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Ethnic Identity of Aromanians/Vlachs in the 21st Century*

Etniczna tożsamość Arumunów/Wlachów w XXI stuleciu

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł jest poświęcony współczesnym zjawiskom w ramach społeczności Arumunów/Wlachów, rozproszonej na całych Bałkanach transnacionalnej zbiorowości. Przedstawiam zróżnicowane formy współczesnej arumuńskiej tożsamości etnicznej/narodowej. Rozważam dyskusje wokół pożądanego kierunku rozwoju społeczności, jej strategii kulturowych i politycznych. Podstawowym kryterium afiliacji etnicznej/narodowej wśród Arumunów jest obecnie pochodzenie, rodzinna genealogia, posiadanie przodków Arumunów. Intelktualiści arumuńscy koncentrują uwagę zarówno na konieczności zachowania określonych cech kulturowych (języka, obyczajowości), jak i na pamięci przodków. Artykuł powstał na podstawie materiału empirycznego zebranego w trakcie antropologicznych badań terenowych z kilku sezonów letnich w latach 2007–2014. Przeprowadziłam obserwację oraz wywiady z lokalnymi intelektualistami, nauczycielami, artystami, działaczami kultury oraz przywódcami lokalnych i regionalnych organizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: Wołosi, Arumuni, etniczność, tożsamość etniczna, mniejszości etniczne

INTRODUCTION

The article traces various forms of Aromanian's identity, an ethnic group/nation of the Balkan region. It considers disputes and discussions around the desired directions of community development, political and

* This article is based on a fieldwork carried out by Ewa Nowicka in the Balkans (Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania) in 2007–2010 and in Serbia in August 2015. Appearing already in the title of my article the name "Aromanians" binds a specific political option, of which I am aware. The use of this term by the Aromanian elites in Europe is the basis of my decision for its use.

cultural strategies. It highlights different ways of expressing the sense of ethnic bonds – relationships between Aromanians as an ethnic group, the ways of setting the boundaries of their Aromaniannes and dilemmas of identity experienced by individuals, and aspirations of ethnic group as a whole. Aromanian's identity is associated with important places and persons in their history, as well as other cultural symbols such as ethnic language, traditional activities (herding, trade, crafts) and the axiological content related to them.

Examining different social, political, economic situations of minority groups, nations and ethnic groups deprived of statehood, we come across one of the European nations, which did not manage to create a separate state during its long history¹. Aromanians live today as indigenous peoples in five Balkan countries (Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria), as well as in Romanian Dobrogea and on the border with Serbia. The latter settlement is the result of relatively recent migration. Aromanians (endo-ethnonym *Armańi* or "*Rramańi*"²). Only among Meglens and Vlachs living in 154 villages in the Timok Valley the name "*Vlach*" is used, which also serves as egzoethnonym. In Polish literature Vlachs are **Neo-Latin** language group in the past occupied with transhumance pastoralism in mountain areas and the traffic on the wide area of the Balkan Peninsula. For thousands of years at different periods of local history, they were known as excellent experts and guides of mountain areas and major merchant caravans traveling from the Balkans to Constantinople (later Istanbul), Vienna, Venice, Belgrade, Budapest, Bucharest and other European cities. Today, they live in scattered localities, officially possessing ethnic minority status only in Macedonia, in a country where they constitute relatively small group estimated at tens of thousands of people (the census records the number not exceeding ten thousands)³. Among Romanian communities of Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 19th century, only on the territory of today's Romania, a state was formed with policies aimed from the beginning and until now at assigning the entire diverse Romanian population of the Balkans. This is one of the factors that currently has impact on the Aromanian identity and in terms of deep immersion in the cultures of majority, it is difficult to distinguish the ethnic borders⁴.

¹ Today Aromanians themselves are reluctant to talk about the artificial creation, which in 1941–1944 was the Principality of the Pindus, because its memory is overwhelmed with the memory of a fascist power of Italians and Germans.

² The term "*Aromanians*" is relatively new transformation of original ethnonym.

³ E. Nowicka, *Nasz język rozumieją aniołowie. Arumuni we współczesnym świecie*, Kraków 2011, p. 82.

⁴ F. Barth, *Introduction*, in: *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. F. Barth, Oslo 1969.

Only in Macedonia, Aromanians are recognized as a minority next to the Albanians, Romanians, Serbs and Turks. This means that Macedonian government contributes from the state funds to support the Aromanian language that can be taught in schools upon the request of parents and youth, and radio and public television broadcasts programs in Aromanian that touch cultural and social problems of the community. In Greece, Albania, Serbia and Bulgaria as well as Romania Aromanians are trying to defend, without state support, their position within the third sector, creating and cooperating with non-governmental organizations. Such activities could be quite effective as thanks to them lectures of i.e. Aromanian language were introduced in the schools of Dobrogea. Another crucial issue shaping the Aromanian identity is the internal division on the merchant Cincars and pastoral Vlachs. Their status is not the same in any of these countries.

