

**ANNEMARIE SORESCU-MARINKOVIĆ, MIHAI DRAGNEA, THEDE KAHL, BLAGOVEST NJAGULOV, DONALD L. DYER, and ANGELO COSTANZO, eds.**  
**The Romance-Speaking Balkans:  
 Language and Politics of Identity**  
 Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2021

**T**HIS BOOK review (written from the perspective of an ethnohistorian interested in the current stage of development in the Eastern Latinity field of research) covers the large topic and area of *The Romance-Speaking Balkans* (also including the Eastern European Republic of Moldova) with a special view on the close relation between *Language and Politics of Identity*. In fact, the current volume represents a monograph structured in nine chapters of theoretical and practical value, bringing together the latest sociolinguistic approaches, critical references and case studies based on field research and archive documents regarding the topic mentioned in the title.

The new project of the Balkan History Association (BHA) in Bucharest—led by BHA President Mihai Dragnea, with the volume's editors Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković, Thede Kahl, Blagovest Njagulov, Donald L. Dyer, and Angelo Costanzo being members of the association—was published last year, as volume 29 of the prestigious interdisciplinary series “Brill’s Studies in Language, Cognition and Culture” (“Notes on Editors,” pp. IX–X). Several social sciences and humanities contribute and cooperate to this end, such as history, sociology and cultural anthropology, social philosophy and political science, even if linguistics and especially sociolinguistics take the lead among the disciplines involved in this volume.

Language has played a key role in “homogenizing the population by political

decision,” since the making of the Balkan modern nations and national identities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today, according to Mihai Dragnea (“Preface,” p. VII). For this reason, the overall aim of this book is to investigate “the complex relationship” between language and politics of identity with respect to the Romance-speaking communities, but also to analyze, in smaller case studies, the Romance varieties spoken in the Balkans, their influence on their speakers’ identity, without ignoring the pressure and stigmatization exerted upon them by various nation-state policies. Defining ethnolinguistic discrimination (without directly naming it), the editors’ critical remark is fair: “The language of a particular group can also set it apart and make it subject to marginalization as much as the color of one’s skin, religion, or sexual orientation” (“Introduction,” pp. 1–11).

The authors of the nine chapters are open-minded, dynamic, and mostly young researchers from Croatia, Germany, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the USA, experts in the topics addressed (“Notes on Contributors,” pp. XI–XIII). Although they are familiar with the most recent theories, the authors necessarily achieve their scientific outcomes by means of their own fieldwork done among the studied Romance-speaking communities from Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

In spite of the ample area proposed for debate, the structure of the book shows a specific unity in diversity. Excepting two chapters that go beyond the implied topic and the geography given in the title: “From Rashi to Cyrillic: Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish (Judezmo) Texts in Cyrillic” by Michael Studemund-Halévy, pp. 12–37, and “Sociolinguistic Relations and Return Migration: Italian in the Republic of Moldova”

by Anna-Christine Weirich, pp. 77–115, the rest of the chapters are dedicated exclusively to the communities of Romanians and/or Vlachs living and speaking in the Balkans nowadays, with a focus on various self-images, surviving solutions and strategies found for preserving their self-identity. Such are the studies: “Political Terror and Repressed Aromanian Core Identity: Ways to Re-Assert and Develop Ethnolinguistic Identity” by Cătălin Mamali, pp. 38–76; “Between Ethnicity, Regionalism, and Familial Memory: Identity Dilemmas among the Eastern Romance Communities of the Balkan Peninsula” by Ewa Nowicka, pp. 116–145; “Identity Constructions among the Members of the Aromanian Community in the Korçë Area” by Daniela-Carmen Stoica, pp. 146–170; “Megleno-Romanians in the Serbian Banat: Colonization and Assimilation” by Mircea Măran, pp. 171–185; “Nation-State Ideology and Identity and Language Rights of Linguistic Minorities: Prospects for the Vlashki/Zheyanski-Speaking Communities” by Zvezdana Vrzić, pp. 186–206; “What Language Do We Speak? The Bayash in the Balkans and Mother Tongue Education” by Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković, pp. 207–232, and finally “Performing Vlach-ness Online: The Enregistrement of Vlach Romanian on Facebook” by Monica Huțanu, pp. 233–256. The contents of this book, which provides the latest synthesis on the Romance-speaking Balkans, seems to lack only the contribution (in the form of a study or at least of a reprint) of the editor Thede Kahl, leading world expert in the Aromanian question, following the German/Austrian golden path of Aromanian studies opened by Gustav Weigand and Max Demeter Peyfuss.

