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The Role of the Newspaper *Parekordzagani Tzain* and its Related Institutions in the Preservation of Language and Identity in the Armenian Community of Plovdiv

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This paper describes the linguistic and identitary challenges faced by the members of the Armenian diaspora of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, in relation to what can be viewed as an irreducible multicultural context. Through the consideration of the community's main cultural institutions embodied by the AGBU organization, the related press organ Parekordzagani Tzain and publishing house Armen Tur, I highlight the Armenian diaspora's ability of combining different resources from a transnational perspective, while keeping alive a fixed sense of collective identity. In such process, I show how language reveals itself as the main chore of the community's value systems, embracing different domains of the diaspora social and cultural life.

Key-words: *Armenian diaspora, Armenians in Plovdiv, Armenian institutions, Multilingualism in Bulgaria*

1. Introduction

Topics related to multilingualism and multi-ethnic societies are accompanied by questions about the survival patterns of ethnic minorities as well as the challenges of maintaining their linguistic diversity. In the case I will deal with in this article, I will show how the specific features of "polyvalent identity" (Zekiyan 1997) of the Armenian diasporic community in the city of Plovdiv in Bulgaria, expressed through the linguistic/identitary attitudes and ideologies of its periodical press and its institutions culture represents the indispensable basis for a harmonious and peaceful integration with the surrounding society. Such feature effectively promotes the possibility of preservation of the diverse ethnocultural and linguistic

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characteristics as well as the external recognition of a minority, which constitutes just 1% of the total population.

The context of this Bulgarian city is marked by a high level of multi-ethnicity, which has always characterised its history and on which even today it insists in its dynamics of self-representation. From the analysis of the operative principles of the main charitable organization, AGBU, its press organ *Parekordzagani Tzain* and its publishing house *Armen Tur*, it can be deduced that in the case of the Armenians in Bulgaria we find ourselves in front of an example of differentiated integration (Ferrari 2003, 29), which is an enrichment not only for the minority group interested in their own survival, but also for the same macro-system.

2. The specificity of the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv in multicultural terms

Plovdiv, the ancient Philippopolis, is a city with a long history, which makes it one of Europe's oldest. Throughout the centuries, it has represented an important cultural center as well as the crossroads between different ethnicities, religions and languages (Wagenstein 2011, 30). The city has therefore had different names, starting from the times when it was the Thracian city of Pulpudeva, to when it became the Philippopolis of Philip the Macedonian, to its Roman name Trimontium, the Slavic Paldin and the Turkish Filibe, and finally to contemporary Bulgarian Plovdiv. The city can be proud of its complex cultural background, linked to the particular story of the country. Bulgaria belongs at the same time to the Balkans and Eastern Europe, is definitely a crossroads where cultures of the West and the East have been meeting and have been in dialogue for centuries - not only Bulgarians, but also Armenians, Turks, Romanians, Greeks, Roma, Pomaks, Sephardic Jews and others (Wagenstein 2002).

In many Balkans cities, until the end of the 19th, ethnic communities were living to a certain extent as a distinct unity in terms of religion and language, being able to keep their own language, customs and social structure alive. This was made possible thanks to the territorial organisation represented by the so-called *millet* system, which conceded to religious communities and minorities wide freedom of self-administration and organization, as well as legitimate representation (Castellan 2004, 133-138).

As for the Armenians, the stronghold of the Armenian millet was the church and the criterion of distinction was religion: the church constituted a sort of symbol and definition of the community's identity: a sort of replacement of the Armenian state that did not exist for centuries (Aghanian 2007, 118). The Church has played a fundamental role at a spiritual level, but also at an ethno-cultural one: it was the

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hub of the community, as all social and cultural activities took place within the walls of its buildings. The Armenians, whose historical presence in the city dates back around the 9th century (Markov 2001, 23) were granted in 1675 the right to have their first Apostolic church, which, from the Greek one bearing the name "Agios Giorgos" became Armenized to "Surp Kevork".

During the period between the 17th and 18th centuries in the area around the Church a real Armenian neighborhood came into being, where the new groups of Armenians that continued to arrive during the following two centuries were settled. The Armenians of this period are known as skilled artisans, especially jewelers, blacksmiths and watchmakers, but also as doctors (Artinyan 2000), cooperating thus actively from an economic point of view with the local government and people, and dealing with a multiplicity of other ethnicities and cultures in their daily activities.

Following the persecutions of the Armenians during the last years of the Ottoman Empire, the so-called 'Hamidian massacres' of 1894-1896, many Armenians began to arrive in Plovdiv as refugees. Bulgaria had achieved autonomy from the Ottoman Empire as early as 1878 (although complete independence came only in 1908) and offered hospitality to the Armenians, given the long presence of the community in the country. The genocide of 1915-1918 (with about one and a half million victims), caused a further dispersal of this people from the borders of today's Turkey (see Dadrian 1995). Neighboring Bulgaria opened again the borders to welcome the Armenian refugees who escaped the genocide by granting them the right to stay. In the years between 1922 and 1926, about 25,000 Armenians arrived. Many of them stopped in the country, while others continued their journey to more distant destinations such as France, the United States and Canada.

Finally, the most recent wave of migration to Bulgaria took place following the dissolution of the USSR: due to economic difficulties in the Republic of Armenia, many Armenians began to arrive in the Balkan country, joining relatives who had previously settled and looking for better job opportunities. This phenomenon has not yet entirely come to an end.