ADAPTATION, ASSIMILATION AND LOYALTY

The ongoing and ever escalating phenomenon of Aromanian cultural assimilation in their countries of residence is said to be dictated by the desire to achieve the cultural and economic success⁵. Aromanians commonly claimed that they are easily furthering the cultural background of the majority. In 1993 Irina Nicolau, an Aromanian researcher living in Bucharest, wrote an article of the telling title "Les Cameleons de Balcans". It aroused hot discussions and disputes in the Aromanian community. Polish researcher of history of the Balkans, Irena Stawowy-Kawka says the following about them: "They were exposed to the very quick national assimilation – in the southern Macedonia to Hellenization, but in the cities of northern Macedonia – to slavization"⁶. Similarly, Vaclav Felczak and Tadeusz Wasilewski⁷ indicate the process by which Aromanians (called Vlachs by the authors) are assimilated among the settled Slavic population; this process was extremely strong also in Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. In the ongoing process of the century-long assimilation, the special role played by the phenomenon of biological amalgamation, on the one hand, and acculturation strategies, on the other hand, was used in differ-

⁵ Knowledge of i.e. Greek gave access to the high culture and was an important tool in trading activity – this is considered a fundamental mechanism of Hellenization (cf. T. Kahl, *The Ethnicity of Aromanians after 1990: the Identity of a Minority That Behaves Like a Majority*, "Ethnologia balkanica" 2002, 6, pp. 145–169).

⁶ I. Stawowy-Kawka, *Macedonia w polityce państw bałkańskich w XX wieku*, Kraków 1993, p. 16.

⁷ W. Felczak, T. Wasilewski, *Historia Jugosławii*, Wrocław 1985.

ent countries – the change of geographical names in Greece and in communist Yugoslavia⁸. Marin Bodrožić, the secretary of the Aromanians' Association in Serbia located in Belgrade, describes the phenomenon in the context of great migrations over Central Europe after the destruction of Aromanian city in Moskopolu by Ali Pasha in 1769.

Faced with the fact that they cannot return to their homeland, Aromanians began to adapt to new cultural environment which was particularly the case among retailers and those belonging to the higher social classes who quickly started to accept the most important elements of identity of dominant indigenous population.

This is why “the most prominent of them are remembered as Greek, Serbian, Macedonian heroic figures in the struggle for national liberation, as retailers, businessman, diplomats, intellectuals and nobles of the Austrian Empire”. As a result of this dispersion, the penetration of the majority culture occurs for there are no heroic personalities who could serve as the referential background for building the ethnic identity. The big issue regarding Aromanian identity is the fact that there are very few authentic Aromanian heroes and prominent historical figures who consciously and intentionally have done something significant for Aromanian culture and the well-being of Aromanians. The most respected and honorable Aromanians are remembered because of achievements and merits done for other nations and states. This declaration of an Aromanian leader points to the consequences of the territorially scattered way of life of the Aromanians and their assimilation. The lack of Aromanian state or autonomous political unit did not contribute to developing a common cultural and educational institution: there was no institutional support for shaping the Aromanian culture. Without institutionally established canon of literature (folk and national), the canonical set of important historical events for the nation, festivals, celebrations of important dates, it is hard to construct a communal collective memory, which is the basis for building a modern nation. In addition to genealogy, which one remembers and cherishes, the place of origin, sometimes relatively recent, sometimes very distant, is still important.

Political and cultural transformation of our circle of civilization have led to the fact that, paradoxically, now when the minority culture is in serious danger, there appears its recovery based on the need for the re-

⁸ N. Minow, *The Aromanians in Macedonia and Their Alter-egos (the Past and the Present)*, in: *The Politics of Culture: Perspectives of Stateless Nationalities, Ethnic Groups*, ed. E. Nowicka, Warszawa 2012; V. Dimow, *Aromanian Perception on the Macedonian Question and Advocacy for Autonomous Macedonia*, in: *The Politics of Culture: Perspectives of Stateless Nationalities, Ethnic Groups*, ed. E. Nowicka, Warszawa 2012.

construction of ethnic identity. As an Aromanian activist of Serbia writes, "Aromanian identity is something which contemporary Aromanians are trying to discover and shape". According to his diagnosis, "it is located somewhere between Greek and Traco-Romanized identity". The phenomenon of rebirth and constructing modern Aromanianness should be treated as a major achievement of the Aromanian movement and the effect produced by numerous activities of such organizations.

Aromanians were included into the activity of European structures only in the second half of the 90s of last century. On 17 January 1997 a document was published that brings Aromanians (Vlachs) under the policies of European structures. It is the European Council Report on Aromanians, Report No. 7728, which was presented by Catalan – Lluís Maria de Puig. In June 24th of the same year, the Council of Europe issued a separate recommendation of the people. These documents became the basis for Aromanians to build their programs of struggle for legal recognition of their own language, culture, and thus – ethnicity.

The report drew attention to the fact that Aromanians reside in the "Balkans over two millennia, but today they are facing the risk of extinction". The recommendation states: "Aromanian language and culture threatens the fate similar to that which befell many European cultures that are capable of extinction or already extinct. The document emphasizes that the acceptance of a pluralistic system of cultural values is a prerequisite for stability in Europe, and especially in the Balkans".

The Balkans in the document are consistently presented as the Aromanian homeland. The protection was written to also cover the objects and places of the cultural importance for the group.

This does not mean that the whole of Europe unanimously applauded this document considering Aromanians as a separate ethnic group with a distinct culture, language, history and a sense of communality. This position is on the radical departure from the interests and views of Romania, Greece, Croatia and Serbia. A large part of the Croatian scientists says that most Serbs and Bosniaks are of the Aromanian (Vlach) origin who came on their present territory in the days of the Ottoman Empire and assimilated with the Slavic population⁹. Serbians refuse to separate Aromanian ethnicity, only emphasizing their differences in terms of their traditional activity, which until today was transhumance, seasonal herding. As a consequence, they were granted separate status in the former Serbian state and then

⁹ M. Ruzica, "The Balkan Vlachs/Aromanians Awakening, National Policies, Assimilation", *Proceedings of the Globalization, Nationalism and Ethnic Conflicts in the Balkans and its Regional Context*, Belgrade 28–30 September 2006, pp. 28–30.

the Ottoman Empire¹⁰. The official position of Yugoslavia ignored Vlachs (Aromanians), refused their contribution to the building of nation-states in the Balkans. Therefore, there was no possibility to grant them the status of a separate ethnic group. Likewise, the Greek State argues that Aromanians (Vlachs) do not form a separate ethnic group, but only due to the pastoral, semi-nomadic economy, which formerly had a kind of specific regional culture. The Romanians also do not acknowledge the Aromanian status of a separate ethnic group, treating them as a regional sub-group of Romanians, speaking the local dialects of the Romanian language – and those Aromanians residing outside of Romania are considered to be Romanians living abroad or Romanian minority in various countries of the Balkans, influenced by local socio-cultural environment.

