

KRAŠOVAN IDENTITIES

The following study of *Karaševci's* journey through their different ascribed identities to their still-nascent Croatness may be regarded as paradigmatic for other isolated, small-sized linguistic “splinter groups” that did not participate in nationalist mobilization, although their case is anomalous on several points. First I will give an outline of that part of their history which is supported by sources and present how language and religion, that could serve as elements of traditional identities, made difficult their incorporation in modern national frameworks. When dealing with linguistic issues, I am restricted to the facts set up by scholars and to sociolinguistic references. Next, I will describe the different speculative theories about their origins that were linked to ascribed identities. Finally, I will sketch the evolution of their Croatian identity and its dilemmas in the 1990s and 2000s.

Karaševci populate seven ethno-linguistically more or less homogeneous villages of the Karaš/Caraș valley, in the South-Eastern, hilly region of the Romanian Banat, at roughly thirty kilometres from the Serbian border, and form a minority in the nearby industrial town of Reșica/Reșița, where most *Karaševak* men worked between the 1950s and the 1980s, as well as in Tirol village, on the edge of the plain, where they settled down in 1828. At the time of the 2002 census, they numbered around 6300–6500, by far the greatest part of which living in the seven villages, 525 in Reșița, 59 in Tirol and perhaps a few hundred scattered throughout the Romanian Banat.¹ The *Karaševci* in Jabalče/Iabalcea, a 210 strong community in 2002, have spoken Romanian as their mother tongue since time immemorial, but they are of Roman Catholic religion and declare themselves *Karaševak*.

The ethnonym *Karaševak/Krašovan* apparently comes from the name of their largest and centrally located village, Karaševo/Carașova.² Their material culture in the 1910s was similar to that of the surrounding Romanians, engaged as they were in cattle breeding and fruit growing, with the notable exceptions of the women's costume that included a very pecu-

1 All statistical data in the present study come from Árpád Varga E., *Erdélyi etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája: Népszámlálási adatok 1850-2002 között*; available at <http://www.kia.hu/konyvtar/erdely/erd2002.htm>; accessed 16 April 2011.

2 Their vernacular Romanian name is *carașoveni*, but as a result of Emil Petrovici's choice of the term *carașoveni* (originally restricted to dwellers of Karaševo, where Petrovici conducted his fieldwork), the latter has supplanted the former in written use as a generic name. *Karaševci* adopted the Romanian word as *krašovan* and since 1991 have been also referred to in Croatia as *karaševski hrvati*. The German ethnonym is *Kraschowaner*. (Marcu Mihai Deleanu, *Însemnări despre carașoveni: Interferențe lingvistice și culturale specifice Europei Centrale*, Reșița: Banatica, 1999, pp. 19–22.)

liar type of headgear protruding like horns above their foreheads, the way of tying the thongs of their sandals and probably women's predilection for carrying every burden on their heads.³ What separated them from their neighbours was their South-Slavic language and their Roman Catholic faith. All nine neighbouring localities are today predominantly Romanian, but throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seven had sizeable German (Anina also Slovak) populations. Although the Germans belonged to the same Roman Catholic Church, most of them, in contrast to the *Karaševci*, were miners, metalworkers or lumberjacks. From a relatively early date, *Karaševci* were selling their fruits in the mining and industrial towns of the area and were hawking them all over the Banatian plain. In spite of their relative geographical isolation – the rugged surface makes access even to the directly neighbouring villages difficult and the only exit of the basin they inhabit is the long and narrow valley of the Karaš heading South-West – they had more intense contacts with outgroup members than most Romanian villagers. By 1900, at least *Karaševak* men were generally bilingual in Romanian.⁴ They also had a remarkably high degree of alphabetisation: 73% of them could read and write in 1900, doubling or even tripling the average of the district, and four or five times the figures nearby Romanian villages reported.

The first explicit mention of the existence of South-Slavic speaking Catholics in Karaševo dates from 1619, when a Jesuit of Dalmatian origin, Father Marin Dobrojević led a mission to the region.⁵ He did not refer to them as a recently converted group (something he would certainly have done if he could have boasted of converting them) and it is almost sure that they had not moved there under the Ottoman occupation. The castle above the locality, today in ruins, was built by the King of Hungary after the Mongol invasion in 1241–42 and was mentioned as “castrum de Crassou” in 1247.⁶ It took this name from that of the river,

3 There are two important ethnographic studies on the *Karaševci* in Hungarian, dating from the 1910s. A *krassósözövényi krassovánok* by the geographer Géza Czirbusz (Budapest: Élet, 1913) is a book-length version of his concise presentation of the group, published as an addendum to Theodor Stefanovic-Velovsky: *Die Serben im südlichen Ungarn, in Dalmatien, Bosnien und in der Herzegovina*, Wien: Karl Prochaska, 1884. Better informed and more reliable is Károly Cs. Sebestyén, who also wrote his study in the same period, but did not publish it until 1941; “Adatok a krassovánok néprajzához,” *A Néprajzi Múzeum Országos Magyar Történeti Múzeum Néprajzi Tára Értesítője* 33 (1941), no. 2, pp. 134–58. Although the latter's description is apparently based on his familiarity with one particular village, his observations are confirmed by the Romanian high-school teacher Traian Simu from two decades later; *Originea crașovenilor: Studiu istoric și etnografic*, Lugoj, 1939.

4 Antal Véber, ed., *A Délvidéki Kárpát-egyesület kalauza*, Temesvár: Délvidéki Kárpát-egyesület, 1894, p. 273 and Emil Petrovici, *Graiuul crașovenilor*, Bucharest, 1935, pp. 15 and 21.

