



## FOGGY DIASPORA: ROMANIAN WOMEN IN EASTERN SERBIA

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**Abstract.** Drawing on ethnographic and anthropological research on the Romanian communities in Eastern Serbia, this article seeks to contribute to the global scholarship on diaspora and migration. It reveals interesting differences between the well defined and intensely studied notion of “diaspora” on the one hand, and the understudied, but useful concept of “near diaspora” on the other. First, the presence of Romanians in Eastern Serbia is looked at from a gender perspective, in the wider context of feminization of international migration. Second, the paper argues that the Romanian women in Eastern Serbia adopt the strategy of living in the “social fog”, thus becoming what can be termed “foggy diaspora”.

**Keywords:** diaspora, women and gender, migration, Serbia, Romania

### Preamble<sup>2</sup>

It was already midday in the torrid summer of 2003 when the second Vlach lady I tried to talk to that day about local traditions and customs saw me off to the gate. Wearing a long black skirt, faded t-shirt and dark head scarf, under which strands of grey hair could be spotted, and bracing herself on a thick wooden stick, probably carved from a branch of one of the trees behind her shriveled house, she waved with a wrinkled hand in the direction of the bridge. She was old, she said, and could not remember a lot of things. Furthermore, she could not speak proper Romanian, only the broken speech from her village, stuffed with Serbian words, as she claimed. But, she added, there were real Romanian women (*românoaice*, as opposed to the local *rumânce*) in the village, who would for sure know much more and better than she did. Maybe I even knew them from Romania, she encouraged me. They also came to work.

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My “work” back then, as a 25 year-old researcher, was to gather material for my PhD thesis, which was meant to offer a comprehensive image of the Vlach folklore and mythology. As my thesis was supposed to dive into the current situation on the field, the first step was to establish a reasonably large network of Vlach settlements, of almost 150 in Eastern Serbia, and to conduct interviews with the inhabitants. As a Romanian native speaker and language professional, with sound knowledge of Romanian dialects, I thought communication with the locals would flow unimpeded. I was wrong. In the beginning I made a fool of myself trying to disguise my standard Romanian accent under a local palatalized pronunciation, and inserting in conversation Romanian archaisms I would randomly pick up from the scant memory of dialectology courses I attended in faculty, and Serbian words, whenever I would think fit, or when my high Romanian was met with frowns or bewilderment. Another mistake was that I would ask, in Romanian, to talk to *români* (Romanians), about their traditional culture. Back then I was not aware of the huge difference between the two words that sounded almost the same: *români* and *rumâni*. While in standard Romanian both terms mean Romanians and Vlachs alike, the Vlachs make a strict distinction in their local dialect: *români* are the Romanians living on the other side of the Danube, in Romania, while only *rumâni* refers to “themselves”.

The Vlachs were thus quick in categorizing me: young Romanian woman, who has come, as tens of others, to their village in search of work. The Romanian women whom I met during my field trips in every Vlach village I put step into – or, better, I was directed to – were also there to work. As bartenders in the village tavern, to take care of senior residents, to work in the field. They also spoke Romanian, like the local Vlach community, but their Romanian was different. Different was also their Romanianness, the Vlachs felt. These “new” Romanians were looked down upon in many instances.

The first to draw attention on the Romanian women settled in the Romanian indigenous communities in Serbia, Romanian anthropologist Otilia Hedeşan wrote, in 2007:

After 1990, an important number of women from Romania who crossed the border with nowadays Serbia married Serbian citizens belonging to one or another Romanian community in this country. The reality in the field confirms the fact that, after almost ten years from these events, these women try to play a specific cultural role in the groups they have entered. Their “voice”, their opinion about the world they are living in and about the world they come from can already be found in a series of documents obtained as a result of ethnological research. (...) The list of such situations remains open, and the topic should be accepted as such and studied in perspective (Hedeşan, 2007: 283).

Their voice can still be heard today, but only if you are keen on hearing it. They can be seen by those who pay close attention, but not because they want to “Romanize” the region, as it has been suggested. On the contrary, most of the Romanian women living in Eastern Serbia prefer to keep a low profile.

The stereotypes of Romanian migrants in Serbia as poor and desperate women who would do anything to marry a Serbian citizen and settle here, or as deprived men prone to crime and even murder, as woven into sensationalized stories in the Serbian media, surfaced as implicit or explicit allusions during my discussions with Vlach residents. It is my aim in this paper to bring forth the voices of the Romanian women living in Eastern Serbia. Using data collected from in-depth interviews with those who came and settled here after the fall of the Romanian communist regime, I try to examine the strategies of adapting and of survival of the interviewees. In so doing, I seek to contribute to the growing scholarship on migration, diaspora and genders studies and, in the same time, to bring to the attention of international academia this Romanian community.

### **Migrant women, near diaspora and the social fog**

The movement of people has always involved the participation of women. Migration research has long recognized the important role women play in migration flows (Pfeiffer et al. 2008), challenging the conventional wisdom that women are generally “dependents” and move only as wives, mothers or daughters of male migrants. Due to several factors, it is increasingly women who migrate in the modern era (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005: 52), a phenomenon which has been described as “the feminization of international migration” (Gabaccia et al., 2006). Today, women account for nearly half of the world’s population of international migrants (Morrison et al., 2008). The role of women in destination labour markets and in remittance flows is getting ever more important in understanding the development of international migration, and “theoretical and empirical models that omit gendered determinants and impacts of migration are missing key elements of the story” (Morrison et al., 2008: x).

