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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON VLACHS IN SOUTHEAST ALBANIA

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Abstract

This research gives an overview of the Vlach identity in southeast Albania within the pattern of self-designation.

I try to identify identity aspects of the place and people under the influence of border and transnationalism, during communism and post-communism, and the transition from communism to a democratic system. I discuss how during the two systems the place and people developed a marginalized identity affected by the lack of the Center's attention (Tirana) and by developing policies.

In this paper, I debate about politics of identity and politics of assimilation relating to the Vlach minority in the county of Korça. Particular attention is given to Census Albania 2011 while I explain the assimilation politics of the Albanian state.

Significant is the fact that I focused my study in my own country as part of anthropology at home, because I saw it worth utilizing the repertoire of being familiar with my own people's culture, including also the acquaintances of language-Albanian and Romanian and with people of the area.

The research was conducted in rural villages with a high presence of Vlach minority, in order to analyze inter-ethnic relations. The social research map targeted the village of Voskopoja, former Moscopole or Moscopolis as it is also a multiculturalist landmark affected by transnationalism and transmigration processes.

In observing identity aspects, I employed a total experience, demanding my anthropological resources, intellectual, political, intuitive, native, and insidersness-outsidersness observation forms of knowledge. Had to measure the controlled information the locals delivered to me or to other researchers who had already produced texts about Vlachs.

Keywords: Vlachs, Albania, Ethnic identity, communism and post-communism, politics of assimilation, identity politics, Census Albania.

1 INTRODUCTION

1. Southeast Albania: a border area, and a migratory society

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Southeast Albania borders Greece and Northern Macedonia more or less, ethnographically is considered a separate realm from the rest of the country, with a high presence of living minorities in the area. The region encounters Albanians, Vlach/Aromanian, Greek, Slavs and Romany ethnic groups who cohabited for decades and some of them for centuries. The Aromanian social group is the largest minority group in the area, where the ethnic group has settled for centuries. Being by the border, with its multiculturalist landmark the region is affected by transnationalism and transmigration implications. The region is rather rural, based on a pastoral and agricultural economy, but with de-collectivization in Albania, job prospects were not many. After the fall of communism, the Albanian state was at the edge of collapse and reconstruction, and due to this reason life necessities of its citizens were strictly limited.

Therefore, as the only solution to survive the economic crisis, people of this area mainly directed to Greece, they passed to or passed through the Greek-Albanian border, and came and went in the short or long term around this area. Immigration to Greece and the West with emigrants' remittances was and still remains essential for the economic income of the inhabitants.

The city of Korça due to its economic importance, cultural distribution in the country, and political influence, is considered the capital of southeast Albania, and the sixth largest city in Albania. It locates along one of the principal transport and trading routes that link Albania with the Balkans and the EU through Macedonia and Greece (Vullnetari, 2012:17). The plains of the area are fertile but after the fall of the Communist regime, the Land Redistribution in Albania caused disparities, a large number of rural inhabitants ended up receiving small plots of land which hardly could be sustainable. On the other side, Shock Therapy led the country's economy into crisis, a crisis not only financially but also in management. This situation was reflected in land use, wherein rural people were left without a strategy and no means to cultivate the land, and above all, no routes in the distribution of goods and services. Consequently, the lands were left barren, migration would be considered as the first and last solution. Politics of identity were a crucial strategy for the migration of the society that the population of the area saw it worth. Especially the Vlachs whom Greece and Romania automatically consider the first place their diaspora, and with migration accessibility, became beneficiaries of the process.

Years later, once Greece entered an economic crisis a fraction of immigrants returned to the area, invested their earnings, and cultivated their family land with a variety of products. At this stage, the area's economy started another kind of relationship with Greece, and agricultural production started to be traded in Greece.

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Another factor that influenced returning migrants was Albania's economy after the tumultuous disturbances of 1997. In the second decade of the 2000s, the country had entered into stability, and the free market was fully applicable nevertheless informal sector was flourishing (about Informality in post-communist Albania see Gërxhani & van de Werfhorst, 2013). Albania's first step for accession to EU membership (2009) opened new financial actions with programs such as Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) to develop and support the country's economy. During this time, Southeast Albania, a region that after communism had suffered severe consequences of economic isolation, from being neglected by the Center's politics (Tirana) through the EU Pre-Accession process, the area finally saw some transformation in economy and found itself involved in the state's developing policies. In this frame, the local and rural economy was beneficiary of grants and tenders whereas in 2011 a flux of investments was made possible in the rural area. Locals of this space and a major number of Aromanian/Vlachs- in villages such as Voskopoja, Shipska, Boboshtica, Kamenica, Drenova and Vlach neighborhoods [mëhalla] in Korça - saw it worth returning to Albania. The returning emigrants put in good service what was accessible to these funds so they could retrieve their farmland either to open new businesses or use their savings in the re/construction of their dwellings. This fragment of time is crucial for the revitalization of the area, not only in economic standards but also demographically.

