

THEDE KAHL¹, GERMANIA

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Păstrarea limbii, pierderea identității: meglenoromâni

Rezumat

Situația meglenoromânilor este caracterizată de răspândirea lor pe un teritoriu întins, în Grecia, Republica Macedonia, România și Turcia, și de lipsa de contact între grupurile din diferite țări. Cei mai mulți meglenoromâni trăiesc în regiunea Meglen (gr. Almopía) din nordul Greciei. Înrudirea strânsă a meglenoromânei cu (daco)româna face ca vorbitorii de meglenoromână din România să nu poată păstra în paralel ambele variante lingvistice, cu foarte puține excepții. Limba și identitatea meglenoromână sunt astăzi cel mai bine păstrate în Ghevghelia (Republica Macedonia) și Arhangelos (Grecia). Păstrarea meglenoromânei în Turcia poate surprinde, dar turca a devenit limbă uzuală abia după imigrarea lor în Turcia. Conștiința etnică de meglenoromân este minimă, în schimb gradul de păstrare al limbii este satisfăcător în multe comunități.

¹ University "Friedrich Schiller", Germany

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Language Preservation, Identity Loss: the Meglen Vlachs

Summary

The Meglen Vlachs are characterized by their dispersion over several countries – Greece, the FY Republic of Macedonia, Romania and Turkey –, and by the lack of contact between these groups. Most Meglen Vlachs live in the Meglen (Gr. Almopía) region from northern Greece. The close kinship of Meglen Vlach with (Daco-)Romanian makes it hard for the Meglen Vlachs in Romania to preserve both language variants. The Meglen Vlach language and identity are today best preserved in Gevgelija (the FY Republic of Macedonia) and Archangelos (Greece). The preservation of Meglen Vlach in Turkey might come as a surprise, but Turkish became the customary language only after their immigration to Turkey. The Meglen Vlach ethnic consciousness is minimal, however, the degree of language conservation is very high in many communities.

Language Preservation, Identity Loss: the Meglen Vlachs²

Origin, language and distribution of Meglen Vlachs

Meglen Vlachs or Megleno-Romanians³ are an independent branch of the Balkan Romanic population, closely related linguistically to the Aromanians, (Daco-)Romanians and Istro-Romanians. The ancestors of Meglen Vlachs may belong to Bulgarian-Vlach groups, which after the battle of Kosovo in 1389 fled to the Karacova heights in Central Macedonia (Weigand 1892: 53-55). The area offered favourable climate and good land, which made the Meglen Vlachs give up their nomadic lifestyle and settle down. This view, however, is far from unanimous (Papahagi 1903: 7-9). Following Konstantin Jireček (1893: 97), many authors believe the Vlachs mixed with the Pechenegs, who, after losing a battle against Byzantine Emperor Comnenos in 1091, were settled as military colonists in the Meglen area. This theory, according to which the Vlachs mixed with the Pechenegs, has competition by another one, which sees them mixing with the Cumans (Katsugiánnis 1964: 34).

Meglen Vlach is considered a dialect of the Romanian language. However, if Aromanian is viewed as a separate language, Meglen Vlach could also be seen as a separate language, at least as a separate variant, or as a dialect of Aromanian.⁴ Most Meglen Vlachs are Christian Orthodox. Under Ottoman rule, they resisted Islamization, with the notable exception of the village Nânti (*Νότια* in Greek, *Нънту* in Bulgarian, *Nutya* in Turkish), whose population converted to Islam in the 18th century. Nânti was once the center of the Meglen Vlach population in Central Macedonia, being the trade hub, and thus having the largest population of the whole Meglen region. Today it is inhabited by a Pontian-Caucasian population, which speaks Greek.