The percentage of women taking part in migratory processes continuously grows, due partly to the modification of population structure in developed countries (through aging), and partly to the increased need of caretaking services, mainly provided by women (Phizacklea, 1998; George, 2005). In addition, marriage is an important strategy for women seeking to migrate. This is usually understudied, one reason being the assumption that marriage is a social contract based on affection and mutual commitment, which downplays the pragmatic aspect (Sorescu-Marinković, 2012b: 229). As Fan and Huang put it in a study on female

migration in China, “the social-romantic and pragmatic facts of marriage are often intricately intertwined and difficult to observe independently. The decision for marriage and migration are also intertwined, so that it is very difficult to determine if marriage motivates migration, or if the desire for migration induces marriage” (Fan and Huang, 1998: 229).

Migration research suggests that patterns of international migration vary significantly between men and women. In any international migration model, “considerations of gender are likely to become increasingly critical as the female share of international migration rises” (Pfeiffer et al. 2008: 13). I will explain the gender pattern of recent Romanian migration to Eastern Serbia by analyzing the push and pull factors behind the process. Drawing on the narratives of my interviewees, I examine the complex relationship between gender, decision to emigrate, labour market in the host country, strategies of coping with the new environment and perceived distance from home.

Gabriel Sheffer (1986) described labour migrants as incipient diaspora. The probability of labour migrants actually becoming a diaspora is often determined by the quality of the diasporic network established in the host country, which can be facilitated by “legal frameworks and accidental circumstances” (Trandafoiu, 2006: 132). In this paper, I will show how the incipient Romanian diaspora in Eastern Serbia has transformed into a near diaspora. As Van Hear puts it, “a distinction may be drawn between near diasporas (a term echoing Russia’s “near abroad”) spread among a number of contiguous territories and those scattered further afield” (1998: 240). Even if the use of this concept has been limited to a specific geopolitical context, and migration and diaspora theorists have not developed it, it deserves our attention. Distance proves to be a crucial factor here. The Romanian diaspora of Eastern Serbia has characteristics which significantly differ from those of the distant Romanian diaspora in Western Europe. While there is a substantial number of studies on Romanian migrants and Romanian diaspora from Western Europe or other continents, research on the diaspora in the countries neighbouring Romania is yet limited. The existent academic papers on the Romanians near the state borders focus on Romanian historical or transborder communities, which are not to be mistaken for “near diaspora”.

Looking for an overall definition of diaspora, Brubaker (2005) identifies three core elements: *dispersion* (interpreted as forced or traumatic dispersion or more broadly as any other dispersion in space, provided that it crosses state borders), *orientation to a homeland* (real or imagined, as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty) and *boundary maintenance* (the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the home society). I argue that, even if these elements can be safely applied to distant diasporas, when it comes to near diaspora, a necessary distinction must be made. On the one hand, the orientation is always

towards a real and geographically easily reachable homeland; on the other hand, boundary maintenance is rather weak and in many instances is even replaced by the wish to go invisible, in what can be called *social fog*.

The concept of *social fog* has been used to describe the reciprocal alliance between irregular migration flows and informal economies. Irregular migrants produce *social fog* “as they evade control and identification by hiding from the state in their modes of working and living” (Bommes and Sciortino, 2011: 222). By analyzing the narratives of my interviewees regarding the reasons for their coming to Serbia and their experience of integration and adaptation, I argue that they adopt the strategy of going invisible in the social fog. However, I use *social fog* with a slightly changed meaning. As they try to evade identification and stigmatization, my respondents create social networks within the home society in which they are perfectly integrated, and where they are not perceived as outsiders. These are kin networks in which they play well established roles (wives and mothers) and which make ethnic identification less relevant.<sup>3</sup>

### **Romanian migration and the formation of Romanian diaspora**

After the fall of communism, in December 1989, Romania had to confront a new phenomenon, which other more permissive countries in the region already knew: massive labour migration, followed by the formation of diasporic communities, mainly in Western Europe. During communist rule, Romanian authorities exercised rather restrictive exit policies, severely limiting the ability of its citizens to travel internationally. Passports were held by the police, and prior approval from the authorities was required to obtain the travel document. Despite this harsh stance on international mobility, a relatively high amount of permanent, legal emigration also took place under the communist regime. Ethnic minorities (Jews, Germans and Hungarians) were clearly over-represented among the group of people who legally emigrated from Romania during communist rule (Diminescu, 2009: 46-48). This was due to the West German government practice of practically “buying back” ethnic Germans under a program to reunite families, prices varying depending on age, education level etc. Some temporary migration was also prevalent during the communist era, notably for education and work. Labour migration was exclusively state-managed. A large majority of Romanian workers headed to the Middle East, particularly to the Persian Gulf, where their labour was tightly regulated and family reunification forbidden (see Horváth, 2007: 2).

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<sup>3</sup> By the same token, Armanda Hisa (2015) described how patriarchy breaks the barrier of nationalism in the case of Albanian women married to Serbs in Southern Serbia.

