Oltenia*, which focuses on presenting the life of the first human communities beginning with the Paleolithic era; *Rediscover History*, on the ground floor, which aims at presenting the origins of the Romanian people, beginning with the customs and beliefs of the Dacian society, the advantages of the Roman civil society and the emergence of Christianity in the region up to the dark Middle Ages (migrations, Wallachian rulers, wars between the Romanian Christian and Ottoman armies); and the last section, titled *Oltenia Rediviva*, which begins with the rule of Michael the Brave (1593–1600), continues with all of the major historical moments for the national history, emphasizing the key role the region played due to its strategic location (Figure 2), and ends with the communist period of agriculture cooperativization, industrialization, propaganda, political cleansing and daily life.

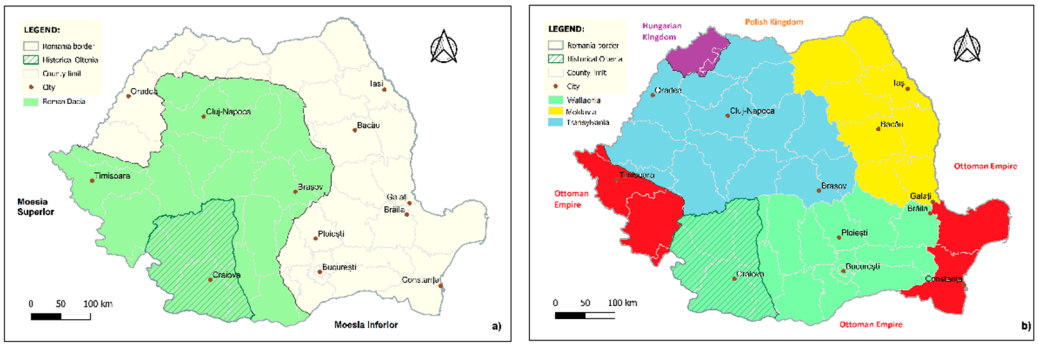

Figure 2. Romanian and Oltenian territory (**a**) after the Roman conquest (2nd–3rd centuries A.D.), and (**b**) during the rule of Michael the Brave (16th century) (Processed after *Romania. Historical-Geographic Atlas*).

5.1. Master Narrative at the Museum

All the objects displayed by the museum were found in the Oltenia region or are related to this region. Depending on the historic period, there are ceramic pieces, coins, weapons and religious objects, together with written documents and personal effects of both illustrious historic personalities as well as soldiers that fought during the most important battles in Romanian history. There are no details about any objects displayed, just their names and places of origin. Every hall includes some panels with a short presentation of the historic period to which the objects displayed belong. For antiquity, most of the time these panels present extracts from famous Greek and Latin historians/writers referring to the Oltenian territory and its inhabitants. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the texts displayed on the panels in each hall present a short chronology and a few characteristics of each period. These texts are usually short and simply state some facts. For the 20th century, apart from descriptive texts on panels, on the walls there are reprints of newspapers reporting on key historical moments, kings' letters to the Romanian people and large photos from several major events.

A visit to the History Section of the Oltenia Museum usually takes 60 to 90 min. There is a chronological route and most of the halls cannot be skipped by visitors, with the exception of five rooms (dwellings of the Dacian people, weapons during the Middle Ages, jewelry, slice of life during the Belle Epoque in the city of Craiova, Communism: prisons and propaganda). There is quite a distinct pattern, with most of the visitors, particularly older ones, following the master chronological trajectory in the museum, including all the side display rooms, while the younger ones (mainly children) tend to stick to the unavoidable trajectory. Individual visitors generally read the information on the panels and discuss among themselves the various artifacts, whereas groups usually just look at the objects displayed and listen to the explanations the guide provides.