5 Castillia Manea-Grgin, Prilog poznavanju vjerske povijesti karaševskih Hrvata u ranom novom vijeku, *Povijesni Prilozi* 2004, no. 27, pp. 57–70.

6 I have reconstructed the history of Karaševo and its vicinity mainly on the basis of Frigyes Pesty, *Krassó vármegye története*, vol. 2, bk. 1, Budapest: Krassó-Szörény vármegye közönsége, 1884, comparing it with more modern works to filter out his potentially forged or dubious sources.

which in turn is perhaps derived from the Oghur-Turkic **qara šuy*, meaning ‘black water.’⁷ The township in the foot of the castle hill, that probably emerged in the following decades, was the seat of a Catholic archdeaconry in 1304, but this fact does not necessarily involve a substantial rural Catholic population residing there at that time, because the castellan also administered the surrounding Vlach (Romanian) district of Haram, extending over a large territory where heads of Vlach villages and ennobled Vlach families often converted to Catholicism. The ethno-linguistic affiliation of the medieval residents is shrouded in obscurity, as contemporary documents did not refer to it, nor did their use of place names reflect the local usage. Thus, the last document issued by a Hungarian chancellery that contained the name of the township before the Ottomans took over the territory from the Kingdom of Hungary in 1552, still used the Hungarian variant “oppidum Krasso.” Four years later, however, an Ottoman defter from 1554 rendered its name as “Qıraşıva-i Bozorg,” with a South-Slavic suffix, suggesting that by that time it was already inhabited by a South-Slavic population, more than likely the ancestors of today’s *Karaševci*.⁸

The distinct dialect of the *Karaševci*, whose closest relatives are spoken some hundred and fifty kilometres to the South, their Roman Catholic religion and above all the combination of the two beg for an explanation. Because of the lack of written sources, however, there will most probably never be an answer to when and from where their ancestors settled in the place where they now live and when and where they converted to Catholicism. The question of origins generally seems to be an important one in the fashioning of group identity, and if historical sources remain silent, speculation will fill the free space.

From the combined testimony of defters and place names, it is clear that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there used to be many South-Slavic settlements in the South-Eastern Banat. If true, it is significant that the “relict dialect” of Svinica/Svinița on the Danube shows important similarities to that of the *Karaševci*,⁹ but the Serbian dialects spoken in the plain areas of the Banat are markedly different from it. It is also quite plausible that apart from the *Karaševci*, the great majority of erstwhile South-Slavic speakers in the hilly parts of the Banat were Orthodox. Had there been a more substantial contingent of Catholic

7 When first mentioned in 1285, its name was spelled “Karasu.” (Kiss Lajos, *Földrajzi nevek etimológiai szótára*, vol. 1, Budapest: Akadémiai, 1978, p. 688.)

8 Quoted in modern Romanized form, at the relevant place of Pál Engel, *A temesvári és moldvai szandzsák törökkori települései, 1554–1579*, Szeged: Csongrád megyei levéltár, 1996. According to Pesty there existed a Bosnian Franciscan monastery in Karaševo between 1509 and 1552, but neither of the two, very accurate works on the historical monasteries of the region mentions it; Adrian Andrei Rusu, *Dicționarul mănăstirilor din Transilvania, Banat, Crișana și Maramureș*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000 and Dumitru Țeicu, *Geografia ecleziastică a Banatului medieval*, *ibid.*, 2007.

9 There is a monograph in Serbian on the Svinica dialect by Mile Tomić that I could not consult, and the Romanian dialectologist whom Deleanu questions on the subject only mentions its existence and does not go into details (Deleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–4.)

Serbian, the Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries, frequently of South-Slavic origin, who repeatedly visited the region in the first half of the seventeenth century, would surely have reported on this state of affairs, but on the contrary, they usually complained of the hostility of Serbians to Catholicization.¹⁰ After the ceding of the Eastern Banat districts by Transylvania to the Ottomans, the subsequent flight of population to Transylvania and the devastations of wars, the region was still far from uninhabited when a Hapsburg-led coalition finally expelled the Ottomans, but its sole Catholic inhabitants were the *Karaševci* and a group of Romanian-speakers in the village of Slatina, the probable remnants of a successful early-seventeenth century proselytizing mission.¹¹

From the 1710s on, the history of the *Karaševci* gradually becomes better documented. With its four hundred houses, Karaševo entered the period of Hapsburg rule in 1717 as the second largest settlement in the Banat after Temišvar/Timișoara. It soon became a centre of Jesuit and later Franciscan missionary activity, with Bosnian Franciscans also maintaining a religious house between 1760 and 85. In 1740 twenty-five Catholic Albanian families came to live there from the Northern-Albanian Kelmendi clan.¹² Their villages consisted of loose clusters of permanent and seasonal farmsteads until the 1790s, when the authorities concentrated the population in compact settlements. They did not have private landlords; most of their lands belonged to the Treasury and after 1855 to the Imperial Royal Privileged Austrian State Railway Company (StEG), but were held in lease by the *Karaševci*. The region was under military administration until 1779, when it became part of Hungary, but in 1810 *Karaševci* were incorporated into the Military Frontier as a separate unit. In 1873 their territory once again merged with Hungary, while in 1919 it became part of Romania. Because of their low birthrates and sporadic migration to the villages in the plain and to towns, they have been on a slight, but steady demographic decline ever since 1880.¹³ Today, except for those from Jabalče/Iabalcea, they are balanced bilinguals, with a solid maintenance of the local idiom. Although they have had mostly Romanian schools since the early 1960s, children up to the age of six don't understand any Romanian, so teachers are compelled to address first-grade pupils in their native dialect.¹⁴

10 István György Tóth, *Misszionáriusok a kora újkori Magyarországon*, Budapest: Balassi, 2007.

11 It is not inconceivable that the Romanian-speaking *Karaševci* of Jabalče/Iabalcea were originally another such group.

