

Vlachian Christmas in Vienna

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Abstract: The article is dedicated to the celebration of Christmas among the Vlachs from Eastern Serbia, currently living in Vienna, on a permanent or temporary base. The author compares their Christmas practices with the ones celebrated by Vlachs in Eastern Serbia (the Zajecar village community, Zajecar district, and the from the Negotin and Kladovo village communities, Bor district). The paper focuses on particular ceremonial practices, such as the use of the Christmas log (Rom. dial. *badnjak*) and the Christmas cake with divination objects inside (Rom. dial. *banica*, *cesnica*). The text is based on fieldwork materials collected by the author from 2016 to 2018.

Keywords: Vlachs, Romanians, Eastern Serbia, Vienna, Christmas

Introduction

The findings reported herein are based on the materials from field research conducted between 2016–2018, in Vienna, amongst the Vlachs (Romanians) from Eastern Serbia, who permanently or temporarily reside in the city.

Native Romanian speakers of various subdialects of the Romanian (Dacoromanian) language reside in Eastern Serbia (in the Branichevo, Bor, Zaechar and Pomoravlie districts)¹, and in Voevodina (in central and south Banat). Romanian language speakers living in the territory of Voevodina are officially recognized as Romanians, while other speakers of the language who reside in Eastern Serbia are traditionally referred to as Vlachs. According to the population census of 2011, the number of residents of Eastern Serbia declaring themselves to be Vlachs is situated around 31 thousand people, and of those calling themselves Romanians there are a little more than three thousand (Popis stanovništva 2011). However, one must

note that the Romanian speaking population of Eastern Serbia is several times larger than those figures combined.

The ethnonim "Vlach" (this is the South Slavic - Serbian and Bulgarian - variant of the word, cf. Ukrainian and Old Russian "Voloch" and Russian "Valach") is the common name of the ancestors of the Eastern Roman peoples (Romanians, Moldovans, Aromanians, Meglenoromanians and Istroromanians). In the past, the Slavs called the Romance peoples as a whole Vlachs. The Vlachs were first mentioned in Byzantine sources of the 11th century. The main occupation of the Vlachs was transhumance (Rusakov 2006). In medieval sources there is a transfer of the term "Vlachs" to representatives of other ethnic groups engaged in transhumance (Litavrin 2001: 135).

Lazar Șăineanu defined the term *Valahia* – the name given by neighboring peoples to the principality of *Țara Românească*, which arose at the beginning of the 14th century between the Carpathians, the Danube and the rivers Milcov, Putna and Siret – as a toponym of Slavic-Germanic origin, included in other languages, but only occasionally used in Romanian literature and the official language (see Șăineanu 1929). For the majority of Eastern Roman ethnic groups, the term "Vlachs" is an exoethnonym, however, among certain groups living in a foreign ethnic environment, it is adopted as a self-name (for example, among Meglenoromanians, as well as among some Istroromanians) (Rusakov 2006).

Currently, the term "vlasi" (pl.), borrowed from the Serbian language, is sometimes used by Romanian-speaking informants from eastern Serbia as a self-name along with the term "rumâni". The expression "*limba vlahă*" (Vlach language) can be heard primarily from public figures who insist that it is a separate language and not a group of dialects of Dacoromanian, although it is now penetrating into the speech of rural residents. Traditionally, Romanian-speaking residents of eastern Serbia referred to their speech as "*vorbim rumânește / rumânească*" (we speak Romanian). Unfortunately, it is impossible to obtain accurate data on the population of Serbian Vlachs (Romanians) residing in Vienna, because many of them do not live and work there legally and because most of them are frequently reported in the local census records as Serbians.

