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Romanian Human Habitat and Atypical Volohs' Living in the Wooded Carpathians (Ukraine). Case Study: Poroșcovo

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ABSTRACT

The Volohs in the Woody Carpathians – a ruin of Romanian spirit, a priority of Romanian historiography. The paradigm of national-state unification in Central Europe and in the South-East areas is one different from the equation of the European occidental state establishment. Extending this assertion we will notice that the mechanism of the ethnic-state turmoil within the Woody Carpathians or even in a wider area, namely the Middle and Superior Basins of the River Tisza, is worth being subjected to a very detailed and complex analysis. Throughout these territories, the mysterious goddess Clio played a destiny game which led the crucible of history to give birth to a very heterogeneous ethnic and cultural picture. Left "without fate", the Voloh people in the Woody Carpathians – a historically abandoned Romanian-speaking population, remained to vibrate in Romanian, to oscillate between appellations of "white gipsy" and "volohs" or Romanians without a lot. The epic of such Romanian remains a function of historical convulsions characteristic of an area ethnically energized up to "final victories" and depicts a painting with lights and shadows which are too poorly defined. The arch described by the evolution of this Romanian-speaking ethnic group frames the features of a ruin-monument of the Romanian spirit but also certain characteristics of an identity paradox, the embodiment of the dispute between the fragile statue of a not well-presumed identity and the hostile moment of a highly perceived existential change.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that there are over 600,000 Romanians living in the current territory of Ukraine. Out of them, about 50,000 live in the Maramureș area on the right of the Tisza. This population remained in the former Czech-Slovak space as a consequence of the system of the Paris Peace Treaties (1919-1920), when, for purely religious reasons, the so-called territory of the catholicized Ruthenia was not assigned to an Orthodox religious Romania. Except these Romanians, who totally evolved in accordance with the rest of the Maramureș and with their motherland in general, at about 200 km away,

toward the city of Munkacevo, there still live between 10,000 and 15,000 Volohs who are in a different stage of historical development. Living together in enclaves on the outskirts of the Ukrainian settlements, these Volohs seem to fully illustrate the former theses of the Hungarian historiography concerning the peoples "without fate" or "destiny revoked" meant only "to be born, to pay taxes and then to die". Historically abandoned, orphaned, ignored and marginalized by authorities, whatever they have been over the last two or three centuries, the Romanian-speaking ethnic group in the Wooded Carpathians remained to resonate in a Romanian way, to assert their nationality, developing to the level of small and very small communities. Having

only weak links between them and no links to the mother country or to the well-established community of former Maramureș, today, these Volohs unsurely oscillate between appellations of “white gypsies” and “Romanian Volohs”, both epithets being attributed to them by others while they call themselves only Volohs or Romanian and “Rumani”.

2. THE DISCOVERY OF ETHNIC ROMANIAN-SPEAKING GROUPS

The film of the discovery of these ethnic Romanian-speaking groups seems incredible for us, the ones who have just come out of “the century of speed” and who are incredibly and urgently connected to the Internet demands.

This time, as if worthy of a noble cause which it reveals, the scenario happened somewhat in slow motion, almost romantically, cropping a relatively long episode of the film formation of the Romanian people. Specifically, during a Sunday morning market, in the Ukrainian city Munkacevo, Domnica Marina, a Romanian teacher who lived on the right side of the Tisza, but from the former Maramureș, intercepted a dialogue, a conversation between several women in a very old Romanian language. When she asked the women what language they spoke, they said they spoke a Voloh language and answered they were Volohs from certain localities in the area.

The enigma slowly began to unravel and the teacher found out that besides the 40-50,000 Romanians to whom she herself belonged to, there were another 10,000 countrymen living in the mountains, who knew nothing about the other Romanians and had never heard of Romania. Starting with the 1990's, there followed several other more or less scientific ethno-historical expeditions and surveys which indeed revealed the fact that there were over 10,000 people who lived in 14-15 localities. These people were named Volohs and called themselves Volohs and so were by no means assimilated by the large Slavic, Ukrainian mass, but simply had their own identity.

In the former Soviet army or in former Soviet sites and kolkhozes, some Volohs accidentally met one Romanian or Moldavian from the former Soviet bloc, but the facts remained isolated especially that the language of communication was very difficult, the Voloh being on a much lower level of development while the Russian language was not only available to all but in fact mandatory.

