

# Timok Valley, Sociological and Historical Aspects The State of the Vitality of the Romanian Community in Eastern Serbia

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*The Romanian community in the Timok Valley possesses a low stock of social vitality in the context of an adverse geopolitical and institutional framework.*

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## Methodology

**T**HIS STUDY comparatively analyzes the state of the Romanian community in eastern Serbia before and after 1944. We will analyze the topic with the help of concepts such as vitality (N. Iorga), social will and cultural personality (D. Gusti), and symbolic infrastructure (O. Bulumac). All these concepts will be subordinated to the idea of manifestation and geopolitical action of the Romanian state.

The premise from which we start is that, after 1944, the vitality of the Romanians in the Timok Valley is on a downward trend, and after the 2000s the weakening of the community has accelerated. To test the hypothesis, the material will be structured in two sections. The first focuses on identifying the socio-historical and cultural context since the emergence of the Romanian community in the Timok Valley until the establishment of the communist regime, synthetically, using docu-

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mentary sources such as censuses, studies in history, sociology and ethnography, specialist articles and cartographic materials.

The second section will present the current state of the community (between 2000 and 2021), being a survey of the current problems faced by Romanians, based on a secondary analysis of the press on the Romanians from the Timok Valley. Thus, of interest was the news portal of the Romanians in this area (TimocPress) and the press agency affiliated to the Foundation for Romanians Everywhere (Romanian Global News), useful to highlight the substantial reality<sup>1</sup> of the Romanians in Timok. By substantial reality we mean the local reality, seen from an emic perspective, namely from the perspective of the researched subject. Apart from the books and press articles, the research also draws on information obtained in the field from exploratory research work that is still ongoing, scheduled for the years 2020–2021.<sup>2</sup>

These two parts are linked by a section that highlights the fracture<sup>3</sup> generated by the instauration of the communist regime in Romania after 23 August 1944.

## Theoretical Aspects

**T**O DESCRIBE the problems faced by the Romanian community in Serbia, we will use the following concepts: vitality, social will, cultural personality, symbolic infrastructure, school, and geopolitics (sociography). The connection between these concepts and the social reality in the area of interest is as follows: although the vitality of the Romanians is waning because of the actions of the Serbian state and the inaction of the Romanian state, this vitality manages to exist due to the Romanian priests, who manifest themselves and act as cultural personalities managing to create a symbolic infrastructure that strengthens the vitality of the Romanian community in eastern Serbia. Also, through their actions and efforts, despite the obstacles posed by the Serbian authorities, they managed to make up for the lack of Romanian institutional support by creating a central institution, both symbolically and spiritually, for the whole Romanian community in the Timok Valley: the first Romanian church on Serbian territory (after approximately 200 years) where the liturgy is celebrated in the mother tongue, namely, the monastery at Mălăinița (Malajnica).

We see this success through the lens of social vitality, a concept developed by the historian N. Iorga, by which we understand the “ability of the members of a people to show cohesion towards the achievement of a landmark goal, both culturally and economic.”<sup>4</sup> Besides, the scientist shows that “true vitality is not when a man possessed of great qualities, a Genghis Khan of that time, or a similar leader now, engenders it, but when it emerges by itself, from the mass of

the people.”<sup>25</sup> However, when the vitality disappears, there is a danger signaled by the historian: the risk of dissolution of the state itself—“the vitality of the country weakened as the secular tradition was abandoned, at the same time as the contact between the ruler and those who formed the nation, all those who formed the nation.”<sup>26</sup> Not every tension that manifests itself, from the bottom up, can be considered “vitality,” but only that kind of tension that meets two basic conditions: “to be a permanent vitality in any circumstance, and to operate at an exceptional level.”<sup>27</sup> Without vitality a state cannot exist, and our analysis will be directed toward researching how the Romanian vitality in the Timok Valley is managed.

In what follows we will also operate with the concept of social will as developed by Dimitrie Gusti, the founder of the Romanian school of sociology (Bucharest Sociological School). According to him, the individual cannot only be perceived as an individual entity. It can be understood only as social unity and the “essence” of social unity is the social will. By social will we mean the “primordial element of social unity.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, social will is “the element that gives unity to individuals and it is also the binder and expression of their social action . . . (a dynamic complex of values, goals, and means, the attitudinal basis of social action, the foundation and expression of socialization).”<sup>29</sup> In fact,

*the main engine of society is the social will, and it must be strengthened by politicians and intellectuals, through what he calls the science of the nation, pedagogy, and the sociology of the nation. The individual is understood in this process as a personality, the contribution of each of us to the advancement of society consisting of the development of the personality following the highest values.*<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, this will is like an “engine of consciousness” and it represents its “coronation.”<sup>11</sup> Individual acts related to the social will reflect this social consciousness, which is responsible for setting the goals according to which we direct our actions. From this viewpoint, the vitality of the Romanian community in eastern Serbia is a continuous manifestation of will.