12 Jenő Szentkláray, *Száz év Dél-Magyarország újabb történetéből*, vol. 1, Temesvár, 1879, pp. 285–6 and Simu, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

13 Petrović, *op. cit.*, p. 4 notes the widespread use of birth control techniques among them. On their present-day demographic trends see “Crașovenii și natalitatea,” *Hrvatska grančica* 15 February 2011; available from http://www.zhr-ucr.ro/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=632&Itemid=250; accessed 16 April 2011.

14 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

Several accounts from before the Second World War agree that *Karaševci*, when questioned on their national belonging, rejected the categories Serb, Croat or Bulgarian and proudly insisted that they were nothing else but *Karaševci*.¹⁵ In 1930 they declared “other” nationality, in spite of there being a “Serb–Croat–Slovene” category on the census sheets.¹⁶ The strength of this locally based identity has since waned and its exclusiveness has evaporated, but unless they make public declarations, they still usually call their vernacular “limba carașovenească” in Romanian.¹⁷ Predictably, the notion of “Krašovanness” was not a very ambitious one and rather fluid at that: symptomatically, a local magic spell differentiated, among other “nations,” between “Krašovanke,” “Seljanke,” “Nermidžanke” and “Jabalčanke” (Krašovan women, women from Karaševo, Nermid/Nermed and Jabalče/Iabalcea).¹⁸ Because of the small size of the group and their lack of a native intelligentsia (until the 1950s, even their priests tended to be aliens: Banat Bulgarians, Slovaks or Hungarians¹⁹), they did not develop a claim for their own language, never consciously tried to implement *Karaševljanski* as a medium of instruction in their schools (they only did so to the extent teachers and pupils were deficient in the official medium), let alone to engage in language planning. Literature in the vernacular was for centuries restricted to a set of popular hymns and when Milja Šera, the author of several books of poetry in Romanian, decided to publish his poems in the dialect, he did it at Matica Hrvatska, with a foreword cautiously advising his readers that he did not speak proper Croatian, because he had not had the opportunity to learn it.²⁰ If something like a “high” variety of the idiom has taken shape since *Karaševci* have been allowed to manage their official affairs at the local communes in “Croatian,” it is likely to owe most of its distinctive words and expressions to adoptions from the Belgrade and Zagreb medias.²¹

Besides the sense of localness, the other ingredient of their traditional group identity has been religion. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century accounts emphasized their devotion and their popular syncretism that included celebrating the Orthodox feasts and observing the Orthodox fasts along with the Roman Catholic ones. They still participate in great numbers in the pilgrimages to Rodna/Radna, at roughly 110 kilometres from Karaševo and have

15 Lj. Miletič, “Ueber die Sprache und die Herkunft der sog. Krašovaner in Süd-Ungarn,” *Archiv für slavische Philologie* 25 (1903), p. 162, Czirbusz, *A krassószörényi krassovánok*, p. 121, Simu, *op cit*, pp. 112–3.

16 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

17 Ivan Birta, *Karaševci: Narodne umotvorine sa etnološkim osvrtom*, Bukurešt: Romcart, 1993, p. 16; quoted in Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

18 Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

19 Miletič, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–8, Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 15 and Petar Vlašić, *Hrvati u Rumunjskoj*, Beograd, 1928, pp. 20–3, quoted in Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

20 *Pogleni, Bože, na naše sbze*, Zagreb: Nakladni Zavod Matice Hrvatske, 1996, p. 5, quoted in Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

21 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 36, 38–9 and 94. He also mentions the “Serbian lilt” *Karaševci* put on when they talk to aliens (*ibid.*, p. 36).

their own annual “Krašovan” fair at the more proximate Ciclova/Tschiklowa pilgrimage site. In the 1990s the regular weekly villages meetings in Karaševo were still held after the Sunday Masses.²² Before 1785 their parishes were staffed by Bosnian (among them also Bulgarian) Franciscans, but the order kept its close ties with the *Karaševci* until the twentieth century. Besides spiritual guidance, representatives of the Church sometimes tried to provide them with viable identities that could offer more than traditional ones, but in which the Roman Catholic church still has a central role. The logo of the Union of Croats in Romania (ZHR) prominently displays a cross, and the current ZHR mayor of Karaševo has a degree in religious instruction.²³

As will be shown, there have always been local clerics, occasional visitors and especially scholars who had never set foot in the Karaš basin, whom the notion of *Karaševci* as a group standing apart did not satisfy and ascribed different national categories to them. These arguments were then backed by theories about the origin of the group. On the following pages, I will outline one by one these claims to national belonging and the theories of origin behind them, together with the responses they triggered from the *Karaševci* themselves, leaving the foundations of their Croatian identity to the end, as something presaging their connections with the Croatian kin state and their recognition and institutionalization as part of the Croatian minority in Romania in the last few decades.