After the fall of communism, passport administration and international travel were liberalized. Although some measures to curb the international travel of certain categories were taken during the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium (Horváth, 2007: 3), none of them drastically reduced the international mobility of Romanian citizens. In the first three years after the fall of communism, 170,000 persons legally emigrated from Romania. Again, ethnic minorities (especially Germans and Hungarians) were over-represented in the legal emigrant population: 60,000 out of a total of 97,000 emigrants registered in 1990 were Germans. Nevertheless, the main motivation for emigrating was economic. At the beginning of the 1990s, young, highly qualified emigrants obtained long-term residence in European countries, the USA and Canada. Thereafter, more and more unskilled, poorly qualified persons from rural areas began seeking (mostly temporary) migratory arrangements. Talking about the exodus that has been associated with Romania since 1990s, Ruxandra Trandafoiu thinks that “it is the cumulative effect of a national psychosis induced by half a century of communism and dictatorship, followed by a lengthy and traumatic transition process” (Trandafoiu, 2013: 49).

Even if the Romanian diaspora has a much longer history, the massive labour migration of the last 25 years resulted in the mass departure of millions of Romanians and the spectacular rise in the Romanian communities in Western Europe (especially Italy, Spain and France), North America, South America and Australia. Researchers have been asking themselves whether Romanians living abroad are immigrants, free movers, diaspora or something else. Before Romania joined the EU, the Romanian press called them *căpșunari* (strawberry pickers), *macaronari* (macaroni eaters) or *stranieri* (foreigners, in Italian) (Trandafoiu, 2013: 7), terms strongly connected with the destination countries, with a rather pejorative connotation. However, today the term *diaspora* is more habitually used, as “for Romanians back home, these work-seeking migrants have now evolved to the status of diaspora” (Trandafoiu, 2013: 7). After the Romanian presidential election of 2014, when Klaus Iohannis won largely due to the vote of Romanians living abroad, *diaspora* quickly switched from a neutral to a fairly positive meaning.

Despite the large and still growing Romanian diaspora, Romania lacks an official institution to deal with diaspora issues. The Department Politics for the Relation with the Romanians Everywhere (Ro. *Departamentul Politici pentru Relația cu Românii de Pretutindeni*, DPRRP), today within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was initially set up with the mission to reconnect and support Romanians outside the state’s immediate borders, the so-called historical or indigenous minorities. From its set up, in 1995, the Department has changed its name and subordination several times, but could not effectively tackle the recent phenomenon of massive migration from Romania and the consequent formation of huge diasporas.

As Trandafoiu puts it, “uneasy about the role such communities should play in the already uncomfortable relationship with neighbours and Western countries, the Romanian government prefers to talk about “Romanian communities living abroad” rather than diasporas” (Trandafoiu, 2006: 132). The focus of DPRRP is still on Romanian indigenous groups living outside its immediate territory, rather than on more recently formed groups, with a much shorter history, different needs and problems. Hence, the Department constructs the nation in a rather traditional fashion, focusing on ethnic and cultural rights, mainly the protection of Romanian language and religion. It also strives to promote Romania’s image abroad, supporting Romanian organizations and associations. Most of the DPRRP work consists of financing projects that are believed to sustain the preservation of cultural, linguistic and religious identity of Romanians from abroad. Until 2015, the DPRRP site did not even mention the immigration system or recognition of Romanian diplomas and degrees. In 2015, however, the *Guide of Romanian Worker Abroad* was uploaded, in four versions: for Italy, Germany, Hungary and Great Britain, this being to this day the only document directed specifically to the Romanian diaspora.

### **Romanians in Serbia and the Yugoslav route**

Serbia is home to three main transborder Romanian communities, not to be mistaken for the Romanian diaspora. The first are the Romanians of Vojvodina (Serbian Banat), officially recognized as a Romanian minority in Serbia. They have access to schooling, mass media and religious service in the Romanian language. According to the last Serbian population census, of 2011, they number 29,332 persons and inhabit around 40 settlements in Central and Southern Vojvodina. Some of these settlements are already mentioned in medieval archives, others were established in the 18<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Austro-Hungarian colonization of the Banat. They speak dialectal variants of the Romanian language and have knowledge of the standard (Măran, 2009; Sikimić, 2014).

The second community are the Bayash or Rudari. They live dispersed throughout Serbia and the Balkans, their mother tongue is Romanian, but they are considered Roma by the surrounding populations, because of their semi-nomadic way of life, mentality and physical characteristics. They do not speak Romanes, but their belonging to the Romanian nation has been intensely contested (for details, see Sikimić, 2005; Sorescu-Marinković 2013).

