

ISTRO-ROMANIANS – A FADING FLAME

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Abstract: The Istro-Romanians are seen today as a very interesting relic of the tumultuous millennial history of the Balkans. They represent the remotest, the smallest, the least studied and the most threatened branch of the Balkan Romanity. Paradoxically, in the recent years, these negative features have attracted the world's attention upon them, and now, the factors that brought them to the brink of extinction could turn into the main factors for their resuscitation.

Key words: Istro-Romanians, Vlachs, assimilation, revival, cultural patrimony, preservation

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INTRODUCTION

Istro-Romanians are the most western branch of the southern Romanians or Balkan Romanians, generally known as Istro-Vlachs. Although in terms of their origin, the opinions are divided among scientists, according to the historical and political interest, going on from Latinized Slavs to Romanized indigenous population theories, yet they have a certain consciousness of their identity, different from the mass majority. Although their national consciousness is almost nonexistent, their belonging to the Balkan Romanity is attested in particular by their idiom, the most part of Latin origin.

Through the present article, we intend to bring to the attention of those interested, a ripple of light on the history of this branch of the Romanian people, with such a cruel destiny and so neglected by the history, pulling a warning signal on the danger of their total assimilation, but also to stress the duty of the national and European authorities to keep this population alive, which represent a first class European cultural patrimony.

ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

About Istro-Romanians' origin, different opinions have been expressed, in relation to the overall outlook of various historians, linguists, geographers on the formation of this Romanian people and its language.

Theories about Istro-Romanians according to which they would be an indigenous Roman population, from the early Roman Empire, were supported first

by Italian scientists. This view was supported also by Ion Maiorescu, who made the first studies on Istro-Romanian lands in 1857. Currently, most of researchers refute this view, based on several arguments such as their language and customs similarities with the Romanians from western Romania and Timoc region.

Two main opposed theories about their origins have the most followers today:

The first one belonging to Ovid Densusianu says that the Istro-Romanians are Daco-Romanians from the southwestern part of the ancient Dacian territory, namely Banat, Apuseni Mountains and Crișana regions and the Istro-Romanian dialect came off, consequently from Dacoromanian, first as a subdialect, developing then an independent dialect (Lozovanu, 2008).

Densusianu's argument is based on linguistics and relies on the similarities between the Istro-Romanian dialect and the Romanian dialects from Banat and Southwestern Transylvania. This theory was taken up and refined by Joseph Popovich, Al. Rosetti and Nicolae Drăganu, which identifies two layers: first from tenth century to thirteenth century, represented by a common Romanian and Megleno-Romanian layer, over would be overlapped in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a Macedo-Romanian layer (Gafu et al., 2007).

The second theory belongs to Sextil Puscariu. He believes that Istro-Romanians came in Croatia during the era of common Romanian language, spread in the north of the Balkan Peninsula, on the territory of Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia, and their reminiscence is found today in these regions of the peninsula. They have formed a single group with Dacoromanians, and then this common ethnic space was fragmented by Slavic invasions (Lozovanu, 2008).

A special mention in this context, it is worth Petrovici Emil's conception, based on arguments of historical phonetics, that Istro-Romanian Slavic loans that were made in an earlier era prior to the manifestation of influence the Istrian Croatian dialects have south Slavic origin, Bulgarian type and not Slavic south-western type (Serbian, Croatian) missing in northwest Balkan Peninsula. Therefore, he advances the hypothesis that the medieval ancestors of Istro-Romanians were originally from south of the Danube, namely from Timoc area.

Trying to find a middle way that would reconcile the controversies aroused about Istro-Romanians' origin, Elena Scărlătoiu (1991) says that "the great mass of Istro-Romanians' ancestors came from northern regions of the Balkan Peninsula" and that "there were many" nuclei "located both in the central, west and north-west of Transylvania and south of the Danube, particularly in the Timoc - Prizren area". As we can see, in the absence of a widely accepted theory, the question about Istro-Romanians' origin remains open.

