

ROMANIANS IN SOUTH-EASTERN UKRAINE FACING AN IMMINENT ASSIMILATION

George DAMIAN*, Cătălin VĂRZARU*

Summary. The following article deals with the present situation of the Romanian minority in Odessa region of Ukraine. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the situation of national minorities in Ukraine has been regulated by domestic and international legislation, such as the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Still, Ukrainian authorities refuse to implement all provisions of aforementioned Convention with the result of continuous assimilation of Romanian minority in Odessa region. In Odessa region in 2001 were registered 123.751 citizens as Moldovans. This denomination of „Moldovans” is part of the assimilation process, splitting the Romanian speaking community living in Ukraine in two ethnic groups: Romanians and Moldovans.

Rezumat. Prezentul articol tratează situația actuală a minorității românești din regiunea Odesa, Ucraina. De la dizolvarea Uniunii Sovietice, situația minorităților naționale din Ucraina este reglementată printr-un set de legi interne și internaționale, cum ar fi Convenția Cadru a Consiliului Europei pentru Protecția Minorităților naționale. Totuși autoritățile ucrainene refuză să pună în aplicare toate prevederile convenției amintite mai sus, cu urmarea unei asimilări continue a minorității românești din regiunea Odesa. În anul 2001 aici au fost înregistrați drept "moldoveni" un număr de 123.751 cetățeni. Simpla denumire de "moldoveni" constituie o parte a procesului de asimilare, împărțind comunitatea vorbitorilor de limbă română din Ucraina în două grupuri etnice separate: români și moldoveni.

Keywords: Ukraine, protection of national minorities, assimilation, Romanian national minority

Note: The present article is based on the findings made by journalists George Damian and Cătălin Vărzaru during a study trip in Odessa region in August 2010.

The situation of Romanians from the Odessa region, Ukraine, can not be understood without a few words on the history of the region. Known by many names – Bugeac, southern Bessarabia, Ismail and Bolgrad counties – the region bordered by Dnestr estuary, Republic of Moldova, Danube Delta and the Black Sea had a deeply troubled history. Until 1812 it was part of the old kingdom of Moldova and in this year was put under Russian rule by Bucharest Treaty, when Ottoman Empire agreed to give Moscow this territory that did not belong to the Sultan and the Romanian state was too weak to defend its borders.

* journalists, Bucharest, Romania

Bugeac became once more part of Romanian territory in 1856 by the Treaty of Paris and stayed as such until 1878, when it was again conceded to Russia by Berlin Treaty. In 1918 Bugeac region entered again under Romanian rule until 1940 when it was occupied by Soviet Union. During the inter-war period, Soviet Russia refused to acknowledge the Union of Basarabia with Romania, something that led to invention of a “Moldavian nationality” separated from Romanians, a people speaking “Moldavian language”. The results of these actions of Soviet Union may be seen up to our days. During the Second World War Bugeac region became once more part of Romania, until 1944 when it was occupied again by Soviet Red Army. Treaty of Paris in 1947 sealed the entering of Basarabia under Soviet rule. Bugeac region, even that it was permanently a part of the Basarabia province, was annexed to Ukraine in exchange for what today is known as the breakaway region of Transnistria, the former Moldavian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic. The idea of mixing peoples and territories proved to be effective until today: the political problems of the region are still not solved, along with the frozen conflict of Transnistria, which is a direct consequence of the measures taken by the Soviet commissars. Beginning with 1991, Bugeac region is part of the new Ukrainian state.

In order to understand the present situation of Romanian community in Bugeac it is necessary to have a few remarks on the theory of “Moldavianism”. Up to the year of 1924 the existence of a “Moldavian language” different from the Romanian language was not a subject for linguists. There have been references to the “Moldavian language” as the language of people residing in the medieval state of Moldova, but almost every time the authors underlined the fact that this language is the same with the one spoken by Romanians residing in Valahia or Transylvania, all this historical provinces forming the today Romania. Until 1924 the unity of Romanian language was not denied – but in this year Soviet Union founded the Moldavian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (RASSM) on the left bank of Dneestr aiming for the sovietization of the whole Romania. It was the RASSM where the term “Moldavian language” was coined with the conclusion of a “Moldavian people” separated from the Romanians. The very inventors of “Moldavianism” were killed during Stalinist purges, but the Soviet system carried on the promotion of this theory by all means. After Basarabia was occupied by the Soviet Union, “Moldavian theory” became a state dogma and all who tried to criticize it were purged. Along the existence of Soviet Union, all Western linguists denied the existence of a “Moldavian language”, separated from

