

Folklore and Post-Socialist Struggles: Contesting Identities in the Quest for Authenticity

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Abstract. Folklore used to be one of the most efficient tools that some authoritarian regimes from Eastern Europe used to naturalize themselves, to gain the trust of the people through carefully reconstructing the oral heritage that was passed on to them by their ancestors in such a way that its message will not become a threat for the ideological hegemony that the communists had to create to secure their power. The 20th century was marked by the rough transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial one, this came in hand in hand with an ambitious urbanization plan which basically fragmented the very core of several societies, we can include here the Romanians, Moldovans, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. Particularly for Romanians, the newly created state-controlled culture, which included solo performers and groups that were responsible with popularizing the new brand of proletariat-friendly folklore which was deemed as more adequate by the authorities that its preexisting form that was exclusively owned by the peasantry. The current paper aims at mapping the way the policies grouped under the umbrella of state-controlled culture manage to influence the content of the folk songs that were broadcasted during that time via state-owned radio and TV. We are interested in highlighting the narratives that were reinforced through the work of many beloved folk singer (*cântăreți de muzică populară*), being an integral part of what we can generally call soft propaganda. Folk music was never intended to act as an environment that would eventually create new nationalistic narrative, but rather to reinforce and popularize the already existing ones.

Keywords: *folk, identity, nationalism, hybrid, new culture, urban, rural*

Folk music can be in itself one of the most interesting and bizarre sources of *soft nationalism* for the nations and local groups of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, its evolution from the beginning of the 20th century up to the present-day is capable of showing us a lot of the turbulence and struggles for the creation and consolidation of new brands and nationalism among the groups of the region. It is important to note that there are several differences between *folk* and *traditional music*, even though they are used interchangeably in most cases; we are not

suggesting that the two genres, but the way they influenced social history in the last three to four decades if substantially different.

For the sake of not creating any sort of confusion, we will explain the manner in which the two terms will be used throughout this study. Traditional music, if we were to use the most simple definition, can be understood as being a collection of various forms of musical forms that are associated with a particular group of people, usually and ethnicity. It is important to notice that the apparition of folk music predated the consolidation of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, but particularly in Romania's case, its golden age was reached during the regime's second phase which was marked by the presence of a strong nationalist narrative. Unlike other forms of propaganda, the *proletariat-friendly folklore* was rather designed in such a manner to reinforce other already existing narratives of that time, not being used as a platform for spread of new messages (Velceanov 2012, 1-3). The *proletariat-ized folklore* of that time was used as a means to reinforce a few narratives that were popularized at that time: the continuity of Romanians within the territories of modern Romania; the purity and uniqueness of Romanian culture; the legitimacy of the second-class citizen status that Romanians had throughout history as a result of foreign rule. The current paper is seeking to map the way in which Romania's vernacular folklore was reshaped by the communists, the new narratives that they introduced within the general perception of vernacular culture, and other talks that gravitate around the authenticity, or lack there of, of a particular form of vernacular/ vernacular-inspired culture. Usually traditional music tends to be exclusively associated with rural communities, but it can also be associated with urban dweller, to a lesser extent. It is passed on from one generation to the other through oral tradition, meaning that these musical creations are not conserved in a written form. This is the reason why it is almost exclusively associated with rural communities, written forms of culture were very rare, the only few notable examples would be those that came in the form of religious texts, but we need to keep in mind those had a standardized form and were used by a consistent number of communities. Adding to this, we need to keep in mind that they were not written by the peasants themselves.

The peasantry from the Balkans greatly struggled with illiteracy, this made possible the preservation of the musical heritage only in an oral form. Traditional music was played in order to entertain members of the family, or of the community, during specific holidays or events that were of particular importance. Some of the

songs were performed as part of various rituals, they could be heard at weddings, funerals, when people gathered to collect the harvest, or within various forms of folk magic. Always when talking about traditional music we are dealing with particularities that are directly sourced in a group's ethnic heritage. *Folk music* is rooted to some degree in traditional music, but it also greatly diverges from it when it comes to the motifs present in the vast majority of songs, the demographics of the audiences affiliated to the two genres present several particularities, the same thing can be stated regarding the channels that are used to make the voices of *folk singers* heard (Stuparu 2017). Unlike traditional music, folk music appeared most probably in the second half of the last century, being a product of a series of major social and demographic changes that marked that era. In Romania the migration of rural dwellers to the country's major urban centers that began in the 1930s had profound influence on the birth and popularization of folk music, this is mainly due to the fact the urban population was strongly split among social, economic and ethnic lines. This made it very hard to efficiently acculturate the newly arrived, as a result, they manage to preserve and to reshape their rural heritage, inserting various novelties that were picked up from the urban dwellers that they came in contact with, thus the result was a sort of hybrid culture.