The third Romanian transborder community are the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, who speak archaic dialectal variants of Romanian (see Sorescu-Marinković, 2012a). According to the last census, they number 35,330, but members of the community put forth unofficial estimates between 150,000 and 300,000. They

are not officially recognized as a Romanian minority. Within the Vlach community there are divergences whether or not they belong to the Romanian nation, and whether or not they should merge, at a political level, with the Romanian minority in Vojvodina. Today, most of the Vlachs have a dual, contextual or politicized identity: they register as Romanians, Vlachs or Serbs and accordingly, but not necessarily in an overlapping manner, they declare their mother tongue to be Serbian, Vlach or Romanian. Romania does not question the Vlachs' origin and considers them Romanians living in Serbia. However, Serbia declares that "there are no concordance and sameness between the Romanian and the Vlach languages and their speakers" (Comments Government Serbia 2009). Until recently, they have not been granted any minority rights regarding the use of their mother tongue. Vlach has been restricted to family use, but even its transmission to the younger generation was endangered. Nevertheless, 2013 saw the publication of the first grammar of Vlach, in 2014 the first textbook for Vlach was printed, and Vlach introduced as an optional object in primary schools. In September 2015 the Vlach National Council adopted the standardization of the Vlach language (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković, 2015).

Apart from these Romanian indigenous communities, a Romanian diasporic community emerged in the last 25 years in Eastern Serbia. It is made up of Romanian citizens who have crossed the border with Yugoslavia, following the *pre-migration patterns and networks* already existing in this area, and finally settled there for good. The border region of Romania with ex-Yugoslavia had a special regime during late communist rule: people inhabiting the settlements in the vicinity of the state border were issued *small-scale trade permits* [*legitimații de mic trafic* in Romanian], which allowed them to pass the border for one-day trips to the markets in Yugoslavia (Sorescu-Marinković, 2012b: 223).<sup>4</sup>

After the fall of Romanian communism, a big share of rural population of Oltenia remained oriented towards Yugoslavia, and engaged in "multiple types of migration, difficult to register" (Sandu, 2000: 21). This exploratory period was marked by individual, temporary, investigative migrations.<sup>5</sup> *Suitcase traders* or

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<sup>4</sup> The Western Romanian frontier, 994 km long, from which 546 km with Serbia (290 along the Danube) and the rest with Hungary, has been regularly crossed, from 1944 to 1989, illegally, by Romanians trying to escape the suppressive communist regime (Ro. *frontieriști* "the borderers"). Between 1980 and 1989, 16,000 Romanians tried to cross the border, and 12,000 were caught; only in 1988, 400 people were shot on the border between Romania and Yugoslavia (Steiner and Magheți, 2009: 13). By that time, Romania's western border had become one of the best protected and bloodiest borders of Europe. For many people, Yugoslavia represented the gate to freedom or to hell. As Lavinia Snejana Stan puts it, "communist Romania invented a border concept that had in its centre not the enemy from the outside, but the escapee coming from the inside" (2013: 164).

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Favell argues against labeling of Eastern Europeans as *migrants* and prefers the term *free movers*, as Eastern European migration is temporary and circular rather than permanent, stimulated by labor requests rather than asylum seeking (2008: 703).



*shuttle traders*, already visible in the 1980s in many Eastern European countries (Wallace and Stola, 2001), expanded considerably at the border with Yugoslavia. Practicing a pendulum movement, most of them were going abroad and coming back home in the same day (Diminescu, 2009: 46).

### **Research methodology and data**

My data come from two main sources. During my field work in the last 10 years in the Vlach community of Eastern Serbia, I often came into contact with Romanian migrants, but did not consider the topic an important one. However, I conducted some interviews with these women, being mainly interested in their perspective on the Vlach culture, as all of them were married to Vlachs. As well, the majority of my Vlach interlocutors offered me their perspective on the “new” Romanians from their villages, during our conversations. All these interviews have been recorded and are part of the Digital Archive of the Institute for Balkan Studies (DABI) in Belgrade.

My other main data source is a research project from 2015 and 2016, financed by the ERSTE Foundation, aiming to map the Romanian diaspora in Serbia. Trying to determine how the Romanian diaspora is being formed, what social groups take part in it, where is it located and what its demographic impact in Serbia is, I revisited Vlach villages to conduct in-depth interviews, primarily with the Romanian citizens established here.<sup>6</sup>

Through snowball sampling, I conducted 15 interviews, ranging in length from one to three hours. I talked with my respondents about their moving to Serbia, the period when they arrived, the reasons which fuelled their decision, the ethnic origin of their partners, whether or not they had Serbian citizenship, whether or not their children had Romanian citizenship and speak the language, whether or not they knew other Romanians, how many and whether they were in contact with them, whether or not they were politically active and considered themselves diaspora, etc.

The joint data is offered in Table 1. This table presents an overview of the geographic, demographic and socio-economic characteristics of 26 interviewees, Romanian women settled in Eastern Serbia mainly after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989.

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<sup>6</sup> Apart from the Romanians in Eastern Serbia, I identified Romanian diasporic communities in the Romanian villages of Vojvodina, in the city of Belgrade and in the town of Pančevo. However, they will not form the topic of my paper.

Table 1.