ISTRO-ROMANIANS IN HISTORICAL SOURCES

The most important sources regarding the Western Vlachs group consists of diplomatic sources. They have the huge advantage of being recorded acts of administrative decisions, legal regulations and court decisions or policy measures imposed by their issuers' direct contact with this missing Romanity. If we think of living conditions and how the archives of medieval Balkans have been preserved, the number of acts of this type we have today is impressive. Western Balkan Vlachs group, spread over a relatively large geographical area, stretching from the Dalmatian coast to the Stara Planina Mountains and from the Danube to Macedonia, shared the fate of the area, changing object of rivalry and confrontation between different powers: Serbian medieval state, Croatia,

Hungarian Kingdom, Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, and the Venetian Republic (Tanașoca, 2004).

Note that, although in the former Yugoslavia, other sources recorded Vlachs (Aromanians and Megleno, coming from the southern Balkan peninsula or Dacoromanians come across the Danube), we deal here only local Vlachs, designated by the term Istro-Vlach and Morlacs, which formed a separate group in Danubian Romania, Romanians fully Slavicized today and, in all likelihood, didn't survive, except by few Istro-Romanians (Tanașoca, 2004).

However, the presence of Romanians on the space of Istrian peninsula is very old. In 1321 there was mentioned a Country of Vlachs. Later, these Romanians were mentioned in some acts of the Croatian and the Hungarian kings such as Sigismund of Luxembourg, Matthias etc. After some feedback based on names and other historical items, it was issued the opinion that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Istrian Romanians constituted about 15% of the population. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under the Ottoman rule, there has been a migration of Romanian elements from the central parts of the Balkan Peninsula to the northwest, especially in Croatia, in the areas of Dalmatia and Istria. But the distinction between Aromanians and Istro-Romanians, descendants of Western Romanians, was kept long enough. (Zbucea, 1999).

Venetian documents, like the Croatian ones, captured a shift of Velebit and Vinodol Vlachs (the part of the coast between Rijeka and Senj) to the island of Krk (Veglia) and to Istria. The penetration is slow and this movement was due to the depopulation of the Istrian peninsula, in second half of the fifteenth century, after repeated outbreaks of plague. These Vlachs were called *Morlacs* and *Cici* but they called themselves *Rumeri* (Tanașoca, 2004).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, began an action in the area, from the Romanian media. Thus in the newspaper "Giovine pensiero" from Oct. 27, 1887, there was an appeal, signed by the Istro-Romanians from several villages, for the approving of several Romanian school establishments (Zbucea, 1999).

In this context entered the early activity of Andrew Glavina, considered an emblematic figure of the Istro-Romanian culture and Istro-Romanian nationalism. Andrew Glavina was born on 30 March 1881 at Susnievita and died at Pola on 9 February 1925. He had the initiative for composition and publication of a work in Istro-Romanian dialect for the first time, as a calendar print and the establishment of the first, and so far, the only, school with teaching in Romanian literary language and in dialect, in the village of Val d'Arsa, between 1921-1925 (Zbucea, 1999).

ISTRO-ROMANIANS IN RECENT TIMES AND TODAY. NUMBER AND GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

Istro-Romanians today, totalizing several hundred speakers, live in the Istrian peninsula in the northern Adriatic Sea into two groups. The first group of Istro-Romanians inhabit the village of Žejane (Jeiani), located northwest of the city of Rijeka and north of the Mount Učka (The Big Mountain). This village located north east of the mountain, in Cicarija region, has a marginal position in Istria. Here Istro-Romanians form an isolated ethnic community, being close to the border with Slovenia (Lozovanu, 2008).

Today, the village of Žejane (Jeiani) has the largest number of Istro-Romanian dialect speakers (about 400), and it is the locality where this minority represents almost 100% of the whole village population (figure 1).



Figure 1. The village of Žejane (Jeiani)

(Source: <http://www.meteo-europ.com/en/hr/primorsko-goranska/zejane-pictures.html>)

The second group of Istro-Romanians inhabits the area south-west of Učka Mountain, living in several villages located in the Valley of Boljuncica (Boliuncița) crossed by the Raša river (Lozovanu, 2008).

In the past their living area was much larger. By the nineteenth century there were other parts of Istria peninsula where traces of Istro-Romanian population were evident (figure 2).