Romanian one. As a paradox, there were even Soviet linguists that rejected the idea of a “Moldavian language” - but this invention was preserved as a political instrument used to maintain the differences between Romanians in Basarabia under Soviet occupation and Romanians living in Romania. The same “Moldavian theory” was carefully preserved by the new Ukrainian authorities after the year 1991, because splitting the Romanian community in Ukraine in two separate groups is very convenient for the Ukrainian nationalism. The Ukrainian census in 2001 registered 275.00 Moldavians and 151.000 Romanians. If there was a single ethnic group registered, it would have been a number of almost half a million Romanians – or “Moldavians” - something that would raise this ethnic group on the second place, immediately after the Russian community living in Ukraine. But when the Romanian community is splitted between Romanians and Moldavians, these groups are placed on third and seventh place. During the two weeks we spent in Bugeac we didn't need a translator, we perfectly managed to understand and be understood speaking only Romanian language.

Today in Bugeac live almost 124.000 Romanians, designated by Ukrainian authorities as “Moldovans”, facing a violent action of assimilation instrumented by the Ukrainian state. In spite of all domestic legislation and international treaties and agreements of Ukraine, none of the fundamental rights of Romanians living here is fully respected.

Mass-media in Romanian language

Mass-media in Romanian language has a pretty large presence - still confronting a lot of problems. The biggest problem is funding the publications in Romanian language - most of these being issued irregularly. The obligation of registering written media with local authorities generates also influences from Ukrainian authorities. Among Romanian language media printed in Cernăuți are: newspapers „Concordia“, „Zorile Bucovinei“, „Junimea“, „Arcașul“; children magazine „Făgurel“; cultural almanac „Țara Fagilor“; „Septentrion literar“ magazine; „Libertatea Cuvântului“, „Clopotul Bucovinei“. In Transcarpatia region mass-media in Romanian language is represented by: daily TV programs „Zi de zi“ and weekly „Telerevista săptămânii“, daily radio program „Plaiul meu natal“ and weekly magazine „Maramureșenii“.

Compared to the Romanian language mass-media in Cernăuți region, the Odessa region has virtually no Romanian language mass-media. There is only the weekly “Luceafarul” printed in Odessa, numbering only four pages, self-branded

as using “Moldavian language”. Financed by the Odessa regional authorities and led by the former vice-governor of the region Anatol Fetescu, “Luceafarul” weekly is distributed for free to Romanians living in Bugeac just because it boasts the “Moldavian language”. There is also a weekly radio show lasting one hour and broadcasting “Moldavian” folk music and a half hour local weekly TV show, also under “Moldavian” influence of the local authorities.

In Bugeac there was a weekly magazine named Concordia, edited with the support of the Romanian community in the Cernăuți region. Financed by the Ukrainian authorities under a program aimed at supporting the national minorities, Concordia weekly disappeared because the journalists refused to comply to the governmental request to write in “Moldavian language”. Concordia weekly saw its budget shrinking from year to year: from 12 pages and 15.000 copies a week, consecutive cuts brought it to 4 pages and 1.500 copies. In 2009 Concordia weekly was refused the budget by the Ukrainian Government because the journalists refused to write it in “Moldavian language” - something that confirms the assimilation intentions of the Ukrainian authorities for the Romanians living in Odessa region.

In Odessa region are active a few local non-governmental organizations, but all of them are subjected to governmental hostility. For example „National and Cultural Association „Basarabia“ of Romanians in Odessa intended to found the „Odessa Regional Centre for Romanian Culture“. The legal steps to register this centre were made beginning with 2005, but up to now the Legal Commission of the Odessa Regional Council rejected the request forwarded by the leaders of Folklore Society „Dor Basarabean“ together with Inter-regional Union „Romanian Community in Ukraine“, saying that the founding of a cultural centre of Romanians in south Bessarabia is „useless“.

