

The Romanians as a Border People during the Middle Ages. Between Slavonianism and Latinity

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Abstract: *In other words, from the great Byzantine culture, the Slavs and the Romanians took only the popular components which they could fully understand. We are dealing here with an ecclesiastical culture of Byzantine-Eastern extraction, adapted however to the spiritual needs of agricultural patriarchal populations. Gradually, the Slavs adapted medieval Slavonianism to their modern culture, also of Slavic extraction, while the Romanians, still of the Byzantine rite, returned to Western culture, in its Latin garb. This return was quite problematic and contradictory: the Slavs saw the Romanians as strange and ungrateful intruders, and then as "traitors," while the Westerners, including those from Latin countries, saw them as strange and poor relatives seeking to join the select few. In fact, Romanians cannot be blamed for what destiny decided for them, but they are responsible for the manner in which they acted throughout history within the coordinates of this destiny. A Neo-Latin people of Orthodox faith and Slavic culture during the Middle Ages, living a modest life, at the point of contact between the East and the West, might very well be an oddity for Europe, but it also a challenge and an argument for mutual understanding and recognition.*

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In the Middle Ages, the Romanians found themselves living on the border between two major cultural and denominational areas of Europe, the Latin and Catholic area, on the one hand, and the Slavic-Byzantine and Orthodox one, on the other. Some commentators, such as Samuel Huntington, saw this "frontier" as a precise and sharp demarcation line following the Carpathians, a line that had allegedly decided the extra-European fate of Romanians for all eternity. We consider such judgments to be rather rash, shallow, and therefore unfounded. The border occupied by the Romanians is indeed a reality, it does exist, but it is by no means a narrow line. Instead, it is a strip hundreds of kilometers wide, which starts from the Baltic and reaches the Black Sea and the Adriatic. Over this vast area, the Western and the Eastern spirituality constantly interacted with one another, both at the level of the elites and at when it came to the daily existence of the common people. Historical sources show that during the Middle Ages this region was inhabited by communities and by individuals who assumed, for a while, a double identity (Byzantine and Latin, Orthodox and Catholic, Christian and Moslem, Mosaic and Christian, etc.), precisely in order to be able to participate in social life, to gain a voice, to survive, or to meet the general expectations. Therefore, in kingdoms and principalities such as Hungary, Poland-Lithuania, the Romanian Principalities, Bulgaria, Serbia, etc., we find evidence of the presence of both Byzantine (Orthodox) and Latin (Catholic) church hierarchies, which operated at the same time, sharing the same territory, underwent changes, etc. Furthermore, in countries deemed to be Catholic, such as the kingdoms of the Arpads or of the Jagiello, where the official church was the Western one, certain sources indicate that in the 13th-15th centuries a huge section of the population, up to half of it, was actually Orthodox, having their own churches, monasteries, bishoprics, and metropolitan sees. Similarly, in the Romanian Principalities (Moldavia and Wallachia), throughout the Middle Ages, alongside the official Orthodox hierarchy operated a number of Latin (Catholic) dioceses, for the sizable population—local or arrived there from Transylvania - belonging to this denomination. Consequently, the area was one of massive mutual influences.

The Romanian people, totaling nowadays approximately 30 million individuals and living mostly in the areas located north of the Danube, is currently the largest in Southeastern Europe, just as it was in the Middle Ages. They are the sole heirs of the Eastern Roman World (Mihăescu, 1993), the only community separated from the body of the Romance world, the only

European Romance people whose language has a Slavic super-stratum (Tagliavini, 1977:253-257), the only Romance people to belong to the Eastern Christian (Orthodox) denomination, the only Romance people whose medieval elites used Slavonic in Church, in culture, and in their written documents, the only European Romance nation to experience the tragedy and the isolation of communism, the only Romance nation sometimes mistaken for the Roma (Gypsy) people, the Romance people whose history is the least known in the West, a European people often associated with the names of a vampire - Dracula - and of a ruthless dictator - Ceaușescu, etc. At any rate, in light of much of their heritage, the Romanians belong to the West, just like they also belong to Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

So many singular features for just one people, a people seen today with a certain degree of mistrust by much of the Western public opinion, for various reasons, some founded, others not so! The present paper is not intended to clarify all of these Romanian "priorities," old and new, positive or negative. Still, we firmly believe that these "mysteries" must be explained and known in Europe, especially following Romania's accession to the EU on 1 January 2007. Ignorance is not only the most vicious enemy truth can have, it is also the opposite of justice, clear thinking, fairness, generosity, and kindness.