Studemund-Halévy focuses on the history of writing, analyzing Judezmo texts of

the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries from the archives in Sofia. After 1492, the Jews chased away from Spain settled in Bulgaria, where they lived until the Second World War. All this time they spoke (medieval) Spanish. Their language, called Ladino or Judezmo, was first written in Hebrew round letters (*rashi*) and in Hebrew cursive letters (*solitreo*), then in Cyrillic letters, using the Latin alphabet by 1900. The scholarly debate about Judezmo belonging to the family of the Romance languages is still open.

Previously undebated is the issue brought up by the study about the Italian language in Moldova. The approach is illustrated by lively and colorful examples of *translanguaging*, which give meaning to the described linguistic evolutions. Such are the Italianized lexical borrowings from Romanian and/or from Russian rendered by Anna-Christine Weirich, who, based on her ethnographic research of 2018 in an Italian-speaking call center in Chișinău, examines the functions of Italian as an important “language of migration” and “resource on the labor market.”

Returning to the title topic of the Romance-speaking Balkans, Ewa Nowicka apparently creates the most general picture of the Vlachs, Aromanians, Megleno- and Istro-Romanians (Megleno-Vlachs and Istro-Vlachs, in the Polish author’s words) living today in Greece, Serbia and in the Istrian Peninsula. From an anthropological point of view, Nowicka focuses on the different types of identity strategies, also tracing the historical background of the respective Romance-speaking ethnic communities. The social scientist’s essay is a combination of abstract (sometimes inappropriate) theory and valuable field observations (collected between 2010 and 2019), joined by in-depth interviews and personal conversations with members of

the Vlach, Aromanian, Megleno- and Istro-Romanian communities. The practical analysis certainly adds value to her study, which might be read as a general introduction to the topic of the Vlachs from Greece, Serbia and from Croatian Istria.

The best-preserved Aromanian dialect (variety) and its “core identity” are conceptualized by Cătălin Mamali. This author also illustrates the “individuation” of the ethnolinguistic identity, in parallel with the political situation of the Aromanians in communist Romania after the Second World War. Mamali shows that at the core of cultural identity there is the mother tongue, which has to be considered the best “sign of ethnolinguistic vitality” (p. 39). But even if the mother tongue and essential cultural features get lost, a strong “core identity” may ensure the survival of the endangered ethnic identity. Invoking the critical bibliography, the same author pleads for the legitimate right of the abused individuals (communities) to non-cooperation with the oppressive authorities and totalitarian states: “Civil disobedience is a way of non-participation in evil structures and actions” (p. 47). As a form of passive resistance, this would be “a pragmatic solution that reveals the *civil disobedience ethic*” formulated by Lawrence Buell, “Disaffiliation As Engagement,” in the volume *Thoreau at 200: Essays and Reassessments*, edited by Kristen Case and K. P. Van Anglen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 200–215.

Based on long fieldwork among the Aromanians (Farsherots) from Albania and rendering several oral histories collected on video and audio support between 2010 and 2015, Daniela-Carmen Stoica thoroughly describes identity constructions and customs. They prove the great importance ascribed to the Aromanian

women and the major role played by them in preserving the mother tongue. Stoica’s linguistic analysis of Korçë Aromanian and her examples of vocabulary code-switching and borrowings from Tosk Albanian are highly valuable, the more so as the Aromanian dialect in Albania (Farsherot) is “in danger of becoming extinct as a result of assimilation” (“Introduction,” p. 7).

It is not the first time that Mircea Măran approaches the Megleno-Romanians from the Serbian Banat. Some of his former studies, as well as the current one, describe the Megleno-Romanians’ history since the autumn of 1945, when about 60,000 households were transferred from Yugoslav Macedonia, respectively they were relocated especially from the village of Huma near the town of Gevgelija (today in the southeastern part of North Macedonia) to Banat and other more distant Yugoslav provinces. For example, in the Vršac area of the Serbian Banat, the colonization of families from the mountain region of Moglena started in the summer of 1946 and ended in the autumn of 1956. Nowadays, the almost complete extinction of the Meglen dialect not only in Banat, but also in Macedonia, is a direct result of the communist policy of ethnodemographic uniformization and Serbization of minority languages, while the official central policy was put into practice, with the help of the mass media, by the local school, church and cultural authorities. The case study of the Megleno-Romanians still living in Gudurica (Serbian Banat), a few descendants left of the 17 families colonized from Huma in 1946–1956, is relevant for this “hidden minority” surviving by miracle today in Banat. Mircea Măran cooperated for many years with the journalists Svetlana Nikolin, author of a book on Aromanians in South-

ern Banat, *Cincari (Aromuni) u južnom Banatu* (Pančevo, 2009) and with Valentin Mic from the In Medias Res Center for Intercultural Dialogue (2010), and mostly with Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković, scientific researcher at the Serbian Academy in Belgrade. Sorescu-Marinković and Măran authored the following studies in English: “Megleno-Romanians in Gudurica: Language and Identity,” *Memoria ethnologica* 14, 52–53 (2014): 82–101; “Megleno-Romanians in Serbia—Shifting Borders, Shifting Identity,” in *Contextualizing Changes: Migrations, Shifting Borders and New Identities in Eastern Europe*, edited by Petko Hristov, Anelia Kassabova, Evgenia Troeva, and Dagnosław Demski (Sofia, 2015), 365–377; “The Meglen Vlachs (Megleno-Romanians) of Serbia: A Community on the Verge of Extinction,” *Res Historica* 41 (2016): 197–211.

