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Migration and Ethnicity: The Czechs from Banat (Romania)*

Introduction

In the first half of the 19th century, Czech colonists have established several colonies, especially in the wood-covered mountains found along the lower reaches of the Danube, in the south-western region of Romania. The colonists lived in a high degree of isolation, resulting in a closed cultural and community organization (e.g. in a high degree of endogamy). In the beginning, the basis of their livelihood was logging. Additionally, where the natural environment allowed it, they also made attempts at following traditional patterns of agriculture.

Before the regime change, Romania had a Czech population of 5500.¹ After 1989, the Czech-speaking, Roman Catholic population has become involved in an increased outward migration to Czech Republic. According to the 1992 census, their population numbered 5797 persons. The 2011 census put their numbers at 2477, which means a 57% decrease in less than two decades. The largest Czech community is in Eibenthal, with a population of 310 in 2011, due to the favourable economic opportunities and to the miner population's pensions, considered satisfactory at the local level.² The population has aged in this locality as well. It is to be expected that Eibenthal will meet the fate of the partially inhabited settlements, where the majority of the houses are only used temporarily, during the summer holiday season, by the members of the younger generation.

The biography of Václav Mašek, the vicar of Eibenthal, points far beyond spiritual service. He also plays a key role in the identity and language preservation, as well as in the conservation of the historical consciousness of the local community. Mašek, who is still active today, has experienced the progressive atrophy of the Romanian Czech community during his own life course and priestly service. The vicar can recall from memory the most important demographical data of all Czech settlements. According to him, the population of Șumița numbered 350 in 1968. Today, there are only 50 left.³ Since this locality is farther away from the 5 or

* The first version of this study was published in Romanian in the monograph of the Czechs from Banat (Jakab–Peti eds. 2018).

1 Information supplied by Václav Mašek, the vicar of Eibenthal (*Ceții din Banat...* 2013).

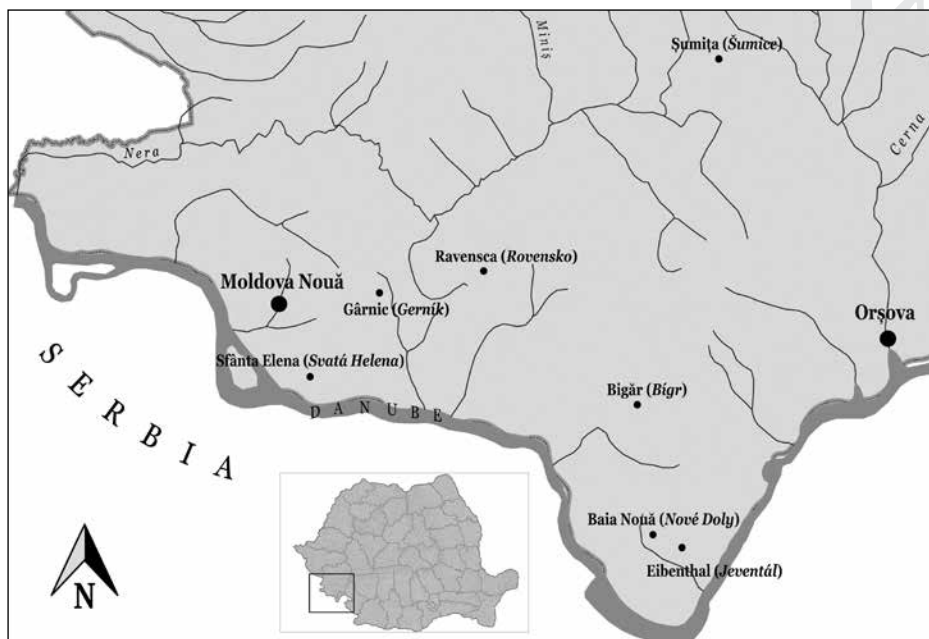
2 Information supplied by Václav Mašek, the vicar of Eibenthal (*Ceții din Banat...* 2013).

3 Information supplied by Václav Mašek, the vicar of Eibenthal (*Ceții din Banat...* 2013).

6 Czech villages (Sfânta Elena, Gârnic, Ravensca, Bigăr, Baia Nouă, Eibenthal) that belong to this micro-region, in spite of their difficult accessibility and relative distance from each other, it is left out of the tourist loop of the Czech emigrants.