## Romanian women settled in Eastern Serbia after 1990

Name*	Year of birth	Year of departure to Serbia	Residence in Romania	Marital status, children	Education	Occupation
Garofița	1972	1994	Neamț	married, 2	elementary school	unemployed
Diana	1968	1992	Sighișoara	married, 2	faculty	teacher
Ofelia	1975	1994	Arad	married, 2	high school	unemployed
Elena	1968	1988	Orșova	married, 1	vocational school	unemployed
Anca	1974	1992	Borșa Maramureș	married, 2	high school	unemployed
Daniela	1977	2001	Dr. Turnu Severin	married, 3	high school	unemployed
Livia	1979	1999	Dr. Turnu Severin	married, 2	high school	unemployed
Ileana	1975	1996	Bocșa Română	married, 2	elementary school	employed in a private company
Victoria	1964	1993	Dr. Turnu Severin	married, 2	high school	business owner
Aurelia	1950	1990	Orșova	married, 4	vocational school	unemployed
Nicoleta	1978	2000	Orșova	married, 2	high school	unemployed
Gheorghîța	1961	1990	Orșova	widow, 1	vocational school	unemployed
Gabriela	1973	1999	Dr. Turnu Severin	married, 3	high school	unemployed
Larisa	1978	2001	Focșani	married, 3	vocational school	unemployed
Florica	1962	1990	Dr. Turnu Severin	widow, 2	Vocational school	village sorcerer
Alexandra	1980	1999	Baia Mare	married, 2	high school	unemployed
Margareta	1979	2001	București	married, 3	high school	business owner
Eleonora	1975	2003	Bacău	married, 2	elementary school	seller at the green market
Adriana	1967	1999	Dr. Turnu Severin	married, 2	vocational school	maternal assistant
Dorina	1981	2000	Orșova	divorced, 3	high school	unemployed
Magdalena	1969	1998	Craiova	married, 0	high school	unemployed
Luminița	1966	1991	Hunedoara	married, 2	high school	unemployed
Paraschiva	1956	2000	Dr. Turnu Severin	widow, 2	elementary school	wage labourer
Mariana	1965	1992	Râmnicu Vâlcea	married, 2	high school	folk music singer
Costina	1979	2001	Dr. Turnu Severin	married, 2	high school	business owner
Brândușa	1967	2000	Dr. Turnu Severin	divorced, 2	high school	wage labourer

Source: Author's summary. \* All names are pseudonyms.

The women in the sample of interviewees were, at the time of writing (2016), between 35 and 66 years old, the average being 46. Given the span of the study, I have interviewed both women in their 20s, as well as in their 60s, which made the sample a rather heterogeneous one, in terms of age of respondents and, consequently, on their life perspective. The year of the respondents' departure to Serbia varied between 1988 and 2003, with a peak between 1999 and 2001; after this date, only one woman in my sample came to Serbia.

Most women came from Oltenia (17), followed by Moldova (3), Transylvania (3), Maramureş (2) and Bucharest (1). The snowball sampling may partially account for the large percent of residents of Oltenia. My Vlach informants mentioned that Moldova was also well represented, however I only interviewed three women from that region. Many Romanian men I talked to on the field were from Moldova, but most of them were only commuting seasonally. Most interviewees came from rural regions, but when asked about their place of residence they mentioned the biggest closest city.

Of 26 interviewees, 21 were married to Vlachs; for a few it was a second marriage, after a first one in Romania. Three respondents were widows: in two cases, the late husbands were Vlachs, while in one, the respondent lost her husband in Romania, came to work in Serbia, but did not remarry. All women but one had children, most of them (17) – two. In a few cases, some women came to Serbia with children from their first marriage, and several gave birth to more children after getting married again, to a Vlach. Two respondents were divorced: one was working seasonally in a Vlach household, while the other was freshly separated from her Vlach husband and intended to move to Western Europe.

Most interviewed women had secondary education (high school – 15, vocational school – 6), a few (4) graduated elementary school, only one had a university degree, illustrating that the migration of Romanian women to Eastern Serbia is not part of the skilled migration flows that Romanians were engaged in the last 25 years (Sandu, 2010). Among the factors influencing the structure of labour migration to Serbia is lack of need of qualified workers and of barriers related to distance, culture and language. More than half of the women in my sample (15) were officially unemployed, but, as most of them live in the rural area and possess land, they are household and agricultural workers.

### **Gendered Romanian recent migration to Eastern Serbia**

After the collapse of communism, migration from Romania began as a mainly male process. However, it has grown and diversified in a very short time, despite its relatively short history (see Vlase, 2013: 46). Migration to Serbia

followed a similar pattern, with men mainly commuting to the neighbouring country in order to pick up seasonal or daily jobs in agriculture or on small construction sites. In the first years after the opening of the borders, this destination was particularly attractive from various reasons: rural Eastern Serbia was a relatively well off region, due to the significant remittances and investments of the Vlach migrants from Western Europe in their native places (see Schierup and Ålund, 1986; Marjanović, 1995; Sorescu-Marinković, 2012b). It was very cheap, close to home and to the West, people could go back at any time, with the ones from the border regions of Eastern Serbia even being able to see Romania over the Danube. No visa was necessary, unlike for Western Europe; and, maybe most important, there was no language barrier, as the local dialects spoken by Vlachs were easily understandable to Romanians.

Soon, this route became attractive to women, too, but not to follow their partners. During my field research, I met only two men settled down in Eastern Serbia, but married to Vlach women. The migration of Romanian women to Serbia can be characterized as autonomous migration of unattached women. Most of them arrived there independently, via a friend or relative, in search of work in the informal sector, with no job security or protection: as bartenders, housekeepers, agricultural workers or care takers for the many elderly Vlachs who live alone, as consequence of more than five decades of labour migration from Yugoslavia to Western Europe and North America (see Schierup and Ålund, 1986; Marjanović, 1995). Most of these women came to marry Vlach men and settled there for good, the temporary migrations changing into permanent ones, difficult to distinguish from marriage migrations, as I mentioned in the beginning.

