

ANNEMARIE SORESCU-MARINCOVIĆ, MONICA HUȚANU, *The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia: Language and Society, edited by the Commission Vanishing Languages and Cultural Heritage*, Vol. 3 (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2023)

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The book under scrutiny essentially presents a “rebirth” of a language, but also of a cultural identity. A phenomenon that, however “exotic” it may seem, conveys a positive message of repositioning local identities. Published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences Press in 2023, the book contains six chapters, an introduction, and a bibliography. Each chapter focuses on an issue related to the Vlach community, from the general to the specific, from the past to the present, from the social to the linguistic. The first chapter presents the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, who they are, the theories regarding their presence in the area, the villages where they live, and their geographical boundaries. Geographically, “the region of eastern Serbia inhabited by Vlachs is bordered by four rivers: Velika Morava to the west, Timok to the east, Danube to the north, and Crni Timok to the south” (26). As a result of several waves of migration over time from north of the Danube to the area south of the Danube, the most common division among them is between *Peasants* (those who live on lowlands and are engaged in agriculture) and *Hungarians* (those who live in mountainous areas and are engaged in animal husbandry, and who “currently make up 80% of the Vlach population”) (33).

In this chapter, we also learn that there are two other communities: the Romanians in Vojvodina, where Romanian is one of the six official languages of the province (35), and the Rudari, who are scattered both north and south of the Danube and comprise 180 localities. The beginnings of the scholarly interest in the Vlachs and their language can be traced back to Gustav Weigand in 1900. In Romania, names such as George Giuglea, George Vâlsan (*De la românii din Serbia* [The Romanians of Serbia], 1913), Emanoil Bucuța (*Românii din dreapta Dunării* [The Romanians of the Right Bank of the Danube], 1941), Emanoil Petrovici (*Românii dintre Timoc și Morava*, 1941), Constantin Constante and Anton Golopenția (*Românii din Timoc*, 1943-1944) show us that, through their research and works, they maintained this interest throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The authors of the present book also discuss, in depth, the term “Vlach” and the fact that “the term is strictly limited to the population currently living in Eastern Serbia and speaking a variant/variety of the Romanian language, which we refer to as Romanian-Vlach” (14).

The two authors talk about the dual contextual identity that is evident in the double ethnonyms they use: Rumanian/Rumanian in the vernacular (popular), but Vlasi when speaking Serbian. In addition, in a broader context, they also discuss two other communities that speak variants of Romanian in Serbia: the Romanians in Banat and the Rudari.

We then learn that the earliest sources on Vlach research date to the late 19th century, beginning with the 1889 folklore collection published in Paris (16), followed by references to linguist George Giuglea and geographer George Vâlsan. Regarding the two historically constituted groups—Peasants and Hungarians—the authors conclude that linguistic differences are now far more pronounced than distinctions in folklore, customs, or dress.

The second chapter contains ten transcripts of interviews conducted by the authors over the past 15 years in various regions of eastern Serbia on various topics: funeral beliefs, mythical creatures, everyday life, and modern technology, in an attempt to present the current state of the Romanian language/variant. At the same time, they constitute documents of prime importance for ethnologists and folklorists. A detailed linguistic analysis leads Petrovici and Pătruț to observe a strong influence of the Serbian language on the variants of the Vlach language. Moreover, researchers from the second half of the last century noticed that there were still Vlachs, especially women, who did not speak Serbian at all.

The third chapter is dedicated to publications and books written in Romanian-Vlach (or Vlach-Romanian) and is divided into three periods. The first period (1940-1948) is referred to by the author as “the pioneers” and the texts are written for and by the Vlach community. In this context, we also find information about the policies of the Romanian authorities during World War II, about the Romanian-language textbooks sent, about the *Nădejdea Calendar*, about the attempts of members of the Vlach community to write in the Vlach language, about the newspaper *Vorba noastră* (published between 1945-1949), and Janko Simeonovic's collection of partisan poems. The second period (1950-2000) refers to the transcriptions and publications of folkloric texts mainly by ethnologists and folklorists, and the authors conclude that the texts have a high degree of variability in their writing and transcription systems. The preferred script for these texts is Cyrillic, and the texts are short and heterogeneous. The third period (the last 20 years) is defined by the two authors as the period in which researchers developed writing systems that they then used to transcribe folkloric texts, compile dictionaries, or create original texts.