The Vlachs (Romanians) of Eastern Serbia are analyzed by Monica Hušanu. This extremely interesting approach examines the Vlach identity as expressed on a Serbian language Facebook page called “Vlasi na kvadrat,” revealing the “pragmatic interactions” of the online speakers. The recourse to humor in using memes or, especially, the Romanian suffix *-ește* (*-ește*, *-ește*) attached to Serbian verbs or adverbs explain the vivid maintenance of this new Serbian-Vlach identity, updated by hilariously “Romanized” words, by lexical, cultural, customary borrowings and by expressions of the Vlach (Romanian) way of life.

The feeble, vanishing identity of the Istro-Romanians is discussed by Zvezdana Vrzić. The author mainly focuses on the laws promoted by the nation-states Romania and Croatia in order to preserve the ethnicity and language of the Istro-Romanians. On the one hand, the Romanian Law no. 299/2007 is thoroughly analyzed

and the Romanian state’s concern for the “Romanians everywhere” is justly praised. On the other hand, Croatia’s (weaker) endeavor to observe the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages, adopted in 2010, is also highlighted. Moreover, based on her original field research started in 2008–2010, Vrzić is able to approach an issue unknown to the scholars, regarding the self-image of the Istro-Romanians. They call themselves *Vlashki*, in a linguistic community consisting of 4 villages grouped around the 5<sup>th</sup> central village, Šušneva, and in Zhejanski, in the community of the mountain village of Žejane, situated 50 km north of Šušneva. As the two areas of Žejane and Šušneva are separated by a mountain, they belonged to different administrative units. The number of their fluent and active speakers, recorded by Zvezdana Vrzić in 2010, was of less than 120 villagers, most of them in their fifties or older. The researcher discovered that the scholarly term *Istro-Romanians* is not used by the native locals and even considered to be “incorrect” (p. 190). Thus, the endonyms used by them assume either the exonym (Vlachs, *Vlashki*) or the name of the village (inhabitants from Žejane, Zhejanski). Placed on the List of Items of Protected Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Croatia, in 2007 *Vlashki/Zhejanski*, the Istro-Romanian dialect has been recognized as an endangered language. Yet there were few positive and practical consequences of this acknowledgement. By concluding that neither Romania’s nor Croatia’s national policy managed to ensure the protection of the Istro-Romanian language, the author reveals the autonomous efforts made instead by the Istro-Romanians themselves, organized in certain civic associations, in order to find, on their own, the necessary linguistic and ethnocultural

surviving strategies, thus eluding the disappointing and inconsistent actions of the Romanian and Croatian governments.

Last but not least, the mystery of the peculiar and contested ethnic identity of the Bayash (*băieși, rudari*)—reflected in the image of the others either as Romanians or as Gypsies, but considering themselves neither Romanians, nor Gypsies—is disclosed in the brilliant, relevant and synthetic study signed by Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković. The author's notable research trips were undertaken in 2006 to Darda (5,000 inhabitants, including Bayash) and soon afterwards to Kuršanec (1,500 inhabitants, with the Bayash living segregated from the majority Croats), both villages belonging to the Eastern Croatian province of Baranya, respectively in 2016 to Vajska (3,000 inhabitants with some 800 Bayash), a village in Serbia (near the border with Croatia). The way Sorescu-Marinković solves the disputed issue of *The Bayash—No Longer a Balkan Enigma* makes for a compelling reading.