DUALITY: LOYALTY TO THE STATE AND ETHNIC AWARENESS

There could be traced some particular problem of identity amongst all Aromanians. For the lack of their own statehood, they cannot identify with any separate unit of a political nature and their identity has to deal with this fact. The other groups of their environment, for example, Serbs live in the nominally Serbian state, Macedonians live in Macedonian state, Albanians and Kosovo's Albanians living in their countries etc. Aromanians do not have such seemingly simple situation. Their ethnic identity does not coincide with identity politics. Nor are they a mere minority, since they live in several countries and are dependent on each of the specific policies in each of them. Therefore, they must appeal to some other more complex strategies of identity: duality, multi-levelness, situational character of identity or to abandon their own ethnic identity, or even to turn to the political-state identity. There is a tendency among Aromanians to turn away from nationalist aspirations to political autonomy in various forms – to identify themselves with a particular politically historical integrity – and even more, from the desire to create their own contemporary state or regional autonomy. The Aromanian transborder identity emphasizes their ethnic identity, its cross border and transnational character. My interlocutors reduce it to a very personal level of family ties, both widely trans-territorial, exceeding the regional and national borders. Everyone has a family member in another country or in many other countries. Liv-

¹⁰ M. Luković, *Katun a katunská organizace středověkých Vlachů v centrálních a západních oblastech Balkánu*, "Slovanský přehled: historická revue pro dějiny střední, východní a jižovýchodní Evropy" 2013, 99, 5, pp. 387–416.

ing in Constasy, Teo has a cousin in Sztipie in Macedonia. Rade lives in Macedonia and the family is in Albania, Stefania lives in Greece and the family is in Dobrogea, Romania, many Albanian Aromanians has relatives in Greece and vice versa. Aromanians comment on this issue spontaneously during our conversations and demonstrate circumstances shaping the contemporary forms of Aromanianness. The Aromanian identity reaching all criteria of ethnic separateness usually implied separate folklore, language, specific history and former way of life, biological community of origin. I will also focus on the psychological aspect of Aromanianness, connected with the phenomenon of ethnic conversion, revival of ethnicity and ethnic mobilization.

DOUBLE IDENTITY – HOW TO BE A MINORITY?

Except Greece, Aromanians living in all the Balkan countries have no doubt that they actually are an ethnic minority, and where they are not recognized as such, they must struggle to gain such status. Only Greece—although it has always belonged to the European Union – failed to build a formula for the protection of minorities; in this country all citizens are ethnic Greeks at the same time. One of my interlocutors in Meglen-Vlach village in northern Greece during conversation about the identity of the inhabitants sarcastically said: “Here everyone, including those dogs and cats are Greeks”. On the one hand, their situation is considered to be “worse than in other countries”, on the other hand, Aromanian activists do not even expect to be considered Aromanians as a minority and to organize education in Aromanian language. However, most of the Greek Vlachs/Aromanians do not depend on recognition as a minority because they feel a deep connection with Greece as a state, which is expressed in the phrase usually heard there: “How is it possible that someone calls us a minority? We made the Greek state!”¹¹.

One of the most difficult issues that face Aromanians (Vlachs) is a dilemma on how to be a loyal citizen and not lose cultural/ethnic identity. The constant contacts with the representatives of the majority and historic experience make the relationships between them more intimate. All Aromanian leaders emphasize good neighborly relations with other nationalities. This gives the necessary effect of acculturation and the minority has, in fact, a full competence in the culture of the majority. At the level of the

¹¹ T. Kahl, *Aromanians in Greece. Minority or Vlach-Speaking Greeks. Minorities in Greece – Historical Issues and New Perspectives*, “Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas (History and Culture of South Eastern Europe)” 2003, 5.

neighborhood, everyday relations between individuals provoke no conflicts, but the minority's presence makes itself felt at the political, national or international level. The Aromanian leaders, being at the same time citizens and minority representatives, are trying to describe their position as harmonious and non-contentious. Arben Lena, whom we have already mentioned, answers the question about this issue: "It is very... This is very natural, it is very easy. Because we are an ethnic group very, very different from the Albanians, but we live in a place that is built within certain limits and we are residents of one country. It is not a problem". In practice, it appears that what is simple is its complexity, and providing simplicity is a symptom of this complexity.

– Contribution to the state and country of residence

Saying that the city Korçe was built in fact by Aromanians, Arben Lena proudly concludes: "Because it is the best part of the Balkans". He defends his argument by stating that "Aromanians fought and worked for the Greek state, fought and worked for the state of Albania, fought and worked for the Macedonian state. And for sure the best things in these countries were made by Aromanians". Aromanians representing a unique autochthonous nation in the Balkans stress that the best things done in all these countries had been done by Aromanians, thus they do have grounds to feel proud and deserve a better position.