Unlike their predecessors, folk singers exploited their talent in order to receive financial gains, some of them building long-lasting careers. As their careers started to evolve, many folk singers started to build their „resumes”, seeking to collaborate with the most prestigious folk ensembles and to go on tours at home and abroad. The peasants that would interpret occasionally various forms of traditional music would do it only for self-entertainment and for that of others. Also, during a major event, such as a wedding, songs were usually performed by several people, being almost unheard of that a single person to fill in all the available space. The folk singer is often presented within an environment that tries to reconstruct the image of the vernacular village, or in some cases the singer is shown within a TV set decorated with various pan-Romanian motifs. The images often fail to fill the thirst of authenticity that is exhibited by some of the listeners and state officials; the overall sensation is that of stiffness, of a scripted scenario where the displayed elements fail to fall in an organic order (Diaconu 2016).

Most of the performers, especially the women, appear only in the traditional dresses that are only worn during various important family and community events. Unlike the dresses that were worn for performing day-to-day activities are never

shown, even though the peasants wore them on a daily basis when doing various chores within the household. More so, in certain scenes the peasants are shown wearing their *Sunday clothes* when collecting grapes, or when doing various agricultural works. This comes in full dissonance with the way the Romanian peasants made a very strict boundaries that Romanian peasants outlined between activities that involved labor, one that involve spiritual and religious communion, and some that involve the rights of passage and community entertainment (Petrescu 1959). The clothing items that the singer uses through the year are not usually changes according to the season, there are videos that show various performers singing winter carols in summer clothing, men wearing wool hats even though the show was filmed in the outdoors in July (Stoica 1980). The traditional dress also suffers various changes within its structure, many performers choosing to wear „*costume stilizate*” „(reinterpreted version of the vernacular traditional dress). Simplified versions of various styles of vernacular dresses became even more popular with the rise of etno music, etno performers often switching between dresses decorated with various pan-Romanian motifs to gains that reflected were in tune with various trends from the „West” (Istratescu-Targoviste, 2003)).

Etno music, unlike folk music, doesn't show a coherent local or regional identity; we can define it as a collection of clichés that tend to highlight various cultural and behavioral features of Romanians from various historical regions. Besides the images that want present in ironic or comedic way the day-to-day struggles of rural Romania, etno music also centered some of its message around the archetype of the *suburban redneck*. Basically, we are specifically talking about those that live in the qvasi-urban neighborhoods that lay at the outskirts of some major urban centers; these places usually being characterized by a residual rural culture. The songs that center their message around the daily struggle of the *mitici*—derogatively term used to describe the rednecks that one can come across in Wallachia, in some contexts its sense is narrowed to describe Bucharest rednecks, especially those that live in former working-class neighborhood and near the city's outskirts. There are a few other narratives that were successfully developed within this genre, namely: the peasant's ongoing struggle for emancipation, the subtle conflict between rural and urban civilization, and rural eroticism. The struggle for emancipation is not exclusively to the individual, but to an entire social group. The emancipation narratives the way consumerist behaviours twisted the minds of the peasant that is usually inclined to live within his needs.