The ability to manifest your social will follows the highest values characterizing what D. Gusti calls the cultural personality. Here, the cultural personality of the Romanian community in eastern Serbia is mainly represented by priests, who managed to coagulate around them the community members. The cultural personality consists of fundamental affections and the endurance of the will. According to Gusti, the cultural personality aims at the good of the community. The next level is that of choosing the right means,<sup>12</sup> because the cultural personality can fight for the highest values while making the difference between goals and means. Therefore, personality is “the functional expression of social

will.”<sup>13</sup> We speak of cultural personalities when individuals seek “the maximum development of the personality by way of the highest values.”<sup>14</sup> From the Gussian perspective, the highest values are society, nation, and humanity. Thus, in the area we have selected for our analysis, we can talk about Romanian priests as cultural personalities because they channel their energy toward actions aimed at preserving the identity of the Romanians in Timok. In their actions, they reshape the social reality through the will they show, contributing to the protection of the vitality of the Romanian community.

Romanian priests are the key to the endurance of the Romanian community in Timok because they managed to create a functional symbolic infrastructure. By this last concept we mean “the set of symbols recognized and legitimate for a community, regardless of its proportions, as well as the relationships between them.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the symbolic infrastructure is that instrument of society responsible for the connection between “the internal space of a social unit and the external environment.”<sup>16</sup>

In the following section, we will try to move from the level of tensions and fundamental energies of any community (social will and vitality) and the elements that convey these energies (cultural personality and symbolic infrastructure) to the institution that makes possible the creation of these energies and bestows meaning on their manifestation, namely, the school. We consider it fundamental that the school must take the first place in the concerns of each nation. The role of the school is multiple, manifest at the micro and individual level, as well as at the national level. Regarding the micro-level, the school is the only institution that bonds the individual to the place where they manifest themselves, both concretely, as a community, and at the spiritual level as a nation.<sup>17</sup> The school is the only institution through which flows the strength of an entire nation.<sup>18</sup> At the macro-level, it must be understood that the intrinsic role of a nation is to promote and strengthen its own culture<sup>19</sup> through the continuous action of education, preservation, and development, to increase, multiply and materialize the latent potential of the whole nation.<sup>20</sup> The major danger that can arise if the school is not oriented in the national direction (in support of the nation) is that education can become an agent of dissolution, namely, the national essence (including vitality) can be lost by uprooting and separating individuals, both from the physical place where they manifest themselves, as well as from the soul framework with which they identify, the nation.<sup>21</sup>

In order to highlight what is significant both in the Romanian community in the Timok Valley and in Romania, the data and information will be analyzed from a geopolitical perspective (A. Golopenția) because the existence of a community is ensured only through political organization, and the states, which provide the right ground for the manifestation of political desires, give free rein

to the creative power of communities, helping fulfill their mission and sustaining them.<sup>22</sup> By geopolitical knowledge we mean the permanent knowledge of the current situation.<sup>23</sup> In other words, geopolitics is a science that deals with the permanent study of events pertaining to geographical dynamics.<sup>24</sup> Not only is it a permanent concern to study the arrangement of social structures<sup>25</sup> in space, but it is an “integral” concern because it requires the subject to be analyzed in its entirety: by area, population, economy and economic potential, mood, communities or diversity of interests, political or historical.<sup>26</sup>

Applied to the topic of discussion, it should be mentioned that geopolitics abroad concerns the feeling of dignity of the Romanian state<sup>27</sup> and ensures the people’s connection with the Romanian nation.<sup>28</sup> The Romanian perspective can be communicated outside the borders only geopolitically<sup>29</sup> and, from the analysis of demographic data, we can notice not only the way in which the Romanian community in the Timok Valley has evolved and the manner in which the majority population relates to them.<sup>30</sup> Summarizing the above ideas, we can say that geopolitics can be a method for approaching reality by “knowing the state of affairs of neighbors based on geographic data.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Socio-Historical Context: Spatial and Demographic Delimitations**

**T**HE ROMANIAN community in Serbia is divided into two main areas: Vojvodina and the Timok Valley. Romanians in the two areas benefit from different socio-cultural and political contexts because of the distinction that the Serbian state makes between Romanians by introducing the Vlach glottonym, leaving the impression that Romanians are different from Vlachs. Thus, the Belgrade authorities use the former designation (Romanian) for the inhabitants of Romanian origin in Vojvodina, and the latter (Vlachs) for the inhabitants of the rest of the territory, especially those in eastern Serbia, in the Timok Valley.<sup>32</sup> In this material we will refer to the Romanians from the Timok Valley, located in eastern Serbia, in the area bounded by the Timok, Morava, and Danube rivers.<sup>33</sup>

Currently, from the viewpoint of the Belgrade authorities, the Timok Valley comprises only the area between the Timok River Valley and the adjacent mountain areas. This region includes Zaječar County, which includes the communes of Zaječar, Knjaževac, Sokobanja, and Boljevac (in this county, 20 of the 39 villages are 100% Romanian), and Bor County (consisting of the communes of Bor, Majdanpek, Kladovo, and Negotin, where 11 of the 12 villages are 100% Romanian, and the city is mixed). The population of this region is

244,959 inhabitants, of which, unofficially, more than 60% are Romanian (according to linguists, association leaders). However, from an official perspective, only 35,330 Romanians (and Vlachs) are registered as such.<sup>34</sup>

