

THE ROMANIAN POPULATION OF SERBIA: ORIGINS AND ETHNIC IDENTITY¹

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The origin of the Romanians or Vlachs of Serbia has stirred a long controversy. The author attempts here a synthesis of the debate and makes some considerations on the complex problem of the identity of that population.

Keywords: origin, migrations, identity, ethno-linguistics, ethno-history.

The origin and ethnical evolution of the Romanians of Serbia

Serbia is one of the states with an important Romanian community. The Romanian ethnical area represents a continuation to the West of the Romanians from Romania and Bulgaria. In the regions between the border of Romania and up to Tisa and Morava to the West, Romanians form a compact area, mainly in numerous localities and municipalities (*opština*). The Romanian-speaking population can be met in other regions of Serbia too, but more dispersed and without detaining a significant percentage in any *opština*.

The origin of the Romanians in Serbia is disputed, versions authors bringing controversial arguments, without reaching the same opinion. For solving the problem of the origin of the Romanian population in Serbia a detailed research is needed at the level of each locality, but this cannot be done because of the lack of documentary sources. It is important to mention the fact that a general conclusion on the Romanians in Serbia is unattainable, the areas with Romanian population being different and resulting from the migration of different groups in the present territories, perhaps even since the Romanization process and the formation of the Romanian people.

Summing up the opinions expressed on the origin of the Romanian population from Serbia we can identify a few main theories:

1. The autochthonous origin of Romanians in the areas presently occupied in Serbia. This opinion is based on a series of sound arguments, which confirm the

¹ Support for this study was granted by the European Social Fund in Romania, Managing Authority for the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007–2013 through the post-doctoral program POSDRU/89/1.5/S/49944 “*Development of innovative capacity and increasing of research impact by post-doctoral programs*”.

Romanization of the population in the entire Balkan space and the continuity of this Romanized Thracian-Illyrian population up to the present. The largely occurring ethnonym of “Vlachs”, which is met in areas that do not have any more Romanian ethno-linguistic characteristics, as in Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia, but which shows the Slavization process of the previously Romanian speaking population, proves the possibility of the continuity of Romanian ethnics on previously vast areas, which have become isolated because of their assimilation by other ethno-linguistic elements, mainly Slavic. Thus the areas around Romania, continuous with the compact mass of Dacian-Romanian population, evidently have the same ethno-historical characteristics like on the present territory of Romania. There are even opinions that try to demonstrate the reverse process, according to which the Romanian population formed initially south of the Danube and later migrated to the north and east. The whole territory of Serbia has long been under Roman administration, and the compact region with Romanian population at present is known as Dacia Aureliana or Dacia Ripensis, the arguments in favor of the formation and lasting of a Romanized population in this area being quite convincing.

If we analyze the more recent historical sources, as well as the ethnographic, folkloric, linguistic and anthropologic characteristics, we may deduce a series of arguments for the age of the Romanian population in the region between Morava and the Danube, as the oldest ethnical element in this area. Numerous migrations, changes of dominations, wars and occupations have affected the demographic processes in the region, the most stable elements being the forested mountain and hill regions, where the autochthonous population found shelter. Thus the documentary attestations for the oldest periods indicate the presence of a Romanian population in eastern Serbia. Historical sources say that up to the arrival of the Ottoman occupation the Romanian population, although dispersed, was dominant in the region between Morava and Danube. For the 15th century the existence of Romanian localities is attested, while various documents indicate the Romanian ethnic character of the population. Some mountain and hill localities are considered to be very old, the year of their formation not being known. Ethnographic researches complete these arguments, by identifying old tradition and customs, sometimes specific only to the Romanians from these regions. Even the Serbian researchers accept the idea of an old, autochthonous, Vlach population in the regions of Serbia, yet their contribution to the formation of the present Romanian population is considered to be insignificant. The quantitative ratio between the old Romanian background from the region and the successive migrations from Romania or other areas with Romanian population is hard to establish. At least, the oldest Romanian population, that may certainly be considered autochthonous, is the one from the Vojvodina villages around Vrsac, and from the mountain-hill villages of the herders from Timok-Morava. The linguists think the Banat-Timok idiom to be initially characteristic to the region. The Romanian ethnic element from the region has been later mixed with the Serbians or Romanians population coming

from other regions, a population which was later enlarged by the migrations of Albanians, Bulgarians, Aromanians and Rroma.

Other opinions, invoking the Romanian unity in the Balkans, are linked to the continuity of the Romanian population from the north of the Danube up to the center of Greece, the Timok Romanians being a link between the Dacian-Romanians and the Aromanians. The interferences between the Romanians from Serbia and the Aromanians exist, being proved by the settling of many families of Aromanians in the region and their integration into the local Romanian fund. Still, the Romanians from Serbia don't present transition characters to Aromanians, being a Dacian-Romanian population both linguistically and ethnographically. The confusion of the researchers who regard the Romanians of Timok as being part of the Aromanians comes mainly from the official use of the ethnonym Vlachs (Vlasi) both for Aromanians and for the Dacian-Romanians south of the Danube, from Serbia and Bulgaria.

