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**The Balkan Vlachs/Aromanians
Awakening, National Policies, Assimilation**

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Preface

The collapse of communism, and especially the EU human rights and minority policy programs, have recently re-opened the 'Vlach/Aromanian question' in the Balkans. The EC's Report on Aromanians (ADOC 7728) and its separate Recommendation 1333 have become the framework for the Vlachs/Aromanians throughout the region and in the diaspora to start creating programs and networks, and to advocate and shape their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity and rights.¹

The Vlach/Aromanian revival has brought a lot of new and reopened some old controversies. A increasing number of their leaders in Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Albania advocate that the Vlachs/Aromanians are actually Romanians and that Romania is their mother country, Romanian language and orthography their standard. Such a claim has been officially supported by the Romanian establishment and scholars. The opposite claim comes from Greece and argues that Vlachs/Aromanians are Greek and of the Greek culture. Both countries have their interpretations of the Vlach origin and history and directly apply pressure to the Balkan Vlachs to accept these identities on offer, and also seek their support and political patronage. Only a minority of the Vlachs, both in the Balkans and especially in the diaspora, believes in their own identity or that their specific vernaculars should be standardized, and that their culture has its own specific elements in which even their religious practice is somehow distinct.

The recent wars for Yugoslav succession have renewed some old disputes. Parts of Croatian historiography claim that the Serbs in Croatia (and Bosnia) are mainly of Vlach origin, i.e. the descendants of those who were running away from or were settled by the Ottoman Empire. The Serbian mainstream sees the 'Vlach concept' as a specific occupational status, that is, as transhumant herders who used to have a special status in the Serbian medieval state or during the Ottoman rule. But generally the (former)

¹ 1. This paper is a brief summary of an initial research project supported by the World Bank, 1992-1994. I did three brief field trips to Serbia (2002), Macedonia (2003) and Albania (2004) and continued gathering related literature and documents. This is the first public presentation of my research on the Vlachs.

Yugoslav historiographies deny any specific ethnic (and even cultural) identity of the Vlachs, and denounce especially their contribution to the creation of regional national states. In this way, historians in the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans have generally completely ignored the Vlachs as a research issue. Thus the history of these stateless people is still obscured and politically biased or simply ignored.

The purpose of this paper is to raise some issues regarding the cultural survival of the Balkan Vlach/Aromanians as a common European cultural heritage. This survival may be uncertain not only because of their advanced assimilation, but also due to numerous controversies and disputes regarding their origin, drastic economic changes and specific pressures coming from the national policies of the Balkan states and their rivalry.

Who are Vlachs

The Vlachs are descendants of the Roman Empire's Latinized but indigenous population of the Balkans. The word Vlach is of German origin and was used by ancient Germans to name the citizens of the Roman Empire. This name was eventually embraced by Byzantium, Ottoman Empire, and generally by all Slavs, though the name was later limited to describe only the remnants of the Romanized population of the Balkans. The Vlachs, however, call themselves Arumani, Armani, Aromani, Rumani – all of them meaning Romans. Internationally, the most common names are Vlachs and/or Aromanians. This second group refers to those influenced by Greek culture and living mainly in northern Greece, Albania, and the Republic of Macedonia. A group of urban Vlachs in Macedonia, Serbia, Southwest Bulgaria (and Greece) is also called 'the Tsintsars'. It is interesting to note that these urban Aromanians in Serbia insist on being exclusively called the Tsintsars (i.e. Cincari). And finally, the Vlachs that used to live in the hinterland of the Adriatic Coast were called Maurovlachi or Morlachs, and Nigri Latini - all meaning the Black Vlachs. It seems that the Morlachs had migrated to the Adriatic hinterland along with the Ottoman Empire's conquest of the Central Balkans and that their Slavicization was already advanced during the 16th century.

