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Ideology and representation of Vlach Romanian online. Between linguistic activism and unengaged language use

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This paper offers a brief review of the main online outlets for the variety of Romanian spoken in Eastern Serbia (Vlach Romanian), exploring the possible functions the internet plays for minority language communities in general and focusing on its role in the formation of active communities of collaborative minority language producers. We will first briefly introduce the Vlach community and their language, Vlach Romanian, and examine how it is used online by the main actors involved in the debate regarding the origin and status of their language (which we call the independentists and the reintegrationists), but also by non-engaged members of the Vlach community, who promote the active use online of this mostly oral variety. The main online initiatives we present are Paun Durlić's website, the website of Matka Vlahilor association and the Vlasi na kvadrat Facebook page. We contend that the internet activity, both of the language activists and of the unengaged members of the community, mirrors their offline, real-world ideologies, but, at the same time, challenges the ideologies of contempt generally surrounding minority languages.

Keywords: Vlachs, Vlach Romanian, internet, minority languages, Eastern Serbia

1. Introduction

With the arrival of the Web 2.0, the internet has become an important outlet for different minority languages, which now have the opportunity of becoming more visible, accessible and associated with modern life and technology. As establishing an internet presence is relatively cheap and easy, minority language communities are now offered the opportunity to be producers of content rather than only consumers of majority language generated content.

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However, writing down a minority language to be used online is as ideologically charged as is choosing a spelling system for an oral language, for the offline use. Vlach Romanian, the Romance variety used by the Vlach community of Eastern Serbia,[3] which is currently undergoing an intensely debated standardization process, is a perfect example in this regard.

This paper offers a brief review of the use of Vlach Romanian online by exploring the possible roles the internet plays for minority language communities in general and focusing on its share in the formation of active communities of collaborative minority language producers. After briefly presenting the Vlach community and the language they speak, Vlach Romanian, we examine how it is used online by the actors involved in the debate regarding the origin and status of Vlach Romanian, the reintegrationists and independentists, and also how non-engaged members of the Vlach community promote, maybe even to a higher degree, the active use online of this mostly oral variety.

2. Minority languages on the internet

It has been signaled repeatedly that the real-world offline imbalance of power and authority between majority and minority languages is also maintained online (Cunliffe 2007), as digital exclusion tends to follow already existing patterns of social exclusion. It is an obvious fact that online content in minority languages is much scarcer than in majority languages, and at the same time the gap between majority and minority languages is exponentially larger in the virtual sphere than in the real one. However, the use of a minority language online is more than a simple communicative act. While the online use of English or a majority language is seen as apolitical and neutral, the use of a minority language is "often perceived as a political statement, particularly where minority speakers speak the majority language as well" (Cunliffe 2007, 139). Furthermore, when a language has no written form, a limited literary tradition or low levels of literacy, the internet, being still a predominantly textual medium, may further marginalize minority languages (Kelly Holmes 2004).

If in its first stages the internet was seen as only serving to expand the scope of a dominant language, often at the expense of minority (and minoritized) ones, as

[3] The term *Vlach* has been known to create confusion, as it was originally used to refer to Romanized populations in the Balkans, and later to designate different groups of Romance-language speakers mainly from Albania, Greece or the Republic of Macedonia. These meanings are concurrent today, but we are using the term *Vlach* here only in relation to the ethnic group of Eastern Serbia and to its language, which we call Vlach Romanian.

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it functioned mainly as a cheap alternative to traditional media, today its role is considered as very positive and empowering (Jones 2014; Jany 2017). The real potential of the internet for minority languages, notices Daniel Cunliffe,

> lies not in the replication of traditional media and the formation of passive communities of minority language media consumers, but in the formation of active communities of collaborative minority language producers. These active communities provide not only the opportunity for people to produce material in their minority language, but also to engage with their community online (Cunliffe 2007, 136-137).

