

## Serbs in Romania Relationship between Ethnic and Religious Identity

**Abstract:** The paper looks at the role of religion in the ethnic identity of the Serbs in Romania, based on the fieldwork conducted in August 2010 among the Serbian communities in the Danube Gorge (Rom. *Clisura Dunării*; loc. Ser. *Banatska klisura*), western Romania. A historical perspective being necessary in studying and understanding the complexities of identity structures, the paper offers a brief historical overview of the Serbian community in Romania. Serbs have been living in the Banat since medieval times, their oldest settlements dating back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Today, they mostly live in western Romania (Timiș, Arad, Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți counties), Timișoara being their cultural, political and religious centre. Over the last decades, the community has been numerically declining due to strong assimilation processes and demographic trends, as evidenced by successive census data (34,037 in 1977; 29,408 in 1992; 22,518 in 2002). The majority belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church (Diocese of Timișoara), but a number of neo-Protestant churches have appeared in the last decades. The research focuses on the role of the Orthodox religion among the Serbian minority in Romania and the role of new religious communities in relation to national identity. The role of the dominant Serbian Orthodox Church in preserving and strengthening ethnic identity is looked at, but also influences of other religious traditions which do not overlap with any particular ethnic group, such as neo-Protestantism. With regard to the supranational nature of neo-Protestantism, the aim of the study is to analyze the impact of these new religions on assimilation processes among the Serbs in Romania and to examine in what ways different religious communities influence either the strengthening or the weakening of Serbian ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** Serbs in Romania, Serbian Orthodox Church, neo-Protestants, Baptists, ethnic and religious identity, assimilation

### *1. An historical overview*

The history of the Serbs in what now is Romania may be divided into several distinctive periods: medieval, Ottoman, Habsburg, Austro-Hungarian, world wars, communist and post-communist. After the first settlers who had come in medieval times, Serbian immigration continued throughout the Ottoman period, which began with the Ottoman conquest of southern Hungary, more precisely, of the Banat in 1522 and Crișana in 1566. Most Serbs in Hungary settled in the course, or as a result, of the Ottoman invasion and subsequent wars (Aleksov 2010, 46). The most massive were two of these migrations, known as “great”, one led by Patriarch Arsenije III in 1690, the other, by Patriarch Arsenije IV in 1739. From the

early sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth, Serbs settled more intensively and founded new settlements in Banat areas north of Timișoara (Cerović 2000, 21). From the sixteenth century they also began to settle in the southern Banat, in the *Clisura Dunării* or Danube Gorge.

Ottoman rule ended in 1717, when the Banat was seized by the Habsburgs. In order to give an economic and demographic impetus to its newly-conquered territories, the Habsburg Monarchy began organized colonization, land was cleared for agriculture and settlements developed. This planned resettlement carried out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries included German, Magyar, Slovak, Czech, Bulgarian, Romanian and other settlers (Tejlor 2001, 10–24). After the Military Frontier was established in the early eighteenth century, Orthodox Christian Serbs from Buda, Komárom and Esztergom<sup>1</sup> moved to the Tisza-Mureș section of the Frontier, but there was also an inflow of Serbs into the Crișana region, north of the Banat (Panić 2003, 27). The central institution of the Serbian population in the Habsburg Monarchy, in religious as well as political terms, was the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Serbs were perceived as part of a broader Orthodox entity, given that collective identifications were powerfully influenced by religion. In 1790, the Serbs in Hungary, aware of their distinctiveness in ethnic and political terms, convened a momentous political rally, the Assembly of Temesvar/Timișoara,<sup>2</sup> which came up with the first Serbian national programme (Pavlović 2011, 33). The Assembly put forth economic, political, educational and cultural demands, which were a strong encouragement for the development of the Serbian community. Moreover, the Assembly called for territorial autonomy, a demand which, however, was not met (Pavlović 2005, 97). After the Revolution of 1848, the imperial decree of 1849 established the *Woiwodschaft Serbien und Temescher Banat* or the Duchy of Serbia and Temesvar Banat (abolished in 1860), the Austrian crown land seated in Timișoara, within which a reform of Serbian schooling and culture could begin.<sup>3</sup> Under the terms of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, the Serb-inhabited areas came under Hungarian administration. The period between 1867 and 1918 was marked by a strong Magyarization pressure on the non-Magyar population, including the Serbs as one of the numerically strongest ethnic group in southern Hungary (Aleksov 2010, 40–46).

After the First World War, the Banat was partitioned: Romania obtained the city of Timișoara and many Serb-inhabited settlements, and the

<sup>1</sup> The Serbs had been settled there since the migration under Arsenije III Čarnojević in the late seventeenth century (cf. Panić 2003).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Assembly, cf. Gavrilović & Petrović 1972; Gavrilović 2005.

<sup>3</sup> On the archival sources for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history of the Serbs in Romania, cf. Gavrilović 1994.

Serbs in Romania were granted national minority status (Pavlović 2003, 342). Under the terms of the Paris Peace Conference, some 50,000 Serbs distributed in about fifty settlements found themselves within the borders of Romania. The status of the Serbian minority in Romania was regulated by international agreements between the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Romania. The Banat was divided into Serbian, Romanian and Hungarian, and the international borders were confirmed by the Treaties of Versailles (1919) and Trianon (1920).<sup>4</sup> In the interwar period, the Serbs in Romania had the right to their own schools, church and cultural organizations. Political changes as an outcome of the Second World War had their effect on the Serbian minority as well. It was soon exposed to various forms and levels of assimilation, culminating after the Resolution of the Cominform (1948). This unfavourable situation, which continued until 1989, had its harshest ramifications in the area of religion. In 1948 the entire education system in Romania was nationalized and placed under state control, and all Serbian confessional schools were shut down. The early communist period was marked by strong assimilation pressures, including the deportation of the Banat Serbs to the Baragan Plain near the Danube delta in 1951.<sup>5</sup> The period between the enactment of the Romanian Constitution of 1965 and the collapse of communism in 1989 was marked by the normalization of relations between Yugoslavia and Romania (Pavlović 2003, 343). The post-communist period has seen the introduction of several new legislations concerning minority issues, and the Constitution of 1991 has to a great extent ensured protection of minority rights (ethnic, religious, linguistic), and enabled the Serbian and other ethnic communities to have their representatives in parliament. Thus, the position of the Serbian community is undergoing a change, experiencing a revival of tradition and religion, the establishing of community organizations (such as the Union of Serbs in Romania) and the re-establishing of former institutions. For the Serbian minority in Romania, the last ten years have been a period of improvement both in terms of creating institutions whose purpose is to further the preservation of their language, traditions and customs and in terms of support extended from various institutions in Serbia.

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<sup>4</sup> For an informative volume on the Serbian Banat (eds. Matički & Jović) published in 2010, which offers a historical overview from prehistoric times, looking at the colonization of the Banat, the period of Ottoman rule, the Ottoman-Habsburg War of 1683–99, Habsburg rule (1716–1918), the Assembly of Temesvar, the division of the Banat and the 1921 Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, as well as a look at cultural and literary life in the Banat, with special reference to great Serbian authors associated with the Banat in one way or another (Dositelj Obradović, Jovan Sterija Popović, Miloš Crnjanski and Vasko Popa).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the deportations, see Milin & Stepanov 1996.