3. The challenge of ethnic survival and the importance of the written language

Culture and cultural diversity are rather complex notions that are interpreted in heterogenous ways by different ethnic or social groups. With regard to cultural values, each group displays a specific set that is considered of fundamental importance for its vitality and integrity, the pillars on which the entire social identification system is organized (Fabietti 2004). This hierarchy of values can differ

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considerably between different groups, as some will give priority to the mother tongue others to religion, and perhaps others to the family structure, etc. In the case of the Armenians, written language is certainly placed at the top of this set of values. This claim appears to be particularly validated by the orientation of the written media of the community of Plovdiv, whose content so insistently deals with the theme of the importance of language and the alphabet for the Armenians.

Through the analysis of its rhetorical content, we can assess how the aim of the media is to spread a legitimizing rhetoric functional both to the practical maintenance of the written language, and to the transmission of a symbol such as that of the mother tongue that communicates the concepts of antiquity, distinctiveness and authenticity that are crucial for Armenian identity. As stated in one of the articles in the first issue of the biweekly newspaper I take into account, Parekordzagani Tzain (in 2004):

> A nation has remained alive after so much violence, fires and massacres and in spite of this they have safeguarded their customs and culture. Now we, their descendants, have the obligation to learn from their morals and their dignity for our self-preservation in order to last forever in the centuries to come as a people, to bring songs and dances all over the world, and the melodious Armenian language (Parekordzagani Tzain 1/issue 1, September 2004, 2).

Similarly, we find words permeated by concepts of ethnic and linguistic survival in another article published in 2006:

> Many historians and scholars worldwide have tried to explain the enigma: how can a small nation without a great military force at its disposal have resisted so many vicissitudes without disappearing from the face of the earth, but rather being reborn? One of the explanations to this mystery is presumably rooted in the characteristic trait of the Armenian people - their devotion to the mother tongue, literature, and spiritual culture. Where the people fail to win by the sword, writing continues to win from generation to generation, building its weapons, hopes and faith. (Parekordzagani Tzain issue 18, February 2006, 4)

According to an anthropological perspective on writing (see Cardona 1982, 1986 and 2009) and inspired by the ethnographic approach of the collective work *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), I interpret the written production of the Armenian community of Plovdiv as a practice of affirmation and resistance to both cultural and linguistic assimilation. In this view, the texts produced by this

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minority are central to the understanding of their attitude towards different levels of society - both the inner, diasporic dimension, and the outer, Bulgarian one. Written culture can reveal to us quite relevant clues about the people who use it and their world and its role proves decisive for the spread of certain key symbols in a diasporic culture that feeds survives precisely on written texts. To understand how writing and written texts are produced and used by different people in various contexts, we need to examine the values, beliefs and behaviors that are associated with different forms of writing (Barton Papen 2010, 9). Writing is above all a privileged place for symbolic production and becomes an effective means of 'remembering' who we are.

In the course of their history of mobility, the Armenians have found themselves in continuous contact with other communities and have drawn from these encounters a reason to affirm their identity even more firmly. The question of the relationship with other groups and nationalities has been a decisive element for the creation of a specific Armenian identity as early as the adoption of the particular derivation of Monophysite Christianity and the indigenous writing system that followed it: Armenians had to act in this way to be able to survive as a distinct people and not be assimilated by stronger powers and surrounding cultural, religious, and linguistic groups. The same dynamic is currently present in the Diaspora and requires the activation of practical and symbolic resources as well as the attachment to specific "metaphorical" (Bateson 1977, 178) cultural values. This proves true for example in today's situation in Plovdiv, where Armenians are confronted on a daily basis not only with the Bulgarian majority but also with other communities, first of all Turkish and Roma, but also Pomaks, Jews, Russians and others.

Lately, in conjunction with the title of Plovdiv as the European Capital of Culture 2019, and of its upcoming celebrations, initiatives have been multiplied in favour of enhancing the ethnolinguistic, cultural and religious diversity of the city's communities[2]. This theme was developed through a series of activities aimed at presenting Plovdiv's complex multifaceted mosaic to the eyes of its residents as well as to external visitors. This has given new impetus and encouragement to the legitimization of a visible, spatial difference in ethno-cultural terms, which led to the establishment of a new museum, called 'House of the ethnic groups'[3] and to many other initiatives.

[2] Program of Plovdiv European Capital of Culture 2019 by the "Together" Foundation

[3] 'Dom na etnosite, http://darikradio.bg/dom-na-etnosite-otvara-vrati-v-plovdiv.html

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4. Language and identity maintenance

Armenians of the diaspora distinguish themselves as being a highly integrated community in the host country's society: its members are usually very well educated, professionally inserted in the job market, competent in the local language and also in foreign ones. However, success in integration does not prevent the fact that ethnic consciousness is experienced in a variety of ways: everywhere they live, they feel Armenians (see Mitseva 2001). Although they have remained for many centuries without an independent state, their cultural activity has been able to develop and decline according to the varying contexts in which they have found themselves - integrating and never assimilating. The gradual integration of the Armenians in the daily life of the host countries, in fact, is accompanied by a parallel process of ideal and symbolic reunification with the community's tradition. Such mechanism allows Armenians of the diaspora to recognize themselves in a common destiny and in a feeling of national belonging.