Most writers before 1903, and especially the well-informed among them accepted, in one way or another, the story about the Bulgarian provenance of the *Karaševci*. According to this, their ancestors were Bogumils converted to Catholicism after the troops of Louis I of Hungary conquered the Tsardom of Vidin in 1365. Fleeing Ottoman occupation, they came to settle in the hills of the South-Eastern Banat in 1393 – or, as an alternative version has it, initially on the plain, from where they moved to the more secure places they now inhabit after the Battle of Mohács. The story was invented by the author of the anonymous “*Historia domus parochia Krassovenssis*,” compiled after the year 1718 by a Franciscan serving as a priest in Karaševo, who probably did not rely on any local legends or confused them to the point of becoming inextricable.²⁴ He must have been inspired by the existence of significant Catholic Bulgarian (Paulican) colonies in neighbouring Oltenia at that time, who were also cared for by Franciscans. Eager to exploit his sources to the fullest, he included in his chronicle the one-time Southern Slavic population of the town of Lipova on the bank of the Mureș,

22 Árpád Gazda, “Hazai lakcím a horvát útleveiben: A romániai horvátok szülőföldjükön kaptak horvát állampolgárságot,” *Horvátországi Magyarság*, Eszék: HunCro, 2010, p. 27.

23 Website of Karaševo commune; available at <http://primariacarasova.ro/primarul/cv>; accessed 18 April 2011.

24 Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 16 and Miletič, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

a border castle of key importance throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century and garrisoned by “Rascian” soldiers in the 1600s and 1610s. The connection with Lipova caught on, and was incorporated by later priests into the myth of Bosnian origin.²⁵

It seems, however, that the inventor of the story did not attach too much significance to language as a criterion of ethnicity, or was not a Bulgarian himself and did not have contact with “real” Bulgarians, because Bulgarian-born priests and teachers appointed into the *Krašovan* villages (most teachers in Karaševo in the nineteenth century came from the Banat Bulgarian village Stár Bišnov²⁶) were sometimes well aware that they could not be Bulgarians.²⁷ The first scholar who publicly dismissed the possibility of their Bulgarian origin on linguistic grounds and identified their dialect as Serbo-Croatian was the Franciscan provincial Eusebius (Martin) Fermendžin, himself a Bulgarian from Vinga.²⁸ His side remark, published in a rather obscure Latin periodical, did not receive wide currency, but ten years later came a decisive blow to the Bogumil–Paulican theory, when another Bulgarian, the well-known philologist Lyubomir Miletich wrote a paper on the *Karaševci* for the *Archiv für slavische Philologie*. After finishing his fieldwork in the Banat Bulgarian villages in 1898, he had visited the *Karaševci* with the design of doing pioneering linguistic and ethnographic research among them, only to find that they did not speak a Bulgarian dialect. What they spoke, Miletich argued, was similar to the dialects spoken in Serbia, along the rivers Morava and Resava. He conjectured that their ancestors had probably arrived to the Banat in the fifteenth century, and the same interval was later confirmed by Emil Petrovici as a *terminus post quem*, since the linguistic changes that had taken place in Serbian in the thirteenth and fourteenth century had affected the *Karaševljanski* dialect as well.

The gist of Miletich’s argument, namely the Serbian (or Eastern Serbo-Croatian) linguistic affiliation of the *Karaševci* remained uncontested by scholars for a hundred years, apart from a few Bulgarian revisionist voices.²⁹ The myth of their purported Bulgarian origin does not seem to have resounded in *Karaševci*’s minds, but neither did they find convincing the

25 E. g., Jenő Boér, Horvát sors a mai Bánságban: Kötetlen beszélgetés Ft. Dobra Péter krassócsörgői plébánossal, *Művelődés* 57 (2004), no. 10, pp. 17–9.

26 Miletich, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

27 Lajos Kiss, “Kik azok a krassovánok, és milyen nyelven beszélnek?” *Magyar Nyelv* 85 (1989), no. 4, p. 422.

28 “Linguam Krasovensium, quae est croatica seu serbica, bulgaricam dicere principia philologiae, vetunt” in year 1892 of the periodical *Acta Bosnae* (Zagreb), quoted by Simu, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–2.

29 Deleanu mentions Maxim Slavchev Mladenov’s doctoral dissertation from 1988, who implicitly classified the *Krašovan* villages together with Svinica as forming a Bulgarian dialect group, and “La question de l’origine des Krašoveni a-t-elle reçu une solution définitive?” by Karol Telbizov, in *Etudes balcaniques*, Nr. 4, Sofia, 1997 (*op. cit.*, p. 151). László Kósa’s entry on *Karaševci* in *Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon* (vol. 3, Budapest: Akadémiai, 1980, p. 420) still pigeonholes them as Bulgarians, but he apparently mixes them up with Banat Bulgarians, asserting that they probably moved to the Banat in the 1740s and knows of eleven *Karaševak* villages, while there are only seven (their number can be in fact increased to eleven by adding the four Banat Bulgarian ones).

claim that they were Serbs. Some Hungarian writers, probably without first-hand knowledge, had called *Karaševci* Serbs before Fermeđžin's and Miletich's articles, and they had been counted as such at the 1880 Hungarian census.³⁰ After all this seemed only too logical, given that Serbs were the one well-known South-Slavic group living closest to them. What weighed perhaps somewhat less, the Matica Srpska in Novi Sad also regarded them as Serbs.³¹ But regrettably enough for those who drew the conclusion from their speech that they should become Serbs, the dividing line between Serbs and Croats came to converge with the one between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, therefore Catholic priests were rightly reluctant to propagate Serbian identity among their faithful and devout Catholic *Karaševci* rightly rejected the claim for their Serbness, something that would have implied that they were Orthodox as well. "It is impossible to persuade a *Krašovan* that he is a Serb, because Serbs are Orthodox and *Krašovans* are Catholic," Emil Petrovici noted.³² Moreover, Cyrillic alphabet was completely alien to them.³³ It seems that they became more responsive to an identification as Serbs (or Serbo-Croats) in the second half of the twentieth century, when they were cut off from Yugoslavia, they could receive only the Belgrade radio and read the journal published in Temišvar with Cyrillic letters.³⁴ 171 people from the *Karaševak* villages reported Serb nationality at the 1992 census, but only 17 in 2002.