The massive labor migration of Vlach (Romanians) from Eastern Serbia to Austria began in the late 1960s. This was caused by the economic reforms initiated in Yugoslavia in 1965, which caused unemployment growth and were soon followed by labor recruitment agreements with various Western European countries. The labor recruitment agreement between Yugoslavia and Austria was signed in 1966, and the one between Yugoslavia and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), in 1968 (Butterwegge 2005; Stakanov 2013). The major labor migration destinations for Serbian Vlachs in the 1960s and the 1970s were FRG, France and Austria. Industrial manufacturing was the main sphere of employment for both the Serbian

Vlachs and other Yugoslavian citizens; some people also worked in construction and the service industry.

A second wave of migration took place in late 1980s. This period was marked by drastic political changes across the entire Eastern Europe. The collapse of the “socialist camp” and the introduction of economical reforms in its constituent countries during their transition towards capitalism, caused unemployment growth and a decrease in the quality of life of their populations. Besides the economical reasons, one can also note the political turmoil caused by the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which led to wars in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991), and in the Kosovo conflict (1999). Germany remains the main country of destination for people from Southeast Europe in the years since the collapse of the socialist system. Together with Germany, Austria and Switzerland are in the top three migrant destinations, followed by Italy and France (Brücker, Damelang 2009). According to the information gathered in interviews with Vlachs from Zajecar and Negotin, Germany, Austria and Switzerland have been the main countries of labour migration for them, since the late 1980s to the present. But it should be noted that during this migration wave the number of destinations increased. There was also labour migration to the USA and Scandinavian countries. These countries are especially popular among the Vlachs from the villages of Kladovo municipality of the Bor district. Serbian Vlachs who moved to the West at that time mostly work in the service industry and constructions.

Christmas Celebrations

Christmas, celebrated according to Julian calendar, on January 7, is the most important winter holiday for Serbian Vlachs residing in Vienna. The informants call it by its all-Romanian name of *Crăciun*. Many people want to celebrate it in their home country, but not all of them are able to get a vacation for the period, as in Austria Christmas is celebrated according to the Gregorian calendar, on December 25. There is also a contrary tendency: according to some informants living in Vienna, their relatives from Serbia visit them during Christmas time. Those who spend Christmas Eve and Christmas in Vienna, can buy a *badnjak* (Christmas log, Yule log) in the Serbian market located in District 16. Nowadays, the “log” usually looks like a bunch of oak branches with leaves. The custom of cutting down and burning a Christmas log, widespread among the Balkan nations, is also common for the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, while it has become rare among the Romanians residing in Romania. It is known that in Romania it used to be popular in the Mehedinți district (Oltenia, Banat) and in the Western Mountains (Transilvania); it is also familiar to the Romanians of North Bukovina (the Chernovice Region of Ukraine), Aromanians and Meglenoromanians (Ghinoiu 2001; Popovici 1974;

Pamfile 2005; Papahagi 1974; Papahagi 1979). The *badnjak* is a derivation from the South-slavic names for Christmas Eve (Serb. *Badnji dan*, Bulg. *Бъдни вечер*). The Vlachs interviewed in Vienna, as well as the residents of Romanian villages in Eastern Serbia, where the author has gathered materials on calendar rituals for many years, always refer to this ritual item as *бадњак*, while the Vlachs in the territory of North-Western Bulgaria (Bregovo, the Vidin region) mention the Romanian term *Moş Crăciun* – literally, “Grandfather Christmas” – together with the Bulgarian term *бъдник* or *дъбник*. According to the data gathered in Romanian villages of Eastern Siberia, the *badnjak* is brought into the house on Christmas Eve, or the night before, and burnt on Christmas Eve, or at Christmas. Inside the house, *badnjak* is laid on straw and adorned with walnuts. While the *badnjak* is burning, people read aloud a certain text or sing a ritual song which foretells good animal offspring in the upcoming year. *Badnjaks* sold in early January in the Serbian market of the 16th district of Vienna can also be presented as baskets, which, besides oak branches with leaves, may also contain corn seeds, walnuts, green grass in small pots, and red plastic or wax apples (Fig. 1). Those are all symbols of fertility. The baskets can also contain various modern symbols of Christmas and the New Year, such as: paper icons with the image of the Mother of God, “*Христос се роди*” (Serb. for Christ has born) signatures on the fabric packaging of the oak branches (Fig. 2), and images of snowmen or Santa Clauses. The sale of *badnjaks* during the relevant calendar period is a temporary business activity for “freelancers” coming from Serbia for that purpose. Unfortunately, traders from Eastern Serbia could not be located among the *badnjak* traders; those who spoke Romanian turned out to be Gypsies from around Belgrade.



