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DYNAMICS OF IDENTITIES: THE EXAMPLE
OF THE VLACHS FROM THE VIDIN REGION

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Abstract. The issues of identity remain relevant topics in ethnological and anthropological research, as the socio-economic realities of the 21st century continually challenge individuals. One of the survival strategies for individuals is to seek support within communities, often relying on historically conditioned markers such as shared language, common history, unified territorial settlement, local culture, and customary-ritual systems. This study will compare findings from research conducted in the mid-1990s, during which I had the opportunity to participate in expeditions led by Prof. Ivanichka Georgieva in the Vidin region, with results from ethnological fieldwork conducted in 2023 – 2024, funded under the project 'Dynamics of Identities in the Danube Region.' The focus of the

research is on the identities of the Vlachs from the Vidin region. It presents aspects of the manifestation of their identity, considering the complex economic and demographic situation in the Northwest region of Bulgaria.

Keywords: Vlachs, identity, dynamics, Northwestern region.

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Identity and self-awareness remain critical topics in ethnological and anthropological research, insofar as humans continue to confront the socio-economic realities in the 21st century. Despite the prevalence of individualistic lifestyles in modern times, individuals also define themselves within the context of specific socio-cultural environments. Consequently, they seek support in communities, often built around historically determined markers such as a shared language, a common past, a shared territorial habitat, local culture, customary ritual systems.

The specificity of these processes is demonstrated by the North-West region characterized by the reality of the border area and the unique traits of its ecological niche, where the Danube river holds a significant role. In human civilization, rivers are typically linked to movement, serving as routes for the exchange of goods, cultures and communication. However, during the socialist era, Bulgarians perceived the Danube river as a border – more so than in prior periods. Under the ideological framework of the Iron Curtain, the river, which would ordinarily serve as a bridge to Europe, became an insurmountable barrier. The lack of communication contributed to the isolation of the north-western region, shaping its cultural, social and economic realities. It is certainly no coincidence that, until 2014, there was only one bridge connecting Bulgaria and Romania along a border spanning over 470 km. More recently, the New Europe Bridge was constructed between Vidin and Calafat with support of the European Union. This project is part of the Pan-European Transport Corridor 4 and holds key significance for the European southeastern transport axis, as well as for the trans-European transport network. Thanks to this project, the once forgotten communication between the populations on the Bulgarian and Romanian banks of the river seems to have been revived. However, the establishment of truly meaningful contact still leaves much to be desired.

The Vlachs in the Vidin region hold a special place in the communication across Danube. Their identity is fluid and adaptable, often influenced by historical developments. It is possible to retrace (historically) conditioned processes that have shaped the development of their community and the stages we observe in this development. The studies focused on the historical processes in the northwestern Bulgarian lands point to the migratory origin of the Vlach community. The historiographical aspects have been well studied and reflected in research. Marin

Drinov¹ and Felix Kanitz both focus on the Vlach population in the Vidin diocese, along the middle reaches of the Vit, Iskar and Osam rivers. Kanitz points out that one of the primary reasons for the Vlach's resettlement in the region south of the Danube was the oppression of landowners (*chokoi*) in the lands north of the Danube². In 1862, Kanitz visited Bregovo, describing the state of the large three-aisled church and documenting the school's activities and his impressions on the general prosperity of the settlement³.

It is also worth mentioning that the policy of the Ottoman authorities took into account the demographic crisis in the Vidin Sandzhak and encouraged the settlement of depopulated agricultural areas. This crisis was triggered in the late 18th and early 19th centuries by hostilities following the central government's intervention against the secessionist attempts of Osman Pazvantoglu and the rebel activities of Haidut Velko⁴. Stoyan Romanski notes that the majority of settlers came from Wallachia, Transylvania and Banat settling in the northern part of the Vidin region, between the Timok and Morava rivers⁵.

The theses on the origin of the Vlachs are discussed in detail by Ninko Zayakov⁶. He explores the etymology of the name Vlach, noting that it has been attributed different meanings by various peoples across certain historical periods, ranging from an economic occupation to an ethnonym⁷.