Dealing on a daily basis with productions of informality such as social inequality people of the area maintained open doors to exchanges and ties with Greece. On the other hand, the neighboring country's financial crisis resulted in new investments in Korça and the surroundings. Cheap labor force of women directed Greek textile factories in cooperation with returning migrants and Vlachs to open new activities in the city. In some way, these investments have revived the employment sector in the city, specifically in textile, garment or tobacco. Food processing especially that of meat is exclusively and successfully run by the Vlachs of Korça and has found a market not only in Albania and Greece but also in Southern Balkans.

Despite the flux of investments and good policy undergone from the Albanian state in the area, since the former Mayor of Korça (Mr. Niko Peleshi) was appointed Deputy Prime Minister of Albania (2013), each impact of the global, national and local economy plays a major role in inducing inhabitants to migration. Migration mentality and mental relation with the border as a physical entity remains active, by all means for centuries the region's inhabitants have considered Greece the closest place of exchange; economically, culturally, socially, and politically. On the other hand, for a majority of southern Albanians, modern Greece was a route or a bridge towards the

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developed areas or countries. Aromanian-Vlachs were always an active section of the population to be part of large flows of immigration. May it be their former lifestyle, or economic push factors and unemployment, Aromanians yet are driven to use the same immigration paths (Greece) to direct to the US, Australia, West and North Europe. Historical records and collective memory, show that the area's population have settled a tradition in relation to migration and border crossing which occurred seasonally or in the long term.

Besides, the legacy of migration is registered in folklore, rituals and customs. The case of Dardhë, a village approximately 19-20 km far from Korçë, at present can be called a 'ghost village' as migration characterizes the society. Men migration was seasonal or in long-term mobility, which occurred in short or long distances. Men's mobility was a fundamental financial source for the village. Generally, the village's geographical conditions (highly mountainous), in addition as facts show, men were mostly unskilled, these factors were not supportive of a good local and rural economy, thus induced men to move for working across the border. Migration over Greece encounters also religious relations, there were many possibilities the locals marked to preserve their Orthodox Christianity during the Ottoman period. Some village traditional feasts, either religious festivities or family celebrations, were related directly to men's migration. At present, we find the most representing one, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary which Christians celebrate on August 15. In the Dardhë, celebrations take place on August 16th, when men used to return from migration which primarily was Greece.

During Ottoman times this phenomenon of men migration was named "kurbet". Kurbet [gurbet] is a word and phenomenon that derives from Ottoman. This process occurred during the Industrial Revolution in the West where rural and urban inhabitants of the region largely used this opportunity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kurbetlinj meaning unskilled emigrants would migrate to industrialized countries such as the United States, Australia, Argentina, Canada. Kurbet, meaning also longing for the homeland came to be part of music and poetry expression; in south Albania, this fraction of time produced those that today are found with "këngë kurbeti" [kurbet songs].

Marriages were a solution to fill the emptiness of an emigrant man in these developed countries. As a response to loneliness and the lack of primary ties, men from south Albania were concerned to marry women from their villages, their town or their ethnic group as many Vlachs did, and settled a new life in industrialized states (see also Balamaci 1995). With the fall of communism, people used the opportunity to

reach their grandfathers or relatives in these countries and migrated again, legally or illegally.

As I have already illustrated, migration throughout history, is a process that occurred through demotivational forces from a constricted, impoverished, disorganized, and resilient space. On the other hand, the results of migration show that it is an overarching motivational force that has driven the space and people in positive changes. Living by the border is an ever-growing self that maximizes vitality and psychic energy (Yeung, 2023). Migration as a pattern in the area can be considered a map of transformation towards transformations. Migration also resonated with my fieldwork at the very first moments in the area (2010), in which my research was led by migration: cultural aspects and lifestyle had gone through metamorphosis such as from atheism to Muslim and to Christianity. For example, many Muslim Albanians had converted to Orthodoxy, and had new names after baptizing in Greece. One could hear conversations in Greek as it was a second language in the area. In Greece, in border villages, towns, or cities close to Albania, I could easily meet Albanians and Vlachs everywhere. They were an important cheap working force; thus their presence was essential. No matter what migration was for southeast Albania, it was a central construct in the acceleration dynamic for Greece and a transformative force for Albanian migrants' life living in the host country. In addition, migration had/has nurtured optimal growth for both neighbouring countries and populations. On the other hand, Aromanian/Vlach emigrants considered identity politics of Greece a forward-moving and generative force to adapt and assimilate in the new country (about transference and the phenomenology of transformations see also Yeung, 2023).