The Romanians did not participate in the great trends of Western culture, they did not build Gothic cathedrals, they left no heroic epics, no *chansons de geste*, no *romans courtois*, no *commedia dell'arte*, they did not have scholastic universities in the 13th and the 14th centuries, they did not experience a Renaissance like Italy or France, and they did not have great philosophers, playwrights, or authors of fables in the 17th and the 18th centuries. Of course, they produced other values, but not of the kind that made the fame of Western culture.

When it comes to any people of the world, one major issue is that of its national identity. The Romanians have a specific identity, which did not disappear following the country's accession to the EU - not that such a disappearance would be in anyone's interest. Just like we know, in broad terms, the origins of the Italians, the Germans, the French, the English, the Danes, the Belgians, and, more recently, of the Poles, the Hungarians, the Czechs, the Latvians, or of the Bulgarians, we must also know who and what the Romanians are. I was often asked how come I do not speak Russian, since I am Romanian, as Romanian is a Slavic language (?!), or how come my skin is so white despite the fact that I am Romanian (?!), and also about the way in which we currently deal with vampires in Romania (?!).

The issue of cultural Slavonianism with the Romanians of the Middle Ages (Panaitescu, 1971:28-49) is a topic which I believe might clear up some of these aspects and render more intelligible the Romanian identity, casting light on the nature of the cultural and religious relations between the Catholic West and the Orthodox East. The issue of this cultural Slavonianism is indeed a most complex one, as we are dealing with a Latin people speaking a neo-Romance language, with its very name derived undoubtedly from that of the Eternal City - Rome - and from its three-continental empire.¹ Besides, in the case of the Romanians, cultural Slavonianism cannot be separated from Orthodoxy, as the Orthodox faith was the very vector of Slavonianism (Pop, 2004:13-18). Therefore, the first question that we must answer has to do with the manner in which the Romanians, a Latin people speaking a Romance language, came to embrace the Orthodox faith.

As opposed to all of their neighbors, the Romanians do not have a precise and symbolic date of their Christianization. Natives of Southeastern Europe and not arrived in the region during the invasions of the migratory peoples, they did not embrace Christianity following the will of a leader converted at a certain time (as it happened with the Bulgarians/Proto-Bulgarians, the Russians, the Serbs, the Hungarians, etc.). The Romanians became Christians in a gradual manner, over several centuries, starting from the time of their

¹ When we speak about cultural Slavonianism or about Slavic culture with the Romanians of the Middle Ages, we always have to keep in mind the fact that the common people, illiterate as they were, developed a folk, oral, anonymous and collective culture of their own, deeply rooted in the late Latinity. This can be seen in the spoken language, in folk poetry (with elements inherited from the Latin vernacular), in their sayings, curses, slogans, chants, woodwork, etc.

Dacian-Roman ancestors and of the colonists arrived in the province of Dacia *ex toto orbe romano* in the 2nd and the 3rd centuries. This sporadic, secret and random Christianization, from one individual to another, amid harsh persecutions, was given considerable impetus after the Edict of Mediolanum (313). At that time, although Trajan's Dacia was no longer within the official borders of the Roman Empire, missionaries present south of the Danube were free to cross north and spread God's word among the Latin populations there, in their own language. This process continued in the centuries that followed. The fact that the Proto - Romanians became Christian in the Latin language is proven not only by the sources of that time, written texts and archaeological evidence, but also by the Romanian language, in itself a living document. Nearly all of the Romanian words concerning the Christian faith (more specifically, its essential dogmas) come from Latin: *creștin, credință, botez, cuminecătură, rugăciune, altar, cruce, închinare, sânt (sfânt), sărbătoare, păcat, iertare, Dumnezeu, domn, împărat ceresc, biserică, îndurare, Păresimi, Cășlegi, Paște, Florii, Rusalii, Crăciun, Sângeorz, Sâmpetru, etc.* However, some of the Romanian words regarding the organization of the Church, its rite, some later holidays, the Church tradition that gradually emerged, all find their roots in the Slavonic language: *popă, vlădică, slujbă, buche, slovă, prescură, Blagoveștenie, vecernie, utrenie, pomână, pomelnic, etc.* How can we account for this duality? There is only one logical explanation, also supported by the historical development of this region and by existing testimonies: while the Romanians were Christianized in the Latin language, the thorough organization of their Church, its ritual, its hierarchy, etc., took place under the Slavic influence.