## 2. Serbs in Romania: current situation

According to the 2002 census, the Serbian community in Romania numbers 22,562 persons, which makes it the eighth in numerical strength among Romania's twenty national minorities. The census shows that Serbs are distributed in all counties, but mostly in those of Timiș (13,273), Caraș-Severin (6,082), Arad (1,217) and Mehedinți (1,178).<sup>6</sup> The area with the highest concentration of Serbs is the Banat, where they mostly live in ethnically mixed environments, accounting for more than eighty percent of the population in only four settlements in the Danube Gorge: Belobreșca, Divici, Cralovăț and Radimna. Demographically, the Serbian community in Romania shows low birth rates and an ageing population. The presence of Serbs in the Banat involves the areas of Muntenegrul bănățean (*Banatska Crna Gora*), Clisura Dunării (Danube Gorge) and highland areas east of Timișoara. Their numbers in Muntenegrul bănățean and the northeast Banat rapidly decreased after the Romanian Orthodox Church became independent from the Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate of Karlowitz (Karlovci) in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> A large number of Serb-inhabited settlements then came under the Sibiu Metropolitanate, which exercised jurisdiction over the Orthodox Christian Romanians (Cerović 2000, 34).

Today, the largest number of members of the Serbian minority lives in settlements in the Danube Gorge, which stretches along 142 km from Baziaș to Drobete-Turnu Severin. In thirteen of its settlements, Serbs have been living since medieval times: Radimna, Moldova Veche, Zlatița, Lescovița, Liubcova, Socol, Divici, Svinița, Câmpia, Măcești, Belobreșca, Pojejena, and Baziaș (Tomić 1989). Research suggests that Baziaș was founded in the thirteenth century and is the oldest settlement in the Danube Gorge, followed by Radimna, Zlatița, Lescovița, and Svinița; there were Serbian families in almost all settlements in the area, and Moldova Nouă is known to have had a Serbian church and priest in 1877 (Tomić 1989, 18). In most settlements, the Serbian children attend classes in their mother-tongue, but due to the decreasing number of pupils, often as the result of migration from villages to cities, more and more of them begin to attend classes in Romanian.

Although Serbian is a vanishing language in this region nowadays, the presence of various Serbian institutions, schools and the Church has helped its survival. The current sociolinguistic situation is markedly characterized by

<sup>6</sup> For more statistical data for the Serbs in Romania, see Stepanov 2007.

<sup>7</sup> On Serbian-Romanian church relations, see e.g. Lupulovici 2009; Bokšan 1998; Bugarski 1994; Hitchins 1977.

bilingualism and, in certain cases, by majority language monolingualism. The role of Serbian is not important only within the Serbian Orthodox Church, as its language of worship, but also in the Serbian neo-Protestant communities, given that language constitutes an important marker of ethnic identity of non-Orthodox Serbs as well. The Serbian children attend eleven four-year schools with about 500 pupils, and two eight-year schools with classes taught both in Serbian and in Romanian. There is a Serbian high school (gymnasium) in Timișoara (“Dositej Obradović”), as well as university departments for Serbian studies in Timișoara and Bucharest. The schools in the Serbian language, however, are evidently fading away; in certain places there are classes in the mother tongue only for the first four years, and there are an increasing number of bilingual children coming from mixed marriages, who tend to proceed to higher levels of education in Romanian.

Serbs in Romania are organized into the Union of Serbs founded in 1989 with the aim of preserving their cultural and religious identity. The Serbian press, considerably richer in the past,<sup>8</sup> today is centred round the daily *Naša reč* (Our Word), the magazine *Književni život* (Literary Life), and the weekly *Timișvarski vesnik* (Timisoara Herald) started in 2009. What appears to be imminent for the Serbian community in Romania, and for the other Serbian diaspora communities, is a process of assimilation and acculturation, with religion and language playing a key role in the process.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Religious identity of the Serbs in Romania

Historically, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church was important in the formation of national identity, since the Serbs in Romania tend to base their ethnic identity on religion and language. Thus the Serbs who do not speak Serbian and are not members of the Serbian Orthodox Church are often perceived as not being “true Serbs”. The Serbian Orthodox Church is doubtlessly the keeper of the tradition, language and customs of the Serbs in Romania today. However, the role of the church in modern societies has been changing in response to the changing socio-historical circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The beginnings of the Serbian press in today’s Romania can be traced back to 1827, when Dimitrije P. Tirol launched the *Banatski almanah* (Banat Almanac), followed by the political paper *Južna pčela* (Southern Bee) in 1851, the literary paper *Svetovid* in 1852, *Sloga* (Concord) in 1918. Later on a number of different literary magazines sprang up such as the almanacs *Život* (Life, in 1936) and *Novi život* (New Life, in 1957).

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed account of different forms of acculturation and assimilation among the Serbs in Timișoara, see Pavlović 2005.

<sup>10</sup> A recent study of the Serbian Orthodox theologian and philosopher Radovan Bigović (2010, 14) points to the changed role of the church in modern society, and emphasizes

Religious pluralism poses an ever greater challenge for modern societies, both for religious communities and for governments. Under communism, the Serbian community, and Orthodox Christianity in general, were primarily characterized by secularization, manifest in a decline in churchgoing and in the number of public religious festivals and gatherings. According to the ethnologist Mirjana Pavlović (2008, 135), in reference to the Serbs in Timișoara, “religion was not forbidden by law, but it came to be seen as undesirable and retrograde, while the practice of religion was normatively strictly privatized and confined to the family circle and places of worship”. After the fall of communism, many East-European countries have experienced a religious revival, but also the emergence of new ways of experiencing and displaying religious feelings: “Particular shape and form of this religious growth and structural changes of the religious mentalities occurred in the process of transition from a closed, ideologically monopolized society to pluralist one” (Gog 2006, 37). However, “mainline churches in Eastern Europe find themselves in a complex situation. On the one hand, they have recovered from spiritual and institutional segregation. On the other hand, they have to come to terms with the new social realities they face and respond to the new challenges, the greatest of which is perhaps that of religious pluralism” (Merdjanova 2001, 281). It should be noted, however, that the presence of Roman Catholics, Greek-Catholics and Protestants, primarily in the Banat and Transylvania, makes religious diversity a phenomenon of a much earlier date in Romania. The predominant religion of the Serbian community in Romania, Orthodoxy, does not differ from that of the majority nation. There are in Romania Serbian Orthodox churches in almost every place where Serbs live. The eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Romania is seated in Timișoara and has three churches in the city itself. The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Timișoara comprises 57 parishes within 56 church communities, with 67 parish and monastery churches and chapels. There are five monasteries of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which are very important in the history and spiritual tradition of the Serbs in Romania: Baziaș (Bazjaš), Zlatița (Zlatica), St.Gheorghe (Sv. Djurdj), Bezdin and Cusici (Kusić).<sup>11</sup> As observed by the Serbian Orthodox

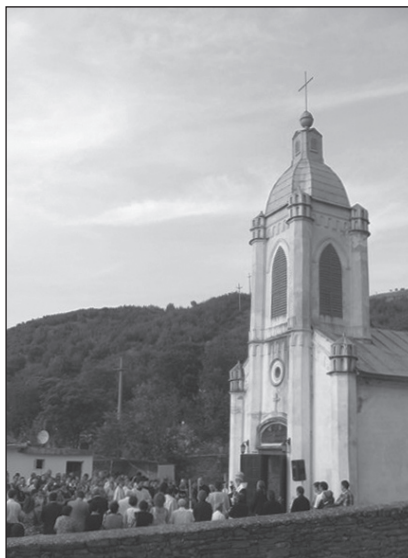
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that the functioning of modern societies is independent of ecclesiastical authorities, religious doctrines and church canons.