2. The origin from the present Romanian territories

There are numerous proofs of the migrations of Romanian population from the present regions of Romania to those with Romanian population from Serbia. The migration processes have been continuous and in both directions. Taking into account the fact that the establishment of the present borders that separate Romanians from Serbia and those from Romania or Bulgaria is recent, from 1918 for Vojvodina and the middle of the 19th century for Eastern Serbia (Timok), it is normal that the Romanian migrations and the inter-ethnic contacts have been permanent. The causes of these migrations have been different according to the historical periods, to political reasons, but mainly because of social and economical considerations. Wars, natural calamities (such as droughts), the socio-political system (oppression, loss of lands, high taxes), the hope for a better life in the new territories, the familial relations, marriages, crafting, seasonal works, herding, mining, valuation of new agricultural terrains have been the motives of migrations in the region. The existence of a Romanian ethnical environment in most cases has eased the adapting of new migrants, who completed the population of existing localities, mainly Romanian but also Serbian. Sometimes new localities have been founded by Romanians originally from other regions, situation documented by linguistic and ethnographic research.

In the Serbian history it is considered that the entire population of Romanian language, called Vlachs (but also Romanians, mainly in works of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th) is allochthonous in Eastern Serbia. In general, according to the opinions of Serbian researchers (including Jovan Cvijić) the territory of Eastern Serbia was weakly populated until the middle of the 17th century; in the following period populations of different origins arrived from South, West, East, but also North, from the Romanian territories. The population

that lived until the 17th century in the regions East of Morava is named timočka or timočko-braničevsko (people of Timok and Braničevo), being considered to be the oldest Serbian element of the region. Sometimes it is admitted that this old population was mixed, Vlacho-Serbian, and other sources even say that the Vlachs are the oldest population of the region.

The migration of the Romanian population in this area, both North and South of the Danube, is a reality attested by numerous historical data and by the popular tradition. It is certain that migratory waves have always existed, and that up to the 15th century the ethnical processes from Serbia have been influenced by permanent migrations on short and long distances. It is hard to say what geographical origin had the population that migrated successively in this space, yet it is certain that ethnical processes were common for the entire North Balkan area, through the gradual Slavization of an older background represented by Vlachs, a Romanized autochthonous Thracian-Illyrian population.

The migrations of the Romanian population known to have taken place since the 17th century are permanent in the region. The Danube did not represent an important obstacle, the contacts between the regions south and north the river being quite intense. Between the 17th and 19th centuries are attested migrations of the Romanians North of the Danube to the South, sometimes new localities being founded. Frequently though, they joined the existing population. The Romanians migrating into Serbia came from various regions, however most of them from lands closer to the border. For the western part of Eastern Serbia, the main emitting regions have been Banat, mainly the region of Almaş (Almaj), but also the Southern parts of Ardeal, Oltenia and even Moldova. In the Eastern part, named Krajina and Ključ, along the Danube and Timok, the absolute majority of the migrants came from Oltenia, rarely Muntenia.

Coming from Banat and Ardeal are the Romanians from numerous localities from Morava (Porodin, Bobovo, etc.), Mlava (Stamnica, Ranovac etc.), Homolje (Osanica, Krepoljin, etc.), Zvižd (Kaona, Turija, Duboka, Bukovska, Neresnica, etc.), Crna Reka (opština Bor and Boljevac, in diverse localities such as Brestovac, Podgorac, Krivelj, etc.). In the majority of cases the Romanian population from the same locality is not homogeneous as origin, besides them a background of local Romanian population existed, as well as migrants from other Romanian localities from Serbia or Bulgaria.

From Oltenia and Muntenia have come many Romanians in localities from the Kladovo, Negotin and Zaječar opština. Among these only Mihajlovac (Măilovăț) is a new locality, founded in 1834 by Romanians coming from Ostrovu Mare. In many cases the population arrived from Oltenia mixed with local Romanians.

People coming from Moldova, even Bessarabia, beginning with the 18th–19th centuries can be found in Podgorac (Boljevac opština), in localities from the Majdanpek opština or even in some villages west of Morava (Suvaja, Varvarin opština).

One of the arguments that are brought in favor of the origin from the territories of present Romania concerns the ethnonyms used to differentiate the two Romanian subgroups from eastern Serbia: that of Ungureni which is possibly related to an origin from Banat and Transylvania (the “Hungarian region”) and that of Peasants for those originating from Oltenia and Muntenia (the Romanian region).

For Vojvodina, except the autochthonous Romanian population from southern Banat (especially Grebenac, Mesić, Ritiševo, Vojvodinci, Kuštilj ș.a.), there are also Romanians that came from other regions on the Romanian Banat, as well as from Crișana (Torac), Ardeal (Ečka, Jankov Most, Lokve, Ovča) or even Oltenia (Straža, Lokve), most of the migrations dating from the 18th century. There are also migrations of Romanian population from Timok to the Serbian Banat (as in Dolovo) or vice-versa.

A situation apart is that of the Romanian language population that has an important component of Roma population, known as *băieși* in Vojvodina or *rudari* in Bulgaria and Serbia south of the Danube. The *băieși* are originating mainly from the territories of Banat, Crișana, Ardeal, and the *rudari* from Banat, Oltenia and Muntenia. Their migration to the west and south is not documented, and most probably has taken place during the 17th–18th centuries. They spread to much larger areas, up to Bosnia (known here as *caravlasii*) and Croatia. Rarely have been created separate localities, most frequently these migrants forming slums in the villages and towns where they settled.

3. Migrations of the Romanians inside Serbia or from Bulgaria and Macedonia

After detailed research at the locality level, according to documents and popular tradition, we may witness that in the majority of cases the Romanian population has arrived successively from other localities or regions. In most cases to the older population that founded the localities were added migrants from neighboring localities or different regions. Generally the migration direction has been from east to west. For example people from Bor, Boljevac, Negotin opština au have migrated on the Morava valley, founding new localities or joining an already existent Romanian population.

The generalization of historically documented cases has often been attempted so as to formulate tendentious opinions that would serve political interests, without taking into account the objective ethnic reality from these territories.