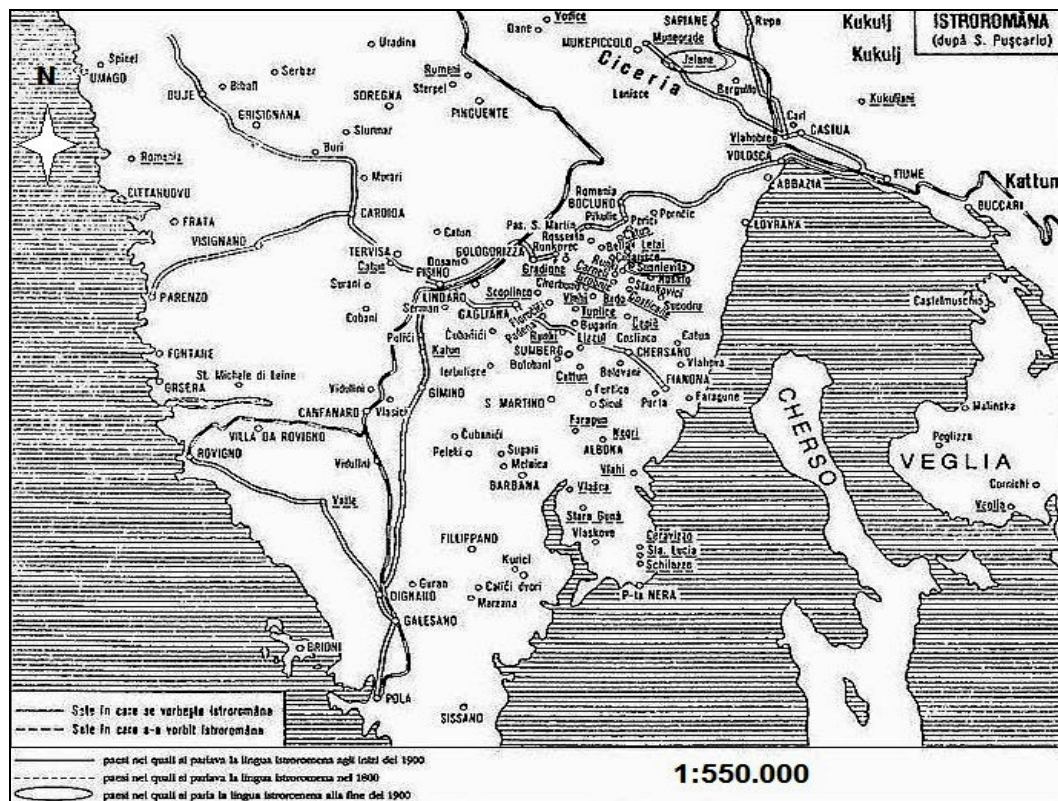


Figure 2. Villages with Istro-Romanian speakers from 1800 till today

(Source <http://cruciutul.blogspot.ro/2008/03/istro-romanii.html>)

The work of dialectology find, however, that in 1846 there were 6,000 Istro-Romanians, 4850, 1904 (Sextil Puscariu, 1926), and especially lately, in a relatively short time, there was a drastic decrease in the number of dialect speakers in 1994 totaling 400 speakers, and now their number does not exceed 300 speakers. (Sârbu, 2012)

Nowadays, especially because of the urbanization, modernization, migration from villages to cities, and the under the most diverse forms emphasized process of emigration, especially to Italy, Trieste particular, but also in other areas, it is considered that the area New York – USA. There are about 500 Istro-Romanians settled there after 1945 (Zbucnea, 1999), the Istro-Romanians and their culture are more exposed than ever to the assimilation process and their number is decreasing artificially because of this process, and, if there are no quick measures taken, within ten years from now, this relic of the western Romanity will be completely assimilated.

However, even if they no longer know their mother dialect, by their descent and some preserved ethnographic traditions and elements, it is estimated that their current number stands at around 1,500 people, which is a drastic decrease if we think that at the end of the 19th century most sources gave number of over 3,000 people (figure 3).