2 METHODOLOGY

Despite my young age, when I started studying the Aromanians in 2009, my education was basically ethnology of socialism, a quite limited frame in criticism and more oriented in the descriptive approach; at that time I was tackling mostly ethnography, not even ethnology. In this line, at first, I chose to undertake a study of typical anthropology at home. On the other hand, I attended my doctoral studies in a former socialist country, Romania, but Romanian scholars of the time with leading anthropologists such as Vintilă Mihăilescu, Katherine Verdery, Lavinia Stan (political scientist), and many more, had analyzed different aspects of socialism and the problematics in the new democratic state. Summing up, Romanian scholars had

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already made a contribution to changing the Romanian paradigm, they democratized the methods and the approach (Mihăilescu, Iliev, Naumovic, 2009).

In Albania, with the coming of the new democratic system nothing was done apart from some analyses from international NGOs that reflected the transition process. Albanian academicians did not concern themselves with analyzes of the directorships of the old regime in humanities. Around 2008, the Brain Gain process brought back freshly graduated young students or who just earned their doctorate. The strategy was to introduce new perspectives and methodologies, but the majority of the new generation was inexperienced. So far, the research did not meet the expectations, at least in anthropology, the studies comparing Romania as a research environment and other former communist countries yet are at a very low level.

As for myself, studying in a multiethnic and multicultural city, above all in an international academic milieu (Cluj-Napoca) was a good possibility. My thesis was accepted at Babeş-Bolyai University with a topic different to Romanian studies and it could also be presented in English. Another factor I saw worth using during my studies in Cluj-Napoca was the academic freedom I was given by the Faculty and my supervisor, University Professor Ion Cuceu, who lines up with the generation of ethnologists of socialist Romania. Thanks to the Institution and my supervisor, I was granted the independence to make inquiries about the Vlachs/Aromanians without political nuances. I was neither led nor imposed on to declare Albanian Aromanians descendants of Romania. In Greece, I proposed my research project but the conditions were set, to receive the scholarship I had to declare Albanian Vlachs under Greek origins. In Albania, my research topic on Aromanians of Albania was rejected and as a researcher, I was banned from the Institute of Anthropology. The old regime method was part of the academic discourse of old-generation ethnologists who did not accept new ideas and methods. At the time, the Heads of the Institute and the Department of Folklore told me that, institutionally and anthropologically, they did not recognize Aromanians as a minority, nor as Albanians. Their statement would go in parallel with the Institution's archive situation. Vlachs or Aromanians as a minority were not found in the registers, they were mixed with regional sections and if one would be interested to identify the community in the archive records that meant losing more time than gaining material. From this first stage, I could understand that the Aromanians of Albania were completely assimilated by the Albanian state. This was the first part of nationalist politics regarding the minority's rights, the second and the third aspect of identity politics I would meet during my fieldwork, and were applied from Romania's and Greece's policies.

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Going back to the debate of anthropology in Albania and why Aromanians were excluded from academic attention, we should also see the scenery in research after 2008. Legally, with the implementation of the Reform in Science and Education in Albania (2007) the new generation of scholars expected the liberalization of Albanian academia (Shkreli, 2019). As part of the new generation, my colleagues and I were going through disillusion and frustration while proposing our research projects. IAKSA the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Arts formerly the Institute of Popular Culture was the only institution in the country studying the human scenery of Albania. Institutionally and scholastically, the old generation was tracing the steps of the old regime and its guidelines of national-communist ethnology. In these conditions, my thesis about the Vlachs (lately also my career) found its fortune in Cluj-Napoca. I could study and analyze Aromanians, and make use of empirical materials that were led during a realist ethnography under a new and updated methodological perspective. As much as I could, I tried to reveal the identity and self-acclaims of the Aromanians and could freely examine the nationalist mechanisms of Romania, Greece and Albania for the assimilation of the Aromanians or Vlachs (this depends on how the people declare themselves).

In this paper, I try to give an overview of the identity of the place as a transnational area and also of the national politics of Albania.