Technology, in the form of various gadgets, and their subsequent use within the rural household is contrasted with the overwhelming image of poverty and underdevelopment. The fancy gadgets are present in day-to-day life, but they are not capable to better the general state of social decay in which the 21st century Romanian village find itself in. Scenes from music videos that are built around this narrative also show us the manner in which the peasants use technology, preferring to promote themselves on social media rather than using the internet as a means to improve their knowledge about science and society. These videos also highlight the savage nature of the peasant, the patriarchal nature of rural communities and the marginal place that women have when it comes to decision-making. The conflict between rural and urban lifestyles is also widely exploited within ethno music songs; this conflict is rather rooted in power struggle over the access to resources, or the manner in which resources are distributed unequally, thus creating a huge development gap between cities and villages. There are a few scenarios that are usually played out, even though it is hard to actually tell the exact frequency under which they are repeated: the peasant that goes to a city or he/she comes in contact with a city dweller, the peasant that dreams of a better life in the city. Ethno music singers, unlike their folk counterparts, are not required, or let's say limited to sing only musical compositions from their native region. Unofficially, this is a requirement that folk music singers had to conform to, it's almost a taboo for a Transylvanian to sing Wallachian songs, and vice versa. On the other hand, *foklorists* are strictly limited to performing songs from the oral tradition of their native lands. This unwritten law is usually motivated by the fact that growing within a certain region you directly take part in performing and preserving the cultural costumes of the place. As a result, a Moldavian that sings Transylvanian songs doesn't enjoy the same level of credibility as a native of the region that would perform the same songs. By contrast, ethno music artists do not stumble across such limitation, most of them singing songs from all of the country's historical regions. More so, they even appropriate songs from various national minorities and they repackage them in a more commercial form that can ensure their rise to popularity (Pop-Niculi, 2010).

Ethno music enjoyed a great wave of sympathy at the beginning of the 2000s, some of the most representative bands were Ro-mania and Etnic. Ro-mania is by some assumed to be the prototype of the boy band in ethno music, while Etnic made up of three female singers. Another genre, sometimes loosely affiliated

with ethno music, but being part of a larger movement that was notable in the early 2000s that seek to act as a voice for Romania's contemporary rural culture, is what we can generally label as „rural rap”. One of the pioneer bands was Fara Zahar (lit. Without Sugar), their songs depicted the in a humoristic manner the general state of social and economic decay present in many rural communities. The band managed to set a standard for a geanra that was short-lived, its popularity slowly fading after 2010. Unlike the manner in which rural life is depicted in folk music videos, which still favors using images that remind us of the daily life of the Romanians peasant from the beginning of the 20th century, ethno music bands don't shy to use vivid images of the grotesque kitsch and poverty which rules over many villages.

The traditional peasant house was replaced with a McMansion, carts were replaced with luxurious cars brought from abroad, and traditional clothing was replaced by kitschy dresses and tops inspired by the various designs of luxury fashion brands. To a certain extent, ethno music videos show us a candid image of the distorted reality in which many rural dwellers live their day-to-day life. A world that is generally dominated by the urge for survival, in which rules are applied preferentially, where people are more interested in gaining advantages and privileges at the expense of violating social order and good morals. The general state of lawlessness and mistrust in state authority is often analyzed in a light-hearted manner within many ethno songs, thus we will see scenes from videos in which a „peasant girl” bribes a local policeman in order to not receive a speeding ticket, or scenes in which the promiscuity of the village priest is shown. Folk music still tries to preserve a dignified image of the traditional village, one that is grounded in the way in which its members strictly follows a series of ancestral costumes that was passed on to them by their forefathers. During the communist era, folk songs greatly emphasised the positive aspects of rural life, deliberately excluding songs that dealt with subjects such as famine, poverty, war, and the daily hardships.

It would be hard to acknowledge for many the fact that, in its very essence, folk music suffers from a lack a diversity when it comes to the range of subjects that it chooses to put emphasis on. This is particularly evident in the songs that were recorded in the communist era; many of which were rooted in three types of traditional songs, each of them being utilized in a specific context: love song (*cântec de dragoste*) – they usually take the form of love declaration, or they

reaffirm an already existing love: songs performed during as part of activities correlated to religious holidays, songs performed during the harvest period. The clothing worn by both and folk and ethno music performers is an integral part of the identity and culture of the genre that they represent. As a result, there are particular trends that can be found on both sides, and some that are a little bit more particular (Pop-Niculi, 2010).

Folk performers usually wear „costume populare” (folk dresses), usually being replicas of the traditional dresses that were worn by peasants during important family and community events.