However, from the perspective of the institutions in Bucharest, Timok (the extended area of eastern Serbia) includes the region of Homolje and Morava and has a population of 712,050 inhabitants. Certain linguists and scientists, as well as the Romanian organizations in eastern Serbia, raise the number of Romanians to 300–400 thousand inhabitants. Estimates are based on 19<sup>th</sup> century Serbian censuses that recorded more than 150,000 Romanians (10% of Serbia's population), being the absolute majority in eastern Serbia.<sup>35</sup>

## The Origin of the Romanians in Eastern Serbia

**D**ESPITE THE current separation, orchestrated by the Serbian state and unsanctioned by the Romanian state, the populations of these areas are interconnected both linguistically, because they speak the same language, from a religious viewpoint (they are mostly Christian-Orthodox), and from a cultural point of view (we refer here to folklore, customs, and traditions).<sup>36</sup>

The first attestations of the Romanians in the area we are analyzing date from Antiquity. In the first millennium BC this region was inhabited by Thracians called Triballi, hence the name Triballia. Between 60 and 44 BC this territory was part of the state led by Burebista. In the year 29 BC this area was conquered by the Romans, who included it in the province of Moesia. After the withdrawal of the Roman administration from the territories north of the Danube in 271, most of the region was included in the new provinces of Dacia Ripensis and Dacia Mediterranea.<sup>37</sup> The proof of this is the “legacy” of the name of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese, which is Dacia Ripensis (with the headquarters in Mălăinița/Negotin commune, it is the only church institution in eastern Serbia where Orthodox services are held in Romanian). In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the region under discussion was the target of important waves of migration, among which we mention the Huns, Gepids, Ostrogoths, Avars, and others.<sup>38</sup>

The Serbs came to this area only in the seventh century. In the ninth century, the first Romanian voivodes who came from what is today eastern Serbia crossed the Danube to establish state formations in north of the river. Simultaneously with this action of the Romanians, the Serbs laid the foundations of their kingdom in the west. Another proof of the existence of the Romanians on this territory since the beginning is given by the existence of a proper principality of the Romanians in the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Moreover, in the twelfth cen-

ture, the Romanians founded a country that lasted for almost a century, known in historiography as the empire of the Asen dynasty, which also included the Bulgarian population. It must be said that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the number of Romanians in eastern Serbia had increased so much that Serbian princes passed a law prohibiting the marriages of Serbs to Romanian women, as there was a risk that they (Serbs) would disappear as a nation.<sup>39</sup> The same information regarding the “power” of Romanian women to “Romanianize” Serbs can be found in Anton Golopenția, who stated that “this love of the Romanian woman for her language, for her people, for her ancestral customs, gave birth to the popular saying throughout Serbia: a Romanian woman can Romanianize an entire village!”<sup>40</sup>

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Serbian polity disappeared from the map after the conquest by the Ottoman Empire. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, because the Romanians from present-day eastern Serbia revolted against the Pasha of Vidin, the Ottomans were forced to accept a reorganization that was directed by Romanian princes. The area remained under the leadership of Romanian princes for almost 300 years, between 1565 and 1833, bearing the name of Margina Autonomous Province, with the capital at Negotin. After that, this province was renamed Krajinina by the Serbs and was included into Serbia. This is the moment that triggered an extensive process of denationalization of the Romanians, as “all the rights of Romanians have been suppressed, the situation continuing until now.”<sup>41</sup>

What we want to specify through this historical excursion is the fact that the Romanians from this area (the eastern part of today’s Serbia) have been there since the formation of the Romanians. In other words, the community of the Romanians from Timok is part of the kernel of the Romanian people.<sup>42</sup>

## Serbian Nationalism and the Weakening of the Romanian Community

**T**HE ROMANIAN identity in the area endured without major difficulties until the emergence of the Serbian national state (1817), when the denationalization policies began, and were perfected until 1830. The turning point in the relation between the Serbian authorities and the Romanian communities was 1833, when the Serbian authorities forbade the introduction of Romanian books and publications, the cultural activities of the Romanians, and historical monuments and documents attesting their existence south of the Danube were destroyed. Also, in that year, the Romanian language was banned in churches and schools and the locals were forced to be baptized with Serbian names.<sup>43</sup> From the prohibitions on baptisms (adding the suffixes -ić, -ović

or -ević to the name of the Romanians was a mandatory condition for being baptized) things escalated to falsifying censuses, defending impossible theses (according to which the Vlachs are Romanized Slavs, etc.), and even the replacement of Romanian teachers with ethnic Serbs.<sup>44</sup> Another direction of denationalization was aimed, according to the Romanian bishop of Serbia, His Eminence Daniil, at the abolition/demolition of Romanian churches, after the establishment of the Serbian administration.<sup>45</sup>

From 1948 to 1955, the Romanians or Vlachs disappeared from official statistics, because of strained Yugoslav-Romanian relations, due to the “Balkan Federation” project started by Josip Broz Tito. This project of the Yugoslav leader to create a Balkan federation to include Albania and Bulgaria, but under the leadership of Yugoslavia, led to a rupture between Stalin and Tito, which worsened relations between Yugoslavia and the Romanian leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej.<sup>46</sup>