This abandonment can clearly be felt in Şumiţa. The boarded-up windows, the nailed-down and locked gates and windows, the image of the main street as well as of the surroundings of the houses and of their gates overgrown with weeds, the acacia trees growing wild suggest that the choice of the former residents is forever. The data supplied by the vicar paint a similarly sad picture of Ravensca. From 380 in 1968, its population has shrunken to a number between 80 and 100.⁴ The depopulation mechanisms are in their most advanced stage in these two villages.⁵

In some settlements (e.g. Ravensca and Şumiţa), the depopulation mechanisms that have taken place over time are almost complete. These villages are dominated by orderliness and proportionality, as well as by the reflections of the understated, but ambitious local handicrafts and ornament use. The restrained, but exigent colouring and the flower decorations painted manually, with great care, on the wooden gates that are built into the street façade, along with the geometrical ornaments, reflect a sense of proportion, homeliness, and attention to detail. The gates are locked, the window shutters are lowered or boarded-up, and the streets are overgrown with weeds.



Map 1. *The Czech villages of the Banat region*
Map realized by Ákos Nagy and Ilka Veress.

4 Information supplied by Václav Mašek, the vicar of Eibenthal (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

5 Information supplied by František Draxel (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

What do the figures reflect? What kind of migration patterns are at work here, and what is the fate of the source communities? How do the meanings attached to the localities of origin change among Czech emigrants? How does the native land appear in the migration discourse? And how do the Czech tourists from the motherland, looking for traditional rurality, the experience of exoticism, and “time travel”, influence the ethnicity of the Czechs living in Romania?

On the Research

István Horváth defines minority from a demographic and sociological perspective, as well as on the basis of economic and status inequalities. In the relational system of majority and minority, it is the demographic proportions and power relations that are decisive, which can actually be defined as relationships of subordination (Horváth 2006: 157-166). The typology of minorities differentiates between “*native minorities*, resulting from colonization, *regional minorities*, as the results of nation building processes, *national minorities*, and *immigrant minorities*” (Horváth 2006: 159).

We have been involved in researching the Czech minority in Romania since 2007. Over the past decade, this effort required our continued attention and periodic fieldwork with various project centres. Between 2007 and 2009, the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities (Institutul pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale – ISPMN) has mapped the institutional cadastre of the national minorities of Romania in the framework of a more comprehensive project.⁶ This research was aimed at assessing the state of the national minorities and of their institutions (see Kiss 2010). Hence, we asked questions about the political, economic/entrepreneurial, ecclesiastical, and civil structures of the Czech national minority. In 2008, we, the authors of this study, have visited the most important Czech villages, conducting biographical interviews with members of the community’s elite (including religious leaders, local and national level-politicians, entrepreneurs, etc.).

Our research results were included, along with the works of researchers from the local communities, involved in the conservation and popularization of their culture, in two study volumes we have co-edited (Jakab–Peti eds. 2009a, 2009b). It is typical for the researches on the culture and social processes of Romanian national minorities to be initiated by specialists from the motherland of that minority. However, the results of their efforts are rarely integrated into Romanian scientific discourse. We therefore considered it is important to identify these previous publications, in order to bring them into the social scientific circulation of Romania.

6 The project was coordinated by Albert Zsolt Jakab. The online database that summarizes and presents the results (*The database of national minority organizations from Romania*) can be accessed at: <http://ispmn.gov.ro/page/institutiile-minoritatilor>.

This was our reason for including translations of the analyses prepared by authors most familiar with the situation of the Czech minority in Romania.

In 2010, we have edited two individual volumes on the interethnic and intercultural existential situations of the Czech and Slovak national minorities in Romania and Hungary. These volumes included studies on topics such as bilingualism, linguistic interferences, identity processes, assimilation efforts and assimilation, culture preservation, interethnic relations and relations systems, as well as on historical issues related to the migration, settlement, and community strategies of the Slovak and Czech minorities (Jakab–Peti eds. 2010a, 2010b). Regarding the Czech population, we would like to call attention to the paper of Alena Gecse and Desideriu Gecse, on the settlement of the Czech in the Banat region, their strategies of cohabitation with the surrounding ethnicities and their cultural ties, as well as on the ethnic identity elements of the Czech minority and their institutions (Gecse–Gecse 2010). After the social transformations of the 20th century and as a result of the work migration and assimilation processes triggered by the 1989 regime change, the Czech villages of Romania have also become sites of the restructuring of ethnic identity. In this context, Sinziana Preda has focused her research on the migration aspirations and on the identity of the Czech community of the Banat region (Preda 2010a; another version: 2010b).

In 2016, we have conducted a research focusing especially on the village Sfânta Elena. Throughout this research, we have attempted to follow the criteria also used in the research project entitled “Manifestation of ethnicity in minority communities” (2011–2012) of the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities.⁷ Thus, we have analysed the impact on ethnicity of such factors as language use, the local institutions influencing ethnicity, the motherland’s minority policies, and economic relations (see Kiss–Kiss 2019). This resulted in an investigation of the manifestation “contexts” of ethnicity outlined by Richard Jenkins (see Jenkins 2002: 255–261, also Jenkins 2008: 65–74). In our research, we paid special attention to the impact of Czech tourism from the motherland in these villages, resulting in a special situation compared to the minority communities studied along similar lines.