In a similar way, the Romanians from the present territory of Bulgaria have migrated to localities from Serbia, the border between these two states in the Timok region being definitely established in the inter-war period. Among the Romanian localities in Serbia we may mention Halova, Miloševo, Aleksandrovac, Šipikovo and Zaječar, where Romanians coming from the Vidin region of Bulgaria

have settled. Several relations exist with the Romanian localities situated close to the border, such as Kosovo, Bregovo, Rabrovo, Deleina.

In the regions of eastern Serbia have also migrated diverse ethnical elements from the south – Slavic, Albanian or Aromanian. Among those migrated from Macedonia have been and Aromanians, which have settled dispersed in diverse Romanian localities, mainly in the mountainous region. Nicknames like *cincar* (*țințar*) and Romanian anthroponyms have been documented from the 17th century. In some localities of central Serbia there are proofs that they have been settled by Aromanians, some of them having even now Romanian population, yet of Dacian-Romanian dialect.

4. The theory of the Serbian origin of the Vlachs from eastern Serbia

In the Serbian scientific community is widely spread the opinion according to which Vlachs (*viasi*) would represent a Serbian ethnical group of mixed Slavic-Romanic origin, a bilingual population that has as native languages both Serbian and Vlach, as language spoken at home. There are several versions of this opinion.

One of the opinions, sustained by many historians and ethnologists (Petar Vlachović for example) wants to prove that the Vlachs from Serbia are ethnic Serbians at origin, that have migrated from various causes (mainly because of the Turkish occupation) during the 15th–18th centuries in Romania, temporarily remaining there and learning the Romanian language and taking Romanian ethnographic characteristics. This theory accepts that a certain mixing with the Romanians occurred, and when these people came back to Serbia, they were already bilingual and had Romanian influences in their culture. Moreover, there are several affirmations in the Serbian literature that say that the Vlachs have constantly assimilated the Serbian population in the region, which was older, the arguments being the dominantly Slavic toponyms or some real cases in which in some localities the more numerous Romanians have assimilated the less dominant Slavic elements. Among these arguments is the well-known proverb that says that if in the family enters a Vlach woman, all the family will speak Romanian. Although lacking serious arguments, such opinions of Serbian origin temporarily assimilated by the Romanians are presently considered veridical and have a large circulation in Serbia. The total lack of truth of these theories is obvious, among the contra-arguments that can be brought being: up to the present in Romanian exists a Serbian ethno-linguistic minority that hasn't forgotten its language, traditions and origin (for example in the Danube villages such as Svinița); except for the native language, totally different from Serbian, the ethnographic, folkloric characteristics, the folk art costumes, habits, mythology and others are clearly different than those of the Serbian population in the region. Finally, if the Vlachs from Serbia are linguistically integrated Serbians, would those from Bulgaria, identically

presenting Romanian features, be Romanianized Bulgarians? Without being under the slightest Romanian political or administrative influence, lacking schools and cultural institutions in their native language, the Romanians from these regions could have become after their assimilation Serbia or Bulgarians. The capacity to assimilate elements of other origins proves the fact that they represent a majority population in this area of eastern Serbia and north-western Bulgaria.

Another theory is that which approaches the Vlach population as being one autochthonous in the region, but being in fact an ethnic subgroup of Serbians, different only because of the Serbian-Vlach bilingualism. Under diverse nuances, is presented the existence on a Vlach autochthonous population in eastern Serbia, which is not identical to Romanians, but closer to the Serbians. From this comes the explanation why Vlachs don't claim their Romanian identity and why they declare themselves as Serbian ethnics. This theory is preferred, outside the scientific and political circles, and by a part of the Romanian population from eastern Serbia, loyal to the Serbian ethnic and national identity. Terms like *sârboVlachi* (*Serbian Vlachs*) are similar to the official theories of other Balkan states on the origin and identity of Romanian communities, such as the *elino-Vlachi* for the Aromanians from Greece, considered, of course, to be Greek.

Somehow different is the opinion regarding the existence of an ethnos separated both from the Vlachs and the Serbians. The arguments brought in this idea depart from the dialectal and identity differences, up to that that the Vlachs are a mixed origin population, with specific features of a separate ethnicity. The arguments for this opinion come from the existence of a separate ethnic category in the censuses, the Vlachs, the opposition regarding the Romanians from Romania but also the influence of the official politics that says that Romanians are only those from Vojvodina. There are tendencies to use the dialectal variants as a form of literary language. The basic problem of an ethnical identity of Vlachs is linked to this ethnonym which denoted in all Slavic languages Romanians south and north of Danube. In opposition to the Aromanians, which have a common ethnonym of *armân* or *rămân* or of *moldoveni*, the Vlachs do not have a common regional name, and even the term of Vlach is an exoethnonym. Thus in the native, dialectal Romanian language, they identify themselves as *rumâni*, and the language as *rumânească*, the glottonym of *limbă Vlachă*, *vlăhească* language appears totally artificial. Attempts to replace the obvious ethnonym of român (*rumân*) exist, by artificially creating terms such as *vlarumâni*, *rumânoVlachi*, *vlarumânescă* language (sustained by Boja lu Kici) and using Cyrillic characters in the dialectal Romanian writing.

As a conclusion on the origin of the Romanian population of Serbia, on the basis of objective arguments we may say that one cannot adopt an exclusive opinion that pretends the total autochthony of them in Serbia, or their complete migration from Romanian territories. The fact that Romanians represent the oldest ethnical element in the region, both in Banat and in eastern Serbia, as well as the continuous migrations of Romanian population in Serbia and in the Romanian

ethnic areas of Romania and Bulgaria are obvious. The attempts to generalize some local cases of migration or assimilation are superficial, as well as those that say that Romanians are exclusively the oldest autochthonous element in all the localities in the region. To solve the existing realities, based on the historical, ethnographic and anthroponymic information, we have to approach each region and locality.