## The Contribution of Romanians to the Creation of the Modern Serbian National State

**T**HE IDEA we highlight here is that the Romanians helped create the modern Serbian state and, after that moment, the Serbs began to introduce denationalization policies against the historical communities. According to C. Papanace, in history there are also people who

*have the curious purpose of not realizing themselves fully, giving their energies to the surrounding peoples. Thus, the Vlachs in the Balkans decisively contributed to the Bulgarian state formula in the Early Middle Ages and to the emergence of the modern Greek state in the times closer to us. . . . Other nations that benefited greatly from the tireless energies of the Macedo-Romanians were the Albanians, Serbs, Hungarians, and even Austrians.*<sup>47</sup>

## Artificial Distinction between Vlachs and Romanians

**T**HE END of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth century mark the end of the Romanian ethnogenesis and the appearance of the ethnic name of Vlach in medieval European sources, which attests the Romanians’ Roman origin.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the term Vlach is the total synonym of Romanian, it is the name given by other nations to Romanians. Paul Iorgovici stated



in this sense that “the Slavs first called the Romanians Ulachs, who after their language-signed Italian, hence the name of the Wallachian Romanians, that is, what other nations call them, only the Romanians keep their name as such.”<sup>49</sup>

In Byzantine and Slavic sources, the inhabitants of this area are known as Vlachs or Wallachians.<sup>50</sup> The Serbian authorities use this name to designate the Romanian community. Although the two terms, respectively Romanian and Vlach, designate the same community, according to the Romanian legislation in force,<sup>51</sup> the Belgrade authorities contribute to the creation of confusion between concepts such as ethnicity and nationality. Thus, over time, this linguistic artifice has led to the denial of the real identity of the Vlachs, who are currently not considered Romanians by the Serbian state, and created a policy also adopted in other states concerning the historical communities of Romanians (ex.: Aromanians in Greece, Moldovans in the Republic of Moldova, etc.). The approach of the Serbian state is all the more obvious as the term Vlach refers to all people who are Romance speakers.<sup>52</sup>

The Vlach ethnonym shows how “the consciousness of other European linguistic communities, in an older epoch, reflected the idea of the Romanians’ identity and their place, together with their language, in the family of Romance languages and peoples.”<sup>53</sup> Over time, secondary meanings have been added to the basic ethnic meaning of the term “Vlach.” Of these meanings, the best known is that of shepherd. An important mention should be made here: the idea of shepherd should not be associated, as some historians have erroneously done, with the idea of nomad. The term associated with Vlach, that of shepherd, does not reflect a nomadic identity, but rather a fundamental feature of Romanian pastoral life, namely, transhumance.<sup>54</sup> The same idea is supported by the geographer George Vâlsan, who states that “in the Balkan Peninsula, today Vlach means shepherd. So if there was a nation that could enjoy the benefits offered by the Iron Gates massif, this nation could only be the Romanian one.”<sup>55</sup>

The discussion on the equivalence between Vlach and Romanian can be easily clarified by an ethnolinguistic argument. According to researcher Vlad Cubreacov,

*ethnonyms are of several kinds: 1) endonyms (names given by the representatives of an ethnic group themselves), 2) exonyms (names given by representatives of other ethnic groups in their languages), 3) infranymys (local or regional names assigned according to narrow criteria), 4) ultranymys (names assigned according to broad criteria) and 5) scientific and historical names.*<sup>56</sup>

From this perspective, the Romanians from Timok and the Vlachs from eastern Serbia are the same community, the Romanian one. They call themselves Romanians, while the others call them Vlachs. This case is a classic example, similar to the Romanian-Moldovan artificial linguistic duality (two polytonyms, one ethnonym).<sup>57</sup> The president of the Romanian Academy, Acad. Ioan-Aurel Pop, also claims “that the name of Vlach (with all varieties) was given to Romanians by foreigners: Valeos, Valascos, Olach, Volochs.”<sup>58</sup>

## The Communist Fracture of 1944

**I**N XENOPOL’S view, “History deals with all things that become what they are over time. It has connections with all phenomena in the Universe, with those of a material nature, as well as with those of an intellectual nature.”<sup>59</sup> From this perspective, the object of social history is time as becoming.<sup>60</sup> The period of the communist regime meant a fracture in the becoming of Romania, where by becoming we mean everything that can be (a sum of possibilities), but it is as yet unachieved.<sup>61</sup> What we want to highlight is the fact that this fracture was experienced both within the borders of Romania and abroad, referring here to the historical communities, including the Romanians in Serbia.