Each ethnographic region has its own set of particularities when it comes to the structure and the aesthetics of the traditional dress. The dress that is worn by folk singers is usually a little bit simplified, lacking some elements and accessories. This can be often seen in the case of musical performers from Wallachia, the dresses that they wear don't come along with the accessories that were once worn by peasant women – necklaces, belts, headdresses etc. The traditional dress is one of the most important visual elements that outline the stage persona of every folk music performer, the presence of the dress stresses the idea that folk performers are the rightful inheritors of Romania's rural musical heritage. It is important to highlight the fact that from the early 1990s, up to the present day, the clothing choices of folk performers had undergone some notable changes. The aesthetic purism that was stimulated to a certain degree by the communist authorities from the second half of the 1960s up to the late 1980s, was basically put aside due to the liberalisation of the folk music industry. It is hard to generalize, mainly due to the fact that there are some folk performers that are known for wearing dresses that authentically resemble those worn by their forefathers, some of the most spectacular ones are actually inherited from their parents or grandparents (Deliu, 2010).

On the opposite side of the spectrum we have a significant number of performers that prefer to wear dresses that quasi-resemble the ones that would still be worn by peasants until the early decades of the 20th century. This choice is motivated in various ways, most debutant performers can't afford a full traditional dress made by a tailor, some choose to wear various slightly modified versions of traditional dress in order to have a more spectacular stage performance, while others simply do not care or have very little knowledge regarding the cultural identity of their native region. Ethno performers, on the other hand,

almost exclusively wear stage clothing that mix various modern styles with traditional motifs. The clothing that they usually wear doesn't actually resemble the style of a specific area or region, usually they are decorated with pan-Romanian motifs, geometric patterns or flowers. The fabrics that the clothing are made from also reflect a preference towards synthetic materials, generally speaking a high degree of popularity when it comes to the usage of industrially manufactured textiles. Some pieces of the outfits may actually attempt to reproduce in a simplified version elements of traditional peasant clothing, such as an apron decorated with geometric motifs of flowers. Even in this case, these pieces would still be made mechanically, this also adds to the fact that some of the fabrics that are preferred by these performers were meant to look good on camera and on stage. Light reflecting fabrics are well represented, the combination of traditional pieces and motifs that are industrially manufactured along with various other types of jewelry and accessories that are worn, referring strictly to those that are not indigenous to the traditional dress, have the potential of creating a general image of tackiness (Georgescu, 2017).

The folk music industry went through some dramatic changes after the fall of communism, especially at the beginning of the 2000s when two channels that were exclusively dedicated to broadcasting *muzică populară* (folk music) were established – *Etno TV* and *Favorit TV*. They had a tremendous effect on the evolution of folk and etno music from that point on, the two new channels came forward with new show formats that could host folk and etno performers. As time went by, they created a specific kind of media culture that would cater to a specific type of audience – in this case, most of it being represented by senior citizens living in rural settlements. It is truly fascinating to see how folk music transition from a genre that utilized as a means for softly reinforcing certain points from the nationalist agenda of the Romanian Communist Party, to being presented as a genre that can be marketed as any other type of music that is seen as being the product of a specific ethnic group.

Before *Etno TV* and *Favorit TV* made their presence notice in Romania post-communist music market, folk music was almost entirely synonymous with *Tezaur Folcloric*, a highly popular TV show dedicated to folk music hosted by the late Marioara Murărescu. Unlike *Tezaur Folcloric*, which was more inclined towards presenting folk and traditional music in a complex manner, which tried to not to distance folk and traditional music from the sphere of ethnographic research. The

new channels came with a totally different take on the manner in which folk music had to be presented and marketed to the public. To begin with, they made folk music marketable as any other musical genre, this being made possible through diminishing the emphasis on its sacred nature, this meant that if it will be taken down from its pedestal it could be reshaped in order to be able to withstand the unpredictable character of an emerging musical market. This period was marked by a boom of new content, this was facilitated by the fact that it became easier for musical performers to receive a spot in one of the numerous new TV shows which were solely dedicated to folk and ethno music. The criteria that were put in place for the selection of the guest performers that were to appear within these shows also were subjected to numerous changes (Adevarul. 2010).

Until 1989 all of the performers that were competing in various folk music competition, or that received some air time at the national radio, would go through numerous committees that would analyse and validate if the content of their songs, the instrumentation and their clothing would follow the traditional pattern. They would also be responsible with closely analyzing the content of the song, so that it would not come in contradiction with the general nationalist narrative imposed by the communists. Beginning with the early 2000s, the liberalization and the folk music industry made it easier for performers to have more control over their music. It is unfortunate to say that this came with a price, the lack of any type of regulations basically filled the market with a lot of poorly produced content. Numerous new performers started to appear at the newly-created folk music channels, many of which shared the same producers.