The official narrative seems to revolve around the fact that the territory has been continuously inhabited by Romanians and their ancestors since prehistoric times, despite

the many hardships they had to face throughout history, with the entire exhibition undertaking the task of emphasizing the struggles that the people as well as their rulers faced in order to preserve the independence of the country. Drawing from Berger's guidelines on shaping a master narrative [16], we can safely assume that conflicts, politics and religion are depicted as the central actors of both national and regional history; the historical figures that populate the museum stage begin with Basarab I and Mircea the Elder, well known figures of Wallachia, followed by the most prominent political figures of the country, originating from Oltenia: Michael the Brave, the Buzesti brothers, Tudor Vladimirescu and Nicolae Titulescu. The enemies are found particularly at the Eastern and Southern region, with Eurasian nomads during the Late Antiquity and Migration Periods, followed by the Ottoman Empire and later on the Russian Empire. The origins of the nation as depicted in the museum go back to the Dacian–Roman period, emphasizing the founding myth of the Romanian people. The story line hints to flourishing periods that alternate with 'darker' ones, in the end leading to the rebirth of the nation in the late 19th century. Just as at national level, regional history is understood in a strictly conflictual manner, as a continuous fight for ethnic and national survival [7] (p. 296).

Although toned down to a certain extent, the focus on the difficult past of the people as depicted by the current exhibition is similar to the idea portrayed during the communist period; only the felons and threats have changed somewhat. Moreover, the stress on the continuous presence of the autochthonous population in the region points to the Romanian version of the universal myth of permanence, with the continuity thesis being sequentially renewed and reaffirmed [53,59].

5.2. Components of Oltenia's Regional Identity

For the second objective of the paper, we tried to identify the three main components of the region's identity: strategic, cultural and functional ones. Throughout the entire exhibition, there are hints about the location of the region at the crossroads of civilizations and its geographic conditions (fertile soils, plenty of fresh water sources) that favored an early process of population since the Early Neolithic period. Bordered by the Danube in the south and the Carpathians in the eastern and northern regions, Oltenia was located at the borders of great empires that continuously tried to push boundaries, beginning with the Roman Empire during the Ancient period, the Hungarian Kingdom/ Austrian–Hungarian Empire in the West and the Byzantine and later on the Ottoman Empire in the South. The presence and pressure from all these major powers has forged the past, as well as the identity of the people in this region. The Danube and its main tributaries in the region were also, since Antiquity, the major development axes (along which the major cities in the region are found) and communication lines, linking Oltenia to the other Romanian provinces. All these strategic identity elements are found throughout the exhibition (in texts, maps and diaporamas).

The cultural identity elements, focusing mostly on religion and to a lesser extent on ethnicity (as Oltenia was one of the most homogeneous Romanian regions from the ethnic point of view), are quite abundant for every major theme and period displayed, with a major emphasis on Christianity, in an attempt towards the re-ethnicization of national identity, i.e., 'the re-emergence of ethnicity as the core idea of national identities in the context of uniform cultural references that are globally available', in line with the pan-European current in the entire of Europe [42]. Thus, the visitor enters a replica of an early Christian basilica, on the walls of which we find symbols employed by the early Christians (the white dove bringing a cross, ichthys/fish, the star) as well as ancient objects with the symbol of the cross that were discovered in Oltenia. There is an entire hall dedicated to early Christianity (titled *Cults and Religious Beliefs: Emergence of Christianity*), with one of the texts indicating that '*In Oltenia, three Christian basilicas were identified beyond any doubt [. . .] that date back to the Late Roman period*'. The hall titled *The early beginning of the Romanian country* features the portraits of six Romanian rules that left their mark on Romanian history. These portraits are replicas of frescoes from various Romanian churches, dating back to the 15th century.

The last major section, *Oltenia Rediviva*, also includes a hall dedicated to ecclesiastic art, where old holy and divine gospels and diptychs, religious objects, frescoes and altar doors from old churches in Oltenia are displayed. References to the religion of the Romanian people are also found in various other halls that focus on major historical events (e.g., the letters of army members, proclamations of the kings and the declarations of political and social elites always mention their faith in God to help them and the Romanian people). Even the hall dedicated to the communist period features two original frescoes from a church in Craiova, dating back to the 18th century, that was demolished by the regime due to the incompatibility between the Christian religion and the communist doctrine [64]. Unlike the previous period, religion is acknowledged as an intrinsic component in this dominant understanding of the region's identity; the idea that the Romanian people were born Christian has become an axiom of Romanian spirituality, defining their identity to a great extent [53] (p. 137), a fact also proven by the current museum exhibition.