Following Valentina Vasseva, I will point out that, that, the villages around Vidin were home to the so-called "wollen" (*valneni*) Vlachs, and also the Campen in the western parts and Puduren near the Serbian border, resettled from Serbia⁸. In the official documents of the Bulgarian state, this population is referred to by various names. Apart from the term Vlachs, the ethnonyms Romanians, Kutsovlachs, Cinzars

¹ ДРИНОВ, Марин. Заселение Балканского полуострова славянами. В: *Избрани съчинения*. Т. 2. София, 1971, с. 326–327.

² КАНИЦ, Феликс. *Дунавска България и Балканът*. София: ИК „Борина“, 1995. ISBN 954-500-058-9.

³ *Пак там*, с. 118.

⁴ ЗАЯКОВ, Нинко. Исторически причини за формирането на влашкото население във Видинско. *Българска етнология*, XXI, 1995, извънреден брой, с. 49. ISSN 1310-5213. ISSN (Online) 2367-6892.

⁵ РОМАНСКИ, Стоян. Ромъните между Тимок и Морава. *Македонски преглед*, II, 1926, № 1, с. 68.

⁶ In his study N. Zayakov draws attention to the so-called "Vidin Vlachs"; in the 16th century, they formed a category of population that had to pay "filuri", a tax distinguishing this population from the so-called "old subjects" (old raiyah). This part of his work is based on B. Tzvetkova's study on the ethnic and demographic shape of Vidin in the 16th century (Tzvetkova 1964).

⁷ ЗАЯКОВ, Нинко. *Цит. съч.*, с. 30–33.

⁸ ВАСЕВА, Валентина. Власи. В: *Общности и идентичности в България*. А. КРЪСТЕВА (състав.). София: Петекстон, 1998, с. 172. ISBN 954-457-007-1.

and Arumans were used in the censuses in the 20th, and their language was defined as Romanian⁹.

From the mid-1920s onward, Romanian cultural propaganda among the Vlachs in the Bulgarian lands intensified¹⁰. Blagovest Nyagulov provides detailed research on this subject. According to him, during the interwar period, the discussion about the Vlach community was already framed as a minority issue¹¹. However, the Vlachs were unable to establish an organized movement, and their activities remained rather spontaneous. Niagulov rightly states that “the remnants of feudalism in Romania persisted until 1921, making the country unattractive to the Vlachs from the Bulgarian lands”¹².

The present study will compare the results of a survey conducted in the mid-1990s, when I had the opportunity to participate in expeditions led by prof. Ivanicka Georgieva in the region of Vidin, with the results of a field ethnological study conducted in 2023 – 2024 and funded under the project “Dynamics of Identities in the Danube Region”. Today, the representatives of the group examined in this study self-identify as Vlachs but also as Bulgarians. For some groups of this community, identification with the Vlach is equal to identification with the Romanians. There are also ethnically undifferentiated names such as “intermediate” population, “border” population, as well as pejorative terms such as *melezi*, *katuri*. In the 1990s, the Vlach population did not use “Romanians” as a self-identifying term¹³. Today, a Romanian Association in Bulgaria is present and active in Vidin and its region. Notably, the Vlachs in Vidin settled in these lands prior to the formation of the modern Romanian state and nation and, therefore, they initially had no Romanian national identity. This identity has been cultivated through targeted policies of the Romanian state, as well as the efforts of various cultural societies in different historical periods¹⁴. It is worth mentioning that the ethnonym Romanians is now used by individuals who have had or continue to maintain intensive ties with modern-day Romania. This is the case, for example, for students who studied there or for Vlachs

⁹ ВАСЕВА, Валентина. *Цит. съч.*, с. 173; НЯГУЛОВ, Благовест. Проблемът за власите в България между двете световни войни (Политически фактори и аспекти). *Българска етнология*, XXI, 1995, извънреден брой, с. 54. ISSN 1310-5213. ISSN (Online) 2367-6892.

¹⁰ НЯГУЛОВ, Благовест. *Цит. съч.*, с. 56.