In this context, we understand how the maintenance of the language, apart from the practical implications at a communication level, constitutes a means to promote a symbolic link with the group's ethnic past. The specificity of the mother tongue is embodied above all by its written form, by virtue of the existence of a specifically Armenian writing system, which has functioned and continues to acts as an effective border marker (Barth 1969). In fact, the presence of an own written tradition constitutes a significant element for the maintenance of a nation's continuity and historical narrative: this is particularly true for peoples who possessed their distinctive alphabet such as the Armenians and Georgians, which can also be historically defined as ethno-linguistic communities (Smith 2007, 328).

With reference to the question of minority languages, it should be noted that the Armenian language, although not threatened in today's Republic of Armenia, is at risk of extinction in its Western variant as a minority language. This consideration is valid in Bulgaria and in all the countries of the world where there is an Armenian diaspora[4], where the Western branch of Armenian, as a non-territorial minority language is spoken, in opposition to its Eastern one, recognised at the language of the Republic of Armenia. Lacking the status of official language, Western Armenian is not employed anywhere as a language of administration in the public life (Demerguerian 1997, 22). Moreover, it has never benefitted from the official protection of the state, a fact that makes it at highly endangered one, since its native speakers are exposed to different forms of linguistic assimilation.

[4] See the following document: http://agbueurope.org/wpcontent/uploads/sites/17/2015/12/Contribution-to-the-NPLD-Roadmap-for-Language-Diversity-Armenian-AGBU-Europe-and-C.-Gulbenkian.pdf

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The operating spaces of the Western variant are confined to the family sphere, which ensures the acquisition of the mother tongue and the transmission of certain cultural values, the school domain, which is a fairly large space for the functioning of the language[5], the religious one through the institutions of the Armenian Apostolic Church[6] and that of the community's media, such as the local press. The intellectual domain (professors, journalists, writers, clergy, artists) constitutes the main working space of the literary language, as it is the engine of cultural creation, supporting the development of thoughts and written communication in this variant. The associative life also offers a not indifferent space for the functioning of the language. In church, although the liturgy is carried out according to the tradition in the old Armenian language, *grabar*, the sermons are delivered in the contemporary language.

In what concerns the literary language, its functioning space is limited to the printing activities of local Armenian newspapers and to the publication of literary works, which are, however, not very large in number. Furthermore, it should be noted that in the case of Plovdiv, most Armenian book publications are in the Bulgarian language, contrary to expectations. The presence of Armenian is more attested in the bilingual newspapers (but always in a lower percentage as compared to Bulgarian). However, this does not exclude the fact that the symbolic function of the language is exercised and maintained, especially as far as the written form of the language is concerned; although this form is not used as a means of writing, the alphabet survives as a recurring theme, and as a sign of an omnipresent tradition in its redundant visibility.

5. The institutions in the diaspora between patterns of "closure" and "openness"

Following the cybernetic theory (Bateson 1977), which conceives society as a complex living organism, we can describe a social group's behavior as characterised by aspects of both closure and openness. It is through this delicate dynamics and balance that a group operates in order to survive and evolve. The former, the closure ones, are aimed at keeping intact the inner organization, conceived as a set of relationships among the parts constituting a composite unity (Maturana Varela

[5] The scholastic environment can be different according to the organisation of the system of every community, but it is, nevertheless, the main domain of transmission of the literary language and of the national cultural values. The community of Plovdiv benefits from the existence of the Armenian School "Tiutiundjian", a unique case in the entire Balkans where the Armenian language is taught to pupils of age 5 to 13.

[6] There is also an Armenian Evangelist Church active.

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1992, 17). The latter, of openness, are to be understood in terms of necessary exchanges with the outer environment, aimed at drawing energy and nourishment, a set of relationships through which the organisation of the system manifests itself in a given environment as a particular space-time entity (Ibid). In what sense can we speak of closure and openness mechanisms for the life of the Armenian community of Plovdiv? I believe that the preservation of the community's inner organization, the hard and unchangeable core of ethnic identity, or 'Armenianness', is made possible precisely through a continuous diffusion of the 'ethnogenic' discourse, constituted by symbolic elements linked to the sphere of myth, imagination, and emotions, characterised by metaphorical and 'transcontestual' patterns of operation (Bateson 1977, 317-8).

On the other hand, as regards its openness, I believe that the appropriation and application of models and elements linked to the surrounding Bulgarian context, manifest for example in the choice of the language for the publication of books or newspapers, reveals itself as necessary action in order to avoid self-ghettoisation or isolation, and with them the risk of a slow suppression of vital energies. As a consequence, Armenians do not have the feeling of being an isolated community, but rather of being a part inserted in a wider communication system, exposed to different levels of confrontation: with the Republic of Armenia itself, with the other Armenian communities around the world, as well as with country where they live.