The internet can play several roles for minority language communities, depending on the degree of endangerment. The most intensely discussed is by far its role in reversing language shift and promoting revitalization, where the minority language is severely threatened (Eisenlohr 2004, Grenoble and Whaley 2002). By being rather inexpensive, the internet provides effective ways for recording linguistic practice in lesser used languages, where language shift is almost complete and intergenerational transmission has failed. Strongly connected to this there is also the role of the internet in language teaching and learning, under the form of web-based materials (Cunliffe 2007, 144-145; Eisenlohr 2004, 24). However, when a minority language is in a healthy state, has a relatively large number of speakers and the intergenerational transmission is not threatened, the aim should be "to normalize the use of that language online and to extend the domains of minority language use" (Cunliffe 2007, 146) by providing a range of services and information in that specific language which represent viable alternatives to majority language services and information providers.

The use of a minority language on the internet is often interpreted as contestation of the "ideologies of contempt" (Dorian 1998) which have it that languages not used in the electronic media are backward and inferior. Recent research suggests that the presence of languages in the digital sphere in the future will be comparatively similar to literacy, as it is understood today (Moring 2013, 35). As Cunliffe states, the online presence of a minority language

> may provide a way to challenge perceptions of particular minority languages as being old-fashioned, rural or of low social status. Through association with new media and technology, a minority language can assert its role as a contemporary, living tool (Cunliffe 2007, 134).

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Today the internet is an important outlet for different minority languages, such as various African languages (Deumert 2014), Irish (Moriarty 2014), Low German (Reershemius 2016), Luxembourgish (Belling and de Bres 2014), Welsh (Honeycutt and Cunliffe 2010) etc., and recently also for Vlach Romanian.

3. Vlach Romanian: A few considerations

From a structural point of view, Vlach Romanian is an archaic, dialectal variety of Romanian spoken in Eastern Serbia, where it was brought by Romanian migrants from Wallachia and Banat, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries (Constante 1929 [2008]; Meteș 1971; Weigand 1900 [2008]).[4] Since then, the language developed independently from (standard) Romanian, with which it had only isolated contact until very recently. As a roofless variety, Vlach Romanian turned to Serbian, the contact idiom, from which it borrows words or syntactic structures.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, Vlach Romanian has historically had very low prestige, both with the ingroup and with the outgroup. The low prestige meant that for a long time Vlach Romanian has been restricted to the family domain; it was only recently, in 2013, introduced in education, as an optional subject in a few schools in Eastern Serbia (Manovich 2014; Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2015) and started to be used in the media (four radio stations and six TV stations have programs in Vlach Romanian in Eastern Serbia).

While the unofficial estimates given by members of the community talk about as many as 200,000-300,000 speakers, the official data given by the most recent census (Census 2011) registered 35,330 people as Vlachs and 43,095 people who declared Vlach as their mother tongue. This discrepancy indicates that at least some of the members of the community have multiple, intersecting identities, with their ethnic loyalty directed mainly towards the national state, and their linguistic one mainly towards the local variety. The simultaneous identity is also obvious in the double ethnonyms used by the members of the community, who generally call themselves *rumîni* in the vernacular, but *Vlasi* when speaking Serbian. However, starting even with the first publication in Vlach Romanian („Vorba noastră", 1945-1949), the exonym *Vla(h)* has been appropriated by some members of the community even when using the vernacular – an ideologically-informed choice suggesting the creation of a new, different ethnolinguistic identity. We have

[4] Though difficult to prove, many historians support the theory that the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are the successors of an ancient Romanized population (Zbuchea 2014).

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discussed elsewhere this independentist, pro-Vlach ideological faction in opposition with the reintegrationist, pro-Romanian one (see Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018a, b; forthcoming); however, neither of the groups are heterogeneous, as they consist of individuals or associations with slightly different orientations. Thus, part of the reintegrationists put forth three main transcription systems of the vernacular, with others aiming at using standard Romanian in writing, while the independentists created two systems of transcriptions (see Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018b), with one of them being declared official and the basis of the standardization of Vlach Romanian currently taking place, amid contestation from the reintegrationists.