When Slavic people started migrating to the Balkans in the sixth and seventh centuries this indigenous Balkan population, pre-Roman but Latinized, had fled to the walled Roman cities on the Adriatic Coast or to the Balkan high mountains. The group of urban Romans and Vlachs was over time slowly assimilated by the Slavs, and gradually lost its language and identity. The other Vlachs, those who fled to the mountains, have pastoralized their life with the nomadic herding as key economic activity, a tribal structure as their core organizational form, and the Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the mainstream religion. When the Slavic peoples established their medieval states, the Vlachs gradually become accepted and tolerated, but continued their parallel existence that was usually institutionalized by so called 'Vlach laws' (Cirkovic, 2004). The Ottoman Empire's westward penetration caused the vast territorial migration of the Balkans Slavs and Vlachs to today's Croatia, Bosnia, and Hungary (15th-17th centuries). The Ottomans used these Slavs/Vlachs to serve as both auxiliary military and transportation units. Austrians and Venetians did the same and created special military structures along the Ottoman Empire's border by incorporating into these structures the runaway or renegade Vlachs/Slavs as their core manpower (Roksandic, 2003). The

majority of the Vlachs were, however, assimilated by the Serbs (mainly) and Croats in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Their origin, national historiographies, and one alternative hypothesis

There are many controversies and never-ending debates about the ethnic origin and identity of Vlachs, discussions about which include their geographic roots and migratory paths. The written documents and other materials are extremely rare. These [transhumant](#) and stateless herders did not produce any written or material evidence until the middle of the 18th century. The Balkan national historiographies, however, interpret their respective national histories in a very simplified and romanticized way, in which the narratives of the Vlachs are always marginal and biased (Mirdita, 2003). The story of their respective national history is simple: nation A has lived in some areas from time immemorial or has come there with a clear ethnic and cultural identity; its national or state territory was expanding or contracting but its core is undeniable, and its possible additional territorial claims are self-evident and easy to justify; the foreign rules could have lasted for centuries but still they have not changed anything of the nation's basic traits; and finally, the rival ethnic or political claims of other peoples, with whom nation A used to live and share space and institutional order, are ephemeral and cannot be substantiated. Within such a conceptual context, views or evidence that the Vlachs (or any other rival group) could have been territorial predecessors or biologically, culturally, linguistically or politically a real contender and sometimes or often an important factor in shaping nation's A identity, are routinely rejected as groundless. That is why there is hardly any serious and critical interpretation of the Vlach presence and impact in the history and contemporariness of any of the respective Balkan states.

By the end of 20th century, however, new research about ethnic origins and identities brought new concepts and evidence, which may be an enabling framework to critically interpret the various ethno-geneses of the Balkan people, the Vlachs included. In this paper, however, we will explore only one promising concept. It is a pioneering work on the concept of a nomadic medieval tribe by R. Lindner in "What Was a Nomadic Tribe" (Lindner, 1982), which may help to better understand the Balkan ethno-geneses. J. Fine has summarized the concept: "A tribe was not an ethnic group, but the constituency or following of a chief. A large tribe was composed of a series of different unrelated groups, who were conquered by or else voluntarily associated themselves for material reasons with the chief. The resulting tribe was usually named for the clan of the chief. Thus the Skythians, Sarmatians, Huns, Avars, and so on, were all composed of bands of horsemen drawn from many language groups – Iranians, Turks, Huns – who collectively bore the name of the dominant group at a given time (Fine, 2006)". Accordingly, the 'original' Croats, Serbs, Bulgarians, and others may have appeared in history as (small and) mixed groups of nomadic warriors in their search for new pastures and plunder, or even running away under the pressure from another but more powerful group of nomads. Both East European and Balkan history from the years 200 to 1000 AD had been heavily shaped by successive raids of numerous nomadic tribes using the east-west route (McNeill and McNeill, 2003).