¹¹ *Пак там*, с. 54.

¹² *Пак там*, с. 59.

¹³ РАДУНЧЕВ, Боян. Самоопределение на власите и степен на интеграция в обществото. *Българска етнология*, XXI, 1995, извънреден брой, с. 121–123. ISSN 1310-5213. ISSN (Online) 2367-6892; АНТОНОВ, Стоян. Някои особености на манталитета на власите от Видинско. *Българска етнология*, XXI, 1995, извънреден брой, с. 128. ISSN 1310-5213. ISSN (Online) 2367-6892.

¹⁴ НЯГУЛОВ, Благовест. *Цит. съч.*, с. 57.

who developed economic relationships with Romania and now prefer to identify as Romanians, because of Romania's economic progress. In the 1990s, the stereotypical answer to the question "What are you?" would be "We are Vlachs, but otherwise we are Bulgarians!". The pejorative term "wet Vlachs" continues to persist today, reflecting the heterogeneous origin of the group. This is further corroborated by the existence of numerous mixed settlements in the region, which contributes to mixed marriages and to the fluid nature of identity. On the other hand, the group is not fully accepted by the Bulgarians, and, to a large extent, it is ambiguously accepted by the Romanians. This prevailing attitude among the majority shapes a specific form of self-identification, which may vary depending on the specific circumstances an individual finds themselves in.

In modern times, young people prefer an identity that would bring them social dividends. Thus, it is not a rare trend for people from minority groups to identify themselves as Bulgarians, declaring rather a national identification. This identification, according to Radostina Antonova¹⁵, is shaped through official narratives and images, with the influence of school and media¹⁶. In turn, minority identity remains for domestic use.

In 2024, the Romance-speaking population of Vidin can be divided into three types of subgroups: one fully accepts the Romanian ethonym as defining their identity and origin. They seek to express themselves precisely as Romanians, with a positive attitude towards the general policy of the Bulgarian state towards the specificities of their culture. The second group identifies itself as Romanian, yet carries a noticeable sense of being undervalued by the majority. At the same time, they express criticism toward the official policy surrounding minority identification. A third group of the population constructs a dual identity, largely based on language use, and self-identifies as Vlachs. It is in this context that Stoyan Antonov wrote in a publication, as early as 1995, that "the young generation does not have the group consciousness of their fathers and grandfathers"¹⁷. This generation, approximately 70 years old now, refers to the language as "Vlach", using it exclusively for domestic purposes. They identify as "Bulgarian citizens with Vlach language". In general, there is no significant difference in terms of ethnicity between this group and the Bulgarian population. A segment of the younger generation discusses the existence and use of

¹⁵ The author examines Roma communities, but some of the conclusions the relations between the majority and minority groups have broader generalizations.

¹⁶ АНТОНОВА, Радостина. *Променящите се ромски общности*. София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2024, с. 7. ISBN 978-954-07-5900-5.

¹⁷ АНТОНОВ, Стоян. *Цит. съч.*, с. 128.

the Romanian language, while also seeking connections to Romania and considers that it forms the “group of Romanians in Bulgaria”¹⁸.

The dynamics of identities also involve confessional determination. The influence of the Orthodox religion serves as a unifying factor, binding the minority group to the majority. In the case of the Vlachs, religious uniformity frequently leads to assimilation. In this context, religion does not function as a marker of ethnic identification. However, in many respects, religiosity among the Vlachs is significantly more prominent at the household level. Notably, the archaic funerary and communal practices retain relative stability. Evidence supporting this can be found in the monographic study by Sashka Bizeranova *Between Life and Death. Funeral and commemorative customs of Bulgarians and Vlachs in Vidin region*¹⁹. The author explores contemporary customary practices, stepping on their functional introversion, and reveals the path of interaction and specific layering in this conservative sphere of ritual and religious culture, understood by both Bulgarians and Vlachs as a transitory phase²⁰. The author’s study is complemented by field work framing the temporal and spatial character of the ritual practice. The fieldwork and interviews confirm practically the thesis that, for both Bulgarians and Vlachs, funerary and memorial rites are subject to “the concept of the multiplicity of the world and the resulting inversion of all aspects of reality”²¹.