Today, the reintegrationists are not too visible, as far as writing in the vernacular is concerned, because they also rely on publications from Romania. The independentist faction seems to be the more vocal and is the one linked to the most recent language planning and revitalization measures, taken in the last 20 years by organizations and individuals: the first Vlach-Serbian dictionary (2004); the first translation of the Gospel into Vlach (2006); the creation of an official writing system for Vlach (2012); the first grammar of the Vlach language (2013); the introduction of Vlach in elementary schools as an optional subject and the publication of the first Vlach textbook (2014); the resolution for the standardization of Vlach (2015); the publication of the second Vlach textbook (2016) (see Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018a, b; forthcoming). In spite of the passing of the decision of standardization and introduction in the school system, Vlach Romanian still has no official status in Serbia and its use is not regulated at state level. However, the last few years have seen the emergence of a new domain of communication in Vlach Romanian, made possible by the new media: social networks, internet sites, forums or blogs, online newspapers.

4. Vlach Romanian on the internet

For the time being, the online use of Vlach Romanian is rather scarce, with only several sites offering a partial interface in Vlach Romanian and a few forums where visitors occasionally comment in Vlach Romanian. However, with the recent advance of social networks, we are witnessing the introduction and use of Vlach Romanian in private comments, as well as on Facebook pages and groups and Instagram profiles set up by Vlachs, which are rapidly gaining fans and followers. Vlach Romanian is also intermittently used on sites which replicate traditional media (e-newspapers).

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As it was to be expected, the Vlach Romanian online initiatives reflect the orientation of their creators. The offline ideological battle between the two factions is transferred to the cyberspace, thus we can easily classify the virtual presence of Vlach Romanian into pro-Romanian and pro-Vlach. In what follows we will present the most prominent online presences which use to some extent Vlach Romanian, affiliated to the two ideological groups, as well as a programmatically non-prescriptive, micro-level online initiative, which pools the language knowledge of the visitors. The authors of the sites or pages in Vlach Romanian are not necessarily the authors of the offline manifests (as we presented them in Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković 2018b; forthcoming), but are still affiliated to the same ideology.

4.1. The reintegrationists

The oldest and longest-lasting Vlach Romanian online initiative belongs to one of the most prominent Vlach reintegrationists, ethnologist Paun Durlić. His website, www.paundurlic.com, was launched in 1999 and nowadays, 20 years later, features on the homepage the motto *Măĭ batrîn saĭt rumînńesk în Sîrbiĭe!* ("The oldest Vlach Romanian site in Serbia!"); however, for more than 10 years from launching the website served mainly to disseminate the ethnological research of the author, published in Serbian. Much later it received an interface in Vlach Romanian (*Rumînńașće*) and standard Romanian (*Românește*), beside the Serbian one. Thus, for example, the *Enter* on the front page is translated and has now three versions: *Tună* (Vlach Romanian), *Întra* (sic! Romanian) and *Uđi* (Serbian). However, Serbian is still the dominant language, as the Serbian interface is only partially translated into Romanian and Vlach Romanian and many pages lack the option of switching from Serbian to another language.

Paun Durlić's site programmatically conveys the ideological orientation of its author, which is evident in all its separate sections: *Vorbarĭu rumînńesk* (Vlach Romanian dictionary), *Florum Vlasi Srbije* (Forum Vlachs of Serbia), *YouTOBA* (Vlach videos), as well as in the other materials presented on the site, such as the *Compendium for the introduction of Vlach Romanian in elementary schools*.

Vorbarĭu rumînńesk, the author's lexicographic and encyclopedic project, was started in mid-2011. By June 2019, it had more than 64,000 visitors[5] and comprised over 5000 Vlach Romanian words. As Durlić metaphorically puts it on his site, the compilers of the dictionary

[5] As shown by the main visitor counter, designed to count only the first visit of a visitor.