The third component of regional identity, pertaining to functional elements, is also visible in the master narrative that focuses mainly on the political and social components, especially beginning with the modern period. It is worth mentioning the fact that the hall dedicated to Michael the Brave, the most prominent political figure at regional and national level, is focused not on the ruler's most acclaimed contribution—the union of all Romanians—but rather on the political and administrative institution of *Bania*, a high office within Wallachia during the Middle Ages, similar to principal reign, but over a smaller territory. Its ruler, called *ban,* had important administrative, juridical and most notably military responsibilities. This institution was characteristic only for Oltenia, and Michael the Brave was its most famous ruler who eventually became Wallachia's ruler.

The events that are considered to be major turning points in the country's history are always correlated with the wider European movement. Special focus is given to the uprising from 1821 that is considered to be the starting point for Romanian nationalism, which originated as a movement against the Phanariot administration (Greek aristocrats from Constantinople/Istanbul appointed by the Ottoman Empire to rule Wallachia for almost a century); it began in Oltenia and later spread to the entire of Wallachia. The exhibition also focuses on Nicolae Titulescu, one of the most important diplomats of the interwar period (the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the President of the League of Nations for two years), who was born and raised in Craiova. There is also a hall dedicated to Craiova during the interwar period, seen as the *Golden Age* in the history of the city, portraying the social and cultural characteristics of the era and subtly underlining the similarities with Western metropolises.

6. Discussion

As the identity markers changed considerably during recent decades, so did the narrative. Consequently, there are no longer reports of the 'gigantism of the finest workmanship carried on in Oltenia', 'the heroic fight of the popular masses led by the Communists' and 'the continuous preoccupation of the socialists from this part of the country to master the bright ideas of the scientific socialism' [57] (p. 130). The changed narrative leads to different ways and means used by the History Section to render the regional identity, crafting texts and displays that capitalize the historical heritage of Oltenia and reinforce its dominant understanding of the region's identity.

However, the narrative and message behind this stems from social, ideological and not least political influences, the curatorial concept being also influenced by the frameworks of knowledge and social relations of the personnel as they partake in the process of exhibition making [65,66]. Apart from the artifacts displayed, a lot of attention was paid to the technical infrastructure, including exhibition furniture, wall panels, lighting and museological mise-en-scene so as to draw the visitor, catch their eye and successfully deliver the message. If during the communist period the museum and research certainly followed a political agenda, the current exhibition tries to 'capitalize the most important artifacts that the museum holds', testifying for the cultural heritage of the local community

as well as significant historical events. The ultimate aim is 'to revive/to re-enact social, cultural or political milieus of the past, and thus provide the visitor the context that may offer new learning experiences, combining education and recreation at the same time'. As one museum guide argued, 'there was no hidden political agenda behind the project, just a lot of enthusiasm, dedication and hard work to put together an exhibition that would showcase the most important heritage objects of the museum related to the events, personalities and characteristics of our past'.

It is worth pointing to the fact that, just like in most of museums worldwide, the past is selectively remembered or forgotten [33,46]. Although the Slavic and Ottoman influences on the cultural, societal and political norms are generally acknowledged, there is little to no mention of ethnic minorities in the region. Oltenia was indeed one of the most homogenous Romanian regions from an ethnic point of view, but this does not mean that only Romanians ever lived and worked here. According to the population census from 1930, almost 10% of the urban population in Oltenia were ethnic minorities, mainly Romani people, but also Germans and Jews. If the latter were located mainly in the major towns of the region, Romani people were also found in the countryside. Togehter with the Tatars, they were the only slaves in Romania, from the 13th until the 19th century, with country rulers usually granting them as gifts to monasteries. They were the cheapest and most reliable labor force [67], the Romanian principalities bringing 'a system of oppression that was formative, generating a culture of prejudice' [68] that still persists today [69]. Although museum guides when prompted do not hesitate to answer questions about ethnic minorities in Oltenia throughout the centuries and offer many details, nothing in the exhibition acknowledges their existence.

The narrative of the History Section seems to support the Western discourse on identity, highlighting the connections and links of the region and of the country with other European countries, especially beginning with the modern period. Thus, the uprising lead by Tudor Vladimirescu in 1821 is presented in close connection with the wider upheaval in the Balkans; the descriptive panel in the hall dedicated to the events from 1859 that led to the unification of Wallachia and Moldova, mentions that 'during the Peace Treaty from Paris [...], the Great Powers also paid attention to Romanian Principalities [. . .] urging for the ad-hoc gatherings—consultative reunions where inhabitants would express their opinion on the organization of the principalities'. Moreover, representatives of peasantry would be part of these reunions and speak their minds. In another hall, dedicated to the 'golden age' (the end of the 19th, early 20th century) of Craiova, the major city in Oltenia, there is detailed information about the most representative buildings or parks in the city that were built according to the plans of French, Romanian or German architects, in line with French and Italian trends, and sometimes by foreign construction crews. Following the Western model, Craiova was the first city in Wallachia that featured street lighting, beginning in 1887. The elite of the city was in constant touch with the Western mentality, either through education (attending various European universities) or economic ties.