As a cursory search of the internet reveals, Serbian nationalism, since re-emerged, has been reclaiming *Karaševci* on the basis of their "real ethnic origin" from the Croats who had supposedly converted them to Catholicism in order to alienate them from their roots.³⁵ Indeed, scholarship in Socialist Yugoslavia already put forward slightly dubious hypotheses on *Karaševci*'s origins. Pavle Ivić located their early homeland around the lower reaches of the river Timok, that is to the East from the region identified by Miletich.³⁶ One of his reasons was that this theory would give an explanation for the presence of early Bulgarian loanwords

30 Which does not reflect their actual self-reporting, only that the "krassován" category was merged with the more generic "szerb." On the methodology of Hungarian population censuses until 1910 see *A M. Kir. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal munkássága (1871–1911)*. Budapest: Magyar Kir. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 1911. Among the Hungarian scholars who referred to *Karaševci* as Serbs before 1900 were András Vályi (*Magyar országnak leírása*, 3 vols, Budán: 1796–99, the individual villages described as "Rátz"), János Csaplovics (Ethnographiai értekezés Magyarországról, in year 1822 of the magazine *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*, quoted in Kiss, *op. cit.*, p. 420) and Pál Hunfalvy (Czirbusz, *A krassószörényi krassovánok*, p. 121).

31 Czirbusz, *A krassószörényi krassovánok*, p. 121.

32 Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

33 They resented the few attempts to teach their children from Cyrillic textbooks (Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 54).

34 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 77 and 91.

35 The expression in quotation marks is taken from the English abstract of the paper "Krašovani – Karaševci" by Petar Vlahović, in *Rad muzeja Vojvodine 1999–2000*, nos. 41–2, pp. 75–83; available from <http://scindeks.nb.rs/article.aspx?artid=1450-66960042075V>; accessed 16 April 2011. Vlahović sets out his aim to defend the ethnic specificity of *Karaševci* from intrusions motivated by "nationalistic reasons."

36 Pavle Ivić, *Die serbokroatischen Dialekte: Ihre Struktur und Entwicklung*, vol. 1, *Allgemeines und die štokavische Dialektgruppe*, 'S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1958, p. 282.

in their dialect. As it turns out from his reasoning, however, he did not have precisely knowledge on where the borderlands between Bulgarian and Serbian dialects lied in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and we are left to presume that in arguing for such a narrowly defined territory, he was motivated by Jovan Cvijić's remark on the lower Timok valley that its earlier Serbian inhabitants had left and where speakers of a different dialect had settled from the South.³⁷

Ivan Popović, in direct contradiction to Miletich, Petrovici and Ivić, contended that he found typically Eastern Slavic features in the *Karaševljanski* dialect that are absent from any other South-Slavic dialect, on the basis of which he maintained that *Karaševci* had not migrated to the Banat from Serbia, but are the survivors of an earlier, probably Eastern Slavic population whose speech had assumed a South-Slavic character in the course of time.³⁸

Another "indigenous theory" by the inter-war Romanian monographer Traian Simu represents a case apart among the hypotheses on *Karaševci*. His book is a solid, informative work of scholarship in most respects, but with a distinct thread of nationalist myth-making, highlighted in its title "The Origin of the Krašovans." If he cannot make the *Karaševci* really indigenous in the land they inhabit, an attribute reserved for Romanians, at least he tries to bolster their pedigree (and consequently their historical rights on the soil of Greater Romania) by showing in it as much "Latin blood" as he can. The story he weaves is entirely based on preconceptions, that he accommodates to Miletich's theory. As he does not necessarily aspire to credibility, his task is relatively easy. Around the areas where ancestors of *Karaševci* lived in the Middle Ages, historical sources occasionally mention Vlachs; therefore early *Karaševci* could not be anything else than Slavicised Romanians.³⁹ Settled in Banat territory, these Slavicised Romanians in turn Slavicised the local, indigenous (Romanian) population. To document the latter phase, Simu singles out mixed marriages from the eighteenth-century church registers.⁴⁰ Simu's work fits in perfectly with the spirit of inter-war Romanian ethnography and had the Romanian state wanted, they could have used his theory as legitimizing a "re-Romanianisation campaign." No direct reference is made in my sources to Simu's theory, although educated *Karaševci* are generally familiar with his book, along with Vlašić's and Petrovici's.⁴¹

37 The relevant statement by Cvijić is referred to in Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

38 Ivan Popović, *Geschichte der serbokroatischen Sprache*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960, pp. 44–5.

39 Simu, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–29.

40 *Ibid.*, 83–4.