Due to their growing attachment to agriculture, the Meglen Vlachs, by the beginning of the 20th century, settled permanently in Central Macedonia, in the Meglen region. Meglen encompasses the north-eastern part of Almopía, the western end of the province Paionia and a small region in the FY Republic of Macedonia, around the town of Gevgelija. Concurrently with the South Slavic toponym *Meglen*, which corresponds to the Greek *Μεγλενά* or *Μογλενά*, the Turkish-Ottoman form *Karacova* is also used, as well as the ancient Greek name *Αλμωπία*, in official Greek use since 1927. When the Meglen Vlachs were displaced, they mostly migrated to Romania and Turkey. The emigration of Meglen Vlachs to Romania was mainly due to economic reasons, the displacement to Turkey was mostly forceful, within the forced Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1923.

In the Meglen region, the following Meglen Vlach villages have been preserved until today: in Greece – Oşani (Archángelos), Liumniţa (Skra), Birislav (Períkliá), Lungunţa (Langadiá), Cupa (Kúpa), Țârnareca (Kárpi), and in the FY Republic of Macedonia – Uma (Huma).

Meglen Vlachs started arriving in Romania from 1925 on. The Romanian state helped the “Macedonian brothers” settling down. Most Meglen Vlachs today live in Cerna, Dobruja. It is often argued that these people left Greece because of exacerbated Greek nationalism; however, it rather seems economic factors played a decisive, if not exclusive, role, in times when Romania was more prosperous than Greek Macedonia.

² This study represents a revised and enlarged version of Kahl 2004

³ *Meglen Vlachs* and *Megleno-Romanians* can be used as synonyms. I prefer and further use the former taking into account the fact that this people uses the term *Vlachs* to refer to themselves, not *Romanians*.

⁴ For details on the Megleno-Romanian language, see Atanasov 1984, 2002, Dahmen 1989, Katsanis 2001.

Islamized Meglen Vlachs who were forcefully displaced to Turkey from Nânti, today live in Eastern Thrace.⁵ Until 1997, the history of the settlement of the Meglen Vlachs in Turkey was unknown⁶. In their new Turkish homeland, Meglen Vlachs were dispersed over many settlements in Eastern Thrace, and several towns in western Turkey (Kahl 2006). Their fate thus differs from the situation in Romania, where the Vlachs from nearly all Meglen Vlach villages settled in one village (Cerna), from which some of them emigrated to the Banat region, while in the case of Nânti, the entire population of a single village settled in numerous hamlets. Meglen Vlach families also live in urban areas of Greece, such as Guménissa, Édessa, Polýkastro, Axiúpoli, Thessaloníki, as well as in Gevgelija and Skopje in the FY Republic of Macedonia, from where they emigrated to other cities in former Yugoslavia. Small numbers live as far as Yambol, Warsaw, Budapest and even Tashkent. The top estimate of the total population of Meglen Vlachs in all these areas today is 14,000.



Self-appellation and external appellation

While referred to by their neighbours as Meglen Vlachs (Greek: *Βλάχοι Μογλενίτες*, Slavo-Macedonian: *Мегленските Власи*), in other languages they are mostly called Megleno-Romanians (Romanian: *meglenoromâni*, German: *Meglenorumänen*, Russian: *Мегленорумыни*). The term *Meglen* designates the Central Macedonian area around S'bocko (today's Aridéa), called Karacova in Turkish, nowadays Almopía in Greece. The terms *Megleno-Romanians* and *Meglen Vlachs* are used synonymously. The young now call themselves Vlachs (singular *Vlau*, plural *Vlaş*), not Romanians.⁷ Aromanian neighbours refer to them as Tucańi.

⁵ For details, see Kahl 1999, 2002, 2006.

⁶ See Andrews 1989: 103, Atanasov 1990, Capidan 1925: 15, Dahmen 1989: 445, Dahmen/Kramer 1986: 266, Wild 1983: 11.

⁷ Theodor Capidan wrote, in 1928: "The name *Rumon*, which should have been in use, was lost without trace" (cf. Arvinte 1980: 37).