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> bare handedly take the Vlach words out of the language ruins, carefully examine what memories their last whisper brings to the people, and watchfully arrange them in the open treasury of the Vlach spiritual culture, which until now has been mysterious and unknown, but today is open to each of us on the Internet, and available to everyone! (our translation).

Among those involved in the creation of the dictionary, beside Durlić himself, there are many engaged participants from the Vlach community (reintegrationists), who contribute words from their villages of origin (for a comprehensive review of the dictionary, see Sorescu-Marinković 2012). The interface of the Vlach Romanian dictionary is only offered in standard Romanian, Serbian and English, which probably indicates that the author considers that Vlach Romanian cannot be used to designate notions connected to the new technologies.

Vorbarĭu rumînńesk was announced in the *Compendium for the introduction of Vlach Romanian in primary schools* (published on the site in 2011), the programmatic material of the site, a manifest for the preservation and revival of the mother tongue of the Vlachs. Durlić claims that Vlach Romanian is a language only in the ethno-historical context, while linguistically it is comprised of two dialects of Romanian: of Banat and of Oltenia. As the Romanian literary language was created in the 19th century on the basis of the dialect of Muntenia and this process did not involve the Vlachs, they "sense" it as a foreign language, considering only its above-mentioned dialects as their mother tongue. Durlić also claims that Vlach Romanian is almost obsolete and cannot be revived by the standard Romanian language, nor by making it an official language. Instead, he suggests a model of language revival, with two main aims: to create a favorable atmosphere for overcoming the huge intergenerational gap, and to get the young Vlachs acquainted with the Romanian literary language, which is, in methodological terms, a partially foreign language for them, together with the introduction of these two varieties in schools.

As for the forum hosted by the site, *Florum Vlasi Srbije*, it was created in 2007 under the motto *Să pastrăm graĭu rumînńesk – să lunźim traĭu omeńesk!* (Let's maintain the Vlach speech – Let's prolong the human life!). Here the interface is mainly Serbian, as are most of the comments.

Another timid attempt (of the reintegrationist type) of using Vlach Romanian in the virtual sphere is the public Facebook group *Rumânii din Sârbie (Vlasi iz Srbije)* (The Vlachs of Serbia) (https://www.facebook.com/groups/vlachsofserbia/), with 1,170 members in June 2019. The description of the group is in Serbian and a

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variety close to standard Romanian, and explicitly points to its target group: "the Vlachs of Serbia who are aware of their roots and ethnic origin, regardless of declaring themselves Vlachs or Romanians or any other ethnonym which has through time designated members of the Romanian people" (our translation). The content is mainly folkloristic and ethnographic, taken over from Romanian or Serbian sites, with most of the comments in Serbian. The very few posts which are not only in Serbian are translations of the Serbian original into a variety very close to standard Romanian. The group administrators and its contributing members are mainly Vlachs who have studied in Romania, are familiar with standard Romanian and advocate, much more than other reintegrationists, the use of standard Romanian to the detriment of the vernacular.

4.2. The independentists

The main internet outlet of the independentists, www.matkavlahilor.org.rs, is the site of *Matka Vlahilor*,[6] an NGO for the education, science, culture, art and information of the Vlachs. As detailed on their site, this organization protects the identity, language, culture and tradition of the Vlachs and aims to develop and improve social and cultural cooperation of Vlachs with other national communities and relevant institutions in Serbia and abroad, especially where members of the Vlach community live.