The field research began in April 2010 and ended in October 2013; the best part was conducted in rural villages with a high presence of the Vlach minority. In this way, I could observe better and analyze inter-ethnic relations between Vlachs, Albanians, Slavs, and Greeks that reside in this region. In order to investigate better the interethnic relations of the Vlachs, I involved in qualitative inquiry four roles of participant observation (Gold, 1997): 1) Absolute participant in life events; 2) participant and observer in different social practices; 3) observer and participant where here I could interview and record practices and the Vlach role in the society; 4) absolute observer where in these cases I was spending short visits in some villages.

Due to my long stay in the area, during my ethnographical process, I included a mixed method of field-working, individual and collective, integrating individual and other research questions where together with scholars who were interested in the Vlachs combined our knowledge. Empirical data were collected through questionnaire drafts, social media, and media and I also conducted a survey during the Civil Census of Albania in October 2011.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Two Vlach divisions in the region of Korçë/a

According to self-affiliation and the informants' claims, I have divided the Vlach community in two sub-groups, Vlachs and Aromanians. The subdivision was a particular experience in my first visit to the area that also shaped my perception of what it means Vlach and Aromanian on a larger scale in south Albania of the present day. The division characterizes two sides from inside which is the self-ascription and from outside which is the ascription from others and as a matter of fact, this phenomenon has put some boundaries in the social group itself.

The multiple efforts for politics of assimilation find a response of loyalty from Vlachs and Aromanians toward Greece and Romania. In these conditions, one would recall Nicola Balamaci's expression that "Vlachs are known for the ease with which they assimilate" (1995). The negotiated identity whether shaped by the states and national strategies, has found a place in the perception of people to the character of their lifestyle being it transhumance or sedentary.

Indicative of the division inside the community is the urbanism of Aromanian/Vlachs, as well as the feature of transhumance or pastoralism this latest lasted till the end of the 1950s in Albania.

Hoxha's regime took care to remove the Vlach fraction, the transhumant community from their seasonal pastoralist life and locate them in rural areas, where they would become sedentary. This segment of Vlachs was knowledgeable about transborder routes and they could be a menace for escape in a regime state that had to control every part of the borders. As a pastoralist society skilled in dairy processing, the government collected their flocks from private to state ownership during the collectivization process and employed Vlach shepherds in establishing the cooperative dairy farms and storages.

Around 1960, Hoxha's government had completed settling the community in rural areas and sometimes from remote villages to estates in large towns, where it was harder to preserve a minority culture (Winnifrith). A cluster of villages was composed of Vlachs who were mixed with other ethnic communities. For instance, Boboshtica and Mborje previously had been villages known for the presence of Albanians and Slav populations. Bellovoda, Drenova, Dardha and Kamenica became mixed villages with fluxes from the semi-nomad Vlachs. Voskopoja and Shipska for several centuries have remained islands of Christianity and historically represented Aromanians living in, however, the regime mixed both villages with the Muslim

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population from the nearby villages and placed in there several families from the Vlach seminomadic group.

The former seminomadic group is called from other communities 'Choban' [Çoban mali], mountain pastoralists, and self-distinct or self-affiliate to the name Vlachs. Based on their kin's oral memory and progenitors' birth certificates, this community relates their origin to Greece.

On the other side, there is the Aromanian fraction or the group who self-distinct from the Aromanian name. The complexities of the Aromanian collective identity are concerned with their urbanity and the sedentary life for more than two or three centuries. The majority of Aromanians who compose the community in urban society associate their roots with the memory origin which relates immediately to the history of Voskopoja, the former Moscopole. Prideful, they claim that are descendants of wealthy families who left Moscopole from attacks and razing that started during the 18th century. Assertions associated with the memory origin relating to the myth of Moscopole are quite frequently heard by Aromanian/Vlachs who live in many parts of Albania and not only, but also Macedonia, Greece, and Serbia. In Korça, the majority of the respondents come from other Vlach villages likewise Plasa, Shipskë, or Grabovë, not only from Voskopoja. Aromanians being well-educated and related to commerce exchanges with Romania have had access to Romanian literature, thus some evidence of their origins comes from the Romanian nationalist literature, where Aromanians declare to have roots in Romania as well.

Romanian nationalist strategies in southeast Albania and beyond have operated since the early 20th century through education and religion, which at present we find penetrating the conscience of the community, and so forth activating a pro-Romanian identity. In the village of Shipskë, I found an old Aromanian who diligently had conserved his baptism document from the 1930s along with his old passport of the 1950s that indicated his Romanian nationality. He told me that his baptizing by a Romanian priest who settled in Voskopoja around the 1930s had made it possible to add nationality in the religious documents, as well had taught them Romanian.