5. The ethnical conscience and identity of Romanians of Serbia

Although according to the ethno-linguistic and ethnographic criteria we can identify pretty well the areas with Romanian population from the Balkan region, the problem of their declared ethnic identity is much more complicated. The ethnic identity and conscience is reflected in several aspects, one of identification as regional or local group with Romanian ethno-linguistic specific (present at the majority of the Romanian population, under different forms) and other linked to ethnic identity written in the official documents.

For the Romanian population in Serbia, the identity situation is different from region to region, case to case, in space and time.

A well determined Romanian ethnic identity during the last two centuries can be found only in the case of the Romanians from western Banat - Vojvodina. Here, the Romanian ethnic population declares itself as such, being aware of the belonging to the Romanian people and considering Romania as the country to which they are ethnically related. The Romanian ethnic identity in this case prevails in face of the regional or ethnographic identity of *bănăţeni*, *ardeleni* or *olteni* (people from Banat, Ardeal, Oltenia), being declared as such at all the censuses. The Serbian, Yugoslavian or more regional (*bănăţean*, *voivodinean*) ethnical identity cases are particular, and related more to the ethno-linguistic assimilation processes or the origin from mixed ethnic marriages. At the censuses the absolute majority of the Romanian population declared as Romanian ethnics (in Serbian – rumuni). Thus in the case of the Romanians from this region, we may consider as true the population censuses' data, and can proceed towards a demographic analysis. The constant diminishment of the number of Romanian ethnics in Vojvodina is related to the migrations, reduced natural increase rate for several decades, as well as to the assimilation following mixed marriages or to changes in the ethno-linguistic environment. The causes for a well expressed Romanian ethnic identity are historic. Up to 1918 the Romanians from this region were a common part of the Romanian population from Banat and Transylvania, where a general Romanian identity was already established. Another cause is represented by the ethno-cultural processes that followed in Yugoslavia and Serbia, the existence of schools, churches and mass-media in Romanians, facts that have maintained unaltered the Romanian ethnic identity.

In Vojvodina only the băieși from the Bačka region, which weren't part of the common mass of Romanians from Banat, have a more flexible Romanian identity, reflected in the sometimes illogical differences from the population censuses. For example the community of băieși from the margin of Apatin appears as 1203 Romanian ethnics at the census from 1981, 561 in 1991 and 967 in 2002. These apparent demographic changes are in fact given by the somehow different ethnic identification at the mentioned censuses, the real number of Romanian băieși being much larger. Yet, some of them declare to be Croatians, Hungarians or Serbians. Still they maintain a quite evidenced Romanian ethnic identity, reflected both in their identity as ethnic group and the censuses declarations. Although they lack cultural institutions in the Romanian language, the Romanian ethnic character is given not only by the spoken language, but also, paradoxically, by the confessional specific. Being Roman Catholics, they cannot be identified with Orthodox Serbians, but they also haven't adopted the Croatian or Hungarian ethnic identity. At the group level, they identify themselves as băieși.

A totally different situation is that of the Romanian language population south of the Danube in Serbia. Both the ethno-historical different evolution of the territories that belonged to the Ottoman Empire, as well as the ethno-cultural politics promoted later in these regions have led to the existence of a confuse ethnic identity, weakly expressed, flexible and often given by the political, social and economical situation. The Romanian ethnic area from eastern Serbia appears in the population censuses from the 20th century with large quantitative and distribution fluctuations, proving an illogical evolution of the official databases. The data closer to the ethnic reality of the population in the region are those from 1921, one of the causes being the exclusive embracement of the linguistic criteria for the ethnic identification of the population. All other censuses record a quantitative variation of the ethnic Romanian population and the „Vlachs”, sometimes with very pronounced modification. Thus in 1921 were recorded 159549 Romanians in eastern and central Serbia, in 1948 only 102953 Vlachs, in 1961 only 1330 Vlach ethnics. In 1981 were recorded 25535 Vlachs and 6387 Romanians, in 1991 17672 Vlachs and 3507 Romanians, and finally in 2002 up to 39953 Vlachs and 4157 Romanians. Of course, these census data do not reflect the real ethno-demographic situation, and the cause of the differences stands in the different declaration of the ethnic identity of the same population in different periods.

For the Romanian population in Serbia, we may mention the declaring of the following ethnic identities, which vary from a period to another, as well as between regions.

1. The Romanian identity

Except for the Romanians in Vojvodina, who identify themselves as such both linguistically and ethnically, the declared identity of Romanian is also present for the population in eastern and central Serbia. Departing from the self-identification as român/rumân and the recognition of the synonymy between