Communism, established by “occupying southeastern Europe, with the exception of Greece, led to the acceleration of the process of ethnic assimilation of the Aromanians.”<sup>62</sup> A relevant moment in this respect is the appointment in 1947 of Ana Pauker as foreign minister. She held that position from 1947 to 1952. Following the lines of action imposed by Moscow, Ana Pauker, through the measures adopted, namely, cutting funding for all educational and religious institutions outside Romania in the Balkans and closing the borders, did nothing but deepen this fracture. The closure of the schools in the Balkans—opened due to the concern of Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza but also of King Carol I for the Romanians in the area in question—occurred in 1948. The reason for adopting these measures was that the Aromanians who were trained in these schools “would threaten the security of the so-called modern socialist state.”<sup>63</sup> The consequences of these measures are still felt because even now the Aromanians from Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, or Serbia have no schools. Through these actions, the projection of Romania’s power abroad was canceled. From that moment on, the Romanian communities outside the borders, in the Balkans and not only, remained unrepresented, becoming fair game for the denationalization policies.

## **A Brief Radiography of Current Issues: A Sociological Analysis of the Vitality of Romanians in the Timok Valley**

**A**LTHOUGH IN the Timok Valley there are today about 400,000 Romanians<sup>64</sup> who lack the most basic rights, in this area one can identify a strong cultural identity resistance directly proportional to the unconstitutional force of assimilation exerted by the Serbian authorities. The key element that offers the Romanian community the ability to continue, despite the various tactics of forced assimilation, is a surplus of vitality that comes from the individual level on the entire community.

The tragic situation consists of the fact that these excesses of vitality are found only among a few cultural personalities who assume a rare and difficult simultaneous task, namely the double mission to preserve and raise the level of the Romanian communities and to generate in the future the formation of new generations to continue this Romanian impulse of energy. This situation can be seen in the fact that the real islands of Romanian conscience emerged around these personalities and this can be considered the main problem of the Serbian authorities. Even though Romanian ethnics want nothing more than the rights they deserve and are guaranteed, paradoxically, by the constitution of the state on whose territory they are, the Serbian authorities, from the political, administrative, cultural, economic to the spiritual level, act openly, without diplomacy, abusively and not infrequently, without pity towards everything that is Romanian or could generate the feeling of belonging to the Romanian identity and culture.

As a direct consequence of the fact that these Romanian communities in eastern Serbia do not have mass media in the Romanian language, many of the abuses of the Serbian authorities remain unknown to decision-makers and to the public in Romania. For this reason, we chose to focus on an event of great importance for the entire Romanian community in eastern Serbia and for the geopolitical relations that Romania can develop from this moment of balance: the erection of the first church with the service in the Romanian language after about 200 years.<sup>65</sup> The importance of this historical moment is shown by the fact that the church in Mălainița became the first pillar of identity, of cultural and symbolic resistance, for the entire Romanian community in eastern Serbia.

## Cultural Aspects

**T**HE ROMANIAN language has been banned since 1833<sup>66</sup> and this aspect is still relevant.<sup>67</sup> The main factor through which the linguistic assimilation of Romanians is being pushed is the introduction in the public discourse of the glotonym “Vlach.” Because the Romanians in the Timok Valley have been deprived of the most important cultural and identity institutions for more than 200 years, the school and the church, respectively, they have become closed communities, isolated from the cities. In the short term, this attitude helped preserve the Romanian values and identity, but in the long term, in the absence of the appropriate institutions, these values were handed down to the younger generations only orally<sup>68</sup> and began to be lost. Against the background of this dilution of the national substance, it was possible to introduce with skill and generational consistency the glotonym “Vlach” as an element of manipulation and confusion among the Romanian ethnic groups.<sup>69</sup>

The proof that the Serbian state is oriented against the ethnic Romanians emerges from the approach to the educational institution as a potential factor of national reawakening among the Romanians. Thus, the Serbian state intentionally sabotages all opportunities for ethnic Romanians to study in Romania, both from the perspective that they can learn about their true origin and given the possibility that they can make public the discriminatory situation (in a negative sense) of their native community. These actions are doubled by those of the Romanian state, which in the centenary year abolished the only institutions<sup>70</sup> that systematically cared for Romanians abroad. First, certain political vectors (frequently these individuals are Romanians ethnics), with support from the majority Serbian parties, create an unofficial scholarship infrastructure in Romania: then paradoxical situations occur, where instead of Romanian ethnics, ethnic Serbs arrive for studies in Romania.<sup>71</sup> Although they declare themselves Romanians, in fact these students oppose the idea of Romanian identity, this being a clear case of ethnobusiness.<sup>72</sup>

This dreadful situation must be taken into account by the Romanian authorities, because it represents a direct and explicit attack on the authority of the Romanian state. Second, the situation becomes more complicated when young students from Timok reach their universities in the mother country and are censored when they want to report the state of affairs in the Timok Valley. If the academic environment had upheld its scholarly values, it could have become one of the pillars of recovery and revitalization of the Romanian community in the Timok Valley.<sup>73</sup> Because even in these academic circles gestures deprived of any

national dignity are spreading, the feeling of injustice that young Romanians feel is intensified, completing the long list of injustices suffered overtime on the territory of Serbia (and more recently on the territory of Romania).