<sup>11</sup> The founding of the Serbian monasteries in what now is Romania began at the time of St Sava of Serbia in the early thirteenth century (Zlatița), and continued until the Ottoman conquest in the sixteenth century (Baziaș, Cusici, Bezdin). Tradition has it that Zlatița was founded by the Serbian archbishop Sava (St Sava), of the Nemanjić dynasty, in 1225; he endowed it with estates and appointed its first abbot; the monastery suffered damage under Ottoman rule. For more detail, see Kostić 1940, 65.

Bishop of Timișoara Lukijan (Lucian), speaking about the preservation of the identity of his church in Romania: “There is a centuries-long tradition of cooperation and mutual respect with the Romanians and the Romanian Orthodox Church, especially because Romanians, the same as Serbs, are an Orthodox people, which means that we share the same religion, the same baptism, the same Eucharist. That is the greatest wealth of Christianity” (Pantelić 2008, 7).

According to the abovementioned census, there are among the Serbs in Romania about 21,000 Orthodox and 284 Roman Catholic,<sup>12</sup> the rest being members of neo-Protestant communities, the most numerous of which are Baptists, Pentecostals, Nazarenes and Seventh-Day Adventists. Living in ethnically and religiously heterogeneous areas, the Serbs in Romania came into more direct contact with German and Hungarian missionaries who began to spread neo-Protestantism in the mid-eighteenth century. The term neo-Protestantism primarily refers to religious communi-



Serbian Orthodox monastery  
of Baziaș, Romania

<sup>12</sup> The data for Roman Catholics most probably refer to Krashovans/Karaševci, who are Catholics but declare themselves variously as Serbs, Croats or Karašovani. The issue of Krashovan identity has been studied the most by the linguist Milja Radan (2002). According to the Serbian historian Ljubomir Cerović (2000, 38), it has been assumed that Krashovans are Serbs who converted to Roman Catholicism at a time of one of the most massive conversions of Serbs to Catholicism in the east Banat carried out by Rome in 1366. The Krashovans have kept many elements of Orthodoxy, including the Julian calendar. In the view of the distinguished Serbian ethnologist Jovan Erdeljanović, the Krashovans constitute the oldest Serbian ethnic layer in the Banat, while the geographer Jovan Cvijić argues that they had come to the Banat from the area of the Crna Reka, a tributary of the Timok, in the late fourteenth century, and that they converted to Roman Catholicism in their new environment. Radan specifies the Krashovan-inhabited settlements in the valley of the Karaš/Caraș in the south-west Romanian Banat: Karaševo, Vodnik, Jabalče, Klokotić, Lupak, Nermidj, Ravnik. The Krashovans lived in the southern Serbian Banat in the following settlements: Banatski Karlovac, Izbište, Uljma, Gudurica and VelikoSredište. In May 2010, researches of the Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Biljana Sikimić and Aleksandra Djurić-Milovanović) conducted a short field research with descendants of the Krashovans in Uljma and Izbište. The results of this research await publication.

ties that arose from some of the branches of the Reformation, most often from Anabaptists, Pietists and Mennonites, during the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> In the Habsburg Monarchy, neo-Protestant communities began to be established in ethnically mixed environments, while the first missionaries were Germans and Hungarians. The largest neo-Protestant communities, Nazarene, Baptist, Adventist and Pentecostal, recruited followers from many ethnic groups in the Banat. Although conversion to another religious tradition was less frequent among Orthodox Serbs than among Germans, Magyars or Slovaks, i.e. members of some of the Protestant churches, during the twentieth century neo-Protestantism found a certain number of followers among Orthodox believers as well. The Baptist movement, on which this paper is primarily focused, began to spread from Germany in the nineteenth century, reaching Denmark, Austria, Poland and Hungary, and, to an extent, parts of the Balkans and Russia.<sup>14</sup> The constant source of missionaries was the Hamburg theological school and a driving force behind the missionary undertaking was one of the founders of the modern German Baptist movement, Johann Gerhard Oncken (Bjelajac 2010, 92). At first the Baptist missionary work in the Habsburg Monarchy was targeted on the German-speaking population, but later on Baptist pastors also began to preach in Magyar, Slovak, Romanian and Serbian. The first independent Baptist church was founded in Novi Sad in 1892, and Baptist communities were also founded among Romanians and Slovaks in the Banat. The first Romanian converts in 1917, Mihai Grivoi and Gruia Bara, were coal miners at Reșița. This is a valuable piece of information, since many of the subsequent Serbian converts were also workers in this and other mines (Bjelajac 2010, 103). The Baptists were recognized as a religious community only in 1944, but the recognition did not much improve

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<sup>13</sup> For a very detailed chapter on Protestantism in Eastern Europe, see McGrath & Marks 2004. As far as Serbian authors are concerned, Branko Bjelajac has offered, in several of his studies (notably Bjelajac 2002), a detailed historical overview of the founding and development of Protestant communities in Serbia.

<sup>14</sup> A Baptist doctrine was first formulated in the early seventeenth century by the English Puritans John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. It spread to other parts of Europe in the nineteenth century, at first to Germany, later on to Scandinavia. Baptist theology is evangelical, and the Baptists' most important mission is evangelization. Today, Baptist denominations across the world share the following dogmatic principles: the Holy Scripture as the supreme authority on the issues of faith and life; a local church as an autonomous community of believers answerable to no one but the Lord, Jesus Christ; every reborn believer has direct access to the God's throne and shares in Christ's royal priesthood (priesthood of all believers); individuals are sovereign in matters of faith; only adult persons can be baptized, and by submersion. For more detail on the Baptists in Serbia and Romania, see Bjelajac 2010; Popovici 2007.



their position.<sup>15</sup> They were not allowed to perform baptism or to preach in public, and Bible distribution was limited. In the post-communist era, some neo-Protestant communities which had been operating “underground”, or had not been recognized by law, were granted a different status. In what Paul Mojzes calls the “religious topography of Romania” after the fall of communism, different neo-Protestant communities have seen a significant numerical growth. Thus, with about 129,000 members, the Baptist Union of Romania, a member of the Baptist World Alliance, is among the largest Baptist bodies in Europe; it is followed by the quite large Pentecostal body (Mojzes 1999). Many neo-Protestant churches have been built in the Romanian Banat since 1989, and with considerable financial support from Romanian immigrants in the United States of America, Canada and Western Europe. With new forms of religiosity now becoming part of a new cultural identity in contemporary societies, it appears worthwhile to examine what kind of changes are taking place in the process of formulating the ethnic identity of members of some minority communities.