Finally, in the early 1990s, for the first time in the very compact village community of Poroșcovo, where more than 1,500 Volohs live, someone came back from the army with a radio on which, in amazement, all could hear a language similar to theirs, understandable but still “very spoiled” as they themselves noticed. On the other hand, once identified and placed in our

horizon of interest, namely the Romanian historiography – the picture of acknowledging or denigrating these unfortunates of history begins to get different hues from one community to another, depending on their ethnic heritage, on competition historiography and on the vectors of interest they start to attract.

More and more often, these isolated groups of Volohs are investigated by various collective “specialists”, whose conclusions are absolutely surprising. These “specialists” call them “Romanian-origin ethnic”, “white gypsies”, ordinary craftsmen (spoon makers) of Romanian linguistic expression, in any case villains, criminals good only to fill the pages of the police press and to scare the authorities.

The sum of these negative traits is increased and exhibited with a zeal worthy of better causes by an “elite” of pseudo scientists who rely on arguments which are outside science, like the fact that “it is not possible”, “we ought not to bury ourselves” and to make ourselves relate to such a “decadent” people (the Poroșcovo case), or the fact that, historically, we should not “turn to gypsies” as this means we would embarrass the majority of Ukrainians.

Citing this pseudo ethnological indictment but remaining, however, within the descriptive identity paradigm, we see that the followers of the theory of “white gypsies” should explain, among other things, certain arguments that, in our opinion, from “accusations” become apologies or in any case insufficient arguments. In any case, they should explain how they managed to preserve this language so well despite the fact that they lived isolated in these mountains and spoke a rudimentary 150-200 year old Romanian language and not a dialect of Romanian.

How can it be that, without any traditions, customs and folklore, without church, means of mass media and education (none of them has graduated more than eight grades - Poroșcovo case - and most of them are illiterate) they developed and preserved a certain distinct and sufficient consciousness of identity, calling themselves and imposing themselves as Volohs? It is generally acknowledged that the terms of Vlach and Voloh in other areas inhabited by Romanians not only define and call a wide range of professions, ethnicities and religions, but in the case of Volohs in the North Carpathians their profession is the one of spoon makers, and therefore it is not to be confused with ethnicity, it overlaps with it at most.

On the other hand, in the case of the Volohs we have mentioned above, the ethnonym of Voloh is not just an alo-ethnonym but their very identity argument, their identity distinction as a Roman population, former Romanian, according to their historic presumption.

Unfortunately, for them and the followers of their Roman origin theory, the term “Vlach” has a very generous destiny in history and if we consider only its

quality of ethnonym, we find that it has evolved from something similar to the notion of “barbarian” (medieval Greeks called some Bulgarians “Vlachs”), to naming all Roman people with this term (the Germans) gradually coming to be restricted and only assumed by Romanians; in the last century, this term was particularly assigned to gypsies or other Vlach entities who lived in the Balkans and spoke Romanian.

Making a continuous parallelism with other ethnic groups, we see the “identity dilemma” of those who study the Volohs, not confirmed in their favour not even when we consider their relative community autonomy, respectively of a particular social stratification inherited over time between “Golets” - the poorest, and the others somewhat the rich of the community.

In order to maintain the comparison argument, it is worth saying that for the magraun Gypsies, people in other villages, their boss is a “baron”; with Volohs, the dignity of “primus inter pares” is owned by a “birău” (mayor), a community function which is passed down from generation to generation and still solves many issues concerning the functioning community mechanism, and it is also a model.

On the other hand, this relative autonomy and functioning somehow parallel to the formal administrative system turned, in time, into an advantage, namely the possibility of preservation of the main identity features; thus, it prevented assimilation through involvement in the management of village life through bilingualism and even training and education.

To extend this idea, we could assume that the “Birău institution” may be a remnant of the old administrative structures of medieval Volohs who had their own ruler, right here in the large Slavic mass and with a very vigilant and strict Hungarian administration “*knezes had an important role and were often used for colonization purposes and especially here they were located on royal lands. The king was seeking to increase the taxes they collected from villages under their administration, then, he or the nobility, gave the right of being a kneze <<jus cnezatus>>. This right was given for a limited time or for life and it was to be passed down to their direct offsprings*” [4, pp. 56-57].