It is also the period when this language variant is introduced in schools. It is the period when members of the Vlach community are actively involved in documenting and revitalizing the language. Several personalities whose contributions have marked this development are also presented: Paun Es Durlic with the *Vorbar* dictionary, the anthology of folk texts, then Ljubisa lu Bozu Kici, collector of stories and poems, compilations of dictionaries and the translation of the New Testament, Dragomir Dragic, supporter of Latin script as the original script for Romanized peoples, the Firul Ariadnei Association, a pro-Romanian NGO, and several founding authors or affiliates: Slavoljub Gacovic, Gligorije Zajecaranovic, and Bozidar Abrasevic (use of the standard Romanian writing system), Stanoje Njagojevic – author of a volume of poetry entitled *Primăvară perdută* (Lost Spring), then the Gergina Association for the Preservation of Vlach Traditions, Language, Culture, Customs, and Identity, whose writing system proposed in 2012 was officially adopted by the National Council of Vlachs (using both Cyrillic and Latin scripts). Both figures and publications related to this association are presented (e.g., Grammar of the Vlach Language).

The fourth chapter deals with the issue of the two opposing ideological factions, comparing it to the dispute between the Galician and Portuguese languages, from which the authors mention that they borrowed the terms *reintegrationists* and *independents*. Thus, “the reintegrationist ideological position is supported by Romanian linguists and dialectologists as a regional variant of the Romanian language, with which it shares the same linguistic structure” (156). The other position argues that Vlach and Romanian are two totally different languages, and the argument is found in the introduction to *Gramatica limbii vlahe* (2013). The second part of this

chapter analyses Paun Es Durlic's four theories of the origins of the Vlachs: return, autochthonism, Aurelian, and Romanian. The end of the chapter concludes that "both the independents and the reintegrationists seek to preserve the native idiom, which is difficult to pass on to younger generations today. While the former push for the status of a standard language, the latter insist on preserving it as a local dialect, resorting to Romanian for norms" (171).

In the penultimate chapter, Anemmaria Sorescu and Monica Huțanu turn their attention to the online environment and analyse the presence of the Vlach language on the internet. We learn that there are only a few websites with partial interfaces in Vlach, and that "the use of a minority language in the online environment is 'perceived as a political statement, especially when speakers belonging to the minority also speak the majority language'" (173). The websites *paundurlic.ro* (by Paun Es Durlic), *Matka Vlahilor*, the online newspaper, and several Facebook pages are discussed, and the textual analysis is richly illustrated with photographic material taken from the online environment. The analysis for March 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 shows that "most of the events initiated by the site administrator are bilingual or multilingual, reflecting the linguistic reality of Vlaho-Romanian speakers" (194).

The volume concludes with a chapter dealing with the visibility of Vlach-Romanian in the linguistic landscape of eastern Serbia. The starting point is that all the aspects discussed in the previous chapters argue that Vlach-Romanian is undergoing a process of revitalization and that members of Vlach communities are beginning to express their ethnic and linguistic identity more openly. After a few theoretical considerations regarding the linguistic landscape, the urban-rural relationship, road signs, commercial signs, street names, places of worship, and graffiti are analysed, with the caveat that the linguistic landscape of the area is changing rapidly. Finally, the conclusion is that signage has mainly symbolic value, being used both as markers of identity and indicators of authenticity.

The work of the two researchers from Serbia thus brings to the fore a "small" treasure hunt, carefully analysed and very seriously presented with a comparative approach that is both diachronic and synchronic.

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