In this study, we also made use of interviews and interview fragments from 2012 and 2013, included in the documentary film on the Czech population from the Banat region.⁸ At the same time, we relied on the observations of the specialist consultants of the documentary, Lehel Peti and Iulia Hossu (RIRNM), made during the preparatory work for the film.

7 The project was coordinated by Dénes Kiss and Lehel Peti. The methodological principles of the research were elaborated by Dénes Kiss. These principles were used by the researchers for all minority communities included in their research.

8 *Cehii din Banat. Minorităţi în tranziţie* [The Czechs in Banat. Minorities in Transition], 2013. Director: Bálint Zágoni, specialists/consultants: Iulia Hossu and Lehel Peti, photographer: Zoltán Varró-Bodoczi. Accessible online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WbEtKYQOnE>.

The Economic Situation

In the Socialist era, the majority of the population of these villages was employed at the surrounding industrial settlements and in the mines. After the 1989 regime change, the industry gradually collapsed, and the mines as well as the heavy industrial plants were closed. E.g. the anthracite mine from Baia Nouă, dating back to 1840, was closed in the mid-2000's. Before the accident that claimed the lives of several workers and was the ultimate cause of the mine being closed, the mine provided a living for 250 workers, with very poor infrastructure conditions. According to a former miner, they worked by hand, with pickaxes and shovels.⁹ Alongside the Czech, the mine also had Romanian and German workers from Moldova and Oltenia.¹⁰

The mine of Moldova Nouă has functioned since 1962. The livelihood of the families from this region was mostly based on the incomes of the men employed in mining. The production of homemade foodstuffs on the small scale has also played an important role in providing for the needs of these families. Along with the family food production, the women working at the household farms also brought products for sale to the marketplaces.¹¹ In some settlements, collective farms named “March 6” have operated as well for a couple years. However, these collectives have largely been loss-making (see Gecse–Gecse 2010: 54). The collective memory of the village Sfânta Elena does not even remember this institution as a collective farm, but as “a kind of fellowship” (*un fel de tovarășie*) in which they cultivated their lands together for 5 years. In the socialist period, the sale of milk and milk products was of special importance.¹² In the years after the start of mining operations, there was a wave of construction in Sfânta Elena.¹³ Due to the smaller size of the minority group, the Czechs were included in the IPUMS (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series) database with a small sample size (the IPUMS' number of cases for the Czechs of Caraș-Severin County was 370 in 1992 and 279 in 2002).¹⁴

9 Anonymous elderly male, Baia Nouă (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

10 Anonymous elderly male, Baia Nouă (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

11 For further details on the traditional crafts practiced in the Czech villages and on the character of the agrarian sector, see Gecse–Gecse 2010: 49.

12 On the basis of the interview conducted with Václav Pek (3 June 2008).

13 On the basis of the interview conducted with Václav Pek (3 June 2008).

14 The 2011 IPUMS only contains 165 cases from Caraș-Severin County. Therefore, we will omit the presentation of the 2011 data.

Table 1. *The involvement of the Romanian and Czech ethnic groups in the different industrial sectors/services in Caraş-Severin County (rural population) – 1992*

Industrial sector/service	Romanians	Czechs
Agriculture, fishing and logging	51%	54%
Mining	6%	27%
Factories	16%	5%
Electricity, gas and water	1%	0%
Constructions	4%	2%
Wholesale and retail	3%	2%
Hotels and restaurants	1%	1%
Transport and communication	7%	2%
Financial services and insurance	0%	1%
Public administration and defence	3%	1%
Real estate and business services	1%	1%
Education	3%	1%
Health care and social work	2%	0%
Other community and personal services	1%	2%
	100%	100%

Source: IPUMS, 1992

The data of the 1992 census reflect the high involvement of the Czech population in the mining industry: 27% of the Czech rural population of Caraş-Severin County was working in the mines still functioning at the beginning of the 1990's. The statistics also show the high involvement of the Czech population in agricultural activity (54%).

The 2002 census reflects the significant (7%) decrease in importance of mining and the parallel increase (8%) in the involvement in agriculture and logging in the county with the largest Czech population. The statistical data on the increased importance of agricultural activity probably reflects the switching to agriculture of the workers laid off from the mines and, to a lesser extent, from the factories.

The industry of this region finally collapsed in the late 2000s. After the closing of the mines, the Czech community entered a state of crisis and was forced to rethink its life-management strategies. Work migration became general and the emigration wave intensified.