Relations between Romania and Ukraine affecting the situation of Romanian community

According to the first Treaty signed between Romania and Ukraine in 1997, a joint intergovernmental cooperation commission regarding minority problems had been established, commission which should have met annually, but which met only five times since 1998 to 2008. In the year 2008 a common governmental decision was made to activate this commission and start a monitoring process regarding the rights of national minorities. The first step was made in 2009: the Romanian monitoring team arrived in Odessa region, but their

activity was concluded in only a few hours. Ukrainian officials stated that in the region people speak only “Moldavian language” and asked the locals not to say that they speak Romanian language. Following this attitude the whole monitoring process was blocked.

The former Ukrainian President Viktor Yuschchenko officially admitted on 23 October 2009 that the situation of national minority rights is not the best. Thus, President Yuschchenko declared himself worried about the situation of ensuring the cultural and educational necessities of the national minorities in Ukraine in a letter addressed to prime minister Yulia Timoschenko that was published on the web page of the Ukrainian Presidency. „I am deeply worried by the situation of ensuring the cultural and educational necessities of the national minorities in Ukraine, which is demonstrated by the large number of letters I receive from citizens and civil society. The public budget expenditures in this year for sustaining the national minorities in Ukraine through the Culture Ministry and the State Committee for Minorities and Religions were reduced by ten times compared to the precedent years. Even in these conditions the financial resources are not fully used“, said President Viktor Yuschchenko in his letter to prime minister Timoschenko. Ukraine's head of state declared himself convinced that the state policy in the area of inter-ethnic relations should not be affected by the difficult economic situation and that state authorities should be able to act in what concerns the prevention of risks raised by ethnic-political conflicts.

Romania-Ukraine relation in 2009 was a difficult one, affecting the situation of Romanian community in Ukraine. In February 2009, the International Court of Justice in Hague decided in Romania's favour in the trial on the maritime delimitations in the Black Sea, and event that sparked many anti-Romanian articles in the Ukrainian mass-media. Another event occurred in March 2009, when following an espionage scandal, two Ukrainian diplomats from Ukraine's Embassy in Bucharest were expelled, and after that two Romanian diplomats being expelled from Kyiv and Cernauti.

On 7 May 2009 the former Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Boris Tarasiuk, presently president of the Commission for European Integration in Kyiv visited Bucharest, on which occasion he accused Romania for not respecting the minorities rights. „Data I know is in favour of Ukraine, not Romania. If somebody wishes to prove the opposite then he should present facts. In fact there is only one Ukrainian high school in Romania and 92 Romanian schools in Ukraine, with more than 22.000 children learning Romanian, while only 260 children learn

Ukrainian in Romania. Romanians in Ukraine enjoy libraries, folklore associations, radio and TV in Romanian and many other such facilities that Ukrainians in Romania do not have. There are only two and a half times more Romanians in Ukraine than Ukrainians in Romania, but this ratio is not respected in those 92 Romanian schools and only one Ukrainian high school“, Tarasiuk argued. Information presented by the Ukrainian official in Bucharest have been contradicted by what we found in Odessa region. Romanian schools are on the verge of extinctions there, libraries have books only in Russian of Ukrainian language and the folklore associations are located in buildings that almost collapse.

Anti-Romanian manifestations in Ukraine are extremely frequent in mass-media and may be found even at the highest political level. In April 2009, during a meeting on agriculture, President of Ukraine Viktor Yuschchenko said to a clumsy assistant „You, Moldavian!“, attaching to this term a negative connotation. The images broadcasted by the STB television show President Yuschchenko asking one of his assistants to set the image on a screen. Instead of setting the image, some of his assistants moved the screen, making the President to call him „You, Moldavian!“. Attaching a negative connotation to a denomination of Romanians did not remained unnoticed at an international level - during the Prague summit of the Eastern Partnership, the president of the Commission against racism and intolerance of the Council of Europe, Eva Smith Asmussen appreciated that the words used by Yuschchenko were insulting. After this, President Yushchenko admitted that it was a wrong joke.