Aromanians see themselves as having high social status and being urban, elite, and well-educated, as opposed to Vlachs, who admit their low social status, belonging to a rural and semi-nomad society with low education. In each moment during my stay in the area, the close past of Vlachs, transhumance, turned out to be a crucial subject in the self-assessment of these two fractions.

Aromanians tend to the homogenization of the community without division, they claim no existence of Aromanian-Vlach dichotomy. They take references to the

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common religion, Christian orthodoxy, and lingual facts which belong to a branch of Eastern Romance and consider quite alike for the two divisions. Aromanians willingly tend to incorporate Vlachs within the group, though Vlachs are inclined to separate from Aromanians, as a separate minority group with authentic unwritten language that exclusively has roots in Greece. In most cases, Vlachs claim to have a different language from Aromanians by emphasizing that Aromanian is a written Romanian dialect with a large vocabulary inherited from Latin. According to Vlachs, they recognize the body of the words originating from Farsherotii dialect shared from the 'two languages' but for them, as they explain 'Vlach is different, a composition of Ottoman, old Greek, Latin in mixture with some Slav'. In the end, Vlachs, the former semi-nomads who settled after the collectivization process put a line from the urban Aromanians identifying them as 'others' and not part of the group.

National policies of Romania and Greece after the 1990s as an end to the life necessities that related only to migration as a solution, as an element has influenced at a large scale to this division by consolidating the pro-Greek and pro-Romanian factions.

Observing very closely the process, the states' multi-mechanisms of assimilation, had attracted Aromanian/Vlachs with different assets, easy migration, education scholarships, citizenship, investments in diverse cultural activities for the ethnic group, the place (Korça as a region) appeared to be a battleground of assimilation policies.

3.2 “We” or “Others”? The Vlach identity between localism and nationalism

Vlachs of Korça taken into consideration as a region itself, and with a heterogeneous community have always lived with a sense of alternative and under-constructed identities. The imagination of sameness, similarities, differences, and contrasts have been conceived along with religion, political, linguistic and class lines.

Since the Ottoman period, living under a citizenship platform and within political systems, the entire community share with other ethnic groups a common system of basic institutions, while also been systematically differentiated at the secondary level of institutional organization where alternative occupational, political and ethnic structures predominate in the area (Smith, G. M. 1996:239).

In this cultural diversity ethnic and linguistic boundaries have been reinforced, whereas a shared religion (Orthodoxy) has softened these ethnic or linguistic boundaries. As I was in the area, during my daily basis conversations with people, Albanians in Korça did consider religious, ethnic, or linguistic groups being different,

but the most marginalized were Albanian Muslims, who are highly differentiated from other ethnic groups who are part of Christian community. Echoed by the locals in Korçë, being unbaptized means being dirty. At the sight of this elite Christian community, the water used for baptism represents Muslims as impure. In psychological terms, water for Christians of the area not only symbolizes the religious process of baptism as a rite of passage, restarting life without the original sin, but in practice baptism represents the history and the relation of local Christians with the name “Turks” which on the continual basis mentioned as “Them” or “Others”. Here, the collective conscience can be explained through the politicization of historiography and a long process of indoctrination during the old regime. National communism of Hoxha’s dictatorship introduced Ottomans as brutal invaders, dirty, undeveloped, etc., and this viewpoint of modern Turks and also old Ottomans has rooted in the conscience of Korça Christians, but also in the myth of Voskopoja burnings and its destruction.

While having a shared religion decreases the feeling of difference and increases a sense of “sameness” with ethnic minorities (Endresen, 2014:18), this fact does not mean that the elite Christian Albanians sympathize with Christian Vlachs, including here also the Slavs. They are neither excluded from ethnic origin prejudice nor have been able, in time, to create a bridge of inclusion and sameness.

Not an end in itself, Korça cultural, historical, and political background, has constructed a high status in the Albanian social hierarchy. It has not only produced social stratification within its space society, but at the same time, it has created a ground for a distinctive elite identity over the entire country. Vlach’s former wealthy families do feel part of this societal elite, locally and at the national level. Dynamics in these inter-ethnic relations between Vlachs and Albanians, Slavs, Greeks, in short, the Christian community of Korça remains negotiable on a continual basis. Despite the strong class system in the city, the positionality of Aromanians or Vlachs (no matter how they self-declare), places them in a better position in the area, who make use of their historical background in the contribution to politics and in the economy of space; though this does not exclude prejudices and negative considerations that generalizes the totality of this inter-ethnic interaction