The effort of those who manage to study in Romania is considerable and shows a struggle for their own identity, given that in eastern Serbia, in 2021, there is no school with teaching in the native language. (The force of attraction of the Romanian language is exercised exclusively within the family, orally because no one knows how to write in Romanian anymore).<sup>74</sup>

## Political-Administrative Aspects

**T**HE ROMANIANS in Timok know that the future of the Romanian community can be ensured and the Romanian identity can be preserved only through political organization. Thus, we can consider the tendency towards political organization not only “a bridgehead” in Romanian geopolitics outside the borders, but also a form of organizing the vitality of Romanians based on their historical rights, which gives them legitimacy. In this sense, one of the major current struggles of the Romanian Democratic Party of Serbia is to obtain the official recognition of a single<sup>75</sup> Romanian minority on the territory of Serbia, regardless of the area in which they are located.<sup>76</sup>

Another problem of the political framework is represented by the Romanian pseudo-elites who do not possess a sense of dignity. The situation can be described by the fact that there are, within the other organizations and political parties, Romanian ethnics who at meetings with senior officials of the Romanian state present the situation on the ground as good,<sup>77</sup> even if it is alarming.

Another worrying episode in the recent history of the Serbian state was the fact that publicly, in the middle of the election campaign, a candidate for the presidency of the state, hoping to get more votes, said that if elected president, he would abolish all national minority organizations. This aspect shows that it has been publicly acknowledged that there is a movement in Serbia aimed at national minorities,<sup>78</sup> intending to reduce or even assimilate them. However, in a state that claims to want to join the European Union, these excesses show the state’s level of concern for minority issues: it tries to “eliminate” the problem, that is, to assimilate that minority; it ignores the problem and thus forces that minority to take its destiny into its own hands and launch a series of individual initiatives in which people decide, in particular, how they will ensure their existence in the future (either emigrate or assimilate); this indicates a fracture in the legitimacy of the Serbian state.

## Major Differences between Vojvodina and the Timok Valley

**A**LTHOUGH THERE was an initiative to set up a National Council of all Romanians on the territory of Serbia, the Romanians in the Timok Valley showed some reservations in joining this council. The reason is the different treatment applied to a national minority within the same state: in the Vojvodina region, the Romanian communities have enjoyed a series of rights (although the recognition is incomplete), while in the Timok Valley the Romanians are deprived of any right provided in the Constitution of Serbia or in any other international regulations on national minorities. Instead, in Romania, the Serbian community benefits from all rights provided in the Romanian Constitution and in the international regulations to which Romania is a part. Although both regions are on the territory of Serbia and the same measures should be applied uniformly, this is not the case. A concrete example in clarifying the major differences between the two regions where Romanians live can be expressed by the wishes of Romanians: while in Vojvodina Romanians campaign for the opening of a theater in Vršac, in the Timok Valley they do not have even a single hour of Romanian language teaching in school.<sup>79</sup>

### Spiritual Aspects

**T**HIS IS the level where the biggest clash of identity pressure vectors occurs, but also where we find actions of high morality and dignity. We must mention from the beginning that the priests have assumed in this territory, in addition to the evangelical mission, a geopolitical one, because through their actions they became cultural ambassadors and representatives of the Romanian state in Serbia, for the entire Romanian community. The eight priests who cater to a territory as large as Olt County in Romania represent true geopolitical vectors through which the Romanian identity and culture are transformed into elements that ensure the solidarity of the community.

The spiritual tragedy that the Romanians in the Timok Valley experienced for more than 200 years consists of the fact that religious services were held in the Serbian language, which made the Romanian ethnics stop attending the liturgy. Serious in this case is not only the fact that the people did not understand what was said during the service or in the sermon, but that in those moments, the Romanian community was forced to break the contact with the divinity.

This aspect meant a leap backwards in time for the entire Romanian community in the Timok Valley, because approximately 400,000 Romanians were basically forced to practice magical rituals (spells, incantations, etc.), in order to compensate for the spiritual needs provided by the church. In other words, the Romanian community has been “transported” back to the time before the Christianization of these lands by the Holy Apostles.

The year 2004 saw the “re-Christianization” of this area following the construction of a church (currently a monastery) in Mălăinița by Father Bojan Aleksandrović (Boian Alexandrovici). The courage, the effort, and the obstacles overcome in laying the foundations of this place, which became a truly spiritual and symbolic center of the Romanian community in the Timok Valley, can be considered elements of a living and ongoing example through which the truth is “revealed” to the people. Beyond the repeated death threats, we point out the following aspects that denote the effort made to build this axis of morality:

1. When he stated that he wanted to build a church in which to serve in his native language, the father was expelled from the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>80</sup>

2. After the beginning of construction work on the church, the Serbian bishop attempted to bribe Father Bojan in order to stop the project. The object of the bribe was the chance to become once again a priest in any parish he wanted, anywhere in Serbia.<sup>81</sup>

3. Although the church building consisted at that time of several concrete pillars raised on a vacant lot and the services were held in the open,<sup>82</sup> the Serbian priest put pressure on the mayor to issue an order to demolish the church and all properties owned by Father Bojan, including his house.