The number of Meglen Vlachs in Turkey is too small for their Turkish neighbors to have an individual name for them. Most Turks of Eastern Thrace do not distinguish them from Slavic-speaking Pomaks and call them *Karacovalı* (people from Karacova/Meglen) or even subsume them under the umbrella term *Rumeli* (immigrants from Rumelia), which is also used for Turkish, Bosnian and Pomak immigrants from the Balkans. However, the Turkish and Pomak immigrants from Meglen do not call the Meglen Vlachs *Ullahlar*, as Vlachs are commonly known in Turkish, but *Nutyalı* (people from Nânti), since that is where the only Vlachs/Romanians in the region come from.

In addition to *Vlaş*, Meglen Vlachs also name themselves after the village they originate from: *Oşineşi* (from Oşani), *Țârnrăcoți* (from Țârnareca) etc.

Ethno-national structure of the Meglen region

The area of the Meglen Vlachs saw, until the beginning of the 20th century, a majority of Slavic speakers of the Macedonian language, which had a strong influence on Meglen Vlach language and culture. Meglen Vlachs were also in close contact not only with their Christian Slavophone neighbors, but also with the Slavophone Muslims of Meglen, the Pomaks, Torbesh or Çitak.

When nationalist movements emerged in Greece, Romania and Bulgaria, Meglen Vlachs were not spared. In 1888, there were five Greek schools in several Meglen Vlach villages, by 1890 Romanian schools were also founded.⁸ The Bulgarians used the Romanian movement to weaken Greek influence. Islamized Meglen Vlachs from Nânti were not the target of nationalist propaganda, as neither Romania nor Greece could expect the support of Muslim Meglen Vlachs. So in Nânti there were neither Greek nor Romanian schools.

In the area of the most intensive settling of the Vlachs in Greek, Central Macedonia, nationalistic conflicts left deep traces, still visible today. It is, for one, a conflict between national orientations, such as the designations “Greek” or “Romanian”, on the other hand, between religious affiliations – to the Bulgarian Exarchate Church or to the Greek-Byzantine Patriarchate. The identity problem is similar to that of Aromanians, although their “Hellenization” was more pronounced, so that the Romanian movement in the Meglen region survived. Romania’s assistance was counter-balanced by the firm foothold which Greece offered. An orientation towards Bulgaria was an option primarily for pro-Romanian groups in conflict with pro-Greek groups. Otherwise, few Meglen Vlachs veered towards the Bulgarian Exarchate Church.

To find out whether or not Meglen Vlachs have a sense of belonging together, let us take a closer look at their relationship towards their immediate neighbours.

Meglen Vlachs and Muslims

The Islamization of Nânti is the only example of conversion of an entire Meglen Vlach village. This village, as the center of Bishopry, until then was a Christian center. After the Islamization in the 18th century, however, the villagers received the support of the ruling class and more influence in the region. Meglen Vlachs preserved some tales about Islamization.⁹

Religion shaped the identity of Muslim Meglen Vlachs, as it increased their identification with other Muslim ethnicities (Turks and Pomaks), at the same time opening a gap to the Christian

⁸ For details, see Capidan 1928: 9-12, Peyfuss 1974: 106.

⁹ For examples, see Kahl 2002, Kukúdis 2001: 283-286, Limanoski 1994: 267-273, Méllios 1986: 24-37, Papageorgíu 1909: 91-95.

Meglen Vlachs. Many of them identified both with the Meglen Vlachs and with the Turks. The identification with the Turks was limited by emphasizing that they were Turks from the Balkans, “Rumeli Turks” or simply “of Turkish faith”, while the Turks from Turkey were “the other Turks”. On the other hand, identification with Meglen Vlachs who remained in the Meglen region was limited, by emphasizing that those who stayed in Macedonia were *gāvurlar/gāuri*, and that only language connected them. Identities sometimes change, but are kept by others. In 1997, a 62 year-old Meglen Vlach man told me in Hoşkōy: “As Turks in Greece feel Greeks, I also feel like a Turk.” However, a 80 year-old Meglen Vlach woman in Şarkōy confessed: “We have become Turks, but in our hearts we remained Christians. Secretly, we continued the liturgy.”