In its development, the diaspora has created and continues to create a series of institutions and structures of its own, maintaining the links with a more or less 'imagined motherland' and the world diaspora through the apostolic Church, the political parties, the social and charitable organizations and a network of newspapers and magazines. In Plovdiv, the charitable organisation Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU, or in Armenian "Parekordzagan") represents the real driving force behind cultural activities aimed at preserving internal cohesion. Through its support and within its operative spaces, many initiatives are achieved, such as meetings of young people and students, pensioners' clubs, promotion of courses of Armenian language and culture, publications of books and the publication of the community's most important newspaper: the *Parekordzagani Tzain.*

6. The Armenian press in Bulgaria: from its origins to the *Parekordzagani Tzain*

For the purpose of understanding the role of printing activities for the Armenian diaspora, it is interesting to remark that its periodic press was born outside its

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historical territories, in a place quite far away - Madras in India. The first publication, called Azdarar, appeared in fact in this city in 1793, written in *grabar* (ancient Armenian), which at the time was still accessible to the average literate people (Zekiyan 1997b, 65).

In Bulgaria, the first Armenian newspaper was published in Burgas in 1884 (named *Huys*, "Hope"), interestingly written in the Armenian language but with Latin characters. A more intense need for a stable journalistic press began to be felt after the arrival of the last wave of Armenian refugees in the country, following the genocide that had taken during the years of the First World War (Hayrabedian 1994, 105).

During the Communist era, only one Armenian newspaper was able to continue its activities, and it followed the line of the Communist party: the publication *Yerevan*, published in Sofia. With the end of the Communist regime and the advent of democratic changes, the Armenian community was finally given the freedom to found two other newspapers - *Hayer* ('Armenians'), published in Burgas, exclusively in the Bulgarian language, and *Vahan* ('Shield') in Plovdiv, bilingual. The *Yerevan* newspaper continued to be printed, and has been bilingual since 1981 (before it was written only in Armenian); in 2004, the monthly magazine (which became biweekly in 2012) *Parekordzagani Tzain* ('Voice of charity') started being published in Plovdiv.

Before describing its contents, it is important to mention the general context of the activities of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) behind it. The AGBU is the *largest* non-profit organization of the Armenian diaspora that coordinates various activities at an international level, established in 1906 in Cairo by Pasha Boghos Nubar. After World War II, it moved its headquarters to New York, where it has remained until now. Its components create a network that unites over 25 countries in which relevant Armenian communities are present. The founding idea of the organisation was from the beginning the maintenance of the Armenian nation through cooperation in education, which is why activities in this setting are sustained and encouraged in a purposeful way. Its members are usually influential and powerful Armenians, who can make their own resources available by giving funds to the organization. The AGBU has its own channels in Bulgaria too, where, due to political reasons, it has been able to set up and carry out its programs again since 1992 after the democratic changes in the country. In addition to Plovdiv, there are also subsidiaries in Sofia, Varna and Burgas and Ruse.

The president of each city is chosen every two years during the joint meeting of the local members. The main fund is collected by the registration fee, by the organisation of charity concerts, dances, theatrical performances, and occasionally help may come from the head office in New York. Nowadays its activities have

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expanded and support is directed not only towards education, but also cultural activities. Students with high achievements are granted scholarships for the continuation of university studies, and even children who have outstanding artistic or musical skills have the possibility of receiving funding to study in special schools in Bulgaria or abroad. The *Parekordzagani Tzain* in Plovdiv tries to reflect the principles of the AGBU and inform its readers about its initiatives at local, national and international level. Very often, biographical articles are published on specific historical personalities whose works have contributed to spreading or protecting the Armenian culture in the world.

In the articles of the newspaper, the activities of members of the AGBU in Bulgaria are given prominence, together with the ones of the diaspora members: for example, in the first issue of the *Parekordzagani Tzain* (September 2004) we find a text in honour of Alek Manoukian, the first president of the global AGBU after the death of its founder. Many articles are published about important personalities close to the Plovdiv community, praising the value of their work. This is a way to recognize the efforts of those who operate for the good of the Armenian culture and language and encourage the community through their positive examples. Below is an excerpt of the inaugurating message published in the first issue of the *Parekordzagani Tzain* by AGBU Plovdiv director, Mr. Rupen Chavushian:

> Dear reader, in front of you is the inaugural copy of the newspaper Parekordzagani Tzain published by the Plovdiv branch of the charity organization Parekordzagan. It will strive to be our newspaper that will inform its readers of the problems of our daily lives and of what awaits us in the future. The newspaper will be published thanks to the direct help of young people, who with their work and their courage will inform us about important aspects of our present. In relation to this we hope for your support, dear reader. Every form of participation will be welcomed as your mark in the community. Time will tell how successful we will be in the challenge of expanding the domain of information for our community (...). We sincerely believe that in accordance with the ideals and values of Parekordzagan, our newspaper will manifest itself as a catalyst for benevolence and charity (Tchavushian 1, September 2004, 1-2).

The *Parekordzagani Tzain*[7] organizes periodical competitions to find journalists and collaborators from Plovdiv and the whole country, as well as to find correspondents from Burgas, Ruse, Stara Zagora, and Varna. The participation of

[7] Managing editor is Mrs. Hripsime Erniasyan.

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people in the organisation is significantly dictated by idealism and patriotism. This is a very effective way to involve young people in a tangible way, making them feel useful for the community, and it is precisely to people in the post secondary school age that the newspaper turns to, asking for their help and their good will. Young adults have thus the opportunity of learning the journalist's job or of making available their translation skills from foreign languages (especially from English). After many years, young people who have studied the Armenian language in the primary and middle school Tiutiundjian, the only one of its kind in the Balkan peninsula, are again involved in, and in direct contact with the Armenian language, having to relate to it through reading and writing activities.