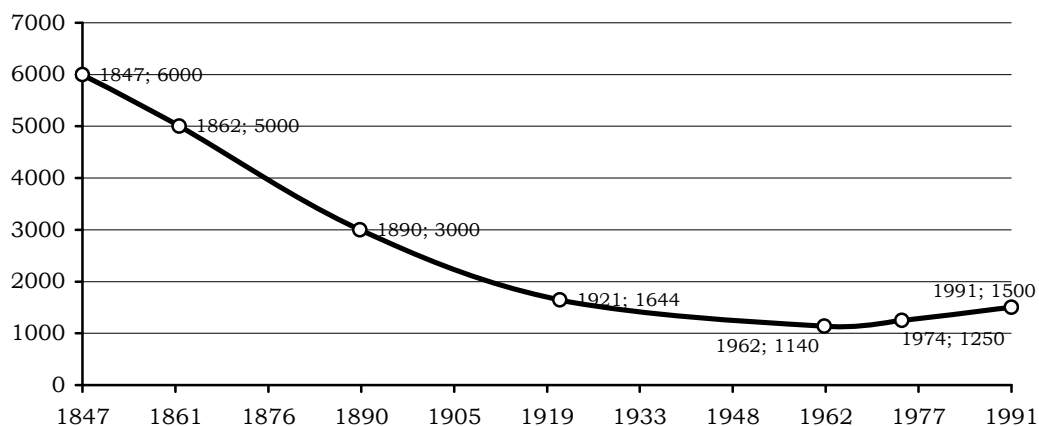


Figure 3. The numerical evolution of Istro-Romanian according to historical sources between 1847 and 1991
(Source: Lozovanu, 2008)

THE PROBLEM OF ETHNONYM AND THE NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

It should be emphasized that although the Istro-Romanians belong to the Balkan branch of Romanian people, together with Megleno-Romanians and Aromanians, speaking a Romanian dialect, they are the only ones of Roman Catholic religion.

Regarding their ethnonym, *Istro-Romanians*, it is a recently scientific creation, based more on geography criteria than on the ethnic one, they being known since the ancient times with the ethnonym of *Vlachs*, like the rest of Romanians and, they called each other *Rumâri*, derived from the Latin *Romanus*.

In villages south of Istria, they call themselves *Vlas*, plural and singular *Vlach* and their language call *Vlaška*. They also use different terms and names derived from their localities, most commonly in the form of the ethnonym; for

example they use the name *šušnevići* and *šušnevski* language, referring to Istro-Romanians from *Šusneviće* (*Sušnevița*) and *novosani*, *novosanski* the language of the Noselo village. In *Žejane*, they call themselves *jeianći*, after the name of the village, and language call *jeianski* ("po jeianski cuvinta"). The Croats call them the most frequently with the word *Jeianci* or *Vlachs* (*Vlaski*). Istro-Romanians from *Žejane* (*Žejane*) do not use the name *Vlas* or *Vlach* (Lozovanu, 2008).

However, this small community is known in the area by many more names: *Vlahs*, *Cici* or *Ciribiri*, *Mavrovlachs* or *Morlachs* to mention just a few¹.

Istro-Romanians have only a very vague national feeling. From their linguistic peculiarity in contact with strangers they are pleased to emphasize their difference from Croatian, often saying they are *Rumunia* or only those in the south, *Vlach*, *Vlas*. But at least officially, probably because of their bitter experiences in this respect, in the past, in the era of violent political clashes between national and rural masses, they prefer to say that they are Romanians speaking Croatian. Even fewer are those who consider themselves Italians, only in Istro-Romanian villages of the south of Istria (Lozovanu, 2008).

On the other hand, given the lack of contacts between the South and those from *Žejane*, between these two groups there is no ethnic or linguistic sense of community. Many had no idea of the existence of the other group, until the intervention of the Romanian researchers who visited them, because when they met at local fairs they all spoke Croatian (Lozovanu, 2008).

Unlike Aromanians, in the case of Istro-Romanians didn't appeared elements of a national renaissance in the early modern era. Traditional lifestyle, their continuous reducing number through assimilation, may be the explanation of this fact. (Zbucea, 1999)

ISTRO-ROMANIAN TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS

The historical documents are attesting the Istro-Romanians as a pastor people, practicing even the transhumance; a feature of the Romanian people everywhere, an occupation disappeared over time.