Fig. 1 and Fig. 2: Sale of *badnjaks* on the market on the 16th district of Vienna. January 2017. Photos by Natalia Golant.

The tradition of burning the *badnjak* is difficult to be maintained within large cities; the log is bought before Christmas and kept in the apartment as an interior decoration, and then disposed of. Some informants have stressed that one are not allowed to burn a *badnjak* near churches in Vienna (the tradition of burning a Christmas log in the church yard is characteristic for Serbians, however, Vlachs among the residents of Zaechar and Negotin, who attend ceremonies of the Serbian Orthodox Church, also recognize it as their own). In Serbian churches in Vienna, a *badnjak* is grandly brought inside the church on Christmas Eve, placed on straw and surrounded with walnuts and sweets for children. In Vienna, Vlachs usually attend Serbian Orthodox Churches, such as: the Cathedral of St. Sabbas, in the 3rd district, the Church of the Resurrection of Christ, in the 2nd district, or the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, in the 16th district. None of the surveyed Vlachs in Vienna ever mentioned visiting churches of the Romanian Orthodox faith, although in Eastern Serbia, many Vlachs visit Romanian churches and invite priests of Dacia Ripensis Deanery of the Romanian Orthodox Church (established in 2005), for home visits.

Another ritual realia partially retained by Serbian Vlachs residing in Vienna, is the Christmas bread, which is called either by its Romanian name, *turtă*, or by its Serbian name, *cesnica* (Fig. 3). Traditionally, divination items were put into the bread: a coin, as the symbol of prosperity; cornel sticks, which symbolized health, etc. Depending on the items found in their piece, one could predict what awaited the family members in the upcoming year. On January 7, 2018, during the Christmas dinner in a Vlach family, which took place in Miloshevo village of Negotin community, the author found a plastic pig in her piece of Christmas bread. According to the hostess, it was a symbol of health and good fortune. Her husband got a tin coin pendant, decorated with coloured enamel. In this case as well, the explanation remained unchanged: a coin in Christmas bread promises wealth, despite the fact that the actual coin had been replaced with its decorative proxy. Christmas bread may also contain a pencil (symbol of intellect and academic studies), a branch of basil (symbol of beauty and health), etc.



Fig. 3: Turta (*cesnica*). Vienna, January 2017. Photo by Natalia Golant.

Other traditional dishes are consumed at Christmas: roast or boiled pork, home-made sausages, sauerkraut rolls, etc. Both the Vlachs who reside in Vienna and those from Vlach villages of Eastern Serbia have a tradition of putting all food and drinks in the house on the table before the beginning of the Christmas dinner. Once it is done, all persons present put their hands on the table and pronounce the phrase “Let Christmas help us” (Rom. *Să ne ajute Crăciunu*). Similar actions are performed at the beginning of other festive meals, during other calendar holidays (each time, the ritual phrase contains the name of the relevant holiday).

Naturally, the described ritual realia are not exclusively Vlach. Vlach or Romanian specific features are to a large extent relevant to the ritual texts, which have almost disappeared among the Vienna Vlachs, having lost their relevance, and also to the terminology. In general, in our view, one can say that among the Vlachs residing in Vienna, the process of assimilation to Serbians is more rapid, compared to the same ongoing process in Eastern Serbia. Among other things, it is also reflected in traditions associated with winter calendar holidays.

Notes

¹ In Romanian, this region is called *Valea Timocului* (the Timoc Valley)

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Biographical note

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