41 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

Earlier ethnographic accounts sometimes classified *Karaševci* as a “mixed” group. This label could refer to the Romanian and Bulgarian influence on their language,⁴² the perceived discrepancy between their physical appearance, their culture and their dialect, their mixed genetic origin (as is the case with Géza Czirbusz, who called them “kleine Mischlings-Völkchen”⁴³) and to the author’s helplessness or puzzlement. Moreover, it seems that emphasizing the group’s mixed character can be a convenient way not to commit *Karaševci* entirely to one of the South-Slavic nations, but rather to keep some of their valences open. Czirbusz already identified certain differences in the ethnic character of the various *Krašovani* villages, although mostly on the basis of physical aspect. It was the dialectologist Mile Tomić who criticised Petrovici for generalising his description of the Karaševo dialect to the other villages. He argued that the differences of the local dialects point to the different origins of their inhabitants.⁴⁴ His thesis was later exploited by Milja Radan, the leader of the Union of Croats in Romania, who in a 1999 interview dwelt upon some overlooked, typically Croatian features of the *Karaševljanski* dialects,⁴⁵ while two years later, when writing for a Serbian public, dusted off the theory of Miletich.⁴⁶

According to the earliest dated local oral tradition of the *Karaševci* about their origins, they came to where they now live in seeking refuge from the invasion of the Turks.⁴⁷ Czirbusz provides more precise, but also more questionable informations; he claims he was told by the inhabitants of Lupak/Lupac and Klokotič/Clocotici that their forefathers had formerly lived in “Turkish Bosnia,” and he adds that in fact Klokotič was populated in 1787, Lupak in 1790 and Nermiđ in 1845, all three from the town of “Kusevje”/”Krasevje”/”Kruisevo” (probably Kreševo) in the “Bjelenica” (Bjelašnica) Mountains in Silver Bosnia.⁴⁸ His latter statements hold no water, because Klokotič and Nermiđ had existed throughout the eighteenth century and Lupak had been mentioned in 1785, but if they were founded on a genuine local tradition, they might preserve the memory of an earlier immigration. As later sources give ample testimony to the persistence of the Silver Bosnia motif (and as Czirbusz does not be-

42 Imre Berecz in *Delejtű* 1860, no. 20, p. 1.

43 “Die südungarischen Bulgaren,” in Theodor Stefanovic-Velovsky, *Die Serben im südlichen Ungarn, in Dalmatien, Bosnien und in der Herzegovina*, Wien: Karl Prochaska, 1884, p. 351.

44 Mile Tomić, “Unitatea’ graiurilor carașovene,” in *Studiile de limbă, literatură și folclor* 2, Reșița, 1971, p. 163, quoted in Deleanu, *op. cit.*, 12–3.

45 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

46 Mihai N. Radan, “Les parlers de la région de Carașova aujourd’hui: Phonétique et morphologie,” *Facta Universitatis Ser. Linguistics and Literature* [Niš] vol. 2, No. 8 (2001), pp. 257–61.

47 Miletich, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

48 The information presented by Czirbusz should be taken with due reserve and the resemblance between the names “Kreševo” and “Karaševo” is in particular ought to make us suspicious. What is more, in Cs. Sebestyén’s and Petrovici’s studies we can read of another tradition, in conflict with the above-mentioned, to the effect that all the other six villages were populated from Karaševo (Cs. Sebestyén, *op. cit.*, p. 137 and Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 1).

long to the handful of scholars frequently referred to by the *Karaševci*), the question remains whether this tradition reveals the authentic origin of the *Karaševci* or it was rather derived from the history and domestic mythology of the Bosnian Franciscans, whose official name also happens to contain the name Silver Bosnia/Bosnia Argentina and who had an important role in *Karaševci*'s lives for centuries. It is certain that *Karaševak* priests in the twentieth century actively fostered in their parishioners the sense of their Bosnian origins. The story of immigration from Bosnia proved to be flexible and can be freely combined with other threads of tradition. For instance, Father Đuređ Katić claims that their ancestors arrived to the Karaš valley from Bosnia around the year 1270, fleeing from the Turks.⁴⁹ Father Petar Dobra, on the other hand, takes up the year 1393 from the "Historia domus" as the date of the first immigration (with due reference to Lipova), but replaces Vidin with the confines of Croatia as its starting point. Then came the second wave of migrants from Silver Bosnia between 1434 and 43, and he also knows of a third one after 1526, again from Croatia.⁵⁰

To be sure, the "Silver Bosnia" myth has the obvious virtue of solving the riddle of how *Karaševci* became Catholic. Finally it was their religious affiliation that tipped the balanced in favour of their Croatness, and in various ways. First and perhaps the least important was their identification as Croats by outsiders who judged a Roman Catholic speaking Serbo-Croatian to be a Croat. They were considered as such by Elek Fényes, the most influential figure of early Hungarian statistics, and also by the 1890 census, although the Hungarian state was most often helpless when trying to classify them.⁵¹ Second, the linguistic variety that the Bosnian Franciscan order implemented in its publications and textbooks, also used in the schools of *Karaševci*, was termed "Croatian" or "Illyrian."⁵² The term was devoid of nationalist overtones (before the invention of Banat Bulgarian alphabet and linguistic norm, it was in use in Banat Bulgarians' schools as well, without the intention of turning them into Croats⁵³), and the generally non-Croat and non-*Karaševak* secular priests and teachers were, so it appears, reluctant to instil national consciousness into their flock. Still, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they usually believed that *Karaševci* spoke "Croatian," so they also tried to learn "Croatian" when appointed into a *Krašovan* village and pretended to communicate with them in the same tongue, that Petrovici described as a mixture of

49 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 49 and Aladár Szilágyi, "Zárványok és szórványok: Népek kohója, Krassó-Szörény; 3," *Erdélyi Riport* 4 (2001), no. 46; available at http://archivum.erdelyirport.ro/mod.php?mod=userpage&page_id=201; accessed 17 April 2011.