Romanians / români (rumuni) and Vlachs (vlasi) by the scientific circles and the officials of Serbia up to the Second World War, we may say that for the inter-war period the Romanian identity was dominant for the population speaking Romanian dialects in eastern Serbia, as well as for a part of Romanian speakers from areas of central Serbia. Once with the ethno-cultural assimilation politics, followed by theories of the existence of a Vlach ethnic group separated by the Romanian ethnicity and the propaganda that led to the creation of an inferior image related to the identification as Romanian, major changes regarding identity occurred in the Romanian population from south-Danube Serbia. The identity of Romanian has yet persisted up to the present, manifested mainly through the identification of an own ethno-linguistic group. For example they have always used the expressions *vorbești rumâniește* (*I speak Romanian*), *tăinui rumâniește* to identify the glottonym in which they speak home and in the village, or *mi-s rumân* (*I am Romanian*) to express the ethnic identity different from the Serbian one. Still, these are used mainly in the informal daily speech, and didn't reflect in the most frequently declared official identity. Interesting is the fact that at the population census from 1948, which introduced the differentiation into separated ethnic categories of Romanians and Vlachs, in some villages the population divided into the two categories. This was the influence of the censors possibly, who also used questions in Romanian. This was the situation in the village Halova (Zaječar opština), the only where the majority declared themselves as Romanians and not Vlachs (1589 Romanians and 17 Vlachs from a total of 1634 inhabitants). At the same census we can see villages where a part of the population declared to be Romanians, for example Rânovăț (Ranovac, Petrovac opština), Porogin (Porodin, Žabari opština) or Sîga (Sige, Žagubica opština). Then followed a diminishment in the official number of people declaring to be Romanians in the second half of the 20th century, most of those who officially expressed the Romanian identity being the rudari, such as in Strijile (Strižilo, Jagodina opština, 465 Romanians in 1981 and 363 in 1991), Trešnevița (Trešnjevica, Paraćin opština), rarely in some Romanian villages between Morava and Timok, such as in Valeacoani (Valakonje, 39 Romanians and 253 Vlachs in 1981, but only one Romanian and 563 Vlachs in 1991, the rest declaring themselves as Serbians), some villages from Petrovac opština: Claduroa (Kladurova, 283 Romanians and 39 Vlachs in 1981, but only 283 Vlachs and no Romanian in 1991), Mânăstărița (Manastirica, 31 Romanians, 440 Vlachs in 1981, and 432 Vlachs and no Romanian in 1991), Menița (Melnica), Rânovăț (Ranovac). In central Serbia, among the localities with rudari and some with Romanian population occurs occasionally the declared identity of Romanians, such as in Osaonița (Osaonica, Trstenik opština, 470 Romanians in 1981), Suvaia (Suvaja, Varvarin opština, 292 Romanians in 1981), Pârcilovița (Prčilovica, Aleksinac opština, 222 Romanians in 1981), Staro Selo (Velika Plana opština, 302 Romanians in 1981) and others.

It can clearly be noticed that the declared Romanian ethnic identity is almost absent in the villages with absolute majority of Romanian population from the

border with Romania, where up to 1946 have even existed Romanian nationalist movements. Only in further located villages, isolated Romanian ethnic areas from the region of Morava or west of it, occurs the Romanian ethnic identity according to the censuses conducted after 1953.

Among the causes of denying the Romanian ethnic identity are the following:

– The political, social and cultural Serbian propaganda in eastern Serbia, which tried to diminish the Romanian ethnic element by linguistic and ethno-cultural assimilation. Romanians formed the majority of the population in many opština of eastern Serbia, and was hard to assimilate by other means, such as creating a separate ethnic category of Vlachs, with a confuse definition and ethnic identity, or the idea of a Serbian ethnic identity of the Vlachs, which had as specific only the Serbian-Vlach bilingualism. The lack of Romanian cultural, religious and education institutions, of an intellectual elite, the relative underdevelopment of the region with Romanian population, preoccupied more about the socio-economical than the ethno-cultural problems, favored the decrease of the Romanian ethnic conscience and its substitution with a Serbian one. The creation of a negative image of the Romanians, with pejorative implications sometimes (such as that of an identity lower than the Serbian or Yugoslavian) has also been argued by the better socio-economical evolution of socialist Yugoslavia in comparison to Romania up to the end of the 20th century. The Romanian or even Vlach ethnic identity was often associated with that of gypsy, herdsman or peasant, being less prestigious. This image was somehow taken even by the mass of Romanian population, willing to rise to a higher level of socio-economical emancipation, which could be obtained through the Serbian language and culture. The fear of the Yugoslavian authorities of previous irredentist movements of the Romanian population from Timok region, manifested in the 19th century and up to 1946, cannot be omitted. Not by chance is that the regions from the Romanian frontier, with compact dominant Romanian population have in the present the weakest expressed Romanian ethnic identity.

– The weak consolidation of the Romanian ethnic element in the region, which never had its own political or territorial formations, and the links with Romania haven't been sufficient, inclusively because of the weakly expressed interest of the Romanian state for this region. Under the influence of the social structures specific to the Balkan space dominated by the Ottoman Empire, ethnic identity didn't represented the basic element for the consolidation of a population, often prevailing the confessional, political or administrative identity imposed earlier. The inexistence of an ethnical consolidation of Romanian ethnographic and dialectal groups, that didn't had the conditions to form a literary language, favored their dispersal and the prevalence of an imposed identity.

– The opposition towards the identification with Romania due to political, social and economical reasons. If politically speaking a centralized opinion of a

relatively democratic and prosperous Yugoslavia was created, in opposition to a poor Romania, lacking democracy, from a social and economical viewpoint the opinions referring to the negative image of Romanian have been subjectively formulated. If the Romanians from Serbia, after the migrations for work in Western Europe from the 70s, have improved their economical situation, for many Romanians from Romania the region of eastern Serbia was one of benefit, mainly through the agricultural work. Communicating in Romanian somehow represented a unity element, Romanians being attracted to the villages of Serbia. Still, the population from Romania, weakly instructed, coming from poorer areas, often left negative impressions among the Romanians from Serbia, thus being created an image of the Romanians (from Romania) as poor, thieves, cheap working power etc. This fact has somehow contributed to the negation of the Romanian identity, based on the simple conclusions such as „I'm not Romanian, I'm not as those from Romania, I'm from Serbia, thus I'm Serbian”, often met during the interviews conducted in the Romanian villages, mainly in the border area with Romania.