#### 4. *Serbs in the Danube Gorge: ethnographic material*

##### 4.1. *Baptists in the Serbian settlements in the Danube Gorge*

This paper is based on the qualitative-oriented field research conducted in August 2010 in the Serbian settlements of Radimna (481), Pojejena (321), Moldova Veche (1423), Divici (296) and Liubcova (412).<sup>16</sup> It encompassed both Orthodox and Baptist Serbs, the latter being the most numerous neo-Protestant group in the region.<sup>17</sup> Based on semi-guided interviews, participants’ life stories and participant observation, we have sought to get as complete a picture as possible of the relationship between the Serb adherents to two different Christian traditions, and of the ways in which they articu-

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<sup>15</sup> The position of neo-Protestant communities under communism in Romania, with special reference to the Baptist communities in Cluj-Napoca, has been discussed by Denisa Bodeanu (2007), in a study covering the period of 1948–1989. Apart from the archival material, she has included more than forty interviews with members of Baptist communities active in the period.

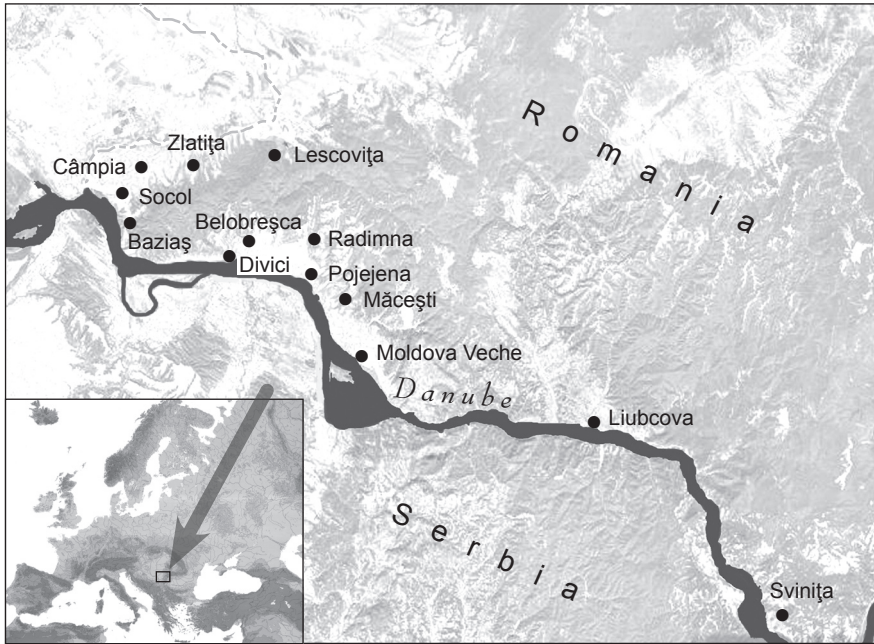
<sup>16</sup> The figures in the brackets refer to the total number of Serbs according to the census of 2002.

<sup>17</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to the Eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Timișoara, the Union of Serbs in Romania, the Baptist pastors from Radimna, Liubcova, Pojejena, Moldova Veche and Coronini, and last but not least, to all interviewees, for helping me to collect material for this paper. I also wish to express my particular gratitude to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Romanian Academy of Sciences (Timișoara Branch) whose project cooperation has made this project possible.

late their religious and ethnic identities, assuming that such an insight may help us understand how a community builds its identity and alterity. One of the goals of the fieldwork was to collect the material in the settlements with largest communities of Baptist Serbs. Namely, interviewees participating in a research on the neo-Protestant Romanian communities in Serbia (conducted from 2007) often mentioned their contacts and cooperation with both Romanian and Serbian communities in Romania. This cooperation has been intensified since the recent start of a partnership programme between the Baptist Union of Romania and Baptist churches in Serbia, which includes monthly visits of Baptist pastors and missionaries to Baptist churches in Serbia. The Bucharest-based Baptist Union of Romania is a legally recognized religious organization. The most numerous and largest Baptist communities can be found in the Romanian Banat, especially in the cities of Oradea, Arad and Timișoara. As our research has shown, unlike the situation in the Danube Gorge settlements, among the Serbs in the northern Banat, i.e. Muntenegrul bănățean, Baptist communities are not many.

Nazarenes were the first neo-Protestants to appear among the Banat Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy in the late nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Through the activity of German and Hungarian missionaries, Nazarene beliefs spread in many settlements with an Orthodox population. As a result of their pacifist beliefs, many Nazarenes were imprisoned during both world wars, and many emigrated from Romania. Due to their marked insularity and non-proselytism, as well as the emergence of other neo-Protestant communities, the number of Nazarenes in Romania has been steadily decreasing, so that today they are no more than 1000 (with the seat in Arad). Nazarene Serbs lived in the areas of Arad, Timișoara and in settlements along the border. Today, the Nazarene community in Timișoara has about fifty members, including a few Serbs. According to the field data, there are several families of Nazarene Serbs in the Danube Gorge settlements. However, lacking their own local place of worship, they gather once a month in the town of Moldova Nouă. In the memory of Orthodox priests and believers, Nazarenes usually evoke the existence of their separate cemeteries, the singing of hymns at their gatherings, families with many children, and their uprightness and discipline. However, there where Nazarenes were present in larger numbers, Baptists were few or none at all. Baptist beliefs spread among the

<sup>18</sup> In 2006 the historian Bojan Aleksov published a more detailed study on Nazarenes, *Religious Dissent between the Modern and National: Nazarenes in Hungary and Serbia 1850–1914*. Aleksov gives an account of the Nazarene community from the late eighteenth century until the First World War, looks at Nazarene influences on the movement of *Bogomoljci* (Devotionalists) and the strengthening of nationalism within the Serbian Orthodox Church. For an article on Nazarene Romanians in Serbia from an anthropological perspective, see Djurić-Milovanović 2010.



Serbian settlements in the Danube Gorge

Serbs of the Danube Gorge settlements by Nazarene Romanians, but they were more reluctant to adopt them than Romanians (Budimir 1994, 60). The first appearance of the Baptist faith in these areas is associated with the arrival in 1878 of German colporteurs of the Bible Society from Budapest. It was first embraced by Germans, later on by Romanians, while the first Serbian Baptist communities were founded in some Serbian settlements in the Danube Gorge in the early twentieth century. The first conversions to Baptist Christianity took place about 1919 in Moldova Nouă and Coroini, which soon became missionary centres with preachers spreading the Baptist faith to other nearby settlements (Popovici 2007, 167). It should be noted that in some cases it was Nazarenes who converted to Baptist Christianity and then spread it in their native places: “In Moldova Veche it was the Nazarene Iva Stefanović who introduced the Baptist faith to the village” (Budimir 1994, 86). In 1936 two Serbian families in Pojejena Sârbă converted to Baptist Christianity, but the first baptisms, in the river Radimna, were not performed until 1948. It was only in 1975 that the church in Pojejena Sârbă obtained permission and started to offer worship services in the Serbian language. In one of the oldest Danube Gorge settlements, Radimna, the first Baptist baptism was performed in 1954, and the newly-converted Baptists used to gather in a private home. In the following years, the Baptist Serbs, lacking a place of worship of their own, attended ser-