50 Boér, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

51 Elek Fényes, *Magyarország geographiai szótára*, 4 vols, Pesten: Kozma, 1851.

52 Miletič, *op. cit.*, p. 168 and Cs. Sebestyén, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

53 Rossitza Guentcheva, "Imposing Identity: The Banat Bulgarian Latin Alphabet (Second Half of the Nineteenth Century)," M.A. thesis, 1995, CEU Library, Budapest.

Karaševljanski and standard Serbo-Croatian.⁵⁴ Petrovici also tells us of a *Karaševak* whom him met at the marketplace in Secaș/Secășeni selling plums, who internalized that label to the point of believing that *Karaševci* spoke the purest Croatian.⁵⁵ “Croatian” as a subject remained in the curriculum of their schools in the 1900s and 1910s, when those were Magyarized and after 1960, when they became Romanianised.⁵⁶

A third important factor was probably that after the Second Vatican Council introduced vernacular liturgy, *Karaševak* priests, the most important organizers of their community, needed the cooperation with the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia (Croatia). Before the fall of Communism in Romania, the help the Croatian Catholic hierarchy could provide was restricted to the Croatian liturgical texts that the local parishes adapted, but it became more intensive, manifold and institutionalized after 1990, that in turn increased the symbolic, economic and social capital *Karaševak* priests could wield. In 2000 a convent of Franciscan sisters was founded in Ravnik/Rafnic, with three nuns from Croatia,⁵⁷ while in 2009 Archbishop of Vrhbosna Msgr. Vinko Puljić visited five *Krašovani* churches.⁵⁸

In the interwar period *Karaševci* already raised some interest in Croatia. After Romania signed an agreement with Yugoslavia, in 1933 Croatian teachers came to teach in the *Krašovani* schools.⁵⁹ They had to leave the country in 1947, but are still vividly remembered by local families. Not only it was a period when *Karaševci* learned “old Croatian songs” and many other things Croatian, but by sustaining practically Croatian schools the Romanian state also tacitly recognized its Croatian minority. The recognition went on tacitly in Communist times, when they entered “Croatian” as the nationality of *Karaševak* men in their army cards.⁶⁰

The single most important form of grass-roots cultural activity in Socialist Romania were folk dance groups. Besides the *Mladi Karaševci* functioning in Karaševo, Klokotič also sported its folkloric ensemble under the name *Mladost*. At the same time exotic and Western, South Slavs were always welcome at folk festivals all over Romania, but the *Mladost* soon discovered that they could achieve greater success if they performed “real” Balkan, that is fast-paced and fiery music and dances. They went on and learned popular pieces from Radio Belgrade, enough to make for an entire show. No jurors could judge on the authenticity of their

54 Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 21. A nineteenth-century priest who spent one year at a *Krašovani* parish held the opinion that they spoke a dialect from Srem or Western Slavonia (Kiss, *op. cit.*, p. 422).

55 Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 15 and Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

57 Botond Makay, Az ünnepi szentmisét a megyés püspök celebrálta, *Nyugati Jelen* 14 (2002), no. 3324.

58 Melinda Molnár, Egyházmegyénk vendége a sarajevói érsek, http://www.katolikus.ro/portal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=324&Itemid=57; accessed 17 April 2011.

59 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 55 and 68.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 78 and Gazda, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

music, and audiences loved them. One day in 1973 four visitors from Buševac near Zagreb called on the leader of the group in Klokoč and convinced him to bring about a partnership between *Mladost* and the Buševac folk ensemble. After considerable effort the group was given green light from the local and county-level party organs to travel to a folk festival in Croatia the following year. But their performance at the festival turned out to be a flop, because the Croatian audience was disappointed by hearing fast Serbian pieces.

Surely their expectations were different from those of the Romanian festival-going public. They wanted *Karaševci* to be an archaic Croatian vestige, representatives of the lost essence of the nation, and were troubled by what they perceived as Romanian or Serbian influences. So their Croatian friends bought *Karaševak* musicians disks with truly authentic Croatian folk music and encouraged them to play pieces they remembered from their childhood. Indeed *Karaševci* found some of the tunes on the disks familiar to them. They understood that in order to have success in front of a Croatian audience, they should single out the fast and cheerful pieces and only play the sad and slow ones. Having made the necessary corrections to their program, they returned every second summer until the fall of the regime to Croatia and always won the applause of the public with their mixture of home-grown and Dalmatian tunes.⁶¹

The 1991 Croatian nationality law created the possibility for *Karaševci* to acquire Croatian citizenship, while remaining residents in Romania. Because of the fall of the Communist system factories in Rešica gradually began to reduce their workforce, and people made redundant seized on the opportunity of working abroad, which the Croatian citizenship made easier. Something less than two hundred *Karaševci* took out the citizenship between 1993 and 99, in spite of the relatively high costs of administration and their having to travel to Bucharest and back. Between 1999 and 2005 consul of the Croatian embassy Refik Šabanović visited the area on a regular basis to relieve *Karaševci* from the burden of travelling, and since 2005 they have had an honorary consul officially residing in Rešica, but in practice in Klokoč. Most of them went to the kin state where they could communicate more easily, primarily to work in unskilled jobs. Virtually no-one from the community settled down in Croatia, with the partial exception of the young people who went to study at Croatian universities with a scholarship from the Croatian state.⁶² Since 2000 the embassy has also set up polling stations in the Karaš valley at the Croatian elections.⁶³

61 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–8 and 86.

62 Gazda, *op. cit.*, p. 27–8. and Mihai Radan, “Ivan Birta–ajuns consul onorific al Croației, la Reșița, prin fals și minciună,” *Hrvatska grančica* 28 February 2006, p. 2; available at <http://www.zhr-ucr.ro/download/prva%20grancica%201.pdf>; accessed 17 April 2011.