After two Ukrainian diplomats were declared persona non grata by Romania following an espionage scandal, Ukraine decided to do the same with two Romanian diplomats saying that they committed actions endangering the national security of Ukraine, according to an article published on 6 March 2009 by Ukrainskaia Pravda quoting official sources. According to Ukrainskaia Pravda the two Romanian diplomats „took steps to spread unionist and separatist sentiments among Romanians in Ukraine“. The source of Ukrainskaia Pravda mentioned also the motion for a resolution in the European Parliament asking for education in mother tongue language as being a threat for Ukraine. „In south-western Ukraine, authorities from Bucharest, with the help from consulates and non-governmental organizations actively form a pro-Romanian public opinion and separatist sentiments“. According to this interpretation, supporting activities for Romanian minority are perceived as threatening.

In spite of the fact that there are no territorial claims of Romania towards Ukraine, Ukrainian mass-media permanently uses this accusation of an eventual Romanian aggression. This danger is evoked by the Ukrainian mass-media whenever is approached the subject of respecting the minority rights for the Romanian community in Ukraine, thus inducing a negative image of the Romanian community in the Ukrainian public opinion.

Religious freedom of Romanians in Ukraine

The religious freedom enjoyed by the Romanian community in Ukraine and the way it is respected by the Ukrainian authorities one can see in what happened in the Romanian parish in the village of Hagi-Curda. The Orthodox church of this village was demolished during Soviet times and only in 1995, with great efforts the Orthodox parish was re-established under the Bessarabian Metropolitan Church, subjected to the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate. The epitrop of this parish was elected Vasile Iordachescu, priest being Anatol Cristea. The Ukrainian authorities did not recognized the parish under the pretext that the Bessarabian Metropolitan Church was not authorized by the Government of the Republic of Moldova. Only on 26th March 2003 the Regional State Administration in Odessa admitted the only Romanian parish in Ukraine. Following the threats to his family, priest Anatol Cristea left Hagi-Curda village in 2005, being replaced by priest Nicolae Asargiu. At the end of the year 2005 priest Nicolae Asaragiu was deported by Ukrainian authorities, being replaced by priest Anatol Curtev. During the last years the church in Hagi-Curda has been vandalized on many occasions and it's believers beaten: on 17th June 2003 - the believers were beaten; on 21st July 2003 – the priest was tied to a car and threatened to be dragged to death; on 6th July 2004 – the church doors were battered down, all objects found in the church were destroyed, the icons were soaked in diesel fuel and the car of priest Cristea was set ablaze; on 9th May 2005 – the believers were denied the access to the cemetery and the priest was beaten; on 9th April 2006 the priest was beaten by unidentified persons in Ismail city; May 2006 – before the Easter sermon unknown persons entered the church and used toxic gas to scatter the believers; 18th June 2006 – the house of priest Curtev was attacked by three masked men who broke the windows and threatened to set the house on fire. For none of these aggressions were the perpetrators identified or punished by the Ukrainian authorities. Any other initiative to establish a new church to be

subjected to the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate in Bucharest will be strongly influenced by the violent events in Hagi-Curda.

Romanian language in Ukrainian schools

According to its own Constitution, Ukraine is a democratic state respecting the rule of law, in which the state contributes to consolidation and development of Ukrainian nation, as well as to the development of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious specificity of all autochthonous people and minorities. In Ukraine, the use of mother tongue of national minorities is granted by the Constitution and is also coded in special laws that grant the free development, use and defense of languages for all national minorities. After Ukraine was admitted to the Council of Europe, the Ukrainian Government assumed the task to sign and ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and also the European Charter for Regional Languages and Linguistic Minorities.

Article 53 of the Ukraine's Constitution grant the members of national minorities the right to use their mother tongue in state and communal schools or through national-cultural societies. At the same time, Article 119 of Ukraine's Constitution states that local state administrations are to ensure the fulfillment for the governmental and regional programs of social, economic and cultural development, environmental programs and in regions inhabited by national minorities they are responsible for the programs aimed at the cultural development of national minorities. This is confirmed by the Ukrainian Constitution, by the Declaration of the Rights of National Minorities in Ukraine, by Conclusion 190 (1995) regarding the admission of Ukraine in Council of Europe, the Recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe No. 1201 (1993), the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and also the European Charter for Regional Languages and Linguistic Minorities, and the Treaty between Ukraine and Romania. All these grant the right of Romanians living in Ukraine to study in their mother tongue at all levels, including University.