– Sentimental ties

The situation of being a minority forces close contacts with representatives of the majority those who are outside of their ethnic group. As a result, the contacts within their group acquire specific psychological and social sense and it is definitely attributed to other connotations from those defined as external. What is more – the external contacts are vitally important for organizing daily life, educational and professional life. In this context, contacts with people from their own ethnic community take on a special meaning. It appears at the same time like a kind of nostalgia for life in their own ethnic environment. To the question posed as "If you could choose your neighbor, would you prefer to have an Aromanian, and why?" the answer is unequivocal: "Sure, sure. All Aromanians would have this feeling if they had to choose, they would choose... they need to arrange the marriage of their children with Aromanians, they need to have Aromanian neighbors, but you know... Life is life. However, it is a very strong feeling, very strong. This is a very strong feeling" – emphatically

said an Aromanian leader of Korce in Albania, Arben Lena, distinguishing sentimental desires and real limitations of the minority living among the majority.

– Situational aspect of duality

My young interlocutor, coming from Korce, living permanently in Germany among the population so different from that of the minority and the majority, in which she grew up, tells about the approach to her Aromanianness in the context of the close contact with Albanianes. Familiarity with the local Albanian majority and her Aromanian family intertwined into one whole:

But when I speak Aromanian with my grandparents, I feel completely Aromanian at this point. I'm totally in this way, but when I go out with my Albanian friends I do not think that oh, I'm Aromanian or Albanian! Because I feel Albanian. These are two parallel ways of life, ways of thinking, ways of feeling. And for me instead of saying: I feel better so, if so, it is better to say that I feel comfortable in both.

My interlocutor is trying to generalize their situation pointing to this kind of double and situational variable identity:

If one has a German father, or a Greek father, and an Albanian mother and lives somewhere in Poland, and if one is able to feel equally freely in these worlds – this is for the best. You can make your own way even regarding the public. For me, this is not essential, it is not the crux to say: I'm so or so and the language that I have, the sounds that I have in mind, or dances that I know, that's what... I can use and pass on.

She has an experience of a long stay abroad, rejecting both her Aromanianness and Albanianes. She demonstrates a kind of rejection of thinking in the categories of ethnicity:

Because I cannot say, I cannot say that at any moment I am so, because... after these eight years in Germany, I cannot say that I am German, but I know that I changed there very much and the longer I am there the more I change as a person, but I still feel internally very, very... So I make pita and do it very often for my friends and I feel that I have a grandmother at this moment, I have my childhood memory and I am very, very Aromanian.

It is at this point, when doing a national dish, that the interlocutor points out that part of her personality possesses the minority's identity of her home country.

The respondent talks about the duality that is characteristic and perhaps inevitable in case of being a minority. She changes different strate-

gies, how to construct such an identity: "Either you're trying to eliminate one side of your identity and develop the other, or – it is more natural for me – to remain in both, in both... roads...". This is a parallel operation in two various cultural spaces that are not competitive, but possess ability of situational use. At the same time one wants to keep both, both are close to him vitally and psychologically.

– Multi-storeyed aspect of duality: cultural intimacy

The indicated duality of identity, which is part of the minority ethnic identification together with association with majority is, however, more complex. Aromanians in all the countries they reside in are an ethnic minority- recognized or not recognized, but always constituting a numerical minority. In such a situation, there is always the problem of constructing an ethnic identity, national and state one; this is what one should consider individually (consciously or unconsciously). In interviews I have conducted in six countries, loyalty to the country, the state of residence is obviously important. Its role depends on the position of being a minority group. This dual identities – Aromanian-Albanian, Aromanian-Macedonian, Aromanian-Serbian – are not symmetric.

Each of the two components of identity fulfill a different role, is based on parallel principles, built on the basis of different psychological relationship with the collectivity, culture and territory. Aromanian identity is associated with a sense of cultural familiarity and intimacy, the intimacy of family character acquired in the process of primary socialization and thus most difficult to work out, subtle and least tangible. This applies, for example, to a specific ethnic humor; funny jokes, which are hardly perceptible by others. Family, clan, local identity are all associated with a sense of communality that Michael Herzfeld called *cultural intimacy*¹². Persuasive leaders and their methods of influence on the less active members of the ethnic community and mobilization techniques date back to the mechanisms of cultural intimacy described by Herzfeld. The former refers to the leaders acting on behalf of ethnic minorities and it is a phenomenon that could be described as excitation and could restore a sense of community by appealing to the manifestations of familiarity, both on the social level and on a purely individual level of psychological experiences. One of them is still emerging in the statements of the elder, but more often in young leaders manifestating their own culture and people belonging to the ethnic community.

¹² M. Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-state*, Oxford 2014, p. 16.

The feeling of closeness, pleasure of using the language, people of one's own nationality, this is all revealed in the following story of a young Aromanian activist from Albania. Zikela, who worked as a waiter in a restaurant in Korce said:

We arranged many of these weddings and once it was an Aromanian wedding, and at this party many guests were Aromanians and the table, for which I was responsible for was occupied by Aromanians and it was a beautiful feeling that I could go there to talk to them in Aromanian: "Shall I bring a plate?", "Do you need a glass?" or "Do you want a beer?" – the things related to my work. But it was great that I could say it in my language. I could talk in this way with everyone there.

Zikel openly talked about a kind of satisfaction that he could talk to someone using his own language. He stressed that in contact with other Aromanian he was sure of sharing the same experiences and the same understanding of the world with him, having common social strategies. The interlocutor also distances himself from any hostile feelings against the Albanian majority, emphasizing, as it always happens in the case of Aromanians, his loyalty: "I'm not saying that I am against Albanians... I love Albania. It has nothing to do with it. All my friends are Albanians. As I said, it's not a problem if you are Aromanian or Albanian. We're all together". It is repeated in his other statements in a more or less hidden way.