By carefully reading this dense book, we came across certain contradictory assumptions derived from the cultural and national background of the authors. For instance, the idiom spoken by the Romanians (Vlachs) from Eastern Serbia is defined in opposing terms, either as a *dialect* of the proto-Romanian (Monica Huțanu) or as a separate Romance *language* (Ewa Nowicka). We also notice that most of the volume's authors are cutting the knot by using a diplomatic, convenient and universal term. They prefer to speak about *linguistic variety*, instead of quarreling about the difference between the notions of *language*, *dialect*, *idiom*, or *variant*. Which means they do not engage in sterile debates that are actually helping politics more than science. A relevant clarification on *Language? Linguistics? Linguistic Policy?* in the case

study of the so-called “Moldavian language” was provided, almost thirty years ago, by Jürgen Kristophson, in “Sprache? Sprachwissenschaft? Sprachpolitik? Fallstudie ‘Moldauisch,’” *Südosteuropa Studien* 56, München, 1995, translated by me: *Limba? Lingvistică? Politică lingvistică?* Studiu de caz: “Limba moldovenească,” *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Cluj-Napoca* 34 (1995), p. 386–394. In fact, more important than theoretical (not always convincing) assertions derived from bibliography and, in my opinion, certainly undisputed and always valid are the practical data of the live archives collected in situ, processed and synthesized by the sociolinguists, ethnographers and historians contributing to this volume (Monica Huțanu, Mircea Măran, Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković, Daniela-Carmen Stoica, Zvezdana Vrzić, Anna-Christine Weirich).

Conclusively, Michael Studemund-Halévy's study reveals an interesting phenomenon, which might also offer a hope for Megleno-Romanian and Istro-Romanian, which are severely endangered languages (UNESCO), “on the verge of extinction” (Mircea Măran). Studemund-Halévy shows how the scattered Jewish community, which had lost for centuries its mother tongue (an essential pillar of self-identity and a defining element of ethnicity), succeeded to survive and to preserve its own ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. Characterized not only by *multigraphism* and *allography* (using foreign writings different from the original one), European Jews also practiced multilingualism, abandoning their mother tongue and speaking Judezmo (old Spanish spoken by the Jews in Bulgaria), Yiddish, Zarfatit (Judeo-French), Dzuadit (Judeo-Provençal), Italkit (Judeo-Italian), Yavanit (Judeo-Greek) or inventing Jewish Turkish (“a non-spoken Jewish language,”

p. 14) and Ivrit (modern Hebrew revived by Zionism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, declared official language of the newly created state of Israel in 1948). In spite of the accelerated loss of the oral non-literary mother tongue and of the multigraphic attempts to settle Judezmo (Ladino) in Greek, Cyrillic or Latin letters, the resilient strategies of adaptation and reshaping of the Jewish identity still offer a chance for ethnic survival. It is a good example to be followed by Megleno-Romanians and Istro-Romanians, who are on the verge of losing their mother tongue.

A final remark, as regards the ethno-demographic map of the Romance-speaking Balkans. According to the volume editors, Aromanian is spoken today by around 500,000 people in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. Even if this dialect has the largest number of speakers after Romanian, it is still endangered (also according to UNESCO). Not to mention the other Romance dialects from the Balkans, which are severely endangered. Megleno-Romanian counts around 5,000 active speakers in the Moglena/Meglen region (on the state border between Greece and North Macedonia), including a small number of descendants of the Meglen emigrants in the Serbian Banat (“Introduction,” p. 4). No figures are offered in this book for the numerous Romanian speakers from Eastern Serbia (living in the so-called Timok Valley), who are deprived not only of ethnic and linguistic rights, but also of any recent field research conducted in this area. A welcomed (partial) reparation is offered by researchers from the European Center for Ethnic Studies of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest, who, based on the news portal Timoc Press, analyze the current state (between 2000 and 2021) of the about 400,000 Timok Romanians.

Moreover, “instead of conclusions,” they advance a bold program in 7 points entitled “Directions of Concrete Action for the Romanian State”, published by Alin Bulumac, Samira Cîrlig, and Narcis Rupe, “Timok Valley, Sociological and Historical Aspects: The State of the Vitality of the Romanian Community in Eastern Serbia,” *Transylvanian Review* 30, 3 (2021): 62–83. With only 35 active Vlach speakers, as recently estimated by Vivjana Brković, the informant of Zvezdana Vrzić (p. 137), non-literary oral Istro-Romanian has practically almost ceased to be a living language. The linguistic situation both in the Istrian Peninsula and in the region of Moglena is far worse than that of Rheto-Roman or Romansh (recognized as a national language of Switzerland since 1938, and as an official language in correspondence with Romansh-speaking citizens since 1996, along with German, French, and Italian). As a matter of fact, it seems that state policies are nevertheless the key, as the national minority-friendly measures and the official acknowledgement adopted by Switzerland managed to save and even to develop a Romance-speaking community which in the year 2000 had 40,000 people speaking Romansh as a main language, respectively 60,000 regular speakers. Excepting Romania and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in Serbia (some efforts on this level being also made by North Macedonia and to a lesser extent by Croatia), none of the other Balkan states has really attempted to secure and preserve the endangered or extinguishing Romance languages, to recognize and support the Romanian dialects spoken in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, or Turkey.