4. He was called to the police and psychologically tortured to cease the work on the church. The commissioner’s thinking, although it exceeds the limits of elementary logic, denotes the quality and the manner in which the Serbian state’s policy of assimilating the Romanians is being implemented.<sup>83</sup>

5. Not only the priest was an element of secessionist propaganda, but also the teacher, who threatened the Romanian children who attended the service at the Romanian church that if they continue, the Romanians will put a bomb in the church and kill them.<sup>84</sup>

6. The mayor of the city of Bor asked his party leader, the Serbian prime minister at the time, to send military units to the area, arguing that pro-Romanian ultranationalist actions (building the church in Mălăinița) would destabilize the region and create a new Kosovo-like episode. Moreover, these statements came at a sensitive time for Romania’s foreign diplomacy, because at the same time the situation of the Russian troops on the Dniester had escalated, the aim being to promote nationally and internationally the idea that Romanians are a destabilizing factor.<sup>85</sup>

7. Less than a month after the church was consecrated, the anti-Romanian theocracy again manifested itself. The Serbian bishop requested the mayor's office to carry out the order to demolish the only church in which the liturgy was celebrated in Romanian. This action violates Article 12 of the Serbian Constitution on

*the inalienable right of the individual and the community to the expression, preservation, cultivation, and promotion of specific national, ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic heritage and their public expression as part of the traditions of national minorities and their members.*<sup>86</sup>

If the activity of Serbian priests and of the bishop<sup>87</sup> seems firmly directed against this identity landmark, it should be mentioned that the Serbian priest, in Romanian communities, is a rare presence, because he does not officiate the liturgy and the only time he participates in community life is during funerals or other events for which he is paid.<sup>88</sup> This is the sense in which the solidarity of the people with Father Bojan should be understood, because they felt for the first time, after many generations, that the church belongs to the people.<sup>89</sup> Thus, this work achieved what the state institutions had failed to do, namely, the creation of a center of spiritual and symbolic solidarity. This action set a precedent for creating an entire functional network of three deaneries: Negotin (Dacia Ripensis), Bor and Lăpușna (Lapušnje), and Morava and Homolji.

## **Instead of Conclusions: Directions of Concrete Action for the Romanian State**

**B**EYOND THE fact that Romania is an oasis of Latinity in the middle of a Slavic sea, and beyond the fact that Romanian vitality has overflowed over time, it should be considered by the competent authorities as a real privilege that offers legitimacy and the possibility of playing an important geostrategic role in the area inhabited by Romanians. In this sense, we want to highlight some directions of action that we consider relevant and urgent for the Romanian state.

1. The Romanian state, through diplomatic (by conditioning Serbia's accession to the EU) and/or economic pressures, must insist on the recognition of the Romanians from the Timok Valley as a national minority, on the one hand, and on the other, on the elimination of the Vlach/Romanian confusion (which becomes a source of stigma).



2. Starting a coherent and constant policy of supporting the Romanian communities abroad through bilateral agreements.

3. The involvement of the consulates and embassies in protecting and developing the Romanian communities.

4. The initiation of cultural activities (summer schools, camps, excursions, school competitions) for young people from the Romanian community in the Timok Valley, because they represent the future vectors of the projection of the Romanian identity.

5. The inclusion of mothers in various socio-cultural activities in order to help them reconnect with the mother country. This aspect is particularly important because mothers educate the future generations, while having the power to revitalize and re-Romanianize the Romanian community in eastern Serbia.

6. Official recognition on the territory of Serbia of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the actions taken by its members.

7. The reestablishment of the institutions that cared about the fate of the Romanian communities abroad.

In summary, the Romanian community in the Timok Valley possesses a low stock of social vitality in the context of an adverse geopolitical and institutional framework. This work focuses on the following hypotheses: after 1944, the vitality of Romanians in Timok has been on a downward trend, and after the 2000s the weakening of the community has occurred at an accelerated pace. Both hypotheses have been validated.

The vitality of the Romanian community in the Timok Valley is experiencing a general downward trend, despite the fact that has been a little growth in vitality achieved by the Romanian Orthodox priests who created a symbolic infrastructure. The core of this infrastructure is the Mălăinița Monastery, built by Father Bojan Aleksandrović, a cultural personality of the Romanian Timok community. The construction of the monastery was a historic moment. Compared to the period before the establishment of communist regime, the Romanians in Timok can attend liturgy in their native language. However, the eight priests (operating after 2004) are not enough for the 400,000 Romanians who live in Timok. In the absence of fundamental identity rights and support from the Romanian state, the vitality of the Romanian community remains in decline, possibly ending in its obliteration.

After the year 2000, the dissolution of the Romanian community has accelerated. The causes lie in the actions of the Romanian and Serbian states. The Romanian community in the Timok Valley has not had education in its native language since 1833. Their identity rights are not recognized by the Serbian state because of the Vlach/Romanian distinction encouraged by the same state. This process will continue despite the manifestation of vitality in the Romanian communities. A good example is the pressure exerted by the Serbian state when

Father Bojan Aleksandrović built the Mălăinița Monastery. Furthermore, the Romanian state only formally supports the community, despite that being its geopolitical duty. Step by step, the Romanian community will vanish if it continues to be ignored.



## Notes

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12. Baltasiu, *Introducere în sociologie*, 186.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 187.
15. Bulumac, *Infrastructură și societate*, 37.
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20. *Ibid.*
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22. *Ibid.*, 343.