As we know, after the crisis experienced by the Roman Empire in the 3rd and 4th centuries, after the capital was moved to Constantinople and the state was split, the eastern part of the Roman world was Hellenized, or rather the old Greek heritage came to the fore and took the center stage. The great Slavic migration to Southeastern Europe partly altered the ethnic composition in the region. The 6th and the 7th centuries saw the massive Slavization of the Balkan Peninsula.² In 679 - 680, the areas south of the Danube were reached by the Bulgarian (Proto-Bulgarian) tribes led by Asparuh, who founded the First Bulgarian Tsarate in 681. This set in motion the Slavization of the Bulgarians, who left their Turkic name to a Slavic people. In 864-865, under the influence of the Church in Constantinople, Bulgarian Khan Boris became a Christian (under the name of Michael) together with some of his nobles and assumed the title of tsar. After some failed attempts to organize an ecclesiastical hierarchy along the Roman model, Boris/Michael established an autonomous Bulgarian Church, subordinated in name to the patriarch of the New Rome, Constantinople. These events would change forever the fate of the Romance/Romanian population living north of the Danube.

Dacia had been an imperial Roman province, with a culture that was Latin and Western rather than Greek and Eastern. The relocation of the capital to Constantinople (330), the official division of the Empire (395), the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476), and the reign of Justinian (527 - 565), when the borders of his Empire reached as far as the Danube, made the Latin population living around the Lower Danube and the Carpathians turn their eyes towards the New Rome and towards the Byzantine Empire. The Slavic invasion and settlement in the Balkan Peninsula (massive after 602) and the emergence of Slavic states south of the Danube, on a wide strip stretching from the Black Sea to the Adriatic, severed the connections between Rome and the Latin population living near the Carpathians and the Danube. The last bishop known to have been present on the territory of present-day Romania and who corresponded in Latin with Roman Pope Virgilius was Valentinianus of Tomis (today's city of Constanța, a Black Sea port). The same Valentinianus of Tomis had direct contacts with the Church in Constantinople. Still, the historical processes that led to the Slavization of the Balkan Peninsula and which severed the bonds between Rome and the Danube Latins also made it

² By Balkan Peninsula we mean that region of Europe bordered to the south by the Mediterranean, to the west by the Adriatic, to the east by the Aegean Sea and by the Black Sea, and to the north by the Lower Danube valley. Consequently, Hungary, Romania (90% of its territory), Slovenia, and partly Croatia do not geographically belong to the Balkan Peninsula. Romania is a Southeastern European country belonging to the Carpathian-Danube area.

difficult for the latter to maintain contact with the New Rome. Isolated from the main centers of the Christian faith, the Latin population living north of the Danube (the Proto-Romanians and the early Romanians) experienced a long period of “popular Christianity” (Zugravu, 1997), lacking a canonical hierarchy and unable to thoroughly organize a Church or Churches of their own. Of course, the organization remained fundamentally Byzantine, but the actual model could only be the Slavic, or indeed the Bulgarian one. The Bulgarian Church, established by the aforementioned Boris/Michael (in the second half of the 9th century) and hierarchically subordinated to the patriarch in Constantinople became the sole and the closest model for the canonical Church of the Romanians. In actual fact, the Bulgarian model was not imitated, but rather imposed. As the Bulgarian state temporarily extended its domination (in the 9th and the 10th centuries) over vast regions north of the Lower Danube and even over southern Transylvania, it most certainly followed the advice of its Church hierarchs and imposed its own ecclesiastical organization in these regions. Alongside other elements, this organization also included the language of the religious service. Or, in the last two decades of the 9th century, through the efforts of Clement and Naum (the disciples of brothers Cyril and Methodius), arrived there from Moravia and Pannonia, the Cyrillic alphabet became widespread in Bulgaria, the natural garb of the Slavic language, recognized in the Byzantine Commonwealth – to borrow the phrase used by Dimitri Obolensky (Obolensky, 1971) – as a canonical language, alongside Greek. Thus, during the 9th and the 10th centuries, the Romanian Church, Latin in both language and tradition but lacking a canonical tradition, came to adopt the Byzantine - Slavic model created south of the Danube. The model included among its essential exterior components the Slavonic language and the Cyrillic alphabet. The adoption of the model was made possible not just by geographic proximity and political domination, but also by the century-old presence of Slavic ethnic elements alongside and among the Romanians. Gradually, these Slavic groups were assimilated, but not before they left their imprint upon the language and the culture of the Romanians. In other words, the Romanian elite (resulted, until the 12th and the 13th centuries, from a mixture of Romanian, Slavic, Pecheneg and Cumanian elements, etc.) adopted the Slavic liturgy, Slavonic as the chancellery language, and the Slavic tradition. The transition from a Slavonic liturgy to a written culture in the Slavonic language was quite an easy one. It is a well-known fact that during the Middle Ages, especially in the East, a written culture was inconceivable beyond the confines of the Church. The Church was the great patron of culture, in all of its aspects. Once the liturgy in Slavonic was adopted and Slavonic became the church language, all forms or written culture followed the Slavonic model. Thus, while the Slavs disappeared as a relevant ethnic element north of the Danube in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Romanians treasured and kept the ecclesiastical and political tradition of the Slavs for another four centuries, and the Cyrillic alphabet continued to be used here until the middle of the 19th century. An impressive testimony concerning this Romanian medieval dualism, involving a written language of culture (Slavonic) and a spoken vernacular (Romanian, of Latin origin) comes from before 1473 and belongs to Nicholas, the Bishop of Modrussa, a close adviser to Pope Pius II (Papacostea, 1988:227). At the time when Enea Silvio Piccolomini (the future Pius II) was writing his comprehensive geographical treatise in which he presented in detail the theory of the Roman origin of the Romanians (accompanied by some highly farfetched etymological deductions), Nicholas of Modrussa wrote the following in his *De bellis Gothorum*: “In support of their origin, the Romanians mention the fact that although they all use the Illyrian language of the Moesians [in writing], from the cradle they speak a Latin vernacular which they never abandoned; and when they meet with strangers and start a conversation, they ask them whether or nor they speak the Roman language.”³ The testimony of Nicholas of Modrussa - who traveled across Central and Eastern Europe, met with the Bishop of Oradea, the