Founded in 2015, *Matka Vlahilor* has close links with the Vlach National Council (VNC) of Serbia, the highest institution regulating the cultural autonomy of the Vlachs in Serbia, as mentioned in the statute of the NGO, published on the site. Unlike the official site of VNC (http://www.nacionalnisavetvlaha.rs), which only has a Serbian interface, the interface of www.matkavlahilor.org.rs is trilingual: Vlach Romanian (*ljimba Vlaha*), Serbian and English. This is the first genuine online attempt to use Vlach Romanian in the domain of new technologies. Accordingly, all headings, subheadings and texts on the site are translated into Vlach Romanian: e.g. *Parća dî nainće* (Home), *Odbuoarîlji* (Boards), *Kataluogu lu edicîje* (Catalogue of publications), *Vjeastă* (News), *Kăljindarju* (Events) etc. By June 2019, the site numbered over 100,000 visitors.[7]

Apart from the description of the NGO boards (editorial, for education, for language and script, for culture, for scientific work, for collaboration with diaspora, for cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church and other religious

[6] *Matica Vlaha* in Serbian, formed on the model *Matica srpska*, which is the oldest cultural-scientific institution of Serbia. *Matka Vlahilor* roughly translates as "Queen bee of the Vlachs".

[7] As shown by the main visitor counter, which is counting every site access, not only the first visit.

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communities), which are also offered in Vlach Romanian, the site contains a few short clips for learning the language, video inserts presenting teaching of the optional subject "Vlach vernacular with elements of national culture", as well as an article in Serbian (written by Milena Golubović) about the interest the Vlach population shows in their vernacular being introduced in the educational system. Apart from these, the site advertises literary contests in Vlach Romanian for schoolchildren and adults, and hosts the first collections of children artistic and literary works in the vernacular, *Škuoala* (The school) and *Juo šî drugarji amjej* (Me and my friends). All these are published as a result of the projects run by the NGO.

The language ideology behind *Matka Vlahilor* is not as explicit as in the case of www.paundurlic.com, however it can be easily grasped from the statement that, in its official announcements in the "Vlach language", it uses the Vlach script adopted in 2012 by the Vlach National Council. Furthermore, it explains that the role of the Board for language and script is "to organize, encourage and popularize work in the area of Vlach literature, language and script, to encourage the inception of contemporary literature in the Vlach language".

The NGO site www.matkavlahilor.org.rs also has an equivalent Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/MatkaVlahilor/, followed by over 700 people in June 2019. However, all posts are in Serbian, and the few inserts in Vlach Romanian (less then 10 in three years) have mainly emblematic functions: *Sî va fije bun Anu al Nuou 2018!* ("We wish you a Happy New 2018!"), *Tuot je bun, nu će sikirji!* ("Everything's ok, don't worry!") or *Ku sănataće, kopij!* ("Cheers, children!").

A more consistent and diversified use of Vlach Romanian can be found on the Facebook page *Vlaski jezik* (https://www.facebook.com/Vlaski-Jezik-425751037614472/), followed by over 1700 people in June 2019. The page has an independentist orientation, visible in the orthography used and in the content of some of the posts, and contains original texts, mainly about religious or traditional holidays, unsigned poems and short videos or films in Vlach Romanian. Often the content is rendered in Serbian as well, with Vlach Romanian occupying the privileged position. Thus, the main purpose of the page – never stated, but hinted at by the name of the page, as well as by the content – is to promote and extend the active use and learning of Vlach Romanian. However, the relatively small number of followers, as well as the fact that comments to the posts are few and far between, mainly in Serbian and often negative, suggest that the page did not manage to create a real sense of community, unlike the project that we present next.

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4.3. The unengaged language users

Vlasi na kvadrat (www.facebook.com/vlasi2/), which roughly translates as "square Vlachs", "double Vlachs" or "two times Vlachs", is a Facebook page of an entertaining character. Labeled "performance art", the page was launched in October 2016 and its content is described by its anonymous administrator as a "daily dose of extreme Vlach creations". The main part of the content consists of internet memes (often containing Vlach Romanian), but also of videos and status updates. Thus, in the case of *Vlasi na kvadrat* we encounter some of the shifts that Pietikäinen discusses in her account about a comedy program in Sámi: a shift in genre, a shift in audience, and a shift related to the age of the producers and consumers (Pietikäinen 2014, 526-527). *Vlasi na kvadrat* is one of the several Facebook pages of this type which approach in a humoristic way the linguistic and regional features of local communities in Serbia, and enjoy great popularity among the younger generation. However, what makes its astounding success[8] even more special is that it actively uses Vlach Romanian, not a regional variety of Serbian, and engages its numerous fans and followers to do the same.