Today, mixed marriages between Meglen Vlachs and members of other ethnic groups represent the rule in Turkey. Vlachs tend to mix more with immigrants from the Macedonian area (“Rumeli”) than with Turks already settled in Thrace. Meglen Vlachs usually marry Pomaks, and see them as close: “Of course we know them well, they are also *Karacovalı (Meglens)*.” People from Nânti living in Kalamış knew almost all Pomak residents of neighboring villages, and are in close contact, while they had never visited *yerli* (“locals”) in the neighbouring Turkish village.

The Meglen Vlach idiom in Turkey was not influenced by standard Romanian language, and so preserved archaic features, different from the variants spoken in Greece, Romania or the FY Republic of Macedonia. Some people told me they would write Meglen Vlach using the Turkish alphabet. However, Meglen Vlachs in Greece consider their language “unsuitable” to be written.

Meglen Vlachs and Slavic Macedonians

Meglen Vlachs have mostly lived in a Slavic environment, so Slav linguistic and cultural influence was strong, different from the Aromanians. The strong influence of Slavic Macedonians is for example visible in the vocabulary related to living in the countryside, but also in material and spiritual culture. Meglen Vlach musicians in the region of Meglen keep many Slavic songs and dances in their repertoire. The Slavic idiom of Meglen was for Meglen Vlachs the language of trade and had a prestigious status. The Vlach population of the village Kastanerî (Barovišta), for example, was completely Slavicized.

Today, Meglen Vlachs in the Greek part of the Meglen region do no longer actively use the Slavic idiom, but the Greek language. Meglen Vlachs in both parts of the Meglen region also identified with the ethnonym “Macedonian”. “I do not know whether Vlachs came from other places, but we are all Macedonians. We speak a different language, but *ντόπιοι*¹⁰ are not more Macedonians than we are”, a 67 year-old villager from Oşani (Greece) told me.

Meglen Vlachs and Aromanians

Although they lived closed to each other, Meglen Vlachs and Aromanians rarely intermarried and if so, usually in one direction: Meglen Vlach women would marry Aromanian men, taking over Aromanian words, customs and habits (like, for example, the cross-like tattoo). On the other side, I met one Aromanian woman who married a Meglen Vlach man. While Meglen Vlachs in Romania did not publish books in their native dialect, nor recordings of Meglen Vlach songs, the much more numerous community of Aromanians in Dobruja published numerous Aromanian texts and recorded tapes with traditional music. Aromanian music is also spread among Vlachs, many Meglen Vlach families in Cerna read Aromanian publications, as they lack Meglen Vlach ones.

¹⁰ “ντόπιοι” = natives; the Megleno-Romanians and Greeks use this term to refer to Slavic idioms speakers.

While Meglen Vlachs in Romania keep their distance from Aromanians, in several places in Greece, it is the other way round. Local Meglen Vlach associations collaborate with Aromanian associations, at Meglen Vlach celebrations Aromanian music is played, rather than their own.

Meglen Vlachs and Romanians

Meglen Vlachs who decided to move to Romania in the 1920s were not hindered by the Greek authorities. Rather, they were incited to leave and were told they would not be welcomed, should they like to return.¹¹ After leaving their homes in the region of Meglen, in Central Macedonia, Meglen Vlachs settled in South Dobruja, where they were forced to resettle again, in 1940, in North Dobruja. Their place of settlement was usually determined on the basis of their origin: Meglen Vlach families from Lundzini would be settled in one part of the village, those from Oșani in another one etc. Many villages were built especially for them, next to Bulgarian or Turkish villages. After settling in southern Dobruja, the Meglen Vlachs sent their children to Romanian schools and went to Romanian churches.

At the Romanian census of 2002, *Macedo-Romanians* (Romanians from Macedonia) and *Aromanians* were classified in the subgroup of Romanians. However, it is unknown to which degree Meglen Vlachs declared themselves as Macedo-Romanians or Aromanians. At the last population census, the entire population of the biggest Meglen Vlach village in Romania (Cerna) declared themselves as Romanians, even if, according to unofficial local estimates, the share of Meglen Vlachs in the village population was 60%.