They have also dealt with the wood exploitation. One of their typical occupations that provided them with a stable income for a long time, was making wood burning coal (in 1994 there were registered last coalmen, this occupation being practiced only for tourists). Also a time they have practiced mining, but recently mining was subsequently closed. A few people left away their places of origin becoming sailors, continuing a tradition widespread among West Romanians near the Adriatic Sea during the Middle Ages. Because of the geographical conditions, they have practiced agriculture only on a very small scale and just for personal needs. (Zbucea, 1999).

QVO VADIS ISTRO-ROMANIANS?

Lately, the Croatian authorities shown some interest for the conservation of this idiom, officially considered "a cultural property". This interest in minority languages or "regional" is actually required by the decisions of the Council of Europe in relation to these languages, and is motivated by the forthcoming entry of Croatia into the EU.

We consider recent cultural and scientific events - occurred between 10 and 12 July 2008, in *Žejane* and organized by residents and local authorities

¹ <http://www.theapricity.com/forum/showthread.php?46370-Istro-Romanians>

under the title "Days of Žejane Vlach language and honesty," dedicated to the project initiated by Zvezdan Vrzic, originating from Istria, a professor at New York University, entitled "Conservation Vlach language or jeienene". The event started in two locations, with a scientific session, attended by linguists and ethnologists from Romania, FYR Macedonia and Croatia, local officials and community members of Istrians Vlach language. (Sârbu, 2012)

According to UNESCO, the Istro-Romanian language is the most endangered throughout Europe, so, it was included on the Red Book of Endangered Languages and Croatia has pledged to do everything possible to preserve the intangible heritage and the bearers of good, but so far all have remained level commitments and statements.

In 2008, the Bessarabian Deputy Vlad Cubreacov as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was the initiator of the draft resolution presented in Strasbourg, entitled "Istro-Romanians must be saved"², which brought the Istro-Romanian issue on the European agenda. In this project, saving Istro-Romanian identity is considered to be a high priority, requiring the Croatian and Romanian state involvement and effective financial and institutional support.

After 1990 there was a slight revival of the Istro-Romanian community, from cultural point of view, by creating several organizations that advocate for the preservation of their language and culture, such as The Istro-Romanian Association "Andrei Glavina", founded in Trieste, Italy in 1994, where an important Diaspora is located, then The Istro-Romanian Union "Soboru lu Istrorumeri", founded in 1995 and the most famous folk group called The Žejane Bells, "Zejanski Zvonciari", founded by Mauro Doric, becoming a sort of Cirque du Soleil of the Istro-Romanians (figure 4).



Figure 4. The famous folk group "Zejanski Zvonciari", Pola, 2006
(Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Carnival_of_the_Istro-Romanians_from_Jeian,_2006.jpg)

The biggest goal of this endangered minority is its recognition by the Croatian State as a national minority in Croatia and the establishment of schools teaching in Istro-Romanian dialect and Romanian, the support by the authorities of the founding of newspapers, radio and TV broadcasting in dialect.

² <http://cubreacov.wordpress.com/2008/05/08/istro-romanii-trebuie-salvati/>

Last but not least, a great importance will have assistance received from the Diaspora, the Romanian and European authorities and all organizations who wish to contribute to saving this cultural heritage of all humanity.

CONCLUSIONS

Istro-Romanians or Histrian Vlachs is presented today as an ethnic and cultural community isolated and threatened with extinction, but now that the threat of their disappearance caught the attention of Europe, they have a chance to be saved.

Their rural and isolated world was the one that allowed them to survive in an aloglot environment so many centuries and, by exploiting these traditions might revive them again stronger and may endure for another centuries yet.

Through language, traditions and their way of being, they are Romanians and this should determine our authorities to support them especially at cultural and educational level.

Istro-Romanians provide an example of resistance, to the whole world, through language and culture of a millennial people and demonstrates our strength and brings us once more, if proof were needed, our Latin vigorously as a Roman people, the only one who lasted from all Latin East and the only one with consciousness of descent from the ancient Romans.

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