As a result, most of the *Favorit era* singers lacked any type of stage identity and charisma, the strategy of these channels was that of guesting big numbers of *no-names* in order to gain profit from the fees that performers had to pay in order to come as guests in various shows. As time went, folk music almost entirely lost its arside, it was left pretty much soulless, for many becoming just a means to gain money and to build a career.

There were numerous advantages that drove many performers to want to appear as guest in folk music shows, it had mainly to do with the fact that these shows were a very good platform for them to get known and to receive various contracts for paid performances. It is also important to mention the fact that the 2000s marked the start of a new era in open air concerts, we are talking here specifically about those concerts organized by the city halls in order to celebrate

various events. City hall-funded events became a great opportunity for folk performers to get some extra cash, harvest-day concerts also started to increase in popularity, all of the performers that were invited had to be affiliated with the genre of folk or ethno music. One aspect that we need to notice right away is the fact that, unlike with pop music, folk and ethno music is way less pretentious when it comes to the actual investments that a performer needs to do in order to begging a career and to stay relevant in time. The folk music industry has this its own dynamics, a performer's relevance and popularity is usually secured by his/her charisma, and the stage image that he/she builds in time. Within this industry, it is more acceptable to reuse old songs, to record albums once every few years, and to reuse the same stage clothing again and again. The themes preferred by folk performers for their songs vary a lot, some are more keen when it comes to performing love songs, some are more comfortable with *cântece de pahar* – this type of songs are also associated with another genre called *muzică de petrecere* (lit. Party Music).

Cântecele de pahar are usually performed at parties and weddings, they usually emphasize the joy and happiness that are associated with drinking various types of alcoholic beverages. This types of songs are also found across a few other related genres such as *muzică lautărească* and ethno music, it can also be found to some extent in *manele* (Velceanov, 2013).

Muzica de petrecere is actually rooted in folk music, as consequence, it doesn't extract its inspiration directly from the traditional music performed by peasants. The years that followed 2007, the moment in which Romania became a member state of the European Union, were marked by an exodus of workforce to various western countries, especially Italy and Spain. The period that followed was marked by a rise in popularity of a new theme, one that can also be found in a certain form within some traditional songs: *înstrăinarea*. It describes the feeling of loneliness and abandonment, but on the case of traditional song this feeling was often link to the empty nest feeling, or with feeling associated with leaving the native village. A similar theme can be also found within *cântece de cătănie* (songs of conscripted men), they usually make a strong link between the period that men serve in the army and the feeling of loneliness and alienation that comes with it. The 1990s was marked by a musical market that was still relying greatly for its survival on the number of tapes that were sold, a performer's notoriety was determined, mostly, by the number of sales.

A phenomenon that deeply plagued the folk music industry in this period



was the black market. Due to the bad state in which the national economy found itself in this period, inflation reaching a staggering inflation during the Văcăroiu government. The deep social and economical depression that the country was falling into generated a need for music, a particular types of music that the common people could relate to, sang by artists that would be trustworthy in the eyes of the masses. This decade was a fertile ground for the popularization of *muzică de petrecere*, which was in part performed by some consecrated folk singers. There is still a great deal of confusion between folk music and *muzică de petrecere*. Unlike folk and etno music which are very well represented across most of the commercial TV channels, *muzică de petrecere* doesn't have channels specially dedicated to broadcasting only those performers that were associated, or associated themselves, with this genre. Singers that performed music related to this genre were usually loosely affiliated with folk or etno music, but there are some substantial differences between the three. As mentioned earlier, *muzică de petrecere* is solely dedicated to parties, the content of the songs that were associated with this genre were not meant to fulfill any type of nationalistic or identitarian agenda, folk and etno music had interfered from time to time with various nationalistic agendas.