vices in a neighbouring place three kilometres away. After many difficulties with authorities, a Serbian Baptist church was founded in Radimna in 1988. The largest single baptism was performed in 1993, involving some twenty people, and with the attendance of “two brothers from Yugoslavia [who] gave sermon in the Serbian language” (Budimir 1994, 73). In several Serbian villages (Divici, Baziaș, Belobreșca, Zlatița), Baptist communities, however few, emerged only after the 1989 Revolution. The growth of Baptist communities has come as a result of Baptist missionary work, greater number of theologically educated preachers, and the status of its being a legally recognized denomination. Farther south in the Banat, more precisely in the Danube Gorge, there are several settlements where Serb members account for more than one half of the Baptist community, and in some of them worship services are performed in Serbian, which primarily goes for the Serbian village of Radimna, whose Baptist community numbers some seventy members. The village of Pojejena Sârbă, with its earliest Serbian Baptist community in Romania, nowadays does not have more than thirty-five believers. In Moldova Veche, the Baptist community comprises both Serbs and Romanians, and services are performed in Romanian. The southernmost settlement included in our research is Liubcova, although Baptist Serbs are quite few and worship services are performed in Romanian. Our interlocutors generally speak poor Serbian. In the case of older generations, one of the reasons may be mixed marriages, while younger generations increasingly attend classes in Romanian language. The only fully competent in using the Serbian language is the oldest generation, the middle generation uses Serbian to communicate with the older generation, while the youngest use their mother tongue very rarely.<sup>19</sup> The process of acculturation and assimilation is in many cases spurred and accelerated by mixed marriages.

#### 4.2. “Us” and “Others”: Orthodox Serbs and Baptist Serbs

One of the focuses of our field research, and this paper, is the perception of the religious Other within one ethnic group, i.e. how Orthodox Serbs perceive themselves in relation to non-Orthodox Serbs, and how Serbs belonging to a minority religion articulate their religious identity and build relations with the confession accepted by the majority.<sup>20</sup> To examine the

<sup>19</sup> Sociolinguistic situation characterized by the loss of the mother tongue in diaspora communities has also been described by Tanja Petrović (2009) for the Serbs in Bela Krajina (Slovenia).

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that field data suggest that Serbs, in contrast to Romanians, hardly ever convert and that therefore we cannot speak about a large number of Baptist Serbs in general, but only of their not negligible presence in certain geographical areas.

role of religion in the forming and strengthening of the ethnic identity of a diaspora community is a complex and demanding research task.

The field research was conducted in the form of interviews in the interviewees' mother tongue, Serbian, based on a semi-guided questionnaire, and with the use of participant observation strategies. The topics included everyday religious practices, conversion, family histories, mixed marriages, but also attitudes towards the "religious other" in local communities. Orthodox interviewees described the number of Baptist Serbs as very small, except in Radimna, where the Serbian Baptist community is numerically the strongest. Almost all Baptist interviewees pointed to the year 1989 (revolution in Romania) as a turning point for the numerical growth and overall improvement of the position of their Baptist community:

[1] In 1975–1988 there were no baptisms, then three women converted from the Orthodox Church; we were baptized in 1989 and in 1993 the church had twenty members; we had evangelization, we organized baptism in the river, twenty [people] from Radimna alone. A lot of young people were there. That was the largest baptism. Then we began to build a new church. (GD; B; Radimna)<sup>21</sup>

[2] There was no church in our village. In 1975 I started to go to the church in Pojejena, the Romanian Pojejena. We went there on foot, then [we started to go] to Șușca. **After the revolution** we were given the opportunity to build a church. (GŽ; B; Radimna)

[3] Believers from Radimna had been going to Pojejena and to Șușca for thirty years, until 1988. **After the revolution**, a church was established here. (IC; B; Radimna)

A majority of the Baptist interviewees are the first or second generation of believers, as compared to the already second or third generation of believers in the Baptist communities in Serbia (the Serbian Banat). Conversion was inspired by the example of their Romanian Baptist neighbours and Baptist missionary activity. Our interlocutors spoke about the first encounters with Baptist Romanians, who sang religious songs, preached and read the Bible while working in the mine in Moldova Veche. Although the founding of the first Baptist communities is generally placed in the 1960s and 1970s, the eighties and the post-communist period have seen a significant growth: congregations began to build their houses of prayer, so that

<sup>21</sup> Given in the brackets at the end of every fragment are the initials of the interviewee, the letter B for Baptist or O for Orthodox, and the name of the place where the interview was recorded. For the purpose of clarity, the interviewer's questions are italicized, and the interview fragments designated with numbers. The English translation of the transcribed fragments, selected from the audio corpus containing 15 hours of recorded material, demanded minor alterations in order to be understandable to non-Serbian speakers.

now they no longer have to gather in private homes. They all took part in the building of churches with the help of their fellow believers from abroad. Most Baptist Serbs previously went to a Serbian Orthodox church, or come from Orthodox families. Few of our interlocutors were born into a Baptist family, which indicates the recentness of the conversion process. Although Radimna is the largest Serbian Baptist community, worship services are partly held in Serbian, and the sermon is preached in Romanian. In other settlements worship services are mostly bilingual.

[4] *In what language are worship services?* **At first everything was in Serbian.** Now we do it more in Romanian; more pastors are educated in Romanian, that's why. (ŽG; B; Radimna)

[5] We spoke Serbian for ten minutes in Pojejena. There was evangelization in the courtyard, the pastor from Pojejena [was] from Langovet, **we said everything in Serbian.** (SB; B; Pojejena)

[6] Today services are in Romanian; there are not many Serbs any more, **and now every Serb speaks Romanian.** (SM; B; Liubcova)

Neo-Protestantism has been embraced by Romanians more widely than by Serbs, but even so, the latter do not tend to convert easily. Our interviewees mentioned only very few Nazarene Serbs, while Baptists are the most numerous neo-Protestant group among the Serbs in Romania, above all in the Danube Gorge area. In the discourse of our interlocutors about their baptism, i.e. conversion, the reaction of their broader community, their family and the Orthodox Church occupied a central place:

[7] **The priest was against it, he went to the police to complain about us.** We are like sectarians, we do not believe in the cross, we do not celebrate the *slava*<sup>22</sup> on Mitrovdan [St. Demetrius' Day], on Petkovača [St. Petka's Day]. (ŽG; B; Radimna)

[8] *What do your neighbours say?* They say, You do as you please, I'll go where my parents are. They don't want to leave their dead, to not have memorial service held for them, their graves censed. (PI; B; Radimna)

[9] My father said to me, I'm **ashamed to show my face because of what you did, you went over to the Pocaiti.**<sup>23</sup> (ND; B; Moldova Veche)

[10] **It's the greatest sin to change from one faith to another.** And I say, It's one God. Me, abandoning my faith, I didn't abandon my faith, I believe in Lord Jesus. (GI; B; Radimna).

<sup>22</sup> The celebration of the family (or village church) patron saint's feast day is specific to Orthodox Christian Serbs, who consider it a peculiarity of their culture. Every household observes one or two family saint's days a year and the custom is passed on from father to son.

<sup>23</sup> *Pocait*, pl. *pocaiti*, "penitent", is the Romanian word for neo-Protestants, in this case, Baptists.