3. ORIGIN OF THE ETHNICAL GROUP AND LOCALIZATION OF THE VOLOH AREA

Volohs' settlement along the Wooded Carpathians was presented in the second half of the 19th century by Hungarian historiography in a very surprisingly objective way as migration process, originated from Maramureș, as no one anticipated at the time the perspective of the Great Romania nor the interest of the Romanian historiography for this subject in general. “*The Hungarian historians who studied the past of the Bereg area- archive-based research – came*

to the conclusion that the Romanians settled here before the Hungarians, extending to the regions of Munkács and Hatszeg” [4, p. 53].

The historical truth revealed more than a century ago only illustrates for today's generations a reality, namely that the “remains” of Romanian culture that we discover in the present overlap the medieval ones: “*the same rights were granted to the Romanians living in the Ilișua Valley (Iloșva) up to the foot of the Hoszuhát mountain, where they had founded the following villages: Dragabartfalva, Medencze, Ardánháza, Hátszeg, Zavidfalva, Kerepcz, Lánfalva, Sándorfalva, Stánfalva and Kendereșke, which formed together a joint <<Crain>>, a specific land, with some independence for the Romanian inhabitants regarding relations with those in the county*” [4, p. 55].

In classical medieval documents, these Volohs, together with those already arrived and organized in Moravia, appear as sheepfold owners, as outlaws which accompanied the herds which were brought for sale, but primarily as large owners and sheep breeders. Having so many occupations they acquired fighter qualities as some foreign authors have recognized: “*In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the guards of the castle, of the town limits or of boundaries were known to be the Vlachs*” [8, p. 46; 9, p. 11].

This historic selection was possible only from a large mass of people who were well organized and so able to create conditions for certain members to acquire qualities that others had not. This organization went beyond the efforts of the Hungarian monarchy to impose its own organizational system here in Bereg, as well as in Maramureș: “*In the Bereg area, in the Munkáci land, along the Bârlava valley and its tributaries lived a large mass of Romanians. The prince of these Romanians was called Craciun and resided in Bilca in the immediate vicinity of Maramureș. His sons and grandsons were also nobles and were the protectors of the rights of the Romanians in Bereg until the end of the 14th century. Then, the fortress and Munkáci land fell under Prince Theodore Koriatovici's authority who proceeded to abolish the autonomy the Romanians in Bereg had enjoyed before he placed them under the Munkáci castellans' authority*” [2, p. 26].

This input of Slavic elements in the area was so massive that the Vlach communities are overwhelmed and denationalized, and in the 19th century the Romanians' cause of in Bereg seemed lost: “*Romanians along the northern and north-western Carpathians are mentioned in documents until the second half of the 17th century. From then on, they occurred less frequently, being slowly denationalized by the numerous Ruthenian and Slovak population*” [2, p. 63].

Somewhat lured by the medieval noble - charm of the documents relating to the history of Maramureș, in this case the history of the Romanians in Bereg, we

shall illustrate the prestige enjoyed by them through a document issued by the Office of King Louis I of Anjou (1342 - 1382), on November 28, 1366, in Budapest: “*We are told by our Romanians, the sons of Maxim; Nicholas and Valentine, sons of Craciun, that while Romanians come on your estates and among you, seeking their food, you try them and incessantly seize their things. In the light of such facts, we strongly urge you not to dare try the above mentioned Romanians and the serfs of these Romanians, except the cases of theft, robbery, and other criminal deeds. And should some of you have a complaint against these Romanians and serfs, you will seek justice only in the presence of their prince who will see that justice is done*” [5, p. 76].

4. CASE STUDY. POROȘCOVO

Moving from the wider area of all the Volohs in the reference area of Munkacevo to the Poroșcovo case, we can see that the role of women in these extremely poor families is quite insignificant, namely to give birth to children and do everyday chores.

Moreover, in these communities are the highest birth rates in the whole area inhabited by Romanians or Volohs. Most families have more than 10 children, some reaching up to 15 or even to 18 births, as in the case of Iulia who had 15 children and was a kolkhoz chief of work brigade in Soviet times, reaching even the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan.

Among many other stories, this hard-working Stakhanov woman managed to reproduce some Romanian folk verses, with the only regret that she could not really grasp their meaning:

*Go my love and come again
Never stay with foreign men
Everybody loves somebody
Only me I have nobody
And whomever loved I found
Is now buried in the ground* [11, p. 51].