Table 2. *The involvement of the Romanian and Czech ethnic groups in the different industrial sectors/services in Caraş-Severin County (rural population) – 2002*

Industrial sector/service	Romanian	Czech
Agriculture, fishing, and forestry	54%	62%
Mining	3%	20%
Manufacturing	14%	5%
Electricity, gas and water	1%	3%
Construction	4%	2%
Wholesale and retail trade	5%	2%
Hotels and restaurants	5%	0%
Transportation and communications	1%	0%
Financial services and insurance	0%	0%
Public administration and defense	5%	2%
Real estate and business services	1%	3%
Education	3%	3%
Health and social work	2%	0%
Other community and personal services	1%	0%
Private household services	0%	0%
	100%	100%

Source: IPUMS, 2002

The household agricultural activity based on animal effort and on low-power machines, hardly exceeding complementary food production, continued to be practiced in some villages, especially by the pensioners. In the years following the regime change, after the start of tourism from the Czech Republic into these villages started to gain popularity, this agricultural activity also took on the role of the traditional “exhibition farm” in some cases. The farms from Sfânta Elena have a couple of cows and goats for domestic food production (milk, curd, etc.). In these cases, the presentation of the production is at least as important to the tourists as the food products themselves.

In the examined settlements, the majority of young people have left, and the villages are now the residences of the pensioners. This intensive migration produces several seemingly unsolvable social problems, including – similarly to many places worldwide – the abandonment of the elderly. For the middle-aged generation still living in the villages, the only reason for them not to have followed their emigrant children is the unsolved situation of their aged parents.¹⁵ After their death, this

15 Information supplied by František Draxel (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

group will probably also leave the Czech villages of Romania. At the same time, the young people whose parents, for whatever reason, have not left Romania, usually prepare themselves mentally already during their school years to leave for work after the age of 18 to the Czech Republic.¹⁶

Along with the collapse of the industry after the regime change, the depopulation mechanisms were also strengthened by the educational opportunities offered by the Czech motherland. In the 1990s and 2000s, in the case of the young people pursuing higher education in the Czech Republic, it was a matter of course to seek employment and to settle down in this modern, Western European state.

The sense of loss is dominant in the older generation. Its members accept it as natural that the young people have to flee the country due to the lack of local/regional sources of livelihood, but, at the same time, they also feel as the losers of the present situation. While the mining industry, with its hard labour mostly based on human strength and on rudimentary techniques, has promised them nice pensions, instead of these joys, they now have to cope with the perspectives of the breakdown and imminent disappearance of their village communities.

The members of the older generation who remained in the villages are clearly aware of the atrophy of the local community as well as of the unsustainability and utopianism of the community way of life prior to the regime change. Iosif Nedved, a former miner and now pensioner from Eibenthal, monitors the contraction process of his local Czech life-world in his “personal statistics” kept in a notebook. According to his statements from the documentary film, in 1999, there were 487 people living in Eibenthal and in Baia Nouă, a settlement that administratively belongs to this village. By 2010, their number decreased to 310.¹⁷

Both the information supplied by him and the declaration of the Eibenthal vicar, Václav Mašek – who could recall from memory the ethnic/linguistic statistics for almost every village of this micro-region for the camera –, reflect the fact that the disappearance of this life-world is not a self-evident, but a mentally and emotionally burdensome process. The keeping of these “personal statistics” – also as a symbolic attempt to hold back time – demonstrates that, for the local people experiencing the depopulation and the transformation to an “ethnic showcase”, these processes are extremely personal.

The Czechs of Romania have managed to immigrate to the Czech Republic along family and kinship networks. This circumstance also explains the relatively small number of migration targets. The Romanian emigrants have reproduced their communities in a quasi-colonial manner. The guest workers even knew of factories from the Czech Republic where more than 60% of the employees are Czechs from Romania.¹⁸ For many of them, the rubber tyre factory Mitas from Prague was their first place of employment in the motherland and – as

16 Anonymous middle-aged male worker, Sfânta Elena (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

17 Information supplied by Iosif Nedved, Eibenthal (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

18 *Cehii din Banat...* 2013.

a young male from Bigăr has put it – a kind of stepping stone toward other employment opportunities in the Czech Republic (or in some cases, even in Western Europe).¹⁹

The migration situation triggered paradoxical processes regarding the assessment of the Czechs from Romania. While the tourists from the motherland visiting Romania enjoy the exoticism (the traditional Czech dialect, etc.), the guest workers themselves complain about their stigmatization due to the identification with the Romanian guest worker status²⁰ – as it is often heard from other Romanian guest workers with multiple ethnic and cultural affinities as well. So, the Romanian Czech immigrants feel that their co-nationals living in the motherland maintain clearly discriminatory ethnicity borders against them.