The same can be applied to the Vlachs, as well. They may also have been originally a mixture of different indigenous tribes and Romans, fragmented and dispersed

all over the Balkans. In specific areas they were able to impose their language and culture; in other areas they were assimilated and lost their language. But as transhumant nomads they have kept some of the basic characteristics of medieval tribes. Briefly, they were organized in clans (called *katuni* in the central Balkans) and permanently migrated in search for better pastures and prospects of plunders. As it is well known, the key element of the economy of any mounted warriors has always been the plunder. By offering opportunities for new pastures and plunder, the Vlach clans were able to attract many Serbian, Montenegrin, Croatian, Bulgarian, Greek and especially Albanian herders, or vice versa. It is not a surprise that some Montenegrin and Albanian clans claim the same ancestors. The Herzegovian and Montenegrin clan structure is shaped by the Latinized Vlach nomads, but also by their eventual slavization. Serious research about the Pastrovic clan in Montenegro, Poljice Republic in Croatia or about Bunjevci in Serbia or the 19th century mountain of Velebit region's shepherds in Croatia would probably discover their (at least partial) Vlach ancestors. The major point here is, however, that their migrations and raids have heavily shaped the ethnographic (and linguistic) structure and culture of the central Balkans, especially around the Dinara Alps. These nomadic warriors were used by Ottoman Turks to guard new borders, bridges or gorges, to be a key military force or even just state-supported raiders to spread fear and panic ... The Austrians and Venetians did the same (Roksandic, 2003). Thus these 'Vlachs' have been the Latin speaking people, Slavs or often Albanians, but also very often a mixture of them all. The respective empires were transporting them across their space, and regulated and incorporated them into specific military and (later on) civic institutional orders in 16th to 18th centuries. That was the beginning of the end for many Vlachs as a specific linguistic and cultural identity. But some survived.

Modern-Day Vlachs/Aromanians

Due to their advanced assimilation process, cultural and political legacy and the social ([mimicry on part of the Vlachs](#)) imitation of the Vlachs, there are no reliable statistics about the number of Vlachs. Within the Vlach communities of the Balkans the estimates suggest 86,000 Vlachs in Bulgaria, 120,000 in Serbia and 186,000 in Macedonia, but even 0,7 million in Albania and 1,6 million in Greece. These numbers are exaggerations, of course. Nevertheless, they form a contrast to the official numbers that count only 10,000-40,000 Vlachs in each of the respective Balkans countries. But the Vlach revival movement has been producing new evidence and/or new self-identification numbers. The best example of this has occurred in Albania, where the 'original' number of a few thousand Vlachs in less than a decade has risen to approximately 200,000.

There are two basic ethno-cultural groups of Vlachs in the Balkans today. The first one is ethnically, linguistically and spatially close or identical to today's Romanians. Broadly speaking, this group lives in territories of Eastern Serbia and Northwest Bulgaria. Their dialect is almost identical to one of the Romania-proper dialects. Until quite recently they were semi-nomadic herders, and they still live in compact rural areas and keep their language and culture alive, though the process of assimilation is advanced.

The other group is the Aromanians. They are of different ethnic origin and directly shaped by the Greek culture, environment, and history. They are mainly concentrated in the Pindus mountain region in Greece, and within the triangle that

borders today's Albania, Republic of Macedonia, and Greece. Traditionally they were long-distance transhumant herders, but later became specialized in transportation and auxiliary military services. Based on these specialties a large, powerful and rich merchant class was created during the 17th to 19th centuries (Stoianovich, 1960). This class was multilingual, but it was Greek language and culture that defined their culture and social status. The Vlach/Aromanian dialect survived and was a source of identity, tradition, and social integration within the group. Their economic and cultural center was in Moschopolis, in today's Albania, where the major routes of international trade have met through centuries. For a brief period of time, Moschopolis was the second biggest city in the Ottoman Empire. It became a center of the Vlach culture with educational facilities, churches, printing press etc. However, Moschopolis was plundered and finally destroyed by local Turkish lords in the second half of the 18th century. The local Vlachs fled the city and migrated north. They established several settlements in today's Republic of Macedonia, but built them high and hidden in mountains, settlements that still exist but are mostly quite depopulated.