Previous research [45,70] points to the fact that locals who visit a history museum already have their own narratives about the version of the story the museum depicts, which comes into contact with the official master narrative; thus, the museum's identity of a place becomes a 'co-construction between individual and official narratives' (p. 297), wherein visitors decide whether to accept or reject a museum's master narrative. This is particularly true for the more mature visitors and it was obvious from the attitude of various Romanian visitors in their early 50s to late 70s within the hall featuring the Communist era. Almost none of them read the texts related to this period, a fact we observed during our visits and which was also confirmed by one of the guides. However, their reaction to the objects displayed, pointing to the daily life of a regular citizen (a typical living room, *sufragerie*, as they all looked almost the same due to limited choices for furnishing and decor, uniforms, clothes and housewares from that period) was completely different. They would usually reminisce with their peers about that period, pointing to various décor or kitchen objects, while children and those in their early 20s paid little to no attention to those objects aimed at

stimulating past memories of everyday life under communism [46]. As proved by previous research, people visiting museums actively make and remake their identities, selectively selecting, rejecting or manipulating the images and identities found within [71].

7. Conclusions

During recent decades, there has been an increasing interest in the role of museums as a means to (re)build identities; however, almost all studies have focused on the role of national museums in the politics of (re)branding and rebuilding national identities, namely post-colonial museum representations of identities or ways in which identity is constructed and negotiated. The current paper addressed the role played by a regional museum, in this case study the Oltenia Museum in Romania, in the construction of regional identity. In exploring this issue, we focused on 'what' and 'how': what is the master narrative at the museum, and how is regional identity constructed within the History Section of the museum?

The thematic content of the permanent exhibition points to the existence of a master narrative and trajectory. The construction and dissemination of a certain image of the nation, often based upon the dominant ethnic group, is among the main strategies employed by nation-builders in their pursuit of a single national identity [10]. The master narrative at the Oltenia Museum greatly focuses on four of the five fundamental attributes of national identity as identified by Smith, namely the historic territory, common myth and historical memories, common culture, addressing to a lesser extent the legal rights and duties and common economy for its members.

For Oltenia, the historic territory overlaps that of the 'much acclaimed Dacian land' [7] (p. 123) that was colonized by the Romans, and hence the place where the Romanian people formed during subsequent centuries. The myth of founding figures of the nation generally follows that of the master narrative on national identity with the most important figures for the national consciousness, while detailing the same characters that had a close connection to the region: Michael the Brave and Tudor Vladimirescu. The idea of the religious origin of the nation [19] pervades the entire of the History Section, always reminding visitors of the early Christianity of the inhabitants in the region of Oltenia and the country as a whole. This widely shared view on the region's identity aligns with the Western theory on nationalism in Romania, pointing to wider European connections and influences. Nevertheless, it still has some continuity with the communist narrative, stressing the continued occupation of the territory by the autochthonous population despite hardships, and the drive for independence. There is no doubt that the master narrative of the History Section is also a selective one, as it generally leaves out minorities that have also lived in Oltenia and have contributed to the social and economic development of the region.

For almost a century, the Oltenia Museum has faced serious circumvolutions, starting from its name, location and artifacts, up to, most importantly, the narrative behind the objects displayed, due to political changes and, to a lesser extent, museology practices. Compared to the narrative projected by other national museums in Romania, the Oltenia Museum barely displays significant differences in terms of themes, narration style and the broader discourse of national identity construction. However, while supporting the national version and timeline of major historical events that shaped the nation's identity, it also inserts elements pertaining to the region's historical trajectory.

No matter the period, the museum has always been a repository of collective memory, since it collects, treasures and preserves artifacts from the past. The current dominant story at the Oltenia Museum's History Section is that the region is a Christian and Latin one, hence a part of Europe, that played a major role in the national history and in the emergence of the current nation.

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