Political Institutions

Established in 1990, the Democratic Union of Slovaks and Czechs of Romania (Uniunea Democratică a Slovacilor și Cehilor din România – UDSCR) is the joint advocacy and political organization of the Slovak and Czech minorities in Romania (see Kukucska 2016: 188–189), with four territorial branches. The Czech Region of the Southern Banat (Zona Cehă a Banatului de Sud) territorial branch unites the local organizations of the Czech settlements from Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți counties. The Czech Cultural Center (Centrul Cultural Ceh), established in 1994 in Moldova Nouă, also functions as the Banat region headquarter of the UDSCR (see Kukucska 2016: 204). The UDSCR supports the school events associated with the cultivation of the Czech language (see Kukucska 2016: 219), provides political and financial support for the establishment of new schools, and has taken on a significant role in contacting the political and civil sphere of the Czech Republic, in order to obtain support for the Czech minority in Romania, in coordinating the distribution of the aids (see, e.g. Kukucska 2016: 191, 193), as well as in maintaining diplomatic relations (see Kukucska 2016: 202, 230, 231, etc.). Additionally, the UDSCR is also active in fields such as channelling state scholarships from the Czech Republic, developing the local libraries (see Kukucska 2016: 191), providing subsidies for professional training in the Czech Republic for the Czech teachers of Romania (see Kukucska 2016: 194), and supporting the (resumption of the) teaching of the Czech language, financed by the Czech Republic (see Kukucska 2016: 197–198).

19 Ion Mleziva, Bigăr (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

20 Sînziana Preda reaches a similar conclusion when reporting that “they let the immigrants know that they are actually ‘Romanians’, with obvious pejorative connotations” (Preda 2008: 503, 2010a: 252).

Education and Language Use

Czech is still the primary language of communication in the villages. Mother-tongue education was present here from the mid-19th century, first with the participation of literate colonists and then of teachers from the Czech Republic (see Gecse–Gecse 2010: 52).²¹

Mother-tongue elementary schooling was secured in most Czech villages until the beginning of the 1970s. The teachers who graduated from the Czech department of the Nădlac teachers college between 1972 and 1977 have played an important role in the Czech schools through organizing various Czech-language cultural activities for the conservation of their traditions and identity (see Gecse–Gecse 2010: 52–53), although actually teaching in Romanian in the schools. From the 1970's, the language of instruction in the kindergarten and elementary school education was Czech. Although the small local Czech cultural elite were opposed to the transition from Czech to Romanian, this language shift still happened.²² In the socialist period, vocational school and secondary school qualifications were also obtained in Romanian in one of the port cities or mining towns located along the lower reaches of the Danube (mostly in Oravița or Moldova Nouă), although the number of people participating in this type of education was rather low (Gecse–Gecse 2010).

The transition to education in Romanian has negatively affected the native-language competence of Czech-speaking children. They can now express themselves more accurately and are in command of a richer vocabulary in Romanian than in the Czech dialect used in their family and neighbourhood environment.²³

The exclusion of the Czech language from the domain of education signals the diminishing function and prestige loss of the local dialect, along with the fact that the Czech community viewed the high level of mastery of the Romanian language as the best guarantee of success in life under socialism. In that period, alongside education, it was employment in heavy industry and mining that provided an opportunity for acquiring good Romanian language competences. Nevertheless, Czech has remained the language of everyday communication in the private sphere for the inhabitants of these villages, also as a significant ethnicity-generating factor, along with their Roman Catholic faith, specific local community consciousness, and particular way of life, within the culturally and ethnically diverse medium of the Banat region.

The Czech language was introduced as a separate subject in 1998, with Czech teachers from the motherland, while the teaching of all other subject went on in

21 Alena Gecse and Desideriu Gecse describe how instruction in Czech was suspended between 1920 and 1929, being substituted with Romanian. Later, Czech native speaker instructors have begun to arrive again, with minor interruptions (see Gecse–Gecse 2010: 52).

22 See, e.g. the recollections of Václav Mašek and Alena Gecse (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

23 See, e.g. the informations supplied by Václav Mašek (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

Romanian.²⁴ The Czech language taught in school was, obviously, not the local dialect, but the standard language spoken in the Czech Republic. The success of this program is also reflected by the fact that, already in 2002, a Czech language competition was held in Moldova Nouă, with the participation of 40 pupils from 7 Czech schools (see Kukucska 2016: 219).

People do not only speak and listen to language, but also represent it for symbolic and practical reasons. The interpretation of the texts and messages represented within various spaces and contexts brings us nearer to the understanding of the linguistic behaviour of the community using that language. If the language that is spoken and listened to and the language represented in the public space are largely identical, then the linguistic vitality of that community is excellent (cf. Shohamy–Gorter eds. 2009). The linguistic landscape of the Czech villages is to be examined in the relationship system of the state language and of the minority language use. Our criteria have to refer to the communicative function and to placement, size, design (composition, typeface, colour, material, etc.), and language style of the linguistic signs and inscriptions (cf. Sloboda 2009: 181).