Identities of national or supranational level, for example the European identity, are built on other grounds – intellectual and not emotional reflections. The individual identity in this case (case in question) is multi-storeyed, but the levels are not equivalent psychologically, nor they are founded on the same types of bonds. The kind of nostalgia Zikel was talking about was accompanied by the pleasant feeling of being together and it is also present in the behaviors and other statements. Aureli also speaks with love and commitment about everything Aromanian as this is something very close to her, like a family, from which she has a sense of detachment, not only because of education, but also due to a long stay abroad.

– Additive aspect of duality

Zikel analyzes the deeper meaning of psychological and social feelings from the contacts with his own ethnic group: "This is the feeling like nostalgia, or... we can say that you feel even exceptionally in some way, even exceptionally. You're different from the rest and you are not the only one who is different. You are in a group that is different from the rest". To be an Aromanian in Albania, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria means having

something more, something added to what the people belonging to the majority have. This feeling increases, but does not disqualify them as citizens of their country.

One can trace how the younger generation determines the canonical symbolic contents defining the uniqueness of Aromanianness. Symbols of Aromanianness, shared by young Aromanians are tinged with a kind of irony. A woman also coming from Albania tells how during a meeting of young Aromanians they tried to realize what is a symbol of Aromanians and one of the participants drew the car, which caused a lot of laughter, but by no means indignation; others who had lived in Romania, Greece or Macedonia resorted to the old symbols and joked about shepherding their grandparents and sometimes even their parents. On such an intimate basis, ethnic identity is being built up by the minority of the younger generation. My interlocutors sometimes recorded the discourse change, which had taken place in recent decades and its significant impact on the development of Aromanian identity. One of the interviewees says:

When the system changed, minorities were given more rights. So the tendency is to... ..to be a part of these minorities. So to find the identity of minorities is not... very difficult, because I do not know how it feels or what kind of criteria can be found to measure identity, or the degree of identity.

To some extent fashion on ethnic distinction adds the value to it.

Territory, clan division and contemporary transformations of Aromanian identity

The structure of Aromanian identity links or rather shifts its vocabulary from the ethnic discourse to the one of state/nation. Noteworthy is the following conversation, which took place in the Aromanian organization in Constanta, June 2009:

(T. is my Aromanian interlocutor, E. is myself: Ewa Nowicka):

T. Serbian, do you not know?

E. I know Serbian.

T. I know Serbian. I am a Serb. Where are you from? (and after explanations), I am from Titograd. I was born there.

Here is revealed with great clarity the multi-leveled, multi-storeyed, multi-faceted ethnic and state Aromanian identity structure. The old Aromanian activist, a member of Aromanian organization in Constanta who has no doubts about his Aromanianness, also refers to the place and to the

country of his birth, which is Serbia. He informs us about the exact place of birth, which introduces the listener into the sphere of privacy, his very personal attitude to his homeland. What is more, during those years that have passed since his birth in Titograd, the place not only changed the name, but also the state affiliation – it belongs now to Montenegro. Teo says: “In Macedonia, now they call it Macedonia, not Serbia”. He continues mentioning various towns in Serbia and then said: “Skopje, it is now the capital”. Of course, he referred to today’s Republic of Macedonia. These divisions seem not to be important for him and quite arbitral in his view. What is more relevant for him is the city of birth – the place connected with his private space, and only then some other levels of identity beyond the state affiliation. Later in the conversation he talked about a few years where he grew up “in Bulgaria”. It is known, moreover, that it is a Cartie de la Terre, the southern part of Romania, which after World War II became part of the Bulgarian state. Thus, the caller sometimes uses the historical, political affiliation, former names of places, sometimes the current names. In the middle of the conversation he suddenly emphasises: “I am Vlach. I am Vlach”. And it seems to be the core element of his ethnic identity, which consists of the exact place of birth, country of birth, country of upbringing and the country where he currently lives.

It is symptomatic that in the quoted conversation between members of the Aromanian society in Constanta there repeatedly appears the will to know who knows whose language and how one arrived here. One of the interlocutors emphasises: “I am not Bulgarian ... from Greece”. The state or national affiliation is used in Anglo-Saxon sense to determine their origin or membership, however how far is this political? Certainly for one’s identity it is of secondary importance because they all gather regardless of the place of origin of one’s organization; they sit at the same table as Vlachs and feel ancestral and cultural communality with each other. After all, they are either Gramostians or Farsherots, who belong to the Aromanian clan (tribal) communities, deriving their origin from certain high places in the Balkans. However, in total there are regional (in the sense of a distant place of origin) parts of one nation (peoples or ethnic group). Today we see the effects of the long duration of the Vlachs as a group integrated through habitual¹³ bonds, a common everyday language, economy and moral tenets. Today the habitual bond based on the local community changes into the ideological bonds determined not by locality, but by conscious choice and procedures¹⁴. Since the practice of everyday use of the

¹³ S. Ossowski, *O ojczyźnie i narodzie*, Warszawa 1984.

¹⁴ E. Nowicka, *Odmienność kulturowa jako wartość? Wymiar etniczny społeczeństwa polskiego*, in: *Jedna Polska? Dawne i nowe różnicowania społeczne*, ed. A. Kojder, Warszawa 2006;

language in most families is disappearing together with pastoral economy and everyday customs associated with this lifestyle, there is a tendency to build communality on ideological ties. The particular characteristics of Aromanian culture are selected to become central for building such ties, which is a task that becomes increasingly more conscious among the intelligentsia. It starts now to fulfill a crucial role in identity process control, building relationships, which some researchers¹⁵ would call to be the bonds of national level.