The Moschopolis refugees also established their colonies along the Danube and Sava rivers, i.e. Belgrade, Zemun, Novi Sad, Zagreb, and also Budapest, Bucharest and Vienna (Stoianovich, 1960). Some of these groups later became very instrumental in the liberation movements of Serbia, Bulgaria, and Macedonia respectively, as well as in Albania and Greece (Winnfrit, 1988). In some of the Balkan countries the urban culture and first urban elites were shaped almost exclusively by these Vlachs, for example Belgrade (Popovic, 1998). It was during this time that they in Bulgaria, the future Republic of Macedonia and Serbia started being called Tsintsars. This name was embraced by them in Serbia and they insist to be called the Cincari. This group has generally preserved its identity, culture, and vernacular (based on the ancient provincial Latin). Supported by their diaspora and Romanian scholars they even standardized their dialect and established advocacy and cultural institutions. They continued to live in compact areas and were, until quite recently, focused on nomadic herding and on maintaining their religious practice. The second half of the 20th century nevertheless drastically changed their way of life. The seasonal nomadic herding was gradually abandoned and their agriculture modernized, they started migrating toward urban centers or abroad, and the assimilation process prevailed.

Awakening, disputes, prospects

As already indicated, the collapse of communism, and especially the European Union human rights and minority policy programs, have in later years re-opened the 'Vlach question' in the Balkans. The European Council's Report on Aromanians (ADOC7728) in 1997 and its Recommendation 1333 has become a framework for the Vlachs all over the region and their diaspora to start creating their programs and networks, and to advocate and shape their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity and rights. The focus is on the use of their language in public affairs and its preservation, on education and religious service, and on the right to have some kind of cultural autonomy, i.e. develop their networks, institutions, and programs.

Our hypothesis is that the best background for any linguistic minority to survive and prosper is the cosmopolitan and multilingual environment of large states, such as the

Ottoman or Austrian Empires. But the creation of national states in the Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries fragmented and limited the Vlachs' ancient nomadic economy by building national borders. These countries have also standardized their languages and culture by establishing educational networks, mass media, mandatory military services and other measures. Their constant and even growing nationalism as well as their mutual conflicts have added additional pressures to the Vlach assimilation. Economic modernization and globalization changed their particular economy and settlements and, finally, the communist regimes paralyzed the Vlachs' self-organization and -preservation. In other words, the recent revival movement may have come too late. The assimilation is too advanced; local countries are indifferent or even hostile, the Romanian-Greek polarization is counter-productive, and the inherent capacity of the Vlach elite locally and regionally seems to be too weak.

What follows is a brief description of the so-called Romanian-Greek polarization, which constrains the Vlach revival by fragmenting them and exposing them to external national interests. The core issue is their minority status, which is specifically defined and advocated by Greece and Romania. They are offered the options of being Romanians, Greek – or neither. This is a very important issue, of course, and the accepting of any of the three options will significantly shape the Vlach future. But an equally important issue is how to preserve some core elements of their identity, such as dialect, traditions, church practice, some aspects of their economy, and some of their settlements or special and symbolic infrastructure ('the Aromanian day', festivals, literature). The final three parts of this paper analyze these vital aspects.

Is Romania the mother country of all Vlachs?

As mentioned, the dominant part of the Vlach leaders in Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria advocate that the Vlachs are actually Romanians, that Romania is their mother country, and the Romanian language and orthography is their preferred standard. A minority of the Vlach leaders from Macedonia, Albania and Serbia, although it recognizes a shared origin in language, culture, and name, believes that the Vlachs have their own identity and specific vernaculars that should be standardized, and that their culture has its own specific traits in which even their religious practice is unique.