The inscriptions found in the public spaces, town centres, schools, and in the vicinity of the local shops of these settlements are divided between the Romanian and Czech languages. The nameplates of the settlements and institutions are bilingual, as are the maps and local histories installed in the village centres. The differences can be detected along the comparison between semi-public and private texts, on the one hand, and the official texts originating from the centres of power, on the other. Cemetery epitaphs, inscriptions of the public (religious) statues, as well as the church, school, and kindergarten interiors represent the Czech language, according to the intense minority language use. Announcements of local interest (private bus services, tour options, appeals, etc.) are, in most cases, exclusively in Czech, while regulations, notices and reports embedded in the discourses of power (employment ads, admission information, instructions, etc.) are published in the state language.

In Sfânta Elena and Eibenthal, the two main motherland tourists' targets, the linguistic landscape is dominated by Czech inscriptions. The inscriptions around the village pub and the shop, as well as the commercial advertisements targeting the Czech tourists at the annual folklore festival are also in Czech.²⁵ The signs installed in the windows advertise accommodation and catering for the tourist in the same language.

As the bilingual (Czech and Romanian) commemorative plaque installed on the elementary school's exterior wall Sfânta Elena advertises, the building was erected between 1996 and 1998 in the framework of the transnational coopera-

24 Alena Gecse, Moldova Nouă (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

25 See the news report of Observator TV, uploaded to YouTube. Published on 17 August 2017. Accessible at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JkxnmPI6lU>. Last accessed on 12 March 2018.

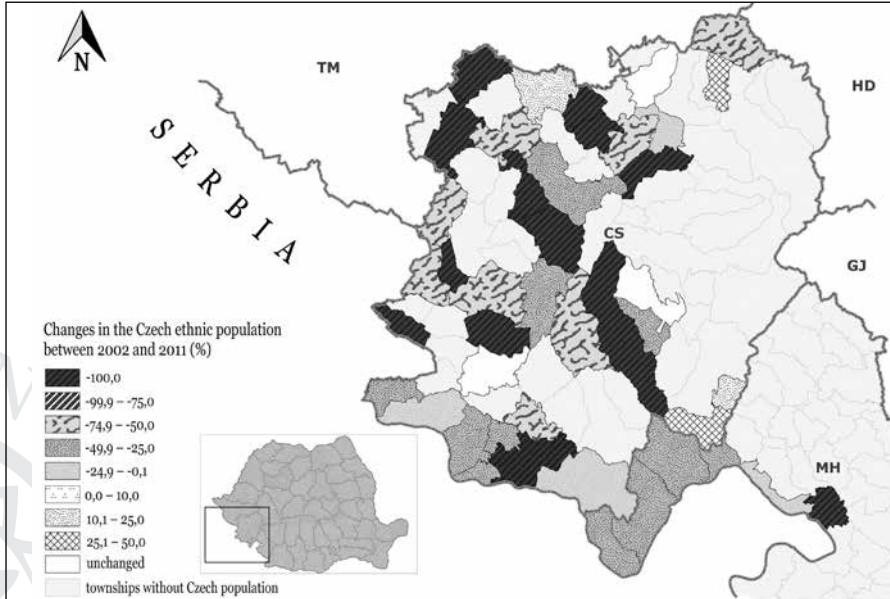
tion between Romania and the Czech Republic. The linguistic landscape of the elementary school presented a (Romanian and Czech) mixed character at the time of our visit. According to Petr Skorepa, a teacher from the Czech Republic who was teaching in Sfânta Elena in 2013, 90 Czech ethnic children were involved in the primary (1-8 grade) education in 1999. Their number fell to 27 by 2013, due especially to the work migration to the Czech Republic. There is no kindergarten anymore in Gârnic, and the teacher envisioned the closing of the village school in 2013, similarly to the 2012 situation in Şumiţa, when only a single child was enrolled in the local school.²⁶

The teaching of Czech as a stand-alone subject is probably not separated from the processes that have made it into an instrument of economic success. As already mentioned, from the 1970s on, after the termination of native language education, the Romanian language was viewed by the Czech population as the sole means of achieving success outside the local life-world, and parents considered its acquisition at the highest possible level to increase the child's chances in life. However, the emergence of the possibility of work migration to the motherland has created new models of personal achievement, increasing the value of Czech language proficiency and indirectly also the prestige of this language.²⁷

The issue of linguistic vitality is linked to the population decline, which is well illustrated by the linguistic maps below.