In contrast to religiosity (formal and in everyday life), language, as has been pointed out, remains the most clearly understood distinguishing mark of the examined community. The overwhelming majority of the group defines this language as “Vlach”, then adding *i.e.* “Romanian”. The latter addition is relevant to the period of 2024. They regard this language as their mother tongue, highlighting its cultural significance for the community. They also take into account the fact that Vlach is a spoken language, largely confined within the community. Those who send their children to study in Romania aspire to see the language realized as Romanian and through the official Romanian language. This is also the policy of the Vlach Association in Bulgaria (VAB)²², which, in the mid-1990s, published the journal *Timpul* (Time) in both Bulgarian and Romanian. However, at the time (in the 1990s), the Romanian section of the newspaper was largely incomprehensible for the Vlach

¹⁸ The data from an interview conducted with I. G., male, born in 1942 in Vidin, higher education, on 30 September 2024 by M. Markova and Kr. Bobeva.

¹⁹ БИЗЕРАНОВА, Сашка. *Между живота и смъртта. Погребални и поменални обичаи при българи и власи във Видинско*. Враца: Алекспринт, 2013. ISBN 978-954-9325-99-7.

²⁰ *Пак там*, с. 10.

²¹ *Пак там*, с. 12.

²² The organization was founded on 10. 09. 1993 see the journal *Timpul* (Time), 1993, no. 1, p. 2 “Statute of the Vlach Association in Bulgaria” (Ustav na sdruzeniето Asotsiatsia na vlasite v Bulgaria).

population. The association pursued activities in various directions. One respondent, Mr. Zhuvetov, expresses strong dissatisfaction with the fact that the Vlachs are not officially recognized as Romanians today²³. He was the long-serving head of the Romanian cultural center in Vidin, which had ceased its activities by the time of the interview. Plamka Radoslavova was the head of the VAB until 2023. Under her leadership, the celebrations for VAB's 30th anniversary were organized and held from 13 to 15 October 2023. The event primarily centered around folklore, showcasing the participation of dance and singing groups from the villages of Gomotartsi, Kapitanovtsi, Negovanovtsi, Gumzovo, Kutovo, Vrav, Deleina and Rabrovo. The participation of folklore groups from Serbia and Romania showed an effort to showcase the unity of modern Vlachs on a regional scale. The event was also distinguished by the presence of Romania's highest diplomatic representatives in Bulgaria.

The Vlach language remains the territorial and cultural marker of the group. This mark is not negligible even for those members of the community who put Bulgarian identity before Vlach. It should be noted, however, that speaking Vlach is an age-related process. During a conversation with a 70-year-old informant from the village of Deleina, he apologized and felt embarrassed for using dialect forms influenced by the Vlach language he and his wife used in their family. The latter spoke Bulgarian with many Vlach borrowings and her husband sometimes intervened with translation. At the time of the interview in 2023, she was 70 years old. The younger members of the community do not speak Vlach. That is, of course, if they have not studied in Romania. Those returning from there speak literary Romanian. These details are indicative of the complex identification processes within the macro-community. Thus, the use – or lack thereof – of the language also emerges as a factor influencing personal choices in self-identification.

According to informants' general opinion, Vlach's lexical heterogeneity is due to the presence of many Bulgarian words. "Our language is more odd", "Sometimes we go into Bulgarian", "We speak something like an international language" or "We speak a bit more confusedly"²⁴. The informant A. I. from the village of Deleina states that, when he was a soldier in the 1950s, at the post in the village of Klyuch, Petrich region, he did not understand the local dialect. "I could barely understand even the commander. I spoke another language, yet we were all Bulgarians!"²⁵. Awareness of the mixed nature of the spoken language within the study group also created a

²³ Interview conducted by M. Markova and Kr. Bobeva on 30.09.2023 Vidin.

²⁴ BACEBA, Валентина. *Цит. съч.*, с. 184.