[11] It was a heavy cross to bear for us because of our sister. **Nobody liked us being in this faith. We were driven out of our home twice.** We suffered a lot because of the faith. My mother was not against it, but the whole family was. (SM; B; Radimna)

[12] They started to agitate my husband. At first, they said, **Some penitent you are, what you did is a sin.** They say our faith is imaginary... But I believe in the same God as you do. (AL; B; Divici)

The Baptists are admitted into the community of the faithful through baptism. As they reject infant baptism, only adults can be members of the community. Most of our interlocutors had been baptized (usually at an early age) into the Orthodox Church. Through being re-baptized, now as adults, they were admitted into a new community of faith. Bible reading is an essential topic in the discourse of our Baptist interlocutors, both as a moment of “revelation”, and as one of the ways in which Romanian missionaries acquainted Serbs with Baptist beliefs:

[13] *How did you convert?* How did I convert? I converted, in fact I read the Holy Scripture. You don't become Protestant if I convince you to, but when the Bible comes into your hands. A man who has become Protestant can explain the Holy Scripture by himself. Not everybody becomes Protestant. The Bible must be given to people the way it is written, to be available as it is written; it's better not to give them any biblical study at all... (ND; B; Moldova Veche)

[14] Then I look at them, and they sing, talk of the Bible, talk of church work. They pray, and I say to my wife, They are praising the Lord. They pray at meals, how nice it is, a nice life... I go to work with them ... they propose to give me a Holy Scripture. They have the Holy Scripture in Serbian ... they prayed in Romanian, they were Romanian. Our village, few people, nobody know who believers are, some [are] poor. (SM; B; Radimna)

[15] *Are there any Baptists among the Serbs?* Here, no, only [among] Gypsies. Among Romanians, yes, there are. They are very active. Elsewhere, there's not a single village without at least a few. Not many, but they are there. If not Baptists, then Nazarenes, if not Nazarenes, then Pentecostals, or Jehovah Witnesses. (VP; O; Moldova Veche)

Both Baptist and Orthodox Serbs say that the number of Serb members of Baptist churches is small, but there are some in most villages. The conversion process is met with the strong reaction of the convert's environment, which sees it as an unacceptable behaviour, often as a result of the stigma attached to Baptist Serbs by the Orthodox majority:

[16] **There were very few Serbs in the Baptist Church before, and this hasn't changed. Very rarely do Serbs give up their faith. If you're born in this faith, you stay in this faith, you don't change it.** It's very different from Orthodoxy. (*Do you believe in the same God?*) I don't know how much they believe in God and how much in customs. (KK; B; Liubcova)

[17] I was shocked by the question of a Serb from Timișoara. He's Orthodox. We're talking and so, talking, we think of having a drink. I take a non-alcoholic one. And he says to me, **You are Serb by name, but you're not Serb.** Why? I ask. **Well,** he says, **You're not Orthodox.** Well, my Serb brother, the way you see it, Serbs are very few. How's that?, he says. The way I see it, there are much more Serbs. **There are Serbs who are Orthodox, then those who are Protestant, but they all are of Serbian stock.** Let's not diminish Serbs that much; they are much bigger in my eyes than they are in yours. When I said that, he said nothing in reply. **If someone's converted from Orthodoxy to another faith, he loses his Serbianness.** We're tightening the belt of Serbdom, we're limiting it. (ND; B; Moldova Veche)

[18] (*There are not many Pocaiti Serbs?*) Not many. (*What about Nazarene?*) No, it's not like that now. Two brothers, Nazarenes, died and there'd been a feud between them, and they died and they hadn't spoken to each other. So, what kind of a Nazarene is that! They say, Love your neighbour as you love yourself. So, how can that be, if you don't speak to your brother. God is one, there's no other. One God only, Lord is one. [There is] No Nazarene God. (Lj.M; O; Moldova Veche)

During interviews, our interlocutors, regardless of their religious affiliation, emphasized elements of their ethnic affiliation, above all their mother tongue:

[19] For me, Serbia remains the greatest state in the world. I can't call myself a Serb and lie. This is my Serbia, I'm Serb and I live here. (VP; O; Moldova Veche)

[20] **If you're [married to] a Serb, you should be able to speak Serbian.** That's what I said to my wife. (SM; B; Moldova Veche)

[21] **I'm Serb** like you, but I was born in Romania by mistake. (ST; B; Moldova Veche)

[22] **My mother tongue is Serbian,** a teacher from Užice. **We are Serbs,** my great-grandfather was Serb, my father, my mother... **now everybody's mixing ... their children are half-blood.** (ŽG; B; Moldova Veche).

It is observable from the quoted interview fragments that the Serbian language plays the role of a key marker of Serbian identity, regardless of confession. Language is a distinctive element that differentiates them from Romanians, ties them together into one, ethnically distinct community of Serbs, determines their position in society (as members of the Serbian diaspora in Romania), affects their sense of belonging and how they declare themselves. On the other hand, what is characteristic of Baptist as well as of other neo-Protestant groups is the emphasis on the supranational nature of the body of believers, i.e. primacy of religious identity over ethnic:

[23] *Does it make any difference in the church if you are Serb or Romanian?*  
**There's no difference in the church, what's important is that we're believ-**



ers; nor does the Lord care about that, the Lord cares about the heart. One flock, one shepherd. (ŽG; B; Moldova Veche)

[24] There's no difference; you can be Serb even if you're not Orthodox. (MH; B; Moldova Veche)

That there has been a long-standing social distance between Romanians and Serbs may best be seen from the virtually non-existent cases of mixed marriages until recently. Mixed marriages have apparently been perceived as an unacceptable form of social behaviour, as illustrated by the following interview fragments, where the loss of the Serbian mother tongue is emphasized:

[25] *Do Serbs marry Romanians? It's not a problem for younger generations*, and, to tell you the truth, that's the advantage of Romanian citizenship. How shall I put it, a Serb marries a Romanian woman, she adopts the Serbian name, the children will speak Serbian; but if a Serbian woman marries a Romanian man, then that's the end of it. (ND; B; Moldova Veche)

[26] My husband said, **From Svinița to Zlatița, there can only be Serbs. I don't want to see any Vlachs.**<sup>24</sup> He wouldn't let any daughter marry a Romanian; no, another nation is out of question. And, they didn't dare (MN; O; Moldova Veche)

[27] **Children don't speak Serbian.** I was born here; I know not only who my parents are, but also my great-grandfathers. There's this mentality that, if we live in Romania, we should know Romanian, it's where we'll get a job. And his surname is Djurković. But they won't know Serbian, and their family name's Djurković. They won't speak Serbian in his family. (VP; O; Moldova Veche)

[28] If the wife is Romanian, the children speak Serbian, and if a Romanian marries a Serbian wife, only Romanian. (AL; B; Divici)

It is the increasing number of mixed Serbian-Romanian marriages that indicates the shrinking of social distance. Mixed marriages, however, are much more numerous in neo-Protestant communities, which are religiously endogamous.