IDENTITY OF CHOICE

Contemporary Aromanian identity often depends on the deliberate choice, which invariably occurs in the case of children from ethnically mixed marriages.

My interlocutors, who were very expressive in terms of choice of their ethnic identity, appear to have been mixed, not of "purely" Aromanian ethnicity. Young ethnic leader from Vlachoklisoury (Greece) has a Macedonian mother (Slavic, whose father says of himself that he knows Bulgarian). Another young caller from Romania has three Aromanian grandfathers and a Romanian grandmother. In his opinion, "Vlachs have always been a local population that was Romanized. So there are two roots and they too are diverse, but all in all do not disturb to be a single nation". Due to the mixing of different ethnic populations there has always been problems with the choice of identity. Many of ideologically distinct Aromanians complain about those other than Aromanian identity choices in their family. An Aromanian activist from Romania has siblings who made a different choice. Petel Simak, Aromanian intellectual from Struga (Macedonia) says thoughtfully, and even with some sorrow: "My brother is a Macedonian as he believes. We are mixing up". Similarly, an intellectual from Bucharest has a brother who chose a completely different identity. The choice of identity in such situations is not completely arbitrary. It is rather limited by the ethnic majority group and the presence of other minorities that live in a particular society. Therefore, one's identity cannot be selected randomly and the choice is always based on some, even distant, sometimes mythical, family relationships. In social practice, we have to deal with the identity of a minority and the majority and the choices between them.

eadem, *Kulturowa odmiennosc w dzialaniu. Narody duze i male, stare i mlode*, in: *Kulturowa odmiennosc w dzialaniu. Kultury i narody bez panstwa*, ed. E. Nowicka, Krakow 2009, pp. 9–22.

¹⁵J. Obrębski, *Problem grup etnicznych w etnologii i jego socjologiczne ujęcie*, „Przegląd Socjologiczny” 1936, 4, 1–2, pp. 177–195.

The “choice” of ethnic identity may play an important role in the practical sense of profits and losses, arising from this or other choice. We can observe how some Aromanian leaders having a very distinct ethnic/national Aromanian identity could at the same time sacrifice this identity for practical purposes. This opportunity occurs when other state (Romania or Greece) offers assistance or their nationality. Both these can be beneficial to Aromanian citizens from countries that do not belong to the European Union. Then there is the problem of loyalty, which is in conflict with particular material benefits and assistance for living. Thus, for example, a man called Rade Nastrowski from Struga (Macedonia) speaks of his adult children who have studied in Romania:

All the time they were called Romanians. I kept asking them whether they felt the pressure that they were Romanians. I suggested to make passports [Romanian passports – E. N.], but they would not agree. Romanians did not force them to anything, neither at school, nor on the governmental level, no. You are Vlachs of Macedonia.

So there was no pressure from the Romanians and the Romanian state; young people had no desire to change their citizenship. It was their father, an Aromanian activist, who suggested a practical solution, diverging from their identity choice: to get a passport, which gives them the freedom to move around Europe, while citizens of Macedonia are in this regard more limited than residents of other Balkan countries. The interlocutor laughs telling how his children refused the Romanianness, which shows a kind of embarrassment, awareness of his inconsistencies. The practical approach to life matters less when getting Romanian or – in the case of Albania – Greek citizenship, and it does not conflict with the choice of identity.

THE DIVERSITY OF LOCAL SOCIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

The main part of my fieldwork was dedicated to the conversation with leaders. While staying in the area of my fieldwork, I also came across the attitudes of average Aromanians towards the processes, which their ethnic group is struggling with. I realize that it does not give the answer to the question whether the leaders are recruited from those who already have the strong sense of identity or only after becoming leaders they gradually engage, expanding and activating their ethnic consciousness. It is probably always to some extent the process of identifying with the social role, which forces the activation of certain, already existing, attitudes. Only in Greece, in Meglen-Vlach village where the name “Aromanian” does not appear, but the name Vlach does, informants were just regular people as

there are no Meglen-Vlach activists in the villages. The reflexive approach to identity is extremely small among them and the policy of Greek state certainly has a serious impact on thinking of ethnic differences.

Among the leaders the alarm is raised on the extinction of language and culture. Meanwhile, ordinary people could or could not use at all the language, or use it only occasionally, but their thinking is not centered around this case – they are not engaged consciously, but they habitually retain their identity and their cultural competence. This is what the situation looked like in Meglen, the village where I moved to for a long observation and where I ran interviews with leaders or people not involved ideologically. One of the interviewees reacted in the following way to our conversation: “It’s a pity that this way is going to disappear”. At the same time I had no doubt that, in fact, her ethnic distinction did not bother her and she was indifferent to its disappearance. Likewise, another person said: “Oh yes, yes it will disappear and that’s it”. In the Aromanian village in Albania I met with other reactions of young people, families from Bobshtitsy not engaged in any movement or organizational activity: they were touched emotionally with the issues about Aromanian traditions in the area. Such reactions of young people indicate a substantial degree of ethnic mobilization among local residents.

The strength of Aromanian identity, the higher level of linguistic competence in large areas inhabited by Aromanians is very diverse. Diversified is also the assessment of the situation with Aromanian culture. When Aromanian musician from Krushevo, Christo, spoke about the Aromanian situation, he presented everything in a positive way: the Aromanian culture is developing, there is no doubt about their identity and people are proud of their origin. These were general formulations, but when it came to details, it turned out that language is not taught in schools and it was not a particularly exciting matter for him.