²⁵ Interview conducted by M. Markova with A. I., resident of the village of Deleina, driver, 83 years old, conducted in September 2023.

perception of its mixed ethnic character, particularly during the 1990s. Today, some respondents consider the “Bulgarianisation” of the language as a negative phenomenon, as, in their opinion, it enhances the distance from the Romanian language.

The interviews revealed a sense high regard for the Vlachs among some of the respondents, from the Vlach community and from Bulgarians, who both characterized the Vlachs as being notoriously wealthy, but also as cunning and inclined towards personal gain. Within the group of the Vlachs itself, for example, there is an extremely positive attitude towards women. They are said to be skilful, able to handle various types of needlework, but also gentle and hard-working by temperament. As mentioned by V. Vasseva, Vlach women are considered to be tidy, good housewives, which makes them a preferred partner of Bulgarians as well²⁶ and this is regarded as the reason for the “spoiling” of the community. When assessing the mentality and character of the Vlachs, one should note the statement that they are adaptable and can cope in any situation. However, it is important to recognize the influence of subjective perspectives in such generalizations, and stereotypes play a considerable role in shaping these assessments. In ethnological research, stereotypes are also tied to public opinion, and, based on this, an individual can be included or excluded from the group²⁷. There is no shortage of standardized notions that influence both awareness and self-awareness. Such perceptions are mostly based on uncritical and unverified statements. People repeat them without making reference to their personal knowledge. Thus, they remain persistent and are adopted as a “convenient excuse” in the assessment of specific interethnic relations.

Another important aspect of exploring the contemporary identity dynamics among the Vlachs in the Vidin region is the impact of depopulation and its effect of identity. In many respects, the interactions between communities determines the development of a region. However, after the collapse of the socialist political system, Vidin has become a region with a serious depopulation²⁸, unparalleled in the developed industrial world. In many statistical reference works, this part of the country is referred to as the poorest region in the European Union. At its core, the reasons for this phenomenon are economic. Due to the inefficient economic system

²⁶ ВАСЕВА, Валентина. *Цит. съч.*, с. 185.

²⁷ МАРКОВА, Мира. Стереотипи: специфика, характеристика, значение (етнологички анализ). В: *Пресечни точки. Юбилеен сборник в чест на проф. Ирина Колева*. В. КОЦЕВА (състав.). София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2019, с. 141. ISBN 978-954-07-4873-3.

²⁸ According to the National Statistical Institute, Vidin District has only 71 773 inhabitants by 31.12.2023, which represents 1,1% of the country's population. See <https://www.nsi.bg/statistical-data/46/190>.

of socialism, existing factories became uncompetitive and went bankrupt as job losses led to forced economic migration. The border with Romania had little effect on the economic development of the population until around 2014. The significance of the border with Serbia shifted depending on the changes in Serbia's economic and historical context. In the 1990s, the border was dynamic and porous, while today the Vrushka Chuka checkpoint is the most underused border checkpoint on the entire Bulgarian border.

The negative economic realities of the early 1990s literally brought the demographic picture in Vidin to a critical low. The crisis affected all ethnic groups, and the Vlachs were no exception. Only the Roma population experienced demographic growth, marked by increased dynamism due to Roma settlers who gradually populated abandoned villages, often acquiring properties at very low prices or, in some cases, squatting. This type of increase is reported even by the city of Vidin, where the historical presence of Roma is insignificant. However, this does not visibly affect the city's general image, where more than 84% of the inhabitants self-identify as Bulgarians. The region exhibits a pronounced trend of population ageing²⁹. The share of children under 4 years of age is the second lowest in the country (after the region of Smolyan), 3,4% (vs. 4,5% in the country), and the share of people over the age of 65 is the highest, 31,3% (vs. 23,8% in the country). According to data in 2023, the population density in urbanized areas of the district is the lowest in the country, 543 people per sq. km (vs. 1,221 people per sq. km in the country)³⁰. It should be noted that the Vidin district is one of the most urbanized in the country³¹.