The political, social and economical processes from the last decade in the region have also influenced the ethnical ones. Thus the conjuncture of the political, social and economical relations between Serbia and Romania has changed, the first being in a profound political, social and economical crisis, while the later has a relative stability and a favorable evolution. The awareness of belonging to another ethnicity than that of Serbian, due to the linguistic, ethnographic and folkloric specific, made big progresses. The transformation of the Serbian identity in a less prestigious at the European level, because of the general politic of discriminating Serbia as nation, the fragmentation and animosity created inside the south Slavic ethnicities, have led to an increase of the role of the Romanian identity for the Romanian speaking population of Serbia. This is reflected in the statistics of the last census, and in the creation of cultural, political and religious organizations and movements with pronounced Romanian character. The movements favoring a common Romanian identity have increased, and at this moment we witness very active processes of claiming a Romanian identity, which manifest in the creation of organizations, mass-media and religious services in the Romanian language, as well as initiatives of teaching Romanian in schools. The support from Romania, although insufficient and controversial, adds to the factors that favor the evolution of the Romanian ethnic identity. Although it faces the opposition of the nationalist Serbian circles and of the movements towards the individualization of a Vlach ethnicity, the Romanian ethnic conscience gains power in eastern Serbia, fact that would lead to a considerable increase in the number of people declaring their Romanian ethnic identity.

We also have to mention the occurrence of identification as *rumâni* in the case of the Romanians from Timok. Although it is clear that the one letter difference (*români* – *rumâni* / Romanians – Rumanians) is not decisive to justify that *rumâni* are not *români*, still there are movements which sustain an identity of *rumâni*, as an authentic denomination for those declared Vlasi (in Serbian),

separated from Romanians. According to these opinions, the Rumanians would be the autochthonous population from eastern Serbia (D. Dragici, 2004).

2. The Vlach (vlasi) identity

The ethnonym of Vlach, Vlachi, with diverse variants in different languages, is known for much time as being attributed to a Romanized population. At the beginning the Germanic tribes have named the Celtic population with this appellative, Wales or Valonia being among the names of this origin. Taken from the Slavic populations, this term has been attributed to the Romanic language population that established contact with the Slavs. *Vlach*, *vlasi*, *voloh*, *vloh* are among the exoethnonyms used in Slavic languages for the Romanian population. Similar to *Vlachos* in Greek or *olah* in Hungarian, it came to identify the Romanian population from different regions. Although the Romanians themselves haven't appropriated completely this ethnonym, different ethno-toponymic variants have existed and still do, identifying Romanian political and administrative structures, such as Valahia (Vlachia), the *vlahii* of the Aromanians from Greece, Moldo-Vlachia, Ungro-Vlachia etc. The southern slaves have attributed this name to the Romanian population from both north and south of the Danube, and the political Romanian formations, especially the neighboring Țara Românească (the Romanian Country) was known in Serbian or Bulgarian as Vlaška.

Thus the use of the Vlach ethnonym for the Romanian population from Serbia is quite old. A different situation is the argumentation of an ethnicity with the name of *Vlachi*, *vlasi* separated from the Romanian one. Mainly after the Second World War, in Serbia and Bulgaria people started to make a difference between Romanians and Vlachs. The causes are inclusively political, so as to avoid the possible irredentist claims of the Romanian population, which was numerous in the border regions of both countries. By creating a minority separated from the Romanian one, with the name of Vlachs, was desired to diminish the Romanian ethno-cultural and political influences in the region. In parallel a politic of linguistic and cultural assimilation was promoted, which ended in changing the identity of the Romanian population.

Nowadays the Vlach identity is manifested through a few different opinions:

– Vlachs are a component part of the Serbian ethnicity. This is a opinion promoted by the Serbian nationalist circles, as well as by a part of the Romanian language population. The Vlachs would thus be a sub-ethnicity of Serbians, autochthonous in the region, which has as specific the Serbian-Vlach bilingualism, which has always existed. Certain ethno-genetic links with the Romanians are admitted, yet the focus is on the Serbian ethnic identity, which is always dominant. The Vlachs would have more common ethno-cultural common features with the Serbians than with the Romanians. The presence of Vlachs in Bulgaria is omitted, situation which creates confusions and does not explain what is the situation of the Bulgarian Vlachs.

– The Vlachs as separated ethnicity, ethnic minority in Serbia, with own ethno-genetic, ethno-cultural and ethno-linguistic characteristics. There are a few variants of this theory, one being that the Vlachs are autochthonous, different from Romanians. Other specifies that Vlachs are an ethnicity formed as a consequence of Romanian-Serbian interferences, having in this case a mixed ethnogenetic character. The supporters of this opinion are based and on the official existence of the two separated ethnicities in Serbia, the Romanians from Vojvodina and Vlachs in eastern Serbia. For the existence of a Vlach ethnicity are brought arguments which individualize the Vlach (Romanian) population from eastern Serbia, such as specific ethnographic characteristics, the lack of a Romanian identity, dialectal linguistic particularities. Due to the use only of local Romanian dialects, the lack of schools in Romanian language, there are even attempts to create a written variant of the Vlach language, based on local dialects, mainly the Timok one. Such attempts have existed from the end of the Second World War, when have appeared newspapers in the local Romanian dialect, in Cyrillic characters, such as „Vorba Noastră” (Our Language). Nowadays, the creation of literary standards for the Romanian dialectal language didn't gained amplex, the adopted alphabet being both Cyrillic and Latin. An essential problem for defining the Vlach ethnicity stands in using this ethnonym, which is used mainly in the cases when Serbian is used, because the Romanian speaking population still uses to identify themselves the ethnonym *rumân*. In the tendency to combine the two ethnonyms, there are even attempts to create an artificial name for the new Vlach ethnicity from Serbia, such as *vlarumân* or *rumânoVlach*. Diverse cultural and political organizations advocate the idea of a Vlach ethnic identity, as an ethnic minority in Serbia, which is not related to any neighboring country. This idea is in general embraced by the mass-media, scientific institutions and local and national officials of Serbia.