[29] I was born in Moldova Veche; my grandfather, my grandmother, they were Serbs. **I took a Romanian wife. You won't find Serbs among the Baptists.** No, they want the Orthodox faith, the people's [faith]. (SM; B; Moldova Veche)

Describing the settlements in the Danube Gorge, Tomić (1989, 17) observes that Serbs are not too manifestly pious, that they respect the church and priests, perpetuate old customs and celebrate festivals, the most important of which are the feast days of the family patron saint and the

<sup>24</sup>The term for Romanians widely used by Serbs in Romania.

patron saint of their village church. There is no doubt that the communist regime considerably contributed to the decline in active participation in the religious life of the community. The role of the Orthodox Church and religion has, however, been slowly restored over the past few years, including the activities of Serbian Orthodox communities occasioned for the greatest religious feast days, such as Christmas Eve, Christmas, Easter and the village patron saint's day. At the Serbian monasteries of Zlatița and Baziaș summer camps are organized for children, where active dialogue in Serbian fostered between children and priests provides an opportunity to talk about Orthodoxy, tradition and customs. At schools, Orthodox religious instruction classes are attended by children from Baptist or other neo-Protestant families as well, since Baptist religious instruction has not been instituted.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the children of Baptist parents sing in Orthodox choirs together with the children from Orthodox families. Both Baptist and Orthodox Serbs celebrate the Christian holidays according to the Julian calendar, unlike the Romanians, who adopted the Gregorian calendar. This indicates that Baptist Serbs perpetuate some elements of their previous faith, even though they do not explicitly figure in their teaching:

[30] **We celebrate the New Year Serbian style, on 13 January.** (SM; B; Pojejena)

[31] The church in Liubcova exists since 1993. It has about twenty-five members, mostly Romanians. **We hold services according to the old calendar, Serbian style, Christmas [on] January 7th, the New Year [on] January 13th.** (SM; B; Liubcova)

These facts seem to be very important to the Serbian community as a whole, since our interlocutors referred to the activities jointly organized by Orthodox and Baptist Serbs for the occasion of important Christian holidays (such as the singing of Christmas carols, or choir and other performances), as well as their generally improved relations in the post-communist period:

[32] As neighbours, **we have good relations, everything is as it was.** When they go around carolling, all doors are open. We do the carolling more, they do their own; they don't sing ours. (SH; B; Radimna)

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<sup>25</sup> Since the Baptists reject infant baptism, the children of Baptist parents are not active members of the community. Once they come of age, they are free to decide whether they will be baptized into the Baptist or some other community. Some were even baptized into the Orthodox Church. For an interesting article addressing the issue of the children of Baptist parents in the Romanian educational system in 1984–89, see Bodeanu 2009.

[33] *What are your relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church?* Relations depend on the priest. Generally, **they are much more open now; it was different before**, now we have the same rights. (GD; B; Radimna)

The fact that the *slava* is not observed by the Baptists frequently causes an adverse reaction of the Orthodox:

[34] *Baptists do not observe the slava?* No. They don't. They'll forget who they are. If you have no past, you can't have a future either. **These customs remind us of what we were. Slavas are observed.** On the *slava* day, it's compulsory to light a candle. (VP; O; Moldova Veche)

Although the Baptist Serbs do not observe the *slava* or go, as is customary, to the *slava* celebration of those who do, they remember that the practice was observed before and often mention it in their discourse:

[35] *Do you go over to your neighbours on the day of their slava?* On their family *slava*? **We practised that before, when we were Orthodox.** But now, in these Evangelical cults, you don't observe anything that doesn't come from Jesus Christ, the birth, the resurrection and the ascension, and not Saint Elias or Saint Nicholas. It would be to deny our faith. **We don't go to a slava**, or where censuring is done or food eaten for the dead. (MH; B; Moldova Veche).

[36] *Was the slava observed in your home?* **Yes, Saint John's Day, 20 January, that's the family slava, a priest used to come**, back then he attended school in Yugoslavia. I remember him. He was quite well prepared theologically. He graduated from two faculties. (SM; B; Moldova Veche)

An important theme in almost all interviews was the cemetery, especially in the context of the relationship with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Previously all cemeteries were church-owned, and they were partitioned in such a way that all neo-Protestant Serbs had a separate part of the cemetery, which may be seen as an indicator of their marginalization within the majority Orthodox community. Today, cemeteries are municipal and contacts with the Serbian Orthodox Church have intensified with regard to cemetery maintenance, since Baptists do not attend services for the dead commonly held by the Orthodox:

[37] I go to the cemetery to tidy up, to weed. (ŽG; B; Radimna)

[38] They wouldn't let us [in] before, no Pocaity to be buried on this cemetery. When they call for something, we're the first to show up to tidy up. (GJ; B; Radimna)

[39] The cemetery's not partitioned, although there are separate ones. Cemeteries are municipal, not the church's. (MH; B; Moldova Veche)

Although the number of Baptist Serbs is quite small compared to the Orthodox majority, their presence in the Danube Gorge indicates that the two religious traditions, now occupying much more "public space" than they

did under communism, intermingle. On the other hand, the social stigma attached to neo-Protestant communities, regardless of their legal status, has resulted from the previous long-standing unfavourable position of the communities as a whole, and from the marginal position of their members themselves, as they usually came from poorer and educationally underprivileged backgrounds. Today, both the Baptists and the Orthodox have well-developed theological educational systems, which means that ministers are much better equipped to provide pastoral care and guidance to their communities.

##### *5. Relationship between religious and ethnic identities*

Over the past few decades, the concept of identity has come to occupy a central place within several disciplines concerned with humans and human societies. Two identity types specified as the most important are personal and collective. Personal identity may be understood as “the awareness of oneself as different from any other”. Collective identity, on the other hand, “joins origin and history, past and future, roots of tradition and rituals practised in collective festivities and celebrations, which strengthens the sense of belonging and solidarity in symbiosis with others” (Golubović 1999, 21). With identity being a sum of components, each of these can shape a different type of identity: ethnic, cultural, religious, regional etc. Rather than static, identity is a dynamic category that adjusts to change and is defined in relation to the “other”. Ethnic boundaries are very elastic; they tend to bend in response to internal and external pressures, and different social mechanisms. They are the product of subjective selection processes, which in turn depend on a given historical context and social structure. Since ethnicity is based both on similarities and on differences, every community is defined in relation to what it is not. An ethnic group is defined through its relations with other groups, it is formed by its boundary, and the boundary itself is a social product whose importance may vary and which may change with time. The boundaries of a group are not necessarily ethnic-based; they can also be drawn along cultural or religious lines. Thus, for example, an invisible but recognizable boundary between Orthodox Serbs and Baptist Serbs indicates that each group defines its identity and distinctiveness in relation to the other one. According to A. Smith (1993, 6), “religious communities, where they aspire to be Churches, have appealed all sectors of a given population or even across ethnic boundaries. Their message is either national or universal. ... Religious identities derive from the sphere of communication and socialization. ... They have therefore tended to join in a single community of all the faithful all those who feel they share certain symbolic codes, value systems and traditions of belief and ritual”. Religious identities are

often closely related to ethnic identities. In contrast to “world religions”, which have sought to cross or even abolish ethnic boundaries, most religious communities tended to coincide with ethnic groups, and many ethnic minorities retain strong religious ties and emblems even today.