Today, despite the growing inclination to seek closer ties with Romania and the rising trend of speaking Romanian to enhance the status of those embracing such an identity, the Vlach population is integrated into the marco-community. Marriages with Bulgarians are not perceived as mixed whereas those with Roma, for instance, are considered as such. The population reflects the prevailing general economic and demographic trends typical of the Northwest region³². The Vlachs travel and migrate throughout Bulgaria and Europe in search of better living conditions. Both in the assessment and in the self-assessment of the group, a clear aspiration for participation

²⁹ СУГАРЕВА, Марта; ДИАМАНДИЕВА, Ивелина. Съвременни тенденции в демографското развитие на област Видин (2001 – 2011). В: *Изследвания и материали за Видин и региона*. Т. 2. П. МИТЕВ; В. РАЧЕВА (състав.). София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2018, с. 4. ISBN 978-954-07-3646-4.

³⁰ Data based on regional profiles by county, see Област Видин. *Регионални профили - показатели за развитие*. Достъпен на: https://www.regionalprofiles.bg/var/docs/2024_BG/05-Vidin-2024-BG.pdf

³¹ СУГАРЕВА, Марта; ДИАМАНДИЕВА, Ивелина. *Цит. съч.*, с. 4.

³² БЪРДАРОВ, Георги; ИЛИЕВА, Надежда. *Хоризонт 2030. Демографски тенденции в България*. София: Издание на Фондация „Фридрих Еберт“, 2018, с. 5–6.

in various power structures is observed. The community is part of the social processes in the region, demonstrating more of a regional engagement rather than an ethnic identity. This identity remains somewhat subdued. It can be said that it manifests “on demand,” *i.e.*, without being openly expressed. This, however, in no way means that it has been effaced. Rather, it simply takes new directions, one of them being the search for proximity with Romania and a “rediscovery” of the Romanian cultural heritage among some members of the community. The 2021 census identified 1,643 people as Vlachs, or 0,02% of the country’s population, but it is likely that a significant proportion of these people are in fact Romanian-speaking Roma (lingurari, rudari³³). The integration processes are strong, with only the language and certain family cycle traditions remaining as resilient ethnic and identification markers, albeit without dominant significance. The complex economic and demographic situation in the Northwest region of Bulgaria challenges all communities (except for the Roma) to address the demographic imbalance between the young and elderly population, to form a sustainable socio-cultural environment, to preserve traditions and to improve the prospects for social development.

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³³ Maxim Mladenov also reported about these Roma in his 1985 study on the distribution and origin of the Vlachs in Bulgaria. See За тези роми съобщава още Максим Младенов в свое изследване от 1985 г. за разпространението и произхода на власите в България. Вж. МЛАДЕНОВ, Максим. Влашкото население в България (Разпространение, произход и топонимия). *Българска етнология*, XXI, 1995, извънреден брой, с. 22. ISSN 1310-5213. ISSN (Online) 2367-6892.

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ДИНАМИКА НА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИТЕ ПО ПРИМЕРА НА ВЛАСИТЕ ОТ ВИДИНСКИЯ РЕГИОН

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Резюме. Проблемите на идентичността продължават да бъдат актуални теми в етноложките и антроположките изследвания, доколкото социално-икономическите реалности и през XXI в. постоянно поставят човека на изпитание. Една от стратегиите за оцеляване на отделния индивид е да потърси опора в общностите, много често стъпвайки на исторически обусловени маркери като общност на езика, споделено общо минало, единен териториален обхват на обитаване, локална култура,

обичайно-обредна система. В хода на настоящото изследване ще бъдат сравнени резултати от проведено проучване от средата на 90-те години на XX в., когато имам възможност да попадна в експедиции на проф. Иваницка Георгиева във Видинско, както и резултати от теренно-етноложко проучване, проведено през 2023 – 2024 г. и финансирано по проект „Динамика на идентичностите в Дунавския регион“. В центъра на изследването са идентичностите на власите от Видинския регион. Представят се аспекти от проявлението на тяхната идентичност, която отчита сложната икономическа и демографска ситуация в Северозападния регион на България.

Ключови думи: власи, идентичност, динамика, Северозападен регион.