The literature on post-communist Romanian external migration mentions the routes to Italy and Spain as being especially dynamic due to facilities of linguistic nature, mainly for the rural population with a reduced level of foreign language knowledge (Sandu, 2000: 21). Yugoslavia was also preferred for similarity of language, but also for the affinity with the inhabitants of the regions towards which Romanians mainly oriented: those inhabited by Romanian transborder communities. This phenomenon, labeled *ethnic-affinity migration*, has been generally studied in the context of return migration of ethnics to their homeland after some generations (e.g. Cook-Martín and Viladrich, 2009). However, in the case of Romanians in Eastern Serbia, the linguistic- and ethnic-affinity migration was directed towards a Romanian community settled there many generations before.

Most Romanians migrating to Serbia lived at or below minimum standards of living. A major issue for many was survival: how to obtain enough income to feed and provide for their families. Aurelia, who came in 1990 to Serbia from Orșova, confesses that she left her four children from a previous marriage in

Romania and moved to Serbia in order to be able offer them a better life and send them to college: “There were nights when all we had for dinner was tea. I couldn’t watch my children go to bed hungry day after day. (...) When I saw all this land here, I knew they would also be better.”

Brândușa, a divorcee with two children, is keeping her job as a nurse in Romania and commutes during summer to care for an elderly Vlach couple whose children are living in Austria, and to help them with field work. She is forced to do this in order to supplement her meagre income and pay for the college education of her children. Paraschiva is a widow also working as a wage labourer in order to support her grown up children in Romania and, even if she did not formally marry, she is cohabiting with her Vlach partner in Eastern Serbia.

Apart from these women, older, divorced or widows, coming to Serbia initially to support their children back home, who are a minority, most of my interviewees arrived in Serbia relatively young, are single, have secondary education, come mainly from rural areas or small provincial towns of Romania. They came with the declared aim to work temporarily as wage labourers and with the undeclared intention to get married and settle in Serbia. Part of them visited a friend or a relative, and then met their future husbands. Thus, they bypassed the wage labourer stage, getting married and settling here, which can be definitely defined as marriage migration.

There are a few exceptions from this double pattern. Diana met her future husband in Romania, where they both studied at the same college. In her case, economics was secondary, love came first: “I met my husband to be in Craiova, in college. He was and still is the best and kindest man I’ve ever met. After graduating, we just decided to move to Serbia.”

Mariana is a Romanian folk music singer. Having been invited many times to sing at Vlach migrants’ weddings and other celebrations, she married a Vlach man, settled in Eastern Serbia and successfully pursued her career.

Today, in every of the around 150 Vlach villages of Eastern Serbia there are at least 10-20 Romanian women. The official 2011 Serbian population census indicates 831 Romanians and 27,645 Vlachs in these villages. However, these numbers do not reflect the real situation (the number of “new Romanians”): some Vlachs also declare as Romanians; not all the “new Romanians” have been registered at the census, as many of them, even after 20 years of residence in Serbia, do not have Serbian citizenship;<sup>7</sup> most of the children who come from

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<sup>7</sup> Here we should point to Serbia’s policy towards naturalization: in order to apply for Serbian citizenship, there is no need for language proficiency, no need of knowledge of Constitutional order, no oath requirement, no renunciation of foreign citizenship, no healthy requirement, and still the state has the discretionary right to turn the application down, which is usually the case.

mixed marriages between Vlachs and Romanians are registered as Serbs and many do not even speak Romanian etc. We estimate a few thousand Romanian women permanently settled in Eastern Serbia, maybe up to 5,000 persons.

The situation of the new Romanian settlers in the Romanian settlements of Vojvodina is somehow similar to that in Eastern Serbia. The Romanian diaspora here is also greatly feminized, but counts less women, as the Romanian indigenous community in Vojvodina is significantly smaller than that of the Vlachs. The Romanian women settled here come from the Banat, Moldova, Oltenia regions of Romania and, per total, are slightly higher skilled than those in Eastern Serbia. Among them are school teachers, professors, doctors, as they can work using the Romanian language (the Romanians of Vojvodina enjoy all the minority rights, including schooling and administration in Romanian, unlike the Vlachs). Here it is more difficult to distinguish between the two groups. Kinship and social connections between the Vojvodina Romanians and Romania have persisted throughout the years, individuals moved from one country to the other, even if during the communist period the intensity of these migrations has decreased. Only in Vojvodina did I have participants in the study who have settled here in 1975, for example. After 1990 a lot of Romanians moved to Vojvodina, again driven by economic reasons. Today, there are probably between 1,000 and 2,000 Romanian citizens living in Vojvodina.

Researchers have also outlined the agenda for gendering diaspora, which includes, among others, two very important aspects: the extent to which diasporic groups are subjects to two sets of gender relations, that of the host country and that of the ethnic community, and the way in which women become the carriers of the cultural symbolism that marks out the boundaries of the diasporic group (Anthias, 1998). As for women coming from rural Romania and settled mainly in rural and provincial Eastern Serbia, within the Vlach community, they comply with both sets of value. The minimum value attached to education in personal achievement is in accordance with the role of women as housewives and mothers in rural Romania and Serbia. Education and professional careers are downplayed in comparison to household duties. Most of interviewees follow their roles in a traditional community: mothers and wives, agricultural workers and housewives.