The prediction that the language will soon be extinct was not considered a tragedy. Since at home, as well as with his friends, he speaks Aromanian, everything is fine. Such a structure commitment to ethnicity seems to be quite common, if not universal in the study group.

In order to understand the Aromanian identity it is necessary to understand what these groups believe to have in common and what not. During conversations about more general identity – Aromanian/Vlach – there is almost always a spontaneously mention of the clan-tribal affiliation: people refer to themselves as Gramostian, Farsherot, sometimes Pindi or even Moskopolitan. Florentina Costea, Aromanian movement activist in Romania, living in and around Bucharest, makes it clear that her family comes from the Gramostian group. She says that there are differences between

them and Farsherots, but they easily can agree: "We understand each other, especially Gramostians and Farsherots, we can understand each other. I did not talk a lot with Meglen-Aromanians. I do not know if I understand them perfectly... I think they are a little bit different". Highlighted is the main core of Aromanians, which skips the Meglen-Aromanians (Meglen-Vlachs), who at the same time are certainly not perceived as alien. There is a special sense of connectedness between the main groups of a clan, which include Gramostians, Farsherots and those from the region of Pindos mountains.

Christo Christovski from Krushevo has at the same time certain fears over the ongoing processes of hidden assimilation, which have serious psychological consequences. While among other small nations and ethnic groups, which have not gained or lost political autonomy, there is a nostalgia, sometimes there is also a sense of resignation that accompany thinking about forgetting the language and the tradition. For the Aromanian activists with whom I have spoken, there exist the ideas that some form of revival of their ethnicity is possible if only young people were engaged. This thread moves Dzioko from the organization of Aromanian businessmen from Macedonia: "What they [Aromanian young activists – E. N.] want is to get young people involved, to make friends; and even if they forgot the language they should be aware of their Vlach origin and share their experiences". This was also the opinion of three people from Mandry – Vlach organization of businessmen from Skopje, people involved both ideologically and through working in business and in cultural field. One of them, the head of the group Dzioko is a musician and director of the vocal group that tries to support and memorize tradition.

Aromanians in this study are in some way involved in the "Aromaian matter" and, therefore, it is not surprising that they express, on the one hand, the possibility to develop their own ethnicity and, on the other hand, they consider it in terms of drama, a tragic situation, which is the disappearance of ethnicity, the disappearance of their own group. The language has to be reborn as a language of everyday use. They do not take into account this development, which is accompanied neither by a complete rebirth in its former shape nor by a complete loss of identity by using language only as a symbolic value and only in situations in which the identity is noted. The collapse of ethnicity defines a situation, where ethnic language is used only on solemn occasions to mark their own identity. In practice, however, the language has no sense of communication, and if it does, it has a completely different way of communicating its presence, its own identity. This sense is essentially an effort to set up their own ethnic magazines, newspapers, TV programs or radio.

I asked the Aromanians who live far away (i.e. Australia, America) about how could they lose their language and still be Aromanians. One of the leaders in Macedonia responded: "One feels just his own origin. And the rest is just the same as here: to assimilate tomorrow, day after tomorrow". This is the origin of the principle and it is the most important determinant of the identity of most of the Aromanians. Another question is whether, in the opinion of Aromanians, one can be an Aromanian by choice. The biological origin of at least one line, especially paternal one, seems to determine the Aromanianness. There is also the question that bothers not only a researcher- what to do with those Aromanians who do not care about their origin or even deny it? My interlocutors always consider such issues with lament, although they cannot deny their Aromanianness.

The situation in Macedonia is described by Jordan Trca, who until recently used to be the head of the Aromanian organization in Ohrid (Macedonia): "In our place everybody identifies with Cincari¹⁶, even those who do not know the language. They say my grandfather was, my mother was, my uncle was".

In the construction of Aromanian identity the territorial criterion is also present. Aromanians know which clan-tribal division they affiliate with. These groups are derived from individual sites or even specific locations, often non-existent today or rebuilt from scratch. A local cultural activist in Samarinie (Greece), who is called John by others for he spent many years in the USA, says the following: "They have a Greek identity, in other words ... Vlachs were tribes. We identify on the basis of the places where we come from. For example, the Vlachs from Gramosti are Gramostians". One commonly could hear this of the homeland of various tribal groups. Gramostia is a village in the mountains of Epirus, in Greece; Moscopole, once flourishing merchant city and today a resort in the mountains of southern Albania; Pindos is a mountain area in northern Greece, where until recently traditional herding was flourishing.

Political ambitions of Aromanians are modest. The idea of a separate state structure, territorial autonomy, evokes a kind of nostalgia and reverie. There is also political realism, as Christo Christoski of Krushevo says: "Now you see what the Aromanian situation is. But I think we do not need cultural autonomy. If people are free and the state gives institutions the money for it, they can work. Maybe teachers would be in a better situation". And at the end, the interviewee adds: "Perhaps we should be more aggressive, but we're not".

¹⁶ The interview was conducted in Serbian and the interviewee uses a Serbian ethnonym meaning Aromanian.

REFLEXIVITY

Many of my interlocutors are highly reflective regarding the problem of identity. They try to analyze their own feelings, delve into their own loyalties and beliefs, analyze their experience related to Aromanian identity. In general, self-reflection in this regard, as is usually the case among minorities, is significant. I came across the cases of clear discovering of one's origin, acquiring knowledge about ancestors, seeking genealogical lines and experiencing the type of individual conversion to "own" ethnic identity.