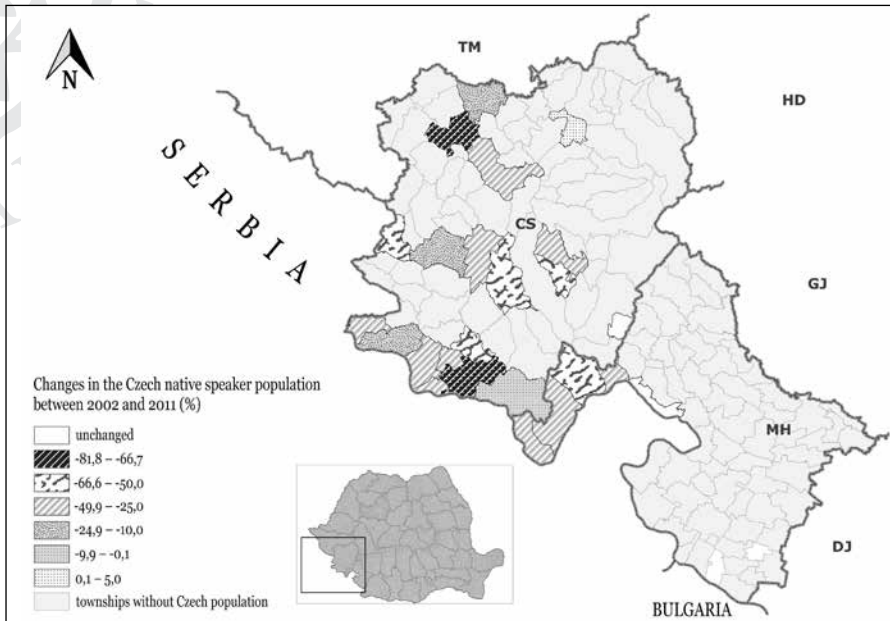
26 Francisc Olteanu, teacher, Şumiţa (*Ceii din Banat...* 2013).

27 Similar processes were described by Ilka Veress in her study about the ethnicity processes of the Greek community of Romania (more specifically, from Izvoarele) (see Veress 2019). She establishes that, in the case of this Greek community, the process of language shift and the attempts at linguistic revitalization are proceeding in parallel. The latter, i.e., "current linguistic revitalization is caused by the fact that the hitherto only virtually existing motherland becomes a target country for migration" (Veress 2019). Similar tendencies can also be observed in the case of the Moldavian Csángós, in which language shift has reached its final phase due to the devaluation of their language associated with the stigmatized Csángó ethnicity (see Tánzos 2012). However, as a result of guest work in Hungary and the associated rediscovery of the use value of their language beyond the local lifeworld and the informal domain, many Csángós have begun to view their native language more positively and got their children involved in a Hungarian language education program financed by Hungary, following objectives of language revitalization (see Peti 2017: 130–131).



Map 2. The difference between number of Czech ethnic residents in the period between 2002 and 2011 in Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți Counties

Source: ISPMN, by Ákos Nagy and Ilka Veress.



Map 3. The difference between number of Czech-speaking residents in the period between 2002 and 2011 in Caraș-Severin and Mehedinți Counties

Source: ISPMN, by Ákos Nagy and Ilka Veress.

The Czech rural ethnic group of Caraş-Severin County had a lower social status than the majority rural population of Romanian ethnicity. This is shown by the comparative analysis of the educational attainment levels of the two ethnic groups, which differ significantly, in favour of the Romanians.

Table 3. *The educational structure of the Czech and Romanian rural population from Caraş-Severin County in 1992*

Educational attainment	Romanian	Czech
NIU (not in universe)	13%	14%
None	5%	2%
Literacy courses	0%	0%
Primary	27%	31%
Lower secondary	37%	41%
Special education	0%	0%
Academic secondary education	2%	0%
Vocational secondary education	7%	4%
Technical apprenticeship secondary	7%	5%
Post-secondary technical	1%	1%
University/college	1%	0%
Unknown	0%	0%
	100%	100%

Source: IPUMS, 1992

Table 4. *The educational structure of the Czech and Romanian rural population from Caraş-Severin County in 2002*

Educational attainment	Romanian	Czech
NIU (not in universe)	10%	11%
None	4%	3%
Literacy courses	0%	0%
Primary	23%	35%
Special education (2002)	0%	0%
Lower secondary	36%	37%
Special education	0%	0%
Academic secondary education	3%	1%
Vocational secondary education	8%	4%
Technical apprenticeship secondary	11%	6%
Post-secondary technical	1%	0%
Short-term education (associate degrees)	0%	0%
University/college	1%	0%
Unknown	1%	2%
	100%	100%

Source: IPUMS, 2002

The Church

The language of the liturgy for the mostly Roman Catholic Czechs is the local Czech language. The congregations of Roman Catholic churches erected in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries in the Czech villages²⁸ were served by four priests in the first year of our research (2008). In Sfânta Elena, masses are held in Romanian, since the priest does not speak any Czech, while the members of the community have no problem in understanding Romanian.²⁹

Following the decrease in importance of the role played by the school in the preservation of the local Czech language, the Church has had and still has the most prominent function in the reproduction of Czech ethnicity. As the Eibenthal vicar Václav Mašek put it: “Understand that the Church has a double function: the civic and the spiritual. Regarding the former: Czech would no longer be spoken, were it