In June 2019, the page had over 17,000 followers, while the all-time number of people reached is much bigger (according to the statistics offered by Facebook to the owner of the page).[9] Acording to the same statistics, more than half of the fans are located in Serbia, while the close runner-up is Austria, followed by Germany, Romania and Switzerland (see Deumert 2014, 492-493, for the importance of the Diaspora in creating websites and making indigenous languages visible). The fans' language (meaning the language of the Facebook profile interface) is, in half of the cases, Serbian, followed by English and German in almost equal proportions. Thus, accessed by Serbs, by the members of the Vlach community in Eastern Serbia, but also by the Vlachs living abroad, and by Romanians, the page manages to coagulate a transborder and transnational community which uses the language resources creatively and is already playing an important role in defining a new Vlach identity.

[8] The title of a newspaper interview with the author of the page, published on the informative portal of Eastern Serbia, *East Side*, in November 2017, reads: *Interview with the author of the most popular humoristic Facebook page "Vlasi na kvadrat"* (*Interview "Vlasi na kvadrat"* 2017). As well, two of the fake events organized by this page made it to top 10 Facebook fake events in Serbia in 2017 (*Top 10* 2017).

[9] On the equivalent Instagram profile *vlasinakvadrat*, with almost 9,500 followers in June 2019, the administrator posts the stories from the Facebook page. As well, the page is the administrator of the closed group *Vlasi na kvadrat. Grupa đe zajebešće na kvadrat*, with more than 2,000 members in June 2019.

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Part of this new Vlach identity is expressed by encompassing Serbian and other languages from the users' repertoires into their online practices and by creating new words that index Vlach-ness (as we will show in more detail elsewhere – Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković in preparation). Only very few posts are monolingual (in Vlach Romanian), while the vast majority are bi- or multilingual, which reflects the current linguistic reality of the speakers of Vlach Romanian and a non-essentialist understanding of their own identity: *Dear mujka, buy me new olovka, asta nu lukre* ("Dear mom, buy me a new pen, this one is not working" – in Vlach Romanian, English, Serbian), *Lako je nama, noj snćem aj noštri…* ("It's easy for us, we are our folks…" – in Vlach Romanian, Serbian), *Excuse me, do you have "brnza, pnje ši platađenj"? – Of course, madam, this is the most exclusive restoranešće in the world. Do you want "ćapa" with your dish? – Numa un usturoj, please.* („Excuse me, do you have "cheese, bread and tomatoes"? – Of course, madam, this is the most exclusive restaurant in the world. Do you want "onion" with your dish? – Only garlic, please." – Vlach Romanian, English, Serbian), *Numa o piva cu mafija ši vin akas šaci* ("Just one beer with my posse and I'm coming home, honey" – Vlach Romanian, Serbian, German).

The use of Serbian and of other languages can also be interpreted as a consequence and a symbolic image of the real state of the vernacular today, which still has a reduced range of use, with Serbian being preferred in modern communication and for the sake of accuracy, and with permanent codeswitching between the languages. Sari Pietikäinen's remark about Sámi being used as part of a multilingual practice rings true about Vlach Romanian as well: "this kind of use of endangered […] language comes close to the everyday 'messy' language practices among many […] speakers" (Pietikäinen 2014, 534).