They are thus prompted to recover the knowledge of this language which they have (quite usually) abandoned after entering high school, where Armenian is not taught.

As for the children, their 'initiation' practices into the Armenian language and alphabet are exceptionally important in relation to this newspaper, which publishes in each issue columns specifically dedicated to them. For example, over the years they have had the opportunity to follow the tales of one of the greatest Armenian writers *Hovhannes Tumanyan* (1869-1923): these were published exclusively in Armenian and written in a very simple language, thus inviting the children to read them - or have them read by someone else - and wait for their continuation in the following issues. Sometimes, there are also riddles and world puzzles, games through which children (but not only) can practice the Armenian language. For the older ones there are also jokes, proverbs and short entertaining stories, etc. In general, we can assess that over the years the newspaper has gradually enriched its contents and a variety of sections has appear: one dedicated to the Armenian school in Plovdiv, one about literature, one about the "Young Professionals" of the AGBU, and many others.

7. The question of the temporal dimension in the *Parekordzagani Tzain*

The AGBU, together with its informative bulletin *Parekordzagani Tzain,* is politically aligned with the Armenian historical party *Ramgavar*[8], closer to liberal and capitalist principles, unlike the party *Dashnaktsutiun*[9] whose left-hand view is exemplified in Plovdiv by the newspaper *Vahan*. The *Parekordzagani Tzain*, however, concerns itself much less than the other publication with issues of

[8] Armenian Democratic Liberal Party
[9] Armenian Revolutionary Federation

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contemporary politics and tends to write more about the events taking place within the Armenian community of Plovdiv and Bulgaria and to describe the many activities of the AGBU worldwide. As the director of the newspaper explains in an interview[10]:

> Although we sometimes have to deal with some topics of Armenian politics, you can hear politics on TV or read it on the internet; on the contrary, for example what happens in Dobrič or what the Armenians do in Burgas, that is something you cannot find it anywhere else (Erniasya, November 2010).

In the use of symbolic elements, one gets the impression that this newspaper is more inclined to give voice to the historical dimension of 'Armenianness', in appealing to the feelings of belonging to a past dimension of the nation, in which time has to a certain extent stalled. Indeed, it sometimes seems that while the Republic of Armenia has moved forwards, the diasporic communities have remained strongly attached to pre-diasporic customs and social structures because they see themselves as the custodians of a common national heritage (Aghanian 2007).

Quite often, Armenians of the early diaspora feed their ethnic identity with memories handed down and resignified from time to time; they have never experienced contemporary Armenia, but rather an 'Armenia of the mind' (see Rushdie 1991[11]). In their imagination, the irremediably lost places of the former Ottoman territories are far more present than the perspective of the current, lively, Armenian capital Yerevan. In any case, this does not imply that their identity presents itself as an unchanged essence, placed outside historical and socio-cultural processes. Diasporic identity is not fixed and homogeneous (Hall 1990, 226), there are different creative processes within every particular social community, although rather often, Armenians themselves tend to believe that they constitute a distinct cultural group with fixed origins and marked cultural characteristics.

In fact, the internal cohesion and preservation of the Armenian identity in the diaspora is possible thanks to the acceptance of a symbolic frame, a sort of ethnic awareness that is activated in certain moments of interaction between the members of the community (Ivančev 2005). Consequently, as Barth has stated in his well-known essay on the organization of cultural difference among social groups (1969, 15), it is not the cultural content, but rather the symbolic protectors of the boundary such as language, religion, folklore that perpetuate the community and require anthropological investigation.

[10] Interview with Mrs. Hripsime Erniasyan.

[11] Salman Rushdie refers to the "India of the Mind" in his famous work "Imaginary Homelands".

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8. The specific bilingual character of the publication

In what concerns the language of the *Parekordzagani Tzain*, as already mentioned above, the texts appear predominantly in Bulgarian, but there is always a certain number of articles in Armenian, or just with a double title, in both languages: in this way, the visualisation of the Armenian language and of its specific alphabet is always made possible. The politics of the publication specifies that a degree of bilingualism be always present, and this is why we find texts in Armenian related to the Diaspora and others in Bulgarian concerning the events of the Armenians in this Balkan country.

Regarding the community's linguistic identity, it is difficult to determine which language is spoken at home, Armenian or Bulgarian, since bilingualism in the family context is very common (Mitseva and Papazian-Tanelian 1998). The fact is that Armenian has a limited scope of use and therefore the situation is closer to diglossia: Bulgarian constitutes the 'high' variety of the repertoire, as the national language of the country, that of the most official, bureaucratic domains, while Armenian, when present, is certainly much more linked to the family and daily sphere, and very little to the institutional one (only in some activities, promoted by the associations within the community, but marginally). Moreover, the question becomes even more complex as some people of the older generations still speak Turkish, although in practice they use it very little.

Many Armenians confirm the fact that the Armenian language of the Diaspora in Plovdiv is a language "at risk" for future generations, in the sense that it is not clear how the linguistic situation will evolve over a few decades. In this respect, I believe that the periodical press can play a significant role in maintaining the knowledge and presence of the written language, by publishing information and news in Armenian and Bulgarian and undoubtedly enriching the linguistic baggage of its readers. Moreover, we can interpret the written production of the Armenian community of Plovdiv as an encouragement to the valorisation of the Armenian language, although it is mainly transmitted in the Bulgarian language. This apparently paradoxical fact is explained by the observation of the use of the Armenian language and alphabet as a particularly recurrent theme in the local press, through articles dedicated to its inventor, its consequences, its celebrations, etc.