Practicing this ancient language which is extremely poor in words with a very elementary vocabulary makes these people be shy, express themselves with great difficulty, and stop the flood of thoughts they have to express; this makes us, the interviewers, to either miss some confessions or to infer only some ideas.

This is the case of another elderly woman belonging to a prominent world of Poroșcovo village, Mrs. Iulia Voloshin, aunt of “birău” Basil Gorvat, who also reproduced these almost ancestral verses:

*I stood up and I'll stand tall
Let my head never to fall
Oh, my heart
Do your command
But take me home into my land* [12, p. 281].

The verses above are so impressive that we cannot help ourselves identifying a genuine deposit of nostalgia and homesickness, a treasure of ethno-historical memory which convinces us once again that people can think with their soul, as ancient Greeks used to believe. The only thing to do when you see such martyrs of fate is to feel some sort of historical chill and when you are refused the right to reunite with your nation, then you may sadden even more, just like Vasile Gorvat, the mayor of this community in Poroșcovo did: “*It's so hard to see my blood withdraw and it hurts to see other mocking at it*” [12, p. 281].

To add more to these historical injustice throughout history, the remaining Volohs are nowadays, for reasons of state this time, scattered and identity confused and are not even mentioned in the current census statistics: “*An unknown number of Romanians still lives in the villages Mircea - Veleka Berezin and Poroșcovo district - Perecin district, around 1,500-2,000 people, traditionally called <<Volohs-loshcarins>>*” [13, p. 1].

It is worth mentioning that these Volohs-loshcarins still proudly wear old Romanian family names which have obviously been turned to Slavic and Hungarian names in time: Voloșin, Horvat, Canaloș, Simocico, Stanchevici, etc. They are so fond of their names as their society was strongly semi autarchic; so is the case of a Voloh lumberjack who was accidentally met in the street on his way to work and who claimed, when asked, that he was Canaloș not Konoloș, that he was Romanian-Voloh, not Hungarian.

In this historical context where a page of minor history, of regional history may be revealed, so true national dignity gestures appear, with a clear distinction between citizenship and nationality, a difference which is not recognized in the West, but is present with the Volohs in Central Europe. In addition, beside their real name, in their identification papers (passport) they are added the name of Canaloș (spoon maker). On the other hand, we underline the fact that the main source of living of some of Voloh communities is work in the forest; they also sell firewood and that is why there are many horses and wagons in their community.

Considering these two complete opposite historiographical theories formulated especially regarding the Volohs of Poroșcovo in the district Perecin (Ukraine) and their consideration as “white gypsies” who speak Voloh language and spoon maker Volohs or Romanian-Volohs, we can say that Romanian culture can still be traced far from the boundaries of the country. During the interwar Great Romania, it was repeatedly said that our country had its borders within its ethnic body. Nevertheless, the old histrionic Central European historiographies about the Romanians of Transylvania and around it brought to life almost tiny human groups who had “no fate”, “no destiny”.

In this context, it is worth quoting another foreign historiography belonging to the Czech Jaroslav Stika: "Accompanied by the special culture of mountain shepherds, Wallachian colonization expanded in the 13th and 14th century to the Slavic part of the Carpathians, in the today Romania. The origin and culture of the people who colonized this region was most likely Romanian. The neighbouring peoples named them <<Vlachs>>: the South Slavs used the term of <<Vlachs>> or << Volohs >>, the Greek <<Blachos>>, the Hungarians - <<Olah>>, the Poles and the Russians <<Volohs>> and later the Czechs and the Slovaks called them <<Valach>>."

We are able to confirm their presence in the 14th century near Munkacevo and at the beginning of the 15th century they were already in eastern Slovakia ..."

[9, p. 31].

5. CONCLUSION

More or less affected by the multitude of scenarios that begin to recently include the 10,000 Volohs in the Wooded Carpathians near Munkacevo, we can only feel historical admiration towards a community which has been haunted by the ghosts of history, a community which is, however, decided to settle in its favour the dispute between the fragile statue of an identity which has recently been assumed and the aggressive monument of alteration, in fact an identity paradox. The situation of the Romanians behind the northern border of Romania can be emphasized by a journalistic account in the early '90s. While conducting a research in the area, a journalist asked an elderly man in Apșa de Jos how many countries he had visited.

The old man replied: "I have been in Austria-Hungary, Romania, Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary, the USSR, and I am now in Ukraine. But I have never left home".

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