Considerable self-reflexivity of Aromanians is the result of a stateless nation status, dispersion and loss of original cultural characteristics including the language and at the same time relatively high social status (cf. Kahl *Minority...*)¹⁷ associated with a good education of a group. This is why when speaking about Aromanians/Vlachs Tede Kahl calls them "minority like majority"¹⁸. Reflexivity is present in the words of all my interlocutors – in historical stories about the origin of ancestral family places. Among more educated and Aromanian activists, there is an extensive knowledge about the past of the nation, territorial divisions, migration and political events in different periods of history. The Aromanian secretary of the association "Lunjina" in Belgrade considers the historical background of the complex identity of Aromanians:

Aromanians were for a long time influenced heavily by Greeks, and they were under cultural and educational pressure from the Greeks and the ecumenical patriarch. It had a great and long-lasting impact on Aromanian identity and national consciousness. From the second half of the 19th century, Romanians also tried to influence them and to make them part of the Romanian cultural and ethnic body.

Then he concludes: "Also during 18th and 19th century Aromanians have not possessed enough political power, as much as intellectual one, which are both very important factors for the formation of the nation".

Modern Aromanian identity is described by a young activist as follows: "Aromanian identity is something Aromanians temporarily are trying to discover and shape. It is located somewhere between Greek and Traco-Romanized identity. Aromanians preserved a unique life conception, which asserts individual human values as well as diligence, frugality and benefaction". Identity described by young activist combines two strategies distinguished by Marketa Vankova, who examined it on the ex-

¹⁷ T. Kahl, *The Ethnicity of Aromanians after 1990*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

ample of Bulgarian Aromanian: “focused on the past and grounded on the idea of a renewal” and the identity strategy „oriented towards the future and the past is understood mainly as resource for present solidarity mobilization”¹⁹. In reality, both types form one common survival strategy, in which a young generation of Aromanians is linked to modern means of communication, striving for inclusion in the elite circles. Young intellectuals are interested in their origin and building their identity around this fact. There is also no doubt that what they do today must be considered in terms of identity of the project, which takes taking into account *performative* and highly contextual character of Aromanian ethnic identity.

CONCLUSION: THE RESIDUAL IDENTITY

In terms of the stateless position, territorial scatter and severe loss of cultural identity including knowledge of ethnic language, Aromanian-ness/Vlachness takes the form, which I define as the residual²⁰ identity referring to activities that are available. The key criterion of ethnic affiliation becomes the origin, having Vlach ancestors. Aromanian/Vlach intellectuals focused, on the one hand, on preservation of the endangered language and culture, and on the other, on the memory of ancestors. Florentina Costea, the famous Aromanian singer who lives in Romania, says:

More important [than all the nation building theories – E. N.] is what I feel now, what I feel inside. Because I do not want to judge whether to recall the theories that are different and do not know which is the best. I know I’m different, I’m happy. And I’m doing everything I can to protect our language, to protect our tradition and our culture, because it is important. It is very threatened, our language will die, our language is in a great danger, especially today when families are different – it disappears, because our family structure is changing. It is not like in the past when the family stayed together, with grandma...

These efforts are accompanied by constant recourse to one’s own past as the final backrest and cultural prototype for personal genealogy, places of residence-ancestors and identifying names. Marin Bodrozic from Belgrade defined the manifestation of today’s Aromanian identity: “Aromanians are keeping the memory of remote ancestors and prominent historical personalities of Aromanian origin”. According to his words, „it also includes respect and nurturing of typically Aromanian values such as: piety, diligence, frugality and tendency to plan everything meticulously,

¹⁹ M. Vaňkova, *Bulgarian Aromanian Elites and Identity Politics in Cross-Border Networks*, in: *The Politics of Culture*.

²⁰ E. Nowicka, *Polacy czy cudzoziemcy?*, Kraków 2000.

and invest in future. Being an Aromanian in Serbia implies the sense of uniqueness and pride that comes from specific and significant role Aromanians had in building the modern society and civic culture." Dina Cuvata (Dimo Dimcev) from Skopje includes both long history and cultural specificity as the ground for Aromanian identity today:

[...] they considered it at least as important and powerful as the other Balkan populations everywhere. To be sure, this is for the simple fact that Aromanians have their special port for thousands of years, songs and dances, proverbs and their own customs. They had always and still have their own flag, which they considered holy because there are strict rules on its use at weddings; they esteemed the flag reverently and feared that some rules not be violated.

The statements of cultural and linguistic distinctiveness should be understood as a certain ideology, which are essential for undertaking actions concerning the indicated differences. No real knowledge, but action on developing and maintaining the ethnolect.

We can see the emergence of categories such as apostates of the nation, or renegades, people lost to the community and people who can be recovered.

Yet another phenomenon manifests itself when it comes to a deliberate blurring of their identity and to moving away from it. The young intellectual from Bucharest tells an anecdote about his brother who migrated to France where he wanted to erase his Romanian origins, contained in the name. The interlocutor tells that subsequently his brother unconsciously returned in this way to the original Aromanian core. It was considered to be funny, but at the same important in returning (although unconsciously) to the ethnic roots.

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to recent development in the community of Aromanians, a dispersed transnational ethnic group of the Balkans. I trace various forms of Aromanian identity. I consider discussions around the desired directions of community development, its political and cultural strategies. I define the residual identity referring to activities that are available. The key criterion of ethnic affiliation becomes the origin, having Vlach ancestors. Aromanian/Vlach intellectuals focused, on the one hand, on preservation of the endangered language and culture, and on the other hand, on the memory of ancestors. The article is based on anthropological fieldwork during several summer seasons from 2007 to 2014. Observation and unstructured interviews with Aromanian local intellectuals, teachers, artists, cultural activists and organisation leaders have furnished empirical material for analysis.

Key words: Vlachs, Aromanians, ethnicity, ethnic identity, ethnic minorities

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