3.3 Aromanian/Vlachs and the politics of assimilation in Albania

Language and religion remain fundamental elements in the collective identity of the Vlachs. Based on the results of the Albanian Census of 2011, the statistics on the minorities suggest that 0.80% of the population in Korça speak Aromanian (Census, 2011). Comparing the final results of the Census and my personal survey and

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observations in the field which occurred at the time when Census 2011 was undertaken, I came to the conclusion that statistics were unreal/fake, which means the filed registration did count all Aromanian population. If we have a look at the website of INSTAT and make some inquiries on the folders per Resident population by municipality/commune, the figures and numbers in the report come from two communes that have a mixed ethnic population, Voskopojë (1058 inhabitants) and Drenovë (5581 inhabitants), living out villages where Vlach community extends through; Boboshticë, Plasë, Mborje, Shipska (a homogeny village with Vlachs), Kamenica including the city itself. The commune of Voskopojë represents the history of the existence of Vlachs community who co-live with Albanians or other ethnic groups (Slavs and Roma). At present, Aromanian/Vlachs share the space with Albanian Muslims who moved from the nearby villages. Voskopoja remains the epicentre of the Balkan Vlachs that gravitates nostalgia, emotions, social activities and high production of identity politics from both Romania and Greece. For the Albanian state, making compromises in giving attention to the Vlachs of Voskopoja in the Census, the action had multiple facets. A matter of diplomacy with the Vlach diaspora, with the minority itself in Albania, with EU Human Rights policies, and with states whose political interests connect with Vlachs.

During my fieldwork, I had the possibility to observe the registrations closely and very intensively, and I could evaluate the process of how data were collected in the field. Very few respondents claimed that they had met with Census field operators, others affirmed that the section on ethnicity and religion had been ignored during the registration. Hence, Official Statistics as they appear online on the official site were not reliable. Some figures in the Census also tend to increase the percentage of the Greek community and reduce the number of Aromanian/Vlachs who live in the area. This, to some extent, is a result of Greek policies that have assimilated a large number of Vlach communities in south Albania. Since 1992, Greece applied different mechanisms to penetrate all over south Albania. The strategy was to gain and register more and more members from Vlach community through the establishment of cultural associations. The call for membership gave optimal results, once Aromanian/Vlachs had given proof of their language knowledge, and the Greek state provided the promised benefits; education scholarships, Greek residency, citizenship, and pensions. As a matter of fact, this process overpassed its cultural purposes and gave way to a corrupted system of registrations of Albanian citizens with no records and/or origin memory relating to Vlach identity. Albanians, be they Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim, could come from each corner of the country and beyond to pay an expensive membership as Vlachs; in legal definitions in front of the Greek state, being/becoming a Vlach means to be/become Greek and this fundamental fact

attracted most Albanian citizens (with/without Vlach origins) after the dictatorship, who in this way would realise their emigration plan to Greece.

In addition, as part of identity politics from Greece, immediately after the fall of communism in Albania, a political faction was established that took seat in the pluralist Parliament (1992). The political party was registered under the name PBDNJ (The Unity for Human Rights Party). A social-liberal political party since then, PBDNJ has had an intensive activity in supporting the Greek minority in Albania, including here also Vlachs, and achieved good results in expanding their policy by largely assimilating Aromanian/Vlachs. Semi-nomadic history and transhumance in pre-nation-state period was a starting point to declaring Greece as their origin country. And, the next pffff was language. During the Population Census of 2011, PBDNJ had a high role in the assimilation campaign where in detail the party took care that the Vlach community had to be declared as Greeks. Their campaign was located in different areas in south Albania, in Korça as a region and a city conducted the campaign where Vlachs of the pro-Greek faction live, in Voskopoja, Shpaska, Boboshtica, Drenova.

3.4 Aromanian-Vlachs between figures and numbers

Tom Winnifrith (1995) estimates 200,000 Vlachs in south Albania, where he includes all those who think of themselves as Vlachs/Aromanians in terms of descent, with or without knowledge of the language, as well as those who speak the language but do not refer to a distinct identity (Schwandner-Sievers, 2002:148).

More or less Aromanian/Vlach Associations' figures in Albania are closer to the ones that Winnifrith gives, according to their surveys. Associations share their figures based on membership registrations that calculate approximately 130,000 Aromanians who live in south and central Albania. The Association 'Arâmânii din Albania', places a vital position in cultural organizations in the country, a pro-Romanian faction in close cooperation with the Romanian government, for this crucial debate of statistical considerations, agrees (affirmations of the president of the Association) that a higher number of Aromanian/Vlach inhabitants live in Albania. While in public, in media, and in meetings with state institutions, the Association takes references from statistics published in the text of the well-known scholar Tom Winnifrith.