All these elements constitute the context of production of positive language ideologies, in which the Armenian mother tongue is seen as an inalienable character of this people's identity, the condition for which Armenians can be legitimised as a nation and be proud of a culture particularly sensitive to all that is written, from manuscripts to printed books, newspapers, monuments, jewels, etc.

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in a continuous line that unites past and present. We can therefore see in the articles published in the *Parekordzagani Tzain* how the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, Mesrop Mashtots, his characters, the translation activity, the manuscripts, etc. are vivified and re-signified in their present function as symbols in the history of the development of Armenian written culture, which continues to produce further values even in the microcontext of a diasporic community as he one of the Armenians of Plovdiv is (Author 2015).

9. The role and spread of language ideologies

It is a fact that many societies tend to strongly favour the written form of the language at the expense of the spoken one. From the situations described so far, it is quite evident that in Armenian culture such an attitude is pervasive, and this prompts us to consider the symbolic value that the written language can acquire beyond the merely communicative one. As Cardona wrote:

> To have neglected or ignored for too long this fundamental symbolic function has meant that we are facing today a variety of unresolved questions. (…) Why do societies vary in the weight given to the profession or competence of writing? We still know too little of the various traditions, of the various ideological systems, of the (...) ethno-graphy. (Cardona 1982:4).

It therefore makes sense to pay due attention not only to the actual skills in terms of the ability to write and read in the mother tongue, but also to the ideologies of literacy operating within such society and these, like a snake that eats its own tail, are channeled largely through written culture and the media. The expansion of social groups that recognise the importance of literacy in the minority language and share positive ideologies about it (regardless of whether they can actually master it) is a significant factor in itself. As a consequence, any effort to increase the prestige of the written language, accomplished through acts of acceptance and recognition from both within and without the community, can make a relevant contribution to the maintenance of the language (Field 2001). In this respect, the activities of the Armenian press of Plovdiv are of fundamental importance, as they have the ability to spread supportive beliefs regarding the language among the members of the community of different age groups and social origins. Precisely for this, the AGBU newspaper publishes articles that refer to the importance of the Armenian language and the alphabet and their value in contemporary society.

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In the 'individual history' of Diaspora Armenians, therefore, after childhood in which it is the responsibility of the school to provide contact with the values and challenges of the written language, the next relevant context is the relationship with the press, crucial in maintaining Armenian identity and consciousness. Moreover, among the journalists of the *Parekordzagani Tzain* there are also former students of the local Armenian school Tiutiundjian, as a result of a specific program that intends to involve young people in the newspaper editorial office. Another important factor is the encouragement to the academic study of the Armenian language at the Department of Armenian and Caucasian Studies at the University of Sofia (founded in 1995), the only one in Bulgaria where the course is offered. Significantly, the community, through the AGBU, advertises in its newspaper the possibility of choosing these studies and offers financial assistance to cover university fees for those wishing to enroll.

The concerns of the defenders of the Armenian language are based on the estimates of the linguistic effects of the processes of globalisation, which thwart to a significant degree the maintenance of national identity, language and culture. The undeniable problem is that the Western branch of the Armenian language is losing its speakers in the diaspora at high speed, and the challenge is to ensure that this language has a proper, institutional role in a long-term perspective. More than 1600 years after the creation of the Armenian alphabet (made possible by Mesrop Mashtots in the year 405 A.D, see Maksoudian 2006), the alarming danger of assimilation appears to be more relevant than ever.

Unlike in the past, this nation does not need to defend itself any longer from the threats of foreign conquerors; however, in the case of the Armenians of Plovdiv, like in other diasporas, the present enemy is represented by the tendency to forget the national language and alphabet, given their low degree of practical utility in the "host country". In fact, it must be borne in mind that the daily life of this community, both in the work sphere and in the social life, takes place mainly among people who are not Armenian, within social and cultural structures sometimes very distant from the Armenian ones (Mitseva 2001). The mother tongue, together with the old customs and traditions, is relegated to confined and inner spaces, mainly those of family relations, Armenian cultural and recreational associations, and religious institutions. Thus, speaking and reading the mother tongue, attending Armenian cultural or social events, being involved in the spiritual life of the community become an end to be pursued, a duty to be fulfilled, an ethical imperative to 'stay Armenian' (Manoukian 1986, 80).

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10. The distribution of the *Parekordzagani Tzain* and its transnational character

The editorial staff of the *Parekordzagani Tzain* is keen on underlining a very important fact, namely that their newspaper has the honour of being stored in the archive of a place considered 'sacred' by all Armenians: the Matenadaran Library in Yerevan, the oldest temple for manuscripts in the Republic of Armenia. This fact demonstrates the interest that the Republic of Armenia has in its dispersed communities, a fact confirmed by the setting up by this country of a specific ministry for the Diaspora and by the official definition of the Armenian nation as including the world's diaspora (Aghanian 2007, 118).