### **Strategies of coping: living in the social fog**

Complying with the role of wives and mothers is both a method of being accepted by the local community and a strategy of becoming invisible and assimilated, of living in *social fog*. Romanian women from Eastern Serbia

form networks almost exclusively at family level. Although they usually use other Romanians to get to Serbia, they do not interact with them after having settled in the host community. In other terms, these groups, even if numerous, do not display a characteristic thought to be crucial for any diaspora: boundary maintenance. Boundary maintenance between them and the Vlach community they anchor in is rather weak, being replaced by the wish to go invisible or foggy, coupled with the strong ethnic affinity between the two groups. The kind of assimilation the Romanians are undergoing is double-folded: first, they merge with the Vlach community they live in, and second, they tend to be assimilated by the wider Serbian majority.<sup>8</sup>

The Romanians in Eastern Serbia, hidden among Romanian-speaking Vlachs, are an invisible diaspora, with no cohesion. Its members are highly dispersed and, as they are settled there for good, long for Serbian citizenship, which is still almost impossible to get. Most of these women have been looked down upon in the beginning, but tacitly accepted, as their demographic role was a crucial one: they practically revived the Vlach villages, with a very large aging population. This practice of accepting immigrants only for certain periods of time, and only if they fulfil a purpose, was coined by sociologists *differential exclusion* (Schierup et al. 2006: 52) and can be applied to the Romanian women in Eastern Serbia.

The dependence of more developed regions on migration becomes more emphasized when fertility declines and the population ages. United Nations specialists speak of *population replacement migration*, meaning migration which imposes itself in circumstances of imbalanced demographical structure (Horvath and Anghel, 2009: 16). As a result of the migratory politics from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the aging of the Vlach communities is quite emphasized. Labour force in Vlach settlements was mainly supplied by exchange or replacement migrants from Romania, who were in time adopted by the host community and who, apart from their economical role, came to play a most important demographic one.

Social assimilation includes linguistic assimilation. Many Romanian women who settled in Romanian indigenous communities have an urban background or come from rural regions of Romania other than Banat, they speak only standard Romanian or other Romanian dialects, not known to Vlachs. They had to learn the Banat dialect spoken in these communities, which is quite distant from the

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<sup>8</sup> Out of the Romanian citizens living on the territory of Serbia, the only ones maintaining boundaries, in the meaning of preserving a distinctive identity vis-à-vis the home society and thus fitting the definition of diaspora are the Romanian high-skilled professionals in Belgrade, who are there for a definite period of time and have a relatively high social status, and the Gabori Roma in the town of Pančevo, who are a very closed social group, strictly endogamous.

literary language, mainly in terms of vocabulary and phonetics. Then, they had to learn Serbian, for official communication or interaction with the Serbs. As Margareta, a Bucharest native, described: “It would have probably been easier for me to marry a Serb. Like this, first I had to learn the Vlach spoken here, which is to me like a foreign language, then I had to learn Serbian, so I would be able to talk to Serbs...”

Other interviewees mocked the Romanian vernacular spoken by Vlachs, imbued with Serbian neologisms, but nevertheless do not hesitate to speak it in the company of the locals (Sorescu-Marinković, 2012b). Some Romanians feel the “pure” Romanian language they can speak, with no Serbian borrowings, automatically lifts them up on the social prestige scale. However, they do not use it in family settings and many of them do not even teach their children standard Romanian. Frequent are also the cases where children from mixed marriages of Romanians and Vlachs speak only Serbian.

After 2007, when Romania joined the EU, the prestige of Romania and Romanians started to rise. The Romanian passport became wanted for it guaranteed access to the Western European labour market. The prestige of Romanian women living in Eastern Serbia rose also. The Vlachs married to Romanian women were hoping they would get Romanian citizenship, as well, but this did not happen.<sup>9</sup> However, the European rights of Romanians after the EU enlargement did not completely lift prejudices of the majority population towards Romanian women in the region: “Symbolic political geography is still inescapable and one only has to turn to the tabloid press for confirmation” (Trandafoiu, 2013: 9).

The consolidation of the Vlach identity currently taking place in Eastern Serbia, with the standardization of the Vlach variant and the introduction of Vlach as optional subject in primary schools, is counterbalanced by the introduction, for the first time in the 150 years, of the Romanian language in the schools of Eastern Serbia (Huțanu and Sorescu-Marinković, 2015). The presence of Romanians here was presented in media as a threat of Romanization of this region. In this local clash of language and political ideologies, uncertain of the role they are supposed to play, Romanians in Eastern Serbia chose to be visible only at a family level and to stay in the social fog.

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<sup>9</sup> Romania passed a new amendment to the law on citizenship in the second half of 2015, which opens up the possibility for foreign citizens living abroad to be granted Romanian citizenship, provided that they contributed to the affirmation of Romanian culture. Many members of the Romanian transborder communities from Serbia have high hopes they would get Romanian citizenship this way, which is, however, rather improbable.