According to the studies made by the Albanian demographer Arqile Bexolli (2000) on behalf of the Centre for Geographical Studies at the Albanian Academy of Science, Aromanians register about 139.000 with a percentage estimation of 3.6 of the population (2005:121).

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Many demographic references in Albanian studies, when it comes to estimating religion and ethnicity based on the first Census survey (1928) that was carried out in the making of modern Albania during the reign of King Zogu I. The data of the census are based on self-identification of ethnic origin and religion. The information provided in the registration records informs us that Aromanian/Vlachs were registered under the name Aromanians, numbering 55,000 Aromanians throughout the country with a percentage estimation of 6.62103 (Ortanovski, 2000:114).

Other official results numerate with the establishment of the communist regime in Albania, in which the first demographic survey was conducted in 1950, then followed by surveys in 1955, 1960, 1969, 1979, and the last one in 1989.

Through the results of the censuses, we can produce a general view of where the position of Aromanians fell under the political pressure of communist dictatorship, for instance from 4249 Aromanian inhabitants the numbers declined to 366 inhabitants. These changes in statistics are part of the deculturalization process of minorities in Albania that took place in 1968, initiated as politics of nationalism with an aim of modernizing, and homogenizing the population as well as assimilating minorities. These mechanisms were generated under the nationalist-communist-atheist state ideology. In this process, minority communities were forced to abandon their nationality and replace it in the official documents with Albanian. In addition, with the establishment of an atheist state, not only religion was eliminated and people were persecuted but also the anti-minorities culture was implanted in society, under the refrain of the construction of the new socialist man. Consequently, the new policy directions had Aromanians, as the largest minority in Albania, be less represented in the demographic surveys.

On the other hand, the new communist state produced multiple hostile activities which laid down crucial elements of human rights. As the national legislation was offered to the people, the Constitution of March 1946 guaranteed equality to all citizens, regardless of nationality, race and religion, protection of the development, and free use of their language to national minorities (see Albanian Constitution of 1946, article 39 in Ortanovski, 2000:193). Nevertheless, in practice, during the communist regime, there were clear violations of human rights for all citizens, and therefore also of the rights of minority members.

Between two censuses that occurred in two different political systems - the last census was in 1989 and the first one undertaken in 2001 - many political, economic, and social events happened. After 1991, Albania started a transition from central planning to market economy, in rural areas, the process of collectivization was modified with de-collectivization and privatization. The change was rapid

nevertheless poverty was not challenged. As a result, the economic instability of the country produced waves of migration mainly to Greece and Italy due to geographical vicinity and the prospect of a better financial situation in the host countries. Different sources (INSTAT Albania, Italy, Greece, EUROSTAT) show figures on the three flows of Albanian migration that till 2001 reached approximately 20 percent of the total population (710,000 people), were living outside the country (IOM:2008). In 2001, the Albanian National Statistics Institute conducted a demographic survey guided by different suggestions of the UN, OSCE, and Council of Europe amongst many sections, the management of ethnic minorities was a part of. As a matter of fact, this demographic estimation in a new political system (democracy) had to be adopted under a new dimension, clearly expressed by international organizations and international conventions on human rights. However, the first Census after communism did not collect real data on ethnic groups approximating an estimation of 992 Aromanians living in Albania (0,03% of the population). When conversing with Vangjel Shundi (2007) the President of the Association Arâmânii din Albania, INSTAT results that represented Aromanians were highly contested in the media. Different associations, pro-Greek and pro-Romanian based the facts on the membership registrations in which each year had seen a growing number thanks to the migration policies of these two states.

In 2011, the European Union financially supported €8 million to the Albanian government to strengthen the Albanian statistical system by also assisting INSTAT Albania in implementing the Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, conducted in October 2011. The launch of Census 2011 marked one of the main achievements of the Albanian State to meet the European and international standards as well as the recommendations requested by the European Parliament for Albania's accession into the European Union. At last, the questionnaires included a section on ethnocultural characteristics like ethnicity affiliation, mother tongue and religion.