– Vlachs as a Romanian sub-ethnicity is a compromise variant, which allows eliminating the opposition of the Vlach-Romanian ethnonyms and at the same time the creation in principle of a common identity. The arguments brought to sustain this thesis are those that prove the possibility of synonymy of the ethnonyms used in different languages for the Romanian population, situation largely found and in the case of other nations (Greeks-Hellenes, Deutsch-German, Albanian-Arnauts-Shqiptaret, Hungarians-Magyars etc.). Then it can be argued the local ethnographic specific of the Vlach Romanians, more archaic in language and traditions than the Romanians from Vojvodina or Romania. One of the basic arguments that stand for the double recognitions of the ethnonyms of Vlachs and Romanians is given by the official background of this Romanian population, which is registered in the censuses as ethnic minority (*vlasi*). This opinion, of double identification gained terrain during the last years, numerous cultural and political organizations of the Vlachs-Romanians from eastern Serbia adopting it. On the basis of this principle was formed in 2007 the National Council of the Vlachs (Roumanians) from Serbia, separated from that of Romanians, which gathers Romanians from Vojvodina but also some from eastern Serbia. The ideas are often confuse, some accepting the

common Romanian identity, while others hesitate to admit the Romanian identity or the separate character of the Rumanians-Vlachs from eastern Serbia. Thus the adepts of the idea of Romanian-Vlach unity, expressed by the ethnonymic diversity, use the name of Vlach (vlasi) in Serbian (different to the term of Rumun, common for other Romanians), but that of rumân or Romanian as a romaine language identifier.

3. The Serbian identity

While disputed are fought over whether Vlachs are Romanians and numerous fractions contradict themselves in problems related to the ethnonym and glottonym, the largest part of the Romanian population appears according to the official censuses as Serbian ethnics. Thus from the total of Romanian population from eastern and central Serbia or at least the ones that are Romanian speakers and which are estimated at 250,000, only 40,000 declare themselves as Vlachs and 4000 Romanians, the rest declaring to be ethnic Serbians. The Serbian ethnic identity for the Romanians in eastern Serbia gained terrain during the last 70 years, being linked to the official propaganda, the tendencies of integration into the Serbian society, but also as a result of the linguistic and cultural assimilation processes. There are of course doubts regarding the correctness of the censuses, which are often influenced by the officially promoted politics or even falsified. We may for sure affirm that the ethnicity that is written in the case of uncertain or confuse declarations is the Serbian one. For someone to be registered Vlach or Romanian he has to obligatorily declare this, in comparison to the Serbians, whose registering is often tacit or usual in the case of absence. Anyway, the reality is that a large part of the Romanian speaking population from eastern Serbia is officially identified as ethnic Serbians. At the local level or when wanting to make a difference to the Serbians from neighboring villages or regions, the identity of Vlach, rumân occurs as a component of the conscience of an own linguistic and ethno-cultural specific, but it isn't manifested in the official declarations. The causes of the identification as Serbians are multiple, some of political order, such as the fear to have problems because of belonging to an ethnic minority, then the desire to emancipate as a titular population in that state, the conviction that the respective persons will be better in the case of joining the titular nation, the desire to overcome the political, social, economical and cultural marginalization in which eastern Serbia is found, the nuance of identification as Serbians bringing them closer to the central role they would occupy in the state. Other motives are social, economical and psychological. Among these are the creation of a negative image for the Romanian or Vlach ethnic identity during the last decades, in contradiction to the positive, glorious and superior image of the Serbian identity, the better conditions that Yugoslavia offered in comparison to socialist Romania created a favorable background for the identification to the Yugoslavian or Serbian identity for the Romanians in eastern Serbia. The lack of any cultural or educational

institution or of mass-media in the native language, the exclusive influence of Serbian education and culture, the tendencies to overcome the marginalization and underdevelopment states complete the motives of officially accepting the Serbian identity. It is interesting to note that the studies made on the Romanian-Vlach population of eastern Serbia, to distinguish the Vlach, speakers of Romania, from the “other” Serbians, use the notion of „pravi srbi (real Serbians)” for the Serbian ethnics and names like Vlachs, Vlach speaking Serbians, Serbians influenced by Romanians for the Romanian population of the region. Thus the conclusion comes that the Vlachs are not „real Serbians”.

One of the greatest paradoxes is linked to the fact that the identity declared by the Serbians is absolutely dominant in the regions with absolute Romanian majority, such as Kladovo, Negotin, Majdanpek opština, where the Serbian ethno-linguistic element is in minority. In most of the villages of these opština the ethnic identity of Serbians is the main, the number of declared Vlachs or Romanians being insignificant. The explanations of this apparently illogical situation are the results of the ethno-political propaganda much more active in these regions from the border with Romania, the alienation of the Romanian ethnic conscience, regarded suspiciously by the Serbian authorities. Another objective motive is that in this region, in the past quite poor, occurred the more massive migration of population towards the states of Western Europe beginning with the 60s. The villages became practically depopulated, although the majority remained is the statistics with the residence here. Many of the rural localities have up to 80% of the population migrated in Austria, Germany or Switzerland, the presence home being occasional and mainly during the summer. This explains that in reality most of the inhabitants haven't been reviewed directly, but instead have been made estimations based on declarations of other family members or previous data, the papers being randomly filled in what regards the ethnicity, confession, etc.