63 Szilágyi, *op. cit.*

In 1992 *Karaševak* deputies walked out of the joint Serbo-Croatian organization to form the Union of Croats in Romania, headed by Milja Radan. (Serbs did not want to give up their claim to *Karaševci* and kept the word “Carașovenilor” in the name of their organization.) In the same year the Romanian parliament ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages and included Croatian among the languages to which it applies.⁶⁴ *Karaševci* became by far the largest contingent of the thus recognized Croatian minority, with the Šokci in Rekaš/Recaș and the Kajkavian-speakers in Hrvatska Keča/Checea Croată numbering at best 270 people between them.⁶⁵

Soon a rival organization entered the scene, but Radan’s Union seems to control all the relevant entities and maintain all posts, except the honorary consulate of Croatia in Reșița that was seized in 2005 by the businessman Ivan Birta, the founder of the rival “Democratic Union of Croats in Romania.”⁶⁶ Radan has represented the Croatian minority in the Chamber of Deputies since 2000. A teacher by profession, he also authored Croatian textbooks and readers for the lower grades. In 1995 a twelve-year bilingual school opened in Karaševo, but its bilingual character is ill-defined, and Croatian-medium instruction could never take firm roots in primary schools, mainly because of the changing mood of the parents.⁶⁷

The Union of Croats in Romania have published the bilingual journal (or rather newsletter) *Hrvatska grančica* since 1994, in 1500 copies.⁶⁸ It is bilingual in the sense that some of its articles are only in Croatian, while others in Romanian. This curious editorial method is difficult to explain unless we take into consideration something that many other circumstances suggest: that bilingualism is the natural state of things for *Karaševci*.⁶⁹ Indeed, we find other people on the pages of *Hrvatska grančica* who, just like Milja Šera, write poetry both in their dialect and in Romanian.

I have already referred to Radan’s frivolous, not to say unscrupulous attitude to the question of the historical origins and linguistic affiliation of his group. It strikes me as decidedly peculiar that the highest representative of the Croatian minority in Romania con-

64 The law on the ratification is available at <http://www.edrc.ro/docs/docs/legis/ro177.pdf>; accessed 17 April 2011. It seems that recognizing a separate Croatian minority was important for the Romanian state as well, as a move that was ought to be reciprocated by a similar treatment of the Istro-Romanian minority in Croatia.

65 The approximate number of South Slavic-speaking Roman Catholics in the two villages. In Rekaš only a slight majority of Šokci declared themselves Croatian in 2002.

66 Radan, *Ivan Birta...*

67 Deleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–61.

68 Its last five years are available at http://www.zhr-ucr.ro/index.php?option=com_jotloader&Itemid=256; accessed 17 April 2011.

69 When conversing in *Karaševljanski*, people from Karaševo sometimes refer to their village in its Romanian name as “Carașova.” This sort of mixing would be simply inconceivable for Hungarians in Romania. (Deleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 89.)

cludes his paper on the national affinities of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century *Krašovani* intellectuals by the following words, referring to his fellow-Croats: “it is high time Serbia did something to preserve that Serbian enclave at the periphery of the Serbian ethnic and linguistic area.”⁷⁰ Without more intimate knowledge of the circumstances, I refrain from speculating on what indirect message this passage, slightly at odds with its context, was intended to convey and whether or not Radan was its real author. Nevertheless, after comparing Radan’s zigzags with the interviews contained in Marcu Mihai Deleanu’s comprehensive volume⁷¹ and five years of *Hrvatska grančica*, it is more or less clear that its community leaders do not think of replicating the patterns of Croatian national ideology in the Karaš valley, simply because the concerns that have been shaping national identity in Croatia do not make sense in Romania and moreover, they feel themselves culturally too distant from Croatian Croats. In a post-1991 context, seceding from the Serbo-Croatian minority and identify themselves as Croats was not only a rational choice for the *Karaševci* that would maximize their benefits, but because of the obvious inviability of a Serbo-Croatian identity and their Roman Catholic religion, the only available option. As a small, vulnerable minority community, however, that cannot rely only on a faraway kin-state, it would be unwise to commit themselves too strongly to it. In the eyes of their intelligentsia, being *Karaševak* and being Romanian are not mutually incompatible notions, and Serbians have never been enemies, but partners whom they cannot afford to entirely alienate. When asserting their Croat identity, they never attack fiercely its theoretical alternatives. Their argumentation is inclusive, not exclusive.

As long as they want to live in their land, *Karaševci* have to reconcile their newly asserted Croatness with their loyalty to Romania and their physical proximity to Serbia. In doing so, they often have to walk on a tight rope. Those with a Croatian citizenship have accustomed to having their names spelled differently in their Romanian and Croatian documents. Their intellectuals have learnt how to use nationalist rhetoric, but it seems that they do not want to inculcate Croatian nationalism in their community and surely do not want to eradicate its distinctive cultural features.

70 Milja Radan, “Odnos karaševskih intelektualaca s kraja XIX i prve polovine XX veka prema etničkom poreklu Karaševaka,” in Miodrag Jovanović ed., *Temišvarski zbornik*, vol. 3, Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 2001, p. 242; available at http://www.maticasrpska.org.rs/casopisi/temisvarski_zbornik_3.pdf; accessed 17 April 2011. My quotation is taken from the English abstract, that very clearly distorts the emphasis of the original, but so far as I can judge the passage is a faithful summary of Radan’s concluding thought.

71 Deleanu, *op. cit.*

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