It is interesting to remark that the *Parekordzagani Tzain* publishes many articles and comments that refer to the importance of the periodical publications in the history of the Armenian communities worldwide. In this respect, the press represents itself and praises its role in keeping alive the consciousness of the nation in diaspora. This is true both for the past and for the present: since the periodical press exists, it has been a point of reference for the Armenians far from their homeland. Let us see what the president of the general AGBU wrote at the time of the first issue of the newspaper:

> I greet the initiative of your branch, and in particular of young people thanks to whose help this newspaper is published (…) a first-born initiative that endeavors to reflect through your work the activity of the AGBU for the Bulgarian society. At the same time the Parekordzagani Tzain will give a resonance to the aspiration to preserving the nation (...). The central management takes a close interest in the needs of the Armenian community in Bulgaria and its activities" (Setrakian issue, September 2004, 2).

Other typical articles deal with the history and life of the Armenian communities in other countries of the world, in India, in Egypt, in Poland, and particularly in the 'near and unknown' Romania. Regarding this neighbouring country, the *Parekordzagani Tzain* in Plovdiv puts a lot of emphasis on the events and the fate of the Romanian Armenians with whom the Bulgarian diaspora shares a religious authority in the figure of the archbishop.

Through the newspaper, the Armenians, scattered throughout the country, or even throughout the world's diaspora, feel their ties unite, and their 'Armenianness' affirmed and recognized. The newspaper has in fact a great success and can boast also subscribers from outside the Balkan country, as for example Armenians of further diaspora, who emigrated from Bulgaria to Canada, France, United States, etc. With great pleasure I subscribed to the publication that I now

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receive in Italy, contributing to making the Armenian word of Plovdiv travel to new destinations. On the other hand, this newspaper also receives attention from the Bulgarian audience and its official organisations: for this reason, it is sent to all national institutions dealing with culture, art, ethnic groups. Sofia's National Library "Saints Cyril and Methodius", sends copies of this publication to its branch libraries, to the libraries of other cities in the country.

The Armenians in Plovdiv constitute a small community, corresponding to approximately 1% of the total population (4,000 out of 340,000) but, as it is typical of most Diaspora Armenians, despite their long stay in the host context and the successful integration, they refuse to be identified exclusively with the country in which they live (see Cohen diasporas). They experience a sort of 'nostalgia' for their lost homeland (Ferrari 2003: 30), and are in contact with the other Armenian communities around the world through supranational organizations of various kinds, first of all the AGBU, living a sort of condition of 'translocality'.

We believe indeed that regarding the relations and interaction among cultures in the sense of a desired ethno-cultural pluralism, Armenians have their own message to communicate, an example to propose by virtue of their historical vocation, as a border, bridge, catalyst nation, or with a more fitting expression, as a vital lymph that flows everywhere, to the most diverse latitudes, creating circulation of energies, contacts, exchanges, reciprocal enrichments among people and cultures. This constitutes, definitely, one of the most fascinating aspects of the vocation and historical destiny of the Armenian people (Zekiyan 2000, 141).

11. The activities of the AGBU publishing house *Armen Tur*

Long before the creation of the newspaper, since the early 2000s, significant activities of literary promotion have been activated in Plovdiv with the support of the AGBU. As such, books by Armenian authors in Bulgaria have been published, while others have been translated from Armenian. These include poetry works, novels, autobiographies, history books etc. The Armenian publishing house in Plovdiv is called 'Armen Tur', and its initiatives have been welcomed by the Bulgarian Armenian community in general. The translators turn out to be fundamental cultural mediators and their help is extremely valuable, since the *Armen Tur* publishes its works almost exclusively in the Bulgarian language in the attempt to reach the largest numbers of readers within Bulgarian society. The leading translator has been for many years Agop Ormandjian, professor of Armenian studies at the Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, who unfortunately passed away in 2015. Among the most significant titles that came out we find the

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novel by the Soviet Armenian writer Khachik Dashtents (1910-1974), *Зовът на орачите* ("Call of Plowmen"), published in Plovdiv in 2003 and especially the one of Suren Vetsigian (1905-1961), *Воден от Бога в служба на народа си* ("His Guiding Hand to Serve My People"), published in 2001[12], both treating the subject of personal life experiences during and after the Armenian genocide.

The two authors were born within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, in the so-called historical Western Armenia, corresponding geographically to the Eastern region of Anatolia. After surviving the genocide, Dashtents spent his life in Soviet Armenia, while Vetsigian became part of the Western diaspora, taking refuge in Bulgaria, studying in the United States and then returning to Plovdiv. After coming back to the country that had first granted him asylum, he decided to make a fundamental contribution to the cultural and educational development of the local Armenian community.

Vetsigian became the director of the Armenian school of Plovdiv, a position he held for 15 years. In addition to this, he was also a writer, publishing countless articles on religious, political, historical and educational topics in the various Armenian newspapers that were active before the advent of the communist regime: 'Mehu', 'Balkanian Mamul', "Paros", From 1934 to 1946. In addition to these articles, the author wrote a series of books, including textbooks for the Armenian school on Armenian literature, religion, history, as well as a grammar of the language. Suren Vetsigian's story represents in a certain sense the exemplary paradigm of the experience of devotion an Armenian can have for his/her mother tongue, touching all crucial contexts in which language plays a fundamental role: reading, education, religion, and printing, and exalting them as pillars of the culture of the Armenian people.