From a legal point of view everything seems to be wonderful. But the history of the last 60 years shows a crystal clear direction of total annihilation of schooling in Romanian language in Odessa region. After the Soviet conquest of the Bugeac, in this region there were 62 schools using Romanian language. In 1991, when Ukraine became independent there were only 21 schools using Romanian language for instruction. These schools were as follows: in 16 schools

the classes were taught only in Romanian language; in two schools classes were split half Romanian, half Russian; the rest of three schools had Romanian language and literature as an optional class. In the year 1996, when Ukrainian Constitution was adopted, only 13 schools out of former 16 were still instructing all their classes in Romanian language, 4 schools used the mixed system of half Romanian, half Russian classes and other 4 schools had the Romanian language and literature as an optional class, limited to only a single hour per week, even less than for foreign languages.

In 2002, from the 21 schools using Romanian language remained only 18: 9 of them used Romanian language for all classes and objects; the rest of 9 schools using the mixed system, Romanian-Russian or Romanian-Ukrainian. In the year 2006, in Odessa region there were only 8 schools using Romanian language for all classes and objects, the rest of 10 schools using the mixed system. The situation changed again in 2008: there were only 6 schools using Romanian language for all classes and objects, the number of schools with mixed system being on the raise. From the 62 schools using Romanian language for all classes at the beginning of the Soviet period remained only 6 such schools in almost 60 years. From 1991 when Ukraine gained its independence the number of schools using Romanian language for all classes dropped from 16 to 6. Also during the Ukrainian rule – under a Constitution and a domestic legislation boasting the protection of national minorities – the schools using the mixed system enjoyed an interesting evolution: in 1991 there were 5 such schools; in 1996 their number dropped to 4 (one of them renouncing all Romanian classes); but in 2002 their number raised to 9 (decreasing the number of schools using Romanian language for all classes); in 2006 their number increased again to 10, following another increase to 12 in 2008.

Seeing these numbers and their modifications during the last 20 years from Ukraine's independence we can decode the strategy of the Ukrainian authorities for the education in Romanian language in Odessa region: during the first phase Romanian schools are transformed in mixed schools, in the second phase being transformed in all-Ukrainian or all-Russian schools, Romanian language and literature becoming an optional class. Ukrainian domestic legislation on protection of the right of national minorities to study in their mother tongue proves to be nothing but a pile of useless paper: the number of schools using Romanian language for instruction decreases from one year to another. The results of such a strategy are catastrophically for the Romanian community in Ukraine; according

to the last census in December 2001 the percentage of people with university level degrees were as follows: 10.5% for Ukrainians, 10.81% for Poles, 8.92 for Bulgarians. In Odessa region only 3.87% persons belonging to Romanian community had university level degrees. While during the Soviet times the Romanian intelligentsia was either executed or deported, nowadays Ukraine implements a mischievous strategy to block the access to education for the Romanian minority, lacking this community of political leaders and intellectuals.

Methods of limiting the right to education in mother tongue

Limiting the right of education in mother tongue is not accomplished only by diminishing the number of schools using Romanian language for instruction, but also by administrative measures that decrease the number of hours and classes taught in Romanian.

Thus, during year 2008, Ministry of Education in Kyiv published Order Number 461 on 26th May 2008 „Regarding the estrangement of the program for improvement of the study of Ukrainian language in the minorities schools for 2008-2011“ and Order Number 496 from 3th July 2008 „Regarding the establishment of Instructions for completing class journals for grades 5-11 of education establishments“. These regulations refer to the following: Starting 1st September 2008 the number of hours granted for studying Ukrainian language will increase, which will lead to a decrease of the number of hours in Romanian language; in the schools for Romanian minorities, starting 10th grade, the student will have to study the history of Ukraine and mathematics in Ukrainian; in the 5th grade, student will have to learn the history of Ukraine both in Ukrainian and Romanian language and starting 6th grade geography, mathematics and physical education as well. In June 2008 representatives of Interregional Union Romanian Community from Ukraine (Vasile Tarateanu and Aurica Bojescu) sent Romanian President a open letter where they presented the means used by Ukrainian government to reduce the number of Romanian schools:

- establishing Ukrainian classes in national schools with the purpose of destroying them from the interior;
- naming as director of national schools persons who do not speak the maternal language of children to whom they teach;
- students are forced to study some subjects from the curricula (Geography of Ukraine, History of Ukraine, Physical Education, Patriotic education,

Ukrainology) in Ukrainian language, which reduces the functionality of maternal language;

- establishing the course „Romanian Literature - Universal Literature“, but not in Ukrainian schools, lead to a decrease of classes referring to national literature (in Ukrainian schools Universal Literature is studied separately from Ukrainian Literature);

- encouraging the lack of textbooks in Romanian language at some subjects to encourage the study in Ukrainian;

- editing low quality textbooks of a low professional, didactic and scientific level. In some textbooks, as for example „Me and Ukraine“, Romanians are not mentioned as a native population in Ukraine, although it represents an important segment of population, outnumbering other populations which are mentioned in the textbook;

- in his speeches, when he is talking about other minorities that live in Ukraine, even the president omits to mention Romanians among Hungarians, Poles, Bulgarians, Russians, Gipsies, Jews;

- the documents, schedules, class journals, working programs, diverse professional challenges are held only in Ukrainian language, reducing the character of national school;

- cancelling the possibility of taking graduation exam in Romanian or any admission exam into a higher institute of education or medium ones;

- replacement of the admission exam in Romanian with an exam in Ukrainian language for the teachers from primary grades.

In spite of the appeals made by the Romanian associations, authorities in Kyiv not only did not annulled these regulations, but during 2009 continued to restrict the use of Romanian language in schools. Thus, during 2009 were promoted new regulations cancelling the exams in mother tongue in the schools used by national minorities, replacing them with exams in Ukrainian language. This regulation will cancel the motivation to attend classes in mother tongue and would lead to a fast assimilation of Romanian pupils. Member of the Parliament of Ukraine, Ion Popescu (also president of the inter-regional Union Romanian Community in Ukraine) declared that since Ivan Vakarciuk was appointed Minister of Education started a process of assimilation of national minorities using schools. Ion Popescu appreciated the new regulations saying that: „First of all, the Article 24 of Ukraine’s Constitution states that discrimination on language or ethnicity grounds is interdicted. According to this article, the children as representatives of national minorities have the right to be examined in their mother tongue that they used during their studies. Secondly, according to the

Article 22 of Ukraine's Constitution, it is not allowed for new regulations to restrict existing rights. For this reason the regulations of the Ministry of Education can not restrict the existing rights. And the most important fact is that Ukraine became an independent state adopting a Declaration of rights for national minorities which provides linguistic rights for national minorities, including the right for education in mother tongue. Those new regulations promoted by the present Government go against this Declaration, against the articles of the Constitution and against all international norms and obligations of Ukraine, assumed by signing the European Charter for minority and regional languages, the Frame Convention for National Minorities, etc“.

Conclusions

The general situation of education in mother tongue for Romanians in Ukraine is characterized by the president of Foundation „Casa limbii romane“ from Cernauti Vasile Tarateanu in the following words: „During the years of communist totalitarianism in the schools of national minorities all classes were held in pupil's mother tongue, apart from two classes: state language and the foreign languages. Now, in our schools beside the classes for Ukrainian language, other five classes are held in Ukrainian. The situation of Romanian schools is worse than that during the USSR times. If things are going the way authorities want, maybe tomorrow we will study even Romanian language in Ukrainian. Now, those who want to be professors of Romanian language or teachers for elementary schools with classes in Romanian are forced to be examined in Ukrainian language, instead of Romanian“.

There is only one conclusion: the situation of mother tongue education in Odessa region is a sad one. Ukrainian authorities made everything in their power to promote the annihilation of education in Romanian language: the number of schools was decreased, the number of classes was reduced, and children that studied in Romanian language have no chance of going for a university level degree. There is only one result for this: the assimilation of the Romanian community in Odessa region.