23. Ibid., 402–403.
24. Ibid., 392.
25. Ibid., 538.
26. Ibid., 412.
27. Ibid., 256.
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50. Monica Budiș, *Comunitatea românească de pe Valea Timocului bulgăresc* (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 2001), 26.
51. “The State shall support the strengthening of links with the Romanians living abroad and shall act accordingly for the preservation, development and expression of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity, with the observance of the legislation of the State whose citizens they are.” The Constitution of Romania, Art. 7, “Romanians Living Abroad,” accessed 19 January 2021, <https://www.presidency.ro/en/the-constitution-of-romania>.
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68. “We know Romanian only from what we learn at home from our parents and grandparents. It means that we can only speak, but not read or write in Romanian . . . we do not know many new words in Romanian” (*Istoria vie a comunităților românești*, 1: 329).

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71. “Young Serbs use scholarships granted by the Romanian state to study in Romania, although there are cases when some of them constantly denigrate the Romanian culture and the Romanian identity in the Timok Valley. This happens by bribing Crăciunovici from the Democratic Movement of Romanians in Serbia with sums of money ranging between 200 and 1,000 euro per student” (*Istoria vie a comunităților românești*, I: 347).
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73. “Blocking the initiatives of young people in Craiova—the confiscation of the headquarters of the Romanian north-east Serbia students association ‘Atanasie Popovici—Furnica’ for absurdly invoked reasons” (*Istoria vie a comunităților românești*, I: 344).
74. Ibid., 331.
75. “The leaders of the Romanian organizations [from Timok and Vojvodina] express in the public sphere the desire of the Romanian communities to be recognized as a single minority, no matter where they live, no matter how they are called, Vlachs or Romanians” (ibid., 322).
76. “Romanian associations claim the constitutional right for the Romanian minority to be officially recognized” (ibid., 316).
77. “However, there are problems with the Romanian leaders, the so-called ‘Romanian leaders,’ who go to Bucharest and falsely present the situation here. I am sure that now most politicians there and the people who deal with our problem do not have all the correct information about our problem” (ibid., 331).
78. Ibid., 323.
79. Ibid., 331.
80. “Bishop Justin of Zaičar sent a priest who told me that he allowed me to be a priest wherever I wanted provided that we did not complete the Romanian church in Mălăinița . . . [After he refused the offer] . . . then they said that this was not possible and that they would not allow me to build the Romanian church. They expelled me from the clergy. I am no longer allowed to preach, take confessions, or perform the rites. The Serbian priests are no longer coming to me. The bishop has notified them, and when they pass by me they turn their heads in the opposite direction. They claim that I want to stir the people because I want to perform in my village the religious service in my native language” (ibid., 338).
81. Ibid.
82. “Bojan Aleksandrović, a young Romanian from Mălăinița, Negotin, is the Archdeacon of the Romanian Orthodox Church . . . he celebrates the liturgy outdoors . . .

a large number of Romanian believers attend the mass held by him . . . the altar is made of a few concrete vaults in the middle of a field in the predominantly Romanian village of Mălăinița” (ibid., 331).

83. “I grew up in the church and the monastery. However, when we heard that Bojan wanted to build a Romanian church in the Timok Valley and that it was not possible to build such a thing in Serbia, we also heard that the Serbian priests would not allow it. So, they [the Serbian priests] got involved, went to the town hall and said that they would not let that happen” (ibid., 337).
84. “In my village only two mentally retarded people have declared themselves Romanians and only sick people can make such statements because we use the Serbian alphabet, we are Serbs” (ibid., 368–369).
85. Ibid., 46.
86. Ibid., 372.
87. Ibid., 357.
88. “When he heard that I was to bless the water for Epiphany, in my village, at my fountain . . . he called: What did Bojan do? He entered my territory! He can’t do that. We shall gather a group of I don’t know how many people and when we catch him we will beat him up” (ibid., 340); “The propaganda of the Serbian priests is a big problem. They tell our people: you will not understand that, you are not Romanians, you are Vlachs” (ibid., 339).
89. Ibid., 363.

## **Abstract**

### **Timok Valley, Sociological and Historical Aspects: The State of the Vitality of the Romanian Community in Eastern Serbia**

This paper presents a socio-historical analysis of the Romanians from the Timok Valley, on the one hand, and on the other hand, proposes a radiography of the current problems faced by the Romanians in eastern Serbia. From the beginning, we delimit conceptually and methodologically the framework of this study, and later we establish which is the population we propose for analysis (with an emphasis on its origin) and the area under investigation. Then we identify the statistical dynamics recorded before and after 1944, until now, to highlight the evolution of the Romanians in the area of interest. Another objective of the material is to identify the key moments in history which had a strong influence on the relationship between the Romanians and the Serbian state. In the last part of the paper, we intend to present the current problems faced by the Romanians in the Timok Valley. Through this approach, we determine whether there can be a case of vitality and highlight the geopolitical manifestation of the Romanian community.

## **Keywords**

Timok Valley, geopolitics, assimilation, vitality, social will, cultural personality, symbolic infrastructure