### Is near diaspora real diaspora?

At a certain point during my research, further reflection on the usefulness of the term *diaspora* was needed. To my question: “Do you consider yourself diaspora?”, most of the respondents answered “No”. Being asked to explain why, they offered several answers: they are not a political force; they are scattered and do not have any connections to each other; they have no institutions; they are very close to Romania. Gabriela, who comes from Drobeta Turnu Severin, a town on the Romanian bank of the Danube, only 6 km away from its Serbian counterpart, Kladovo, says: “How can I be diaspora if I see my hometown on the other bank? We are too close to be away.”

Distance does play an important role in defining diaspora. Van Hear’s distinction between near diasporas, spread among a number of contiguous territories, and distant diasporas, scattered further afield, comes in handy here. The community of Romanian citizens from Eastern Serbia forms a diaspora of the former kind, as opposed to the distant Romanian diaspora of Western Europe. Ruxandra Trandafoiu’s research on the Romanian diaspora in Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom showed that “diasporans continuously reflect on social and political realities in both home and adoptive countries, constantly locating their diasporic experience within a transnational space with fast-changing parameters” (Trandafoiu, 2013: 5). The Romanian diaspora in Serbia follows a different pattern of action. Thus, *long-distance nationalism* (Benedict Anderson) turns into short-distance indifference and political inertia or into short-distance nationalism, which can best be practiced at home, as home is within a reachable distance when it comes to voting or taking part in political or social events.

At first glance, it might seem strange to even use the word *diaspora* in relation to the Romanians living in Serbia. The Romanian indigenous communities here are well known, both to the academia and to the public, and the naturalized names used to refer to them are simply descriptive, localizing the community: *Romanians in Serbia*, *Romanians in Vojvodina* or *Romanians on the Timok Valley* (sometimes within the wider category of *Romanians from abroad* or *forgotten Romanians*); in Romania, *diaspora* tends to be associated with the big Romanian communities formed in Western Europe from the 1990s on (mainly in Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Germany etc.), which have a great political potential, coupled with financial power. Little is known about the Romanians settled in Serbia at the same period when *distant Romanian diasporas* were forming in Western Europe. My research points to the necessity of distinguishing between the Romanian indigenous communities in Serbia and the newly formed (and forming) *near Romanian diaspora*. Talking about Romanians in Serbia, we have to operate with two concepts. The Romanian indigenous community or minority in Serbia, even if

it acts as a possible anchor for coming Romanians, is not levelling or completely adopting the newcomers. Serbia is a unique case, as the indigenous Romanian minority coexists with the Romanian diaspora.<sup>10</sup> In spite of the common origin, the two communities speak different variants of the Romanian language, perceive the world similarly, but not identically, and in many instances perpetuate different cultural values.

Romanian research on labour migration does not offer any data regarding Serbia or remittances coming from Serbia. DPRRP has many projects directed towards Serbia, but they are exclusively focused on the Romanian minority of Vojvodina and on the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia. The Romanian diaspora in Serbia is an invisible one, both for the Romanian state, which does not address its problems in any way, and for Serbia. Furthermore, not even the members of this diaspora know about the existence and the dimension of this group(s) in Serbia. The social networks of the diasporans are rather reduced, as they tend to nurture kinship networks, not national clusters.

The near Romanian diaspora in Eastern Serbia, intermingled with the Vlach transborder community, *in between* home and away, small in terms of figures, if we compare it, for example, with the ones in Western Europe, with part of the members settled here for good, part being here only for a definite period of time, lacks some of the traits that characterize distant diaspora. Remittances, for example, are insignificant, as only the very few who have children in Romania are sending money back home. As for the intention of return, there was none in my sample. However, from the beginning of my research three interviewees left Serbia and settled in Austria or Germany: two together with their Vlach partners and children, and one alone, after divorcing.

### Concluding remarks

The longitudinal dimension of my research and studying the host community, the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, for more than ten years, enabled me to understand the strategies of coping with the new environment employed by Romanian women settled in Eastern Serbia. Unlike the distant Romanian diaspora from Western Europe, which usually complies with the three core elements used to define it (*dispersion, orientation to a homeland and boundary maintenance*), the near Romanian diaspora in Serbia adopts the strategy of living in social fog. They create social networks within the host society in which they are perfectly integrated, and where they are not perceived as outsiders, allowing them to

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<sup>10</sup> Hungary might be another example, but there was no representative research on this topic so far.

merge with the majority population. The combination of geographical closeness, ethnic affinity and low level of education explains to a great degree why this female population has settled here and adopted this way of life, in which traditional gender roles are valued above individual qualities.

My research suggests that the Romanian diaspora in Eastern Serbia does not seem to grow any longer. The process of consolidation reached a peak between 1999 and 2001; after this date the number of Romanian women coming to Serbia drastically decreased. After 2007, when Romania acceded to the European Union and the Romanians could freely travel and work in most of the EU countries, the favourite destinations changed, Serbia being chosen only rarely. Many children from mixed marriages of Romanians with Vlachs have double citizenship, both Serbian and Romanian, even if some of them are not taught Romanian by their parents. For part of the Romanians in Eastern Serbia, this is only a temporary destination, as some have already moved to Western Europe, and many others intend to do so in the near future.

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