Consequently, the publication of his book by the *Armen Tur* of Plovdiv offers readers the opportunity to experience an example of a concrete commitment to Armenian culture, which is the idea underlying the ideologies expressed in every press organ as well as in the rhetorics of the Armenian school. This does not mean that every member of the community should become a writer or an Armenian teacher, but the message is rather that in order to be really Armenian, one must be conscious of the importance of the mother language and its writing system, and share the 'ethnogenic' ideas in this regard[13]. In this sense, the discourse on language requires and generates participation.

[12] Published in AGBU in Plovdiv in English too, on the occasion of the 100 years since the Armenian genocide.

[13] Armenians claim to have become a real nation only after the adoption of their specific writing system.

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As for the publication of works by contemporary Armenians, a very special space is dedicated to the memory of Hrant Dink, editor-in-chief and one of the founders of the important bilingual Turkish-Armenian publication, Agos Weekly, who was killed in front of the newspaper's office in Istanbul on the 19th of January 2007. Since his death, a strong need has been felt among Bulgarian Armenians to make his reportages, his thoughts and positions, his civic conscience, and his battles for the recognition of the genocide by the Turkish government known to the wide Armenian and Bulgarian audience. As a result, the book "Two close peoples two distant neighbors" (in Bulgarian:*Два близки народа, два далечни съседа Армения – Турция*) was published in 2011, a work presenting a selection of Hrant Dink's articles published in *Agos*. A second volume of the Turkish-Armenian journalist's writings is due to appear. The publication activities of the *Armen Tur* are inscribed in the context of the initiatives for the commemoration not only of the journalist's death but also of the Armenian genocide, which is probably the most heartfelt theme around which the whole community unites and to which the Bulgarian public adheres significantly.

12. Rhizomatic Conclusions

In this paper I have examined how the positive ideologies on Armenian cultural identity and language are promoted and propagated in the diaspora of Plovdiv through the cultural institutions embodied by the *AGBU* (Armenian General Benevolent Union), the relative press organ *Parekordzagani Tzain* and the publishing house *Armen Tur*. The Armenian cultural environment seems to be permeated with a spirit of veneration for the written word, just as it is expressed in the ecclesiastical Slavic culture of which Bulgaria constitutes a part (Author 2011). Not surprisingly, Armenians found a second homeland in Bulgaria, in which certain cultural and symbolic dynamics of identity linked to the written form of the language have found fertile ground. The successful levels of integration of the Armenian community appear conditioned by the 'openness' of the Armenian people and of Bulgarian society, helped by the elements of a common history of Christianity under the rule of the Ottoman empire and by the contact between communities across the centuries.

The cultural and social life of this community in Plovdiv evokes principles of complex identity, in which simplistic ethnic determinations and conceptions of cultural monolithism do not find a place. The Armenians are part of a minority community with specific identitary patterns, dating back to a handed-down past of

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mobility and non-exclusivist belonging, based on the connecting principle of multiplicity. Such mechanism is similar to what has been defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) as the *rhizome*, and then extended by Glissant (1998) in identitary terms. According to this view, cultures proceed with integration, reciprocal translation, exchange acts, as their development is based on the fact that identity itself can evolve thanks to alterity. Diversity becomes therefore a spiritual, ethical resource.

The concept of Armenian diaspora forces us to reject a discourse still based on the dichotomy of national and non-national and emphasizes the ability to combine resources from multiple (trans-national) positions, challenging the idea that social groups and their cultures belong, in some way, to a given territory. In doing so, the Armenian diaspora opens the doors to a broader concept of identity, that is 'translocal', 'multi-focused' and 'polyvalent' (Zekiyan 1997). The awareness of belonging to more places at one time leads to giving up a mentality, an imagery shaped through the conception of an exclusivist, single-root identity, which suffocates what lies around it.

Such fact allows us to penetrate the complex system of what Edouard Glissant (1998, 26) has defined the 'relation-identity', an identity which implies the opening towards the other, without the danger of being diluted. It is rather a *rhizome* identity, as a 'root that webs with other roots'. Consequently, what matters is not the "presumed absoluteness of each root, but the way, the manner in which it came into contact with other roots": and this is the relationships, Glissant states (Ibid).

Plovdiv is a world where different languages have always coexisted, where it seems that people strive to let all these languages be open to one another. I consider this an exemplary conception of multilingualism, as a vision on the same way of speaking your own language, with a different attitude towards it. The importance is to speak it not ignoring the presence of other languages, having instead the perception that other languages exist and influence us even without us noticing. While exploring patterns of complex interaction among cultures and languages, we should focus our attention on the dialogic character of multilingual and multicultural spaces, and in this respect Wolfgang Welsch's definition of *transculturality* (1999) proves useful to understand the processes at the base of multiple identity formation at an individual as well as at a community level.

The identity of the Armenian diaspora of Plovdiv is characterised by two main elements that make it a trans-national one. On the one hand, the community insists on the sense of continuity, on the memory of their own past, on the identitary traits distinguishing them from the Bulgarian context, and on the contact

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with the other Armenian communities around the world. On the other, they carry on a rhetoric on the spirit of integration in the host country, opening up to a variety of influences from the surrounding societies and taking advantage of the intercultural contacts. The Armenian diaspora culture, as a trans-cultural identity, has therefore the ability of crossing linguistic, temporal and spatial borders and improve the various fields that host it, making a fundamental contribution to the further development of a plurality of roots.

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