The territory of today's Romania had been colonized and Latinized under the Roman Empire, which ruled there for about 150 years (Tanasoka, 2001). Afterwards, no written records or documents were able to provide information about the Daco-Romanians for several centuries. But in the 12th century they reappeared in history (Byzantium, Bulgaria) and formed their first principalities. After the Ottoman Empire's conquests in the 15th century their two principalities preserved semi-autonomy, which was the basis for the country's unification in the 1860s. One of them was called Wallachia, i.e. a land of the Vlachs. After the unification, the Romanians started the process of standardization of their language, which was based on its origin, that is, ancient Latin. The Cyrillic alphabet was substituted with the Latin alphabet and the Old Church's Slavic language was replaced with a new language standard in the Romanian Orthodox Church. The country's history and culture were redesigned to emphasize their Roman Empire roots. It is this way Romania has presented an attraction to Vlachs from all over the region as their potential mother country. This claim is supported by intensive 'Romanian'

activities in opening Romanian schools, signing international treaties, enabling Romanian language church service, providing scholarships to young people and opportunities for doing research and studies. All this is often referred to as the “Romanian propaganda.”

The controversy lies in whether a shared language can justify such a claim. Although it seems that the Balkan Vlachs may understand each other when they use their dialects, they have lived separated from each other. Many are of different ethnic origin and have been influenced by a variety of dominant cultures. For Vlachs from Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Montenegro and Croatia, their history, vernaculars, and cultural identities were shaped without any direct influence from their Romanian brethren. The controversy is furthermore fuelled by the overlapping meanings of the word and concepts of the ‘Roman’ and its variations, such as Romania, Rumelia, Romans. The Eastern Roman Empire people, or Byzantium’s citizens, called themselves Romans (although it was clearly a Greek culture); the Ottoman Empire called big chunks of its European territory Rumelia, i.e. Romania; the newly established Bulgaria started its life as a two-country entity, one part of which was named 'Eastern Rumelia.' And finally, there are a lot of geographic toponyms all over the Balkans which have roots in the world Roman or Romania, but they still have nothing to do with the country and people of Romania.

The Greek view

According to an official Greek claim there are no ethnic or national minorities in Greece. Thus, the Vlachs are seen as Greeks who happen to speak a Latin dialect. These odd and strange claims are sought justified in numerous studies and pamphlets. In short, it is argued, the Vlachs are originally indigenous Greek people who are descendents of local (Greek) population and the Roman Empire soldiers placed to guard passes in and around the Pindus mountain area. This was supposed to have happened even before the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century. However, it is well known that Latin as the official language had died out in Byzantium in the early 7th century, and we need a miracle to explain how a large number of Latin-speaking people in Northern Greece survived the collapse of Byzantium, the long Ottoman rule and the two centuries of ethnically narrow-minded Greek domination. This has in Greece been a wide-spread interpretation of both the Vlach identity and their status for long time, but it has been univocally rejected regionally and internationally.

This also forms an implicit conceptual basis for rejecting the opposite claim called the “Romanian continuity.” The Romanian continuity thesis claims that the Daco-Romanians (who used to live in today’s Romania, but also south of the Danube) are the ancestors of the contemporary Romanians, and that these Latinized people have continuously lived in today’s Romania and some other pockets elsewhere in the Balkans. The thesis continues to argue that large migration waves of Vlachs came mainly from the north going south, i.e. from the Carpathian and Danube region to Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece. In this way the local Vlachs elsewhere are seen as descendants of these northern migrants or heavily influenced by their long presence. The Greek claims, supported by Hungarians, are quite contrary. They suggest that it is hardly possible that the province, which was last conquered and first abandoned by the Roman Empire, had the capacity to preserve its Latinity and spread it all over the Balkans. Based on linguistic, archeological, and historical studies, Hungarian and Greek scholars claim that Romanians are not

descendants of the Latinized Dacians. There is no historical evidence of their presence north or south of the Danube after the Roman province of Dacia was evacuated in the 2th century. Their thesis is that the Romanian ancestors came as transhumant herders from the south (Dalmatia, Macedonia and Greece). In addition, they claim that the ancient and medieval Latinized population had died out a long time ago. In this way the Romanians are just a line of ancient (Aromanian) migrants (Lote, 1980).