Conclusion

Folk and etno music can be considered staples of modern Romanian culture, they embody a failed transition to an authentic modernism, usually marked by various hybrid forms of cultural expression, ones that usually are keen in gathering most of their content from rural art and music. Even though the several decades that Romania stayed under communist rule were beneficial to the popularization of non-folk inspired forms of musical interpretation, it still greatly advantages those that used local forms of folklore as their primary form of inspiration. We need to understand that folk and etno music are not isolated cultural phenomena, they also exist in the countries that neighbor Romania but morphed in different forms, taking along the way various particularities which outline their own identity. Folk music is reconstructionist in its very essence, it basically simulates the supposed many in which peasants would interpret the vernacular music of their native regions. Folk and etno music still greatly rely on certain nationalistic images that were developed during the 1960s, they usually are quite reluctant in reframing traditional

Romanian culture, to put it in a wider European context. Ethno music was born out of the need of the masses that settled in the country's major urban centers during the period in which the nation's industrial giants were developed, specifically we are talking about the heavy industry, manufacturing, and the food industry. Romania's urban centers were not capable of fully assimilating the newly arrived, the "resistance" towards assimilation was also strengthened by the fact that some of the workers were housed in specially designed working-class quarters where they formed homogenous communities of individuals that came from a similar background, and shared similar cultural values. Ethno music, in the early 2000s, became an ambassador for those that were usually first, or second generation, born in the cities. Their parents never were fully emerged into the culture that was common to those that came from families that traced their roots in the cities already for a few generations. Also, we must keep in mind the fact that, even before the i of communism, the cultural landscape of many cities differed substantially depending on the social-economic profile of each quarter. Usually the downtown will be dominated by wealthy families, and as we progressed to the outskirts usually the dwellers become more emerged in poverty and exclusion. Simply said, ethno music became popular due to the fact that a significant part of its listeners were brought up by parents that were of rural background, some of which were still strong in preserving some aspects of their lives lived in the countryside. We can mention here practices that involve a certain preference towards a specific type of diet, habits that are centered around Folk and ethno music still greatly rely on certain inationalistic mages that were developed during the 1960s, they usually are quite reluctant in reframing traditional Romanian culture, to put it in a wider European context. Ethno music was born out of the need of the masses that settled in the country's major urban centers during the period in which the nation's industrial giants were developed, specifically we are talking about the heavy industry, manufacturing, and the food industry.

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Romanian villages in the 1980s resemble very little how their used to look in the 1930s, most of the songs and rituals that were part of local and regional folklore already were not performed anymore. This was determined by the fact that many rural settlements already went through some significant demographic changes beginning with the 1930s, when many peasants started to resettle into the regional urban centers. The systematization policies increased mobility and the penetration of various aspects of the urban lifestyle within villages. The 1980s found many Romanian villages in a semi-modernised state. The role of keeping the community's oral heritage alive was passed on to the state which used it to reforce certain identity politics. So, in most cases, the folklore that people grew up with in the '70s and '80s was already greatly subjected to some significant content changes. The widespread use of the radio made it possible for the new brand of "proletarial folklore" to replace the vernacular folklore. Unlike their predesors, which had almost no access to any form of mass media, beginning with the late 1960s peasants from all over the country were exposed to folklore from other regions than their own. This increased the perception of a highly homogenous

traditional culture across the territory of Romania. First-generation city dwellers were facing an identity crisis, this became more evident after 1989. The Ethno music industry had as a mission that of producing songs that are catchy, leaving aside any attempt of creating content that could actually be accepted as authentic contribution to Romanian national culture. Artists associated with this genre were keen on creating catchy tunes and lyrics, the artistic part being almost entirely ignored.

Another aspect that is highly important is the fact that ethno singers were not brought up in an environment where folklore was still performed regularly within the family or at community events. Ethno singers were brought up with reconstructed pieces of folklore, especially those that were produced during the 1980s, a period that set the stage for the birth of ethno music. Folk and ethno music still greatly rely on certain nationalistic images that were developed during the 1960s, they usually are quite reluctant in reframing traditional Romanian culture, to put it in a wider European context. Ethno music was born out of the need of the masses that settled in the country's major urban centres during the period in which the nation's industrial giants were developed, specifically we are talking about the heavy industry, manufacturing, and the food industry. Romania's urban centres were not capable of fully assimilating the newly arrived, the "resistance" towards assimilation was also strengthened by the fact that some of the workers were housed in specially designed working-class quarters where they formed homogenous communities of individuals that came from a similar background, and shared similar cultural values.

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