Even though ethnic identity has distinctive characteristics differentiating it from other identities, including religious, these two identities frequently overlap. If we take language as a criterion for drawing up an ethnic boundary, we can see that it plays a major role in preventing assimilation and constitutes the stable core of an individual’s sense of belonging to his or her ethnic group, regardless of religious affiliation. In the discourse of our interlocutors, language functions as a universal category, tying all Serbs together regardless of their religious community: [20] *If you’re [married to] a Serb, you should be able to speak Serbian.* [22] *My mother tongue is Serbian... We are Serbs.*

Their sense of belonging to the ethnic community of Serbs has not changed with the change in religious affiliation, and their ethnic identity is primarily based on language. However, the question is whether the sense of belonging to the Serb ethnic community that is based on linguistic identity, rather than on the Orthodox religion and tradition, will be as strong in the third or fourth generation of Baptists, where the “memory” of the religion of their Serbian ancestors or their mother tongue might be lost. Ethnic identity is built and manifested around a number of ethnic symbols which are seen as more or less representative of a community. Symbolism is in fact an important characteristic of ethnic identity. In the discourse of our interlocutors, there figures a selection of religious symbols as important elements of ethnic distinctiveness, such as, for instance, the custom of celebrating the family or village patron saint’s day, or the practice of observing religious holidays according to the Julian calendar: [30] *We celebrate the New Year Serbian style, on 13 January;* [31] *We hold services according to the old calendar, Serbian style, Christmas [on] January 7th, the New Year [on] January 13th;* [34] *These customs remind us of what we were. Slavas are observed;* [35] *We practised that before, when we were Orthodox.*

“Slipping” from one identity, or identity type, into another is situationally determined and depends on the preservation of the boundary (ethnic or religious), i.e. it becomes important when the boundary is exposed to pressure. Conversation about the “other”, about a religiously different member of the same ethnic community in the diaspora, brings the problem of negative tagging and rejection by the community to the surface: [7] *The priest was against it, he went to the police to complain about us;* [9] *My father said to me, I’m ashamed to show my face because of what you did, you went over to the Pocaiti;* [10] *It’s the greatest sin to change from one faith to another;* [11] *It was a heavy cross to bear for us because of our sister. Nobody liked us being in*

*this faith. We were driven out of our home twice; [17] You are Serb by name, but you're not Serb ... Well, he says, You're not Orthodox ... There are Serbs who are Orthodox, then those who are Protestant, but they all are of Serbian stock. ... If someone's converted from Orthodox to another religion, he loses his Serbianness.*

The majority of the interviewees, both Baptist and Orthodox, emphasized the Serbs' reluctance to convert: [16] *There were very few Serbs in the Baptist Church before, and this hasn't changed. Very rarely do Serbs abandon their faith. If you were born in this faith, you stay in this faith, you don't change it.*

Adherence to the "predominant" religion of an ethnic group as a whole may be particularly strong among members of ethnic minorities living in the immediate neighbourhood of the "mother country". Brubaker (1995, 7) defines it as "triangular relationship between national minorities, the newly nationalizing states in which they live and the external national 'homelands' to which they belong, or can be construed as belonging by ethnocultural affinity though not, ordinarily, by legal citizenship". This definition seems to apply to the Serbian minority in Romania as well. Their adherence to Orthodoxy and membership in the Serbian Orthodox Church provides a sense of historical continuity and tradition, and ties the ethnic community with the religion that predominates in the mother country.

Over the centuries, Serbs in Romania have been able to preserve their linguistic (Serbian) and religious (Orthodox) identity primarily owing to the community's strict rule of endogamy. Assimilation processes, especially pronounced over the last twenty years, are indicated by the increasing number of Serbian-Romanian marriages. Ethnically mixed marriages reflect also on the use of mother tongue, as well as on affiliation to the majority confession. Apart from influencing the attitude towards the mother tongue, the selection of the spouse of the same or different nationality may frequently be a significant indicator of the attitude towards the idea of national identity (Pavićević 2005, 430). On the other hand, contacts with Romanians, many of whom belong to the Baptist Church, result in mixed marriages: [22] *now everybody's mixing ... their children are half-blood; [29] I took a Romanian wife. You won't find Serbs among the Baptists.* The very emphasis on (ethnic) equality in supranational neo-Protestant communities, as an element underpinning religion-based cohesion, plays a key role in the expansion of Evangelical communities and their universal messages. [23] *There's no difference in the church, what's important is that we're believers.* By laying emphasis on religious identity, Baptists emphasize that ethnic identity is irrelevant in community membership, and that, therefore, it is religion and not ethnicity that is seen as central in defining "sameness" and "otherness". However, despite the supranational orientation of Baptist churches, Baptist Serb believers seem to feel the need to "symbolically"

emphasize their ethnic affiliation, as may be seen from the inscription on the church building in Radimna: The Serbian Baptist Church. An adverse attitude of the majority of Orthodox Serbs, although much less pronounced than it was in the past, at the time when the first Baptist communities were founded, may be observed in the use of the negatively connotated Romanian word *pocaiti* (“penitents”) to refer to those who converted to the Baptist faith. However, mutual respect and dialogue between Orthodox Serbs and Baptists with regard to local community issues is growing. Religious pluralism poses a great challenge, both for societies and governments on the one hand, and for religious communities on the other. The diaspora issue and diaspora studies are directly related to the issues of ethnic identity, while religious affiliation certainly plays an important role in building the identity of diaspora communities. The intertwining of religious and ethnic identities raises numerous questions, and studies of diaspora communities and of their modes of adaptation may provide valuable insights into general patterns of religious change.



Serbian Baptist Church Radimna,  
Romania

### 6. Concluding considerations

In studying diaspora communities, processes of assimilation and integration are closely related to the issues of identity of given groups, whether ethnic or religious. Since the preservation of a minority's identity always depends on the policies of a society, the government's institutional support at different levels may encourage productive differences through continuous cultural interaction of both ethnic and religious minorities. In that sense, the extent to which diaspora communities would preserve their ethnic identity primarily depends on institutional programs, legislation, the presence or absence of minority institutions.<sup>26</sup> Over time, Serbs in Romania have kept a

<sup>26</sup> The Union of Serbs in Romania supports various cultural events during the year, the Days of Serbian Culture in Timișoara being but one of them. For the calendar of cultural events, see <http://savezsrba.ro/kultura-umetnost/akcije/>

sense of belonging to the Serbian community, but they have also developed a sense of belonging to Romanian society. Over all that time, the Orthodox faith has been instrumental in the preservation of tradition and language. However, the presence, within the Serbian ethnic group, of communities of Protestant origin indicates that the encounter with different religious traditions has led to changes which are taking place in many diaspora communities. In a certain number of cases, the adoption of a different set of religious beliefs by Serbs in the Danube Gorge came as a result of their contact with the ethnic communities which introduced neo-Protestantism in the Banat, but also with Romanian missionaries who had well-organized and developed Baptist churches. The numerical growth of neo-Protestant communities in post-communist Romania is a good indicator of strong processes of social change and of the so-called religious revival that has swept ethnic minorities in Romania. The studying of identity dynamic may prove central to understanding the processes taking place in diaspora communities, with a special emphasis on preservation of cultural individualities in a multiethnic environment such as the Serbian and Romanian parts of the Banat. The issues of complex identities, double minorities and religion in diaspora communities require a continuous research process which, with time, should show whether the numerically small group of Baptist Serbs will influence the assimilation processes in any way, what kind of changes in cultural identities will take place among members of supranational religious communities, as well as whether such changes will influence ethnic identities.

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