³ “Valachi originis suae illud praecipuum prae se ferunt argumentum, quod quamvis Mysorum lingua, quae Illyrica est, omnes utantur, vernaculo tamen sermone hoc est latino haud prorsus obsoleto ab incunabilis loquuntur; et cum ignotis congressi, dum linguae explorant commercium, an Romane loqui nolint interrogant” (Giovanni Mercati, “Notizie varie sopra Niccolò Modrusiense,” in *Opere Minori*, IV, Città del Vaticano, 1937, p. 247).

humanist John Vitez, and, at the court of King Matthias Corvinus, in 1463, made the acquaintance of Romanian Prince Vlad Țepeș (the future Dracula!) - is important for two reasons: 1) it shows that some of the medieval Romanians were aware of their Latin origin, and 2) that they distinguished between the function of the Romanian language (Latin) spoken by the people (*loquuntur*) and that of the Slavic language (Moesian) used as in the written culture (*utantur*) (Papacostea, 1988:228). Slavonic was taught as a language of culture in the monasteries located in the Romanian Principalities, and it was in fact a dead language, with some influences coming from the living Slavic languages (Bulgarian, Serbian, Russian) and from Romanian. The Slavic church language used by the Romanians was the language in which Cyril and Methodius had translated the religious texts during the Christianization of the Slavs. The main religious texts written by Romanians for Romanian readers come from the 14th - 17th centuries, and also from that period we have chronicles (historiography), codes of law (juridical literature), stories, and official documents (property deeds, mostly), princely writs, diplomatic and private correspondence. Among the centers of Slavonic writing we find the local monasteries and churches, but also the princely and the urban chancelleries. Slavonic was taught at the prince's court and at the courts of some boyars. Princely academies with Slavonic as the language of instruction also appeared later on. Beginning with the 16th century, we know about the existence of important libraries, especially in the metropolitan sees, bishoprics, monasteries, and churches. Printing, introduced in the Romanian territory in 1508, was also initially done in Slavonic, and only a few decades later the first books in Romanian were printed (using the same Cyrillic alphabet). The 17th century was the time of an authentic "Orthodox Renaissance" in the Romanian Principalities, with the printing of important books in both Romanian and Slavonic, through the efforts of princes Matthew Basarab and Vasile Lupu, supported by Peter Movilă, a clergyman of Romanian origin who became Bishop of Kiev (located at that time in Poland).