This Greek-Romanian polarization has not only obscured and paralyzed the narratives about the Vlach's origin, it also created a lot of obstacles for the Vlach revival. On the one hand, the 'Romanian propaganda' sees all Vlachs/Aromanians in the Balkans as its diaspora, and a lot of practical measures have been undertaken to support this claim since the modern state of Romania was established in the 19th century. On the other hand, Greece, the country with the biggest Vlach population and thus a huge potential for Vlach revival, has denied the Vlachs even a limited possibility to freely explore their identity and the use and development of language, including the language of church service. They are only granted collective or political rights to express their "Greekness."

This polarization has constrained free exchange of opinion, communication and cooperation in addressing the Vlach/Aromanian as a regional (in the Balkans) or European question (as a common European cultural heritage). The Vlach/Aromanian/Cincar communities in Albania, Macedonia and Serbia are between a rock and a hard place. Romania still tries to behave as the mother country and Romanian officials raise a lot of issues with their counterparts in Albania and Macedonia. Local Vlach leaders in these countries request special meetings with the Romanian officials and ask them to push some issues. And finally, numerous stipends for Albanians and Macedonians to study in Romania are being offered, which include good opportunities for scholarly research, participation in conferences or publishing funds. There is also a continuous effort to promote the use of Romanian language in church services that includes Romanians as priests, or even suggesting that a branch of the Vlach church be controlled by the Romanian church. Greece is playing the same game and has initiated efforts such as offering work permits to Albanian Vlachs, donating large funds to their organizations or giving stipends for studying in Greece. This means a lot of opportunities for local researchers and offers community leaders the opportunity to participate in a growing number of projects. The result is that the Vlach communities, especially those in Albania and Macedonia, are split into pro-Greek or pro-Romanian groups, and only a minority struggles to be autonomous from either. This situation paralyzes the Vlach community in these countries and elsewhere and prevents them from reaching a consensus about their identity, language issues, set of traditions to be revived and the articulation of a joint regional strategy to be advocated internally and internationally

Vlachs in Serbia

The Vlachs from Eastern Serbia (and North West Bulgaria) are a different story. There are estimates that there are about 80,000 Vlachs in Eastern Serbia and 40,000 Romanians in the province of Vojvodina. (There are estimates of about 15, 000 urban Tsintsars in Serbia but they are excluded from this section). One can immediately observe a similar controversy: although both groups live as immediate neighbors to Romania, their history

and capacity to organize are different. It is also evident that these two groups have limited contact, communication, and there is little exchange between them. This became evident in 2002, when these two groups could hardly agree on selecting their representatives to form a National Council. The 2002 Yugoslav National Minority Law allows every ethnic or national group to create its own National Council, which is a collective organ to shape some cultural issues. Vojvodina's Romanians have a clear Romanian identity, the same language standard, and developed their networks a long time ago (schools, cultural centers, church service in their language, and political representation at the local level). They were recognized as national minority group back in 1934, and they have been enjoying this status ever since.

Their brethren across the Danube River in Eastern Serbia have not been recognized as a national minority group in Serbia. They speak a special dialect that is clearly identical with one of the Romanian dialects, but it is nevertheless a non-written language. They have no schools or education of their own and Serbian is their church language. Until the collapse of the former Yugoslavia they used to have only a few semi-formal associations. The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia started self-organizing after the simultaneous collapse of communism and the former Yugoslavia in early 1990s. The European Council's Report of 1997 energized the Vlachs and gave them both a framework for action and implicit international support. After the regime change in 2000, the new Serbian government has passed a National Minority Law, which has enabled these Vlachs to formulate political programs. After a lot of internal strives and conflicts they finally produced a Joint Declaration of the Vlachs/Romanians of Eastern Serbia in May of 2002. The Declaration's core elements are that the Vlachs should be regarded as a national minority whose mother country is Romania (this means that they are not only an 'ethnic group'), that their standard language is Romanian, and that Church services to be in Romanian. They also want some education and schools, newspapers, and the right to publicly communicate by using the standard Romanian language (Dragic, 2002). In addition, they require a sort of cultural autonomy, that is, to freely form their own agencies, NGOs and programs in order to maintain and develop their culture. It seems, however, that the Declaration is not fully recognized among the Vlachs and Romanians as a joint platform. What appears to be a subject of the dispute is not self-consciousness, local rivalry or political ambitions, but rather the Vlachs' identity and their vernacular in particular. There are groups quietly claiming their own specific identity and advocating the standardization of their vernacular.