The Romanians in Vojvodina, mainly from the Romanian localities of western Banat, have their ethnic identity well determined, reflected and in the logic evolution of the official censuses. This is due to the historical, political, social and cultural situation from Vojvodina, where the ethnic identity of each ethno-linguistic community was traced even during the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and Serbia respected the rights of the ethnic minorities in this region. The Romanians in Vojvodina have been recognized as ethnic minority, and a series of bilateral agreements with Romania has facilitated the ethno-cultural development, through schools, churches, publications and mass-media in the Romanian language. Thus the generally Romanian national conscience prevailed, the regional identity being auxiliary. The processes of assimilation and taking the Serbian identity are limited to the existence of mixed marriages. The migration of Romanians towards states in Western Europe, USA or Canada constantly diminished the number of Romanian population in the native localities.

The situation of the Romanians from south-Danube Serbia is different, here the problem of ethnic identity and national conscience being one of the most

controversial. The historical evolution in this area has been different from that in Vojvodina, the processes of consolidation and creation of a well determined ethnic conscience continuing up to the present. The declared ethnic identity differs very much from a period to another, being influenced by the political, social, economical and psychological situation. Based on ethno-linguistic identification, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th one could see consolidating a Romanian ethnic identity in eastern Serbia. The lack of cultural and educational institutions in the native language, the lack of interest on the part of Romania and the official Serbian politics to assimilate this population led to a diminishment of the Romanian ethnic identity, now present only locally, and weakly expressed in movements of ethno-cultural emancipation. In this sense the Romanians from eastern Serbia are more like a type of crypto-ethnicity, as it is and in other areas of the Balkans or the world. In general, at the ethnic classification level, only the gypsies in Serbia present such characteristics as the Romanians from south-Danube Serbia. The demographic evolution based on data from population censuses is illogical, and cannot be taken into account in conducting objective research on the ethnic situation of the Romanian speaking population from central and eastern Serbia. The situation of their identity is even more complicated by the official politics of dividing the Romanian speaking population into Romanians (rumuni) and Vlachs (vlasi), with tendencies to justify two separate ethnicities, one Romanian and the other undetermined. At the same time we cannot consider fully justified the separation of the two ethnonyms, because Vlachs (vlasi) were declared mainly after censuses conducted in the Serbian language, because in the local Romanian dialect the most common ethnonym of self-identification is that of Romanian (rumân). Thus the majority accepts the synonymy of the Vlach and Romanian ethnonyms. The fact that the majority of the Romanian-speaking population from the region declares itself as Serbian in ethnic identity presents a contradictory aspect. The motivation are diverse, related to a confuse conscience of belonging to Serbia as citizens, then political, social and economical, transformed into an ethno-psychological complex. In general the Romanian ethnic identity became one less prestigious than the Serbian, as a result of the ethno-cultural politics, and belonging to Vlachs is associated with being a peasant, uneducated and peripheral in relation to the Serbian ethno-centrism. The last decade views a Romanian ethnic emancipation, which becomes more obvious and largely spread in the Romanian speaking population of eastern Serbia.

An interesting aspect is presented by the mass of Romanian speaking population, known in Vojvodina as *băieși* and in central and eastern Serbia as *rudari*. These speakers of Romanian language are considered to be gypsies by other groups of Romanians, as well as by other neighboring ethnicities. At the same time their self-identification is more of Romanian, the Roma identity being absolutely denied. The *băieși* from Vojvodina, generally catholic, identify themselves as Romanian both officially and at the level of the local community. The population of *rudari*, Orthodox Christians from central and eastern Serbia identify themselves

on the local plan as Romanians, and officially in different modes, according to the period and region. Most of them have been reviewed as Serbians, some Romanians and rarely as Rroma. They have declared themselves as Vlachs only in eastern Serbia, close to the compact Romanian population of the region. It is curious that during the 20th century, some of the *rudari* communities have continued to maintain the declared identity of Romanians, being even more consistent than the other Romanians in eastern Serbia, as it is the case of the Strižilo (Strijila) or Trešnjevica (Trešnevița) localities west of Morava. At the same time, other groups of Romanians regard the *rudari* and *băieși* as a foreign ethnic element, as gypsies, although the linguistic identity unites them.

This situation, of diverse ethnic identity, may be regarded and as a prestigious and un-prestigious ethnic. The Serbian ethnic identity, being that of the titular nation, sustained by the political and ethno-cultural propaganda, occupied the most prestigious place. The identity of Vlachs or Romanians is in general much less prestigious, being associated with peasant, herders, uneducated persons (objective reality, of a less knowledge of the Serbian language), less developed and peripheral, but also with the less prestigious image of socialist Romania – of poverty and theft (created and during the work migrations from Romania). Even less prestigious is the identification as Rroma, gypsies, and so the *băieși* and *rudari* prefer the Romanian identity.

In reality the identity problem is related to the existence of a confuse, weakly expressed ethnic identity, of a double or triple identity, combined with a national, regional, local, linguistic and ethno-cultural identity. According to the political, social, economical and ethno-cultural situation, different tendencies at self-identification have manifested, in the case of the Romanians from eastern Serbia this situation being very obvious.