Interestingly enough, the Romanian elite in Transylvania and in the Western Parts - consisting of small nobles known as knezes, of clergymen, and of a few burghers - was also using Slavonic in religion and culture. This is clearly indicated by the books of that time, by the written documents produced by the Orthodox churches and monasteries and by copyists, by the archives and libraries that have survived until today. Besides, on the verso of donation documents issued in Latin in the 15th and the 16th centuries by the Hungarian kings to the aforementioned Romanian knezes and nobles in certain regions (Hațeg, Banat), we find personal notes made in Slavonic by the beneficiaries, proper names and explanations of what the Latin documents actually said (Drăgan, 2000:188-189). In fact, the Romanian Church in Transylvania always remained in contact with the metropolitan sees and the bishoprics of Wallachia and Moldavia. Beginning with the 14th century, the Metropolitan Bishop of Wallachia was also the "Exarch" of Transylvania and Hungary, and the Transylvanian bishops and some of the local priests and archpriests were ordained south of the Carpathians. The 15th century brought with it a certain spiritual patronage of the Metropolitan See of Moldavia over the Transylvanian Romanians, especially when it came to those living in the northern and the eastern parts of the province.

A written culture in the Romanian language began to emerge in the 15th century, with a number of rhotacized religious texts produced in Transylvania, the area more directly exposed to Western influences. The same region saw the creation of the first Romanian schools and the first translations into the Romanian language. Also, this is where the first Romanian prints appeared and where the Latin alphabet was first adopted. Beginning with the 16th century, the influence of the Latin and Neo-Latin West became increasingly stronger, especially in Transylvania. With this, the cultural Slavonianism of the Romanians began to wane. 17th century chroniclers wrote in Romanian, Dimitrie Cantemir (Prince of Moldavia) was a pre-Enlightenment scholar and a member of the Berlin Academy, writing extensively in both Latin and Romanian, and the Union between the Romanian Transylvanian Church and the Church of Rome (1697-1701) and the Transylvanian School - the main Romanian Enlightenment trend - brought Romanian culture even closer to the West. Thus, after several centuries of cultural and

religious Slavonianism, the Romanian people brought its culture in synchrony with its Neo-Latin specificity.

However, the Slavonic period of the Romanians was not just an accident of history, but rather the living reality of several centuries, fascinating from many points of view and a product of this "frontier" location. During the Middle Ages, the Romanians were a Romance population of Orthodox faith and Slavonic culture (we are referring to the culture of the elites), firstly because of geography and secondly because of history. Geographically situated in the area of Byzantine influence, but in the immediate vicinity of the Latin sphere of influence, it was only natural for this people to vacillate for a while and eventually follow Byzantium from a cultural and religious point of view. In the Early Middle Ages, Byzantium was the main cultural center of Europe. The Byzantine tradition privileged classical forms, the concrete over the abstract, and disliked intellectualism; in politics, the central authority prevailed, as opposed to the decentralized model of Western feudalism, etc. This Byzantine culture was perfectly suited for an empire, for the New Rome, but the Slavs and the Romanians were peoples of farmers, organized chiefly into rural communities, with patriarchal monarchies. From Byzantium, the Slavs took all that was suitable for their nature and degree of social organization: mass sermons by monks rather than a sophisticated Christian philosophy, courtly chronicles listing annual events rather than rhetorical historical writings in the fashion of Thucydides, not the exquisite art of resplendent mosaics, but religious mural painting likely to present an illiterate population with the deeds of the Redeemer and of the saints, to present the Holy scripture by way of images; then, they took the lives of the hermits and of the martyrs, the simple songs praising the Virgin, the witty proverbs, etc., practically anything suitable for their peasant existence (Panaitescu, 1971:40-41). In other words, from the great Byzantine culture, the Slavs and the Romanians took only the popular components which they could fully understand. We are dealing here with an ecclesiastical culture of Byzantine-Eastern extraction, adapted however to the spiritual needs of agricultural patriarchal populations. Gradually, the Slavs adapted medieval Slavonianism to their modern culture, also of Slavic extraction, while the Romanians, still of the Byzantine rite, returned to Western culture, in its Latin garb. This return was quite problematic and contradictory: the Slavs saw the Romanians as strange and ungrateful intruders, and then as "traitors," while the Westerners, including those from Latin countries, saw them as strange and poor relatives seeking to join the select few. In fact, Romanians cannot be blamed for what destiny decided for them, but they are responsible for the manner in which they acted throughout history within the coordinates of this destiny. A Neo-Latin people of Orthodox faith and Slavic culture during the Middle Ages, living a modest life, at the point of contact between the East and the West, might very well be an oddity for Europe, but it also a challenge and an argument for mutual understanding and recognition.

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