As I followed the survey directly, minority members and associations hoped that this census finally would bring to an end the former situation inherited from the dictatorship and would clarify the contentious position about figures and numbers. Simultaneously, it was a moment of truth that minorities would express legally their ethnic origin. In fact, during the pre-Census stage, the registration of ethnic groups and religion was accompanied by intense contestations from Albanian nationalists urged by a nationalist movement Aleanca Kuq e Zi (Red and Black Alliance), that in its content appeared with primordialist stances. Under the epitomized slogan "The Albanian's faith is to be Albanian!" explicitly in public AKZ appeared in public

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repossessing a repertoire from the national movement of the 19th century. In reality, for many Albanian intellectuals, these slogans and the campaign appeared as an extension of nationalist-communist propaganda. The selection of information was a mix of nationalist literature highly used in education during communism. Capturing the many events in Albania and in countries where there is a high percentage of Albanian diaspora, AKZ led by Kreshnik Spahiu ran a proper campaign. Spahiu made a set of appearances in media, meetings and gatherings with juveniles, a target group who were born after communism. AKZ nationalist campaign in 2011 worked efficiently. The mosaic of post-communist transitional settings had influenced at large to manipulate society's attention, where remembrance and justice for the victims of communism came to be replaced with complete amnesia. For 20 years, there was a politic of anti-remembrance that integrated into the everyday life of people a set of multiple factors. The entire mechanism nourished the possibility to erase the mental records of the communist dictatorship. With the fall of communism, society itself was involved in many changes in their life: freedom of speech, free-market, poverty, migration, economic crisis, shock therapy in conjunction with the collapse of financial pyramid schemes, the collapse of the state in 1997(nearly a civil war), the war in former Yugoslavia and Kosovo refugees in Albania.

On the other hand, not only were AKZ and Kreshnik Spahiu reviving the nationalist method of Lenin-Stalin communism- Albanians who lived in communist times were confused but at this time public debates and talk shows on television, voiced nostalgic arguments for communism. During their televised quarrels, the phrase "it was better when it was worst" was frequently articulated.

The AKZ campaign was following the same line of atheism and homogenization that communist dictatorship had used in 1968. Through massive slogans in the media and in the streets, Spahiu invited Albanian society, mainly the young generation to boycott the three questions of the Census; religion, mother tongue and ethnicity.

On the other side, associations' representatives from linguistic and national minorities set up a so-called State Committee for Minorities (2010) in order to monitor the process of the Census, and how would be applied in the field. In addition, an 'Assembly Declaration by the Minority groups in Albania' came out imposing on the Government and INSTAT to respect the rights of minorities in Albania where they suggested the Law Against Discrimination and the Convent of European Parliament for the protection of national minorities (2010).

The pre-Census stage appearing in media and social networks reflected a battle

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between nationalists, INSTAT (Government), Non-Profit Organizations for Human Rights, minority members and associations. Each party asked for ground either in their political interests or in human rights matters. In reality, the influence of AKZ deteriorated the situation, Spahiu claimed either to boycott the Census registration and Albanian society had to declare themselves 100% of Albanian origin. Concurrently, as the process was deteriorating, leaders of minorities' associations found it unconstitutional and abusive, which reduced opportunities for self-identification of National and Linguistic Minorities and thus they also invited their communities to boycott Census 2011.

The results came out and the statistics on the Aromanians suggested that 8266 inhabitants were ethnic Aromanians, making a percentage of the population in Albania of 0.30%. Accordingly, the census numbered 3848 inhabitants who use Aromanian as their mother tongue, making 0.137 percent of the Albanian population. Due to partial work in the field, Census 2011 conducted by INSTAT Albania lacked major data from villages with Aromanian communities and in many areas in Korça as well. The priest of the Aromanian church in Korça told me in an interview (2011), "Nobody knocked at our doors. We didn't even see how the form was made". Some community members affirmed that "when it came to responding to religion and ethnicity section, INSTAT field employers neglected our replies". Therefore, the first Albanian census which had to include questions on the citizens' identity (religion and ethnicity), was not representative, at least the section on identity and origins resulted in a failing process. After 80 years in which they have had not been able to openly express their ethnic and religious identity, not only minority communities but also Albanians did not find space to use this right. Even the Albanian community itself was affected by this fictive Census. As they express INSTAT employers in the field neglected also the registration of religious communities.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Of course, the question of the Vlach minority in Albania remains controversial. Multiple facts that are mentioned in this paper show that the position of Vlachs in identity matters is contestable. Over the course of time, a variety of figures has been produced by the Albanian state and by cultural associations, and scholars made their personal surveys and gave their research statistics. These figures from different sources have influenced at large the Aromanian/Vlachs of Albania to have been almost or completely Albanianized (Endresen, 2014: 18). Aromanians' identity argumentations are an open subject due to constant changes of socio-political events in national or global level. In addition, Aromanians/Vlachs for centuries are part of

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integration either assimilation or self-determination, their identity at times/moments is fragile and at times stronger, it is simply negotiable when better living opportunities are present.

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