The Meglen Vlachs, while speaking their native dialect, call Daco-Romanians *Mucani*. However, this name is avoided in the presence of Daco-Romanians, as it could be perceived as offensive. One of my interlocutors stated: “Although Romanians are not happy when we call them «Mucani», we still use this term. [...] Of course we ourselves are Romanians. We [Meglen Vlachs] have more in common with Romanians than with Aromanians.”

Meglen Vlachs and Greeks

In comparison with the Aromanians, the Meglen Vlachs fell very late under the influence of the Greek culture. Church treasurer Joachim Ananiades from Gevgelija wrote the governor of Macedonia, Stéfanos Dragúmis (1842-1922): “The population of seven Vlach villages of Meglen is «Romanianized», and they would rather call themselves Turks but Greeks.” The reason for the Aromanians to adopt the concept “Greek” may be their dependence on Greek as the language of commerce, whereas Meglen Vlachs settled in a non-Greek environment, and thus did not adopt the Greek concept. The fact that Meglen Vlachs found themselves in an isolated military area until the 1980s, added to the preservation of their language and identity. Today, in the Greek part of the Meglen region, most Meglen Vlachs refer to themselves as *Έλληνες* (Hellenic), but not as *Greeks*.¹²

Is there a sense of belonging together among Meglen Vlachs?

For Meglen Vlachs, the sense of unity within their community is less pronounced than for other Romanian communities, especially for Aromanians (Belkis 1996, Kahl 1999). The three most important areas they inhabit (Meglen, Dobruja and Thrace) got so “distanced” from each other that the only thing connecting them is the language they speak, which is not sufficient to foster a deeper sense of joint belonging between them. Because of the weak connection between Christian and

¹¹ According to my interlocutors in Cerna.

¹² For more details on the Hellenization of Megleno-Romanians, see Dahmen 1997, Kahl 2003.

Muslim Vlachs, contacts between Meglen Vlachs in Turkey and those in other countries of South-Eastern Europe are inexistent.

While elder Meglen Vlachs in Turkey still vividly remember the regions they came from, people in the Romanian Dobruja and the Meglen have no idea where Muslim Meglen Vlachs live today. In Cerna only two people I met knew about the existence of Islamized Meglen Vlachs, had heard of the village of Nânti and knew that once there lived Islamized Meglen Vlachs. Contacts between Meglen Vlachs in Romania and those in Greece were also discontinued during the Cold War; only few families re-established contact afterwards.

Meglen Vlach culture and identity, in comparison with Aromanians, seems to have even less chances to survive. The Meglen Vlach language (dialect), with appropriate support, could be preserved in the next few generations in Gevgelija, where a relatively compact Meglen Vlach community lives. In Romania, the Meglen Vlach idiom is too similar to the standard language, while in Greece and Turkey Meglen Vlachs are too dispersed, and the desire to preserve the native dialect, too small, for the language to survive. Here, Meglen Vlachs will probably be rapidly assimilated (eventually with the exception of Archángelos), while in Gevgelija and Cerna they might survive as a small, isolated island of population.

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Thede Kahl is university professor for South Slavic and South-Eastern European Studies and director of the Institute of Slavonic Studies at the University “Friedrich Schiller” on Jena (Germany). He studied geography, Slavic philology, and Byzantine studies in Münster, Hamburg, Cologne and Moscow. In 1999 he got his PhD in geography (University of Münster) and Venia legendi in *Cultures and languages of South-Eastern Europe* (University of Vienna). He is the editor of numerous volumes of studies on the political transformation in post-communist Romania, Romanian dialects, Balkan people etc. He authored and co-authored several monographs on Aromanian, among which: *Ethnizität und räumliche Verbreitung der Aromunen in Südosteuropa* (1999), *Die südaronumische Mundart des Dorfes Turia [Krania], Pindus. Syntax, Lexik, Ethnolinguistik, Texte* (together with Maria Bara and Andrej N. Sobolev, 2005), *Istoria aromânilor* (2006).