The creation of new words also relates to indexing this new Vlach identity, as it is to be understood in the 21st century: cool, modern and technologically updated; therefore, the administrator and the users coin new words in Vlach Romanian, which refer to new technologies or are part of an emerging Vlach Romanian slang. One of the very frequently used new linguistic inovations is *ćefra* (from *fraće* "bro"), made upon the model of *tebra* (from Serbian *brate* "bro"), which follows the rules of the *šatrovački* slang of Serbian, in which words are formed by replacing the syllable order, with the new words having the same meaning as the original ones (e.g. *Ćedu kudra ćefra* from *Duće draku fraće* "Go to hell, bro" – posted in February 2019). Other less used creations are the words for the Facebook reaction emojis: *Draguc* (for *Like*), *Rđelan* (for *Haha*), *Injimuca* (for *Love*) and *Plngator* (for *Sad*), as well as *snguril* ("selfie"), a totally unexpected creation given the fact that most languages – including Serbian – have just adopted the English term: *Kad dedi kažeš: "Unđeš ćefra, ai sa faćem un snguril ku mein*

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handy de 100 megapixelešće" ("When you tell your grandpa: Where are you, bro, let's take a selfie with my 100 megapixels phone").

What makes *Vlasi na kvadrat* stand out is that, while all other Vlach online initiatives clearly and even programmatically convey and mirror the orientation of their authors in what concerns identity (either pro-Vlach, or pro-Romanian), *Vlasi na kvadrat* is not created by an activist with revitalization or status planning purposes in mind. So, the use of Vlach Romanian has no political or ideological undertones and is never stated as a purpose. Moreover, through its witty remarks, unengaged attitude, creative use of language resources and plurilingual practices, the page succeeds in mitigating the differences between the two factions and in creating a specific, overarching Vlach online identity.

5. Conclusions

The online presence of a minority language can provide a way to challenge perceptions of that particular language as being old-fashioned or exclusively rural, unfit for modern communication. As Eisenlohr notices, the electronic mediation of minority languages

> is not only encouraging language maintenance and revitalization by providing speakers with opportunities to hear and maintain skills in the language, but also is achieving a transformation of ideological valuations of the language so that the lesser-used language is viewed as part of the contemporary world and as relevant for the future of a particular group (Eisenlohr 2004, 24).

The association of a minority language with the internet and new technologies raises its prestige, both within the ingroup and within the outgroup, which might support the extension of its domains of use, as the language becomes relevant and meaningful for the present and for the future, not only for the past. Thus, despite the fact that Vlach Romanian has always been associated with tradition, old age and village life, by being used now in the virtual sphere, it becomes cool, modern, technology-related, visible and, above all, accessible. This traditionally oral variety is now written, on electronic support, and used by old and young generations of speakers, in Serbia or abroad. Furthermore, the use of the vernacular on the internet may empower and encourage young speakers, who are in many cases reluctant and insecure, to use it offline as well, in everyday communication.

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However, Vlach Romanian is rarely used online by itself, usually being accompanied by or mixed with dominant languages (Serbian, English, Romanian, German). This reflects the linguistic reality of today's speakers of Vlach Romanian, and, at the same time, can also be seen as a way of mitigating the perceived impoliteness of using a language that not everyone understands (Cunliffe 2005, 139). Since all Vlach Romanian speakers are proficient in Serbian, this is the predominant language in all online outlets we discussed.

While the first online Vlach Romanian initiatives we discussed in this paper programmatically convey the ideological orientation of their authors and may be categorized as independentists or reintegrationists, Vlach Romanian is also used online on non-prescriptivist pages. Thus, on the one hand, the online activity in Vlach Romanian is led by activists, either with the purpose of documenting and preserving the language (Durlić), or with that of raising the prestige and status of the language and turning it into an *Ausbau* language (Matka Vlahilor). On the other hand, the language is used online by ideologically unengaged members of the community (the users of Vlasi na kvadrat), who most often have only partial competence in Vlach Romanian, and are using their plurilingual repertoires for communication, rather than for ideological stances that might ward off potential users.

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