If we for a moment put aside the issue of minority or ethnic group status, the preservation of this specific group is a core issue. Any Vlach activity has this as a major objective. The Vlachs are native to the region and the oldest population there (with the exception of the Greeks), and they have a distinct culture in which their vernacular and their religious practice make them different from both the Serbian majority and the mainstream Romanians. Until quite recently their main economy was nomadic herding and related to production and life style. Some remnants of this economy have survived, but only partially motivated by economy. As they live in a compact rural (and urban) area, they have preserved some of the ancient economic forms, whose function today is more to socially integrate and maintain their communal life rather than to achieve market economic goals. Although the land is privately owned and fragmented, they maintain the tradition of having joint flocks of sheep or herds of cattle, of collectively using private

plots after the harvest, and the once collectively-owned meadows are returned to their communities and used by everyone. There are still a lot of log cabins and even small settlements built high in the mountains that serve as summer homes during the pasture season. The small town of Zlot is known for an annual socio-economic activity called 'bacijanje u Zlotu'. This late spring event gathers all community members to collectively milk their sheep and cows, process the milk, and produce cheese. This is done on a nearby mountain where specially designed log cabins are used and maintained. Their rich clothing, cuisine and numerous folk customs that reflect the economic and seasonal cycles are also very distinct. Their spiritual culture, especially a cult of death, is a cornerstone of their religious and family life, which is still very strong in rural areas.

Conclusions and suggestions

In order to formulate a framework for advocating and suggesting a region-wide strategy that may help creating the conditions needed for the Vlachs' cultural survival we can use the World Bank Safeguard Policy concept of indigenous people (Ruzica, 2003). According to this concept it is not enough to be native to a territory, live in compact areas and to have a distinct language and culture, but also to use the land and other natural resources in a collective and traditional way. This concept thus implies that external interventions and projects (roads, dams, big manufacturing and mining) can disturb and structurally damage indigenous economy and social life, and that certain protective measures should be introduced. But the concept can be also applied to a set of policies that may support the Vlachs in maintaining some aspects of their ancient economy and ways of life. In general the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia and elsewhere fulfill most of the requirements, but not the economic one. Modern economy and civilization have arrived to the shores of Eastern Europe and changed its production mode, agriculture, and urban life. The traditional subsistence economy and collective use of land is a part of the past now and cannot be restored. But its remnants and surviving forms are the cornerstones that can help the Vlachs maintain their collective identity, culture, and spiritual life. This needs to be better researched and documented, not only in Eastern Serbia, but also in other Balkans countries, such as Albania, Greece and parts of Bulgaria and Macedonia. It is clearly evident that the (remnants of) Vlach subsistence economy and collective use of land are spread and practiced in Albania and the Pindus area in Greece.

And finally; the "Vlachs' awakening" is only in its initial stages. One can expect that the new supranational networks, such as the US-based Society Farsarotul or the Union for Aromanian Language and Culture affiliated with the University of Freiburg, Germany, will soon start lobbying and pushing their agenda through regional, European and international institutions. The suggestion of this paper is therefore to 'upgrade' the 'Vlach question' to an issue of common European cultural heritage, which should be supported by a substantive, international and independent research program. Additional support is needed to encourage and support the Vlachs in developing a regional, independent and pro-active set of annual events and actions, such as conferences, festivals, and socio-economic simulations of their ancient practice. As for the "Vlach community" itself it would be wise if the Vlachs could make some minimal consensus about their name, a common strategy to preserve and advance their dialect, develop

regional networks and programs and establish symbolic and institutional infrastructure around which to build their communication, cooperation, and integration.

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