28 The construction years of the churches erected in each village can be found in Gecse–Gecse 2010: 49.

29 Anonymous informant (born in 1948), in the company of Václav Pek (3 June 2008).

not for the Church. As for the latter: in our parts, in these six Czech villages, about 90% of people are regular church-goers.”³⁰

Similarly to the description offered by Dénes Kiss and Tamás Kiss about the Croat (Krashovani) minority in Romania, the Catholic religion and its symbolic spatial articulations (small sacral buildings, the architectural style of the churches, the religious symbol usage of the private houses, etc.) are also for the Czech minority the most important expressions of their differentiation from the Romanian majority (cf. Kiss–Kiss 2019: 8–9). Similarly to the situation outlined by the co-authors, three of the four priests who are serving here are graduates of the Roman Catholic Theological Institute of Alba Iulia, where “the training of clergy [...] does not push the priests toward the Romanian culture (as, for instance, in the case of the Csángó)” (Kiss–Kiss 2019: 9). However, the fact that the masses are held in Romanian in Sfânta Elena indicates that the religious element may be a more important articulating factor than language.³¹ In addition to its good community organization, one of the key pull factors of the Baptist church in this village presumably consists in the religious ceremonies being held in the community’s mother tongue.³²

The vicar Václav Mašek, who was almost solely responsible for the religious practice of a few villages, has practically represented a one-man institution throughout the entire socialist period up to the present.³³ In the socialist era, the vicar smuggled liturgical books to the communities served by him. According to him, the religious rituals (other than funerals) that are still held, albeit very rarely, merely reflect the nostalgic sentiments of the visiting families from the Czech Republic, who still attach importance to marriage and baptism ceremonies in their native village.

The Baptist community of Sfânta Elena was established in 1921.³⁴ The current religious practice of this numerous congregation is also conducted in Czech.³⁵ The Church also supports the activity of a mandolin youth orchestra. Up to 1966, the building currently used by them has functioned as a Reformed church, where religious services have sometimes been held even in Hungarian, and later in Czech,

30 Václav Mašek, the vicar of Eibenthal (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

31 This process of language shift and assimilation due to the adherence to the religious identity (in spite of the changed liturgical language) was described in 1996 by Gábor Barna in the case of a Hungarian Reformed community from Slovakia (Barna 1996). Vilmos Tánzos’ research conducted among the Moldavian Csángós is similar (cf. Tánzos 2012), and Klára Sándor’s study could be mentioned as well (Sándor 1996).

32 István Higyed suggested that “Romanian sermons are also occasionally held” (Higyed s. a.) in the local Baptist church. However, we could not personally ascertain this information.

33 For more details about his biography and on his contribution to the identity preservation of Czech communities, see Gecse–Gecse 2010: 57–58.

34 On the basis of the interview conducted with Václav Pek (3 June 2008). In his text on the church and on the congregation from Sfânta Elena, converted from the Reformed to the Baptist faith dates the formation of the Baptist congregation to 1924 (see Higyed s. a.). Alena Gecse and Desideriu Gecse date the formation of the Baptist community to 1921 (see Gecse–Gecse 2010: 49).

35 According to community leader Václav Pek (or as he called himself: Baptist presbyter), the community has 55 members, but there are almost 100 people on their Sunday gatherings (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

after the World War II (see Higyed s. a.).³⁶ According to the description of Reformed priest István Higyed, “the congregation was led by church-wardens, and there were readings and even Holy Communion at the services” (Higyed s. a.). He also identifies the reasons that made the pastoral care of the Reformed Congregation impossible in the specific obstacles of the border area. Finally, by 1978, even the remaining members of the Reformed congregation have converted to the Baptist faith and took over the church as well in 1982 (see Higyed s. a.).

The Role of the Czech State in the Identity Preservation of the Czech Minority in Romania

Rogers Brubaker distinguishes four forms of non-state-seeking nationalism: the ‘nationalising’ nationalism (involving “claims made in the name of a ‘core nation’ or nationality”), the nationalism of ‘external national homelands’ (“oriented to ethnationally kin who are residents and citizens of other states”), the nationalism of national minorities (these “stances characteristically involve a self-understanding in specifically ‘national’ rather than merely ‘ethnic’ terms, a demand of state recognition of their distinct ethnocultural nationality, and the assertion of certain collective, nationality-based cultural or political rights”), and national-populist nationalism (which “seeks to protect the national economy, language, mores or cultural patrimony against alleged threats from outside”) (Brubaker 1998: 276–277). In our case, the Czech Republic and various organizations from the motherland are both directly and indirectly present through their support for cultural and language preservation as well as through aids of a social nature (for basic infrastructure and local healthcare) in the life of the Czech minority of Romania.

“Following the Romanian Revolution of 1989, the Czech state has tried, through its Bucharest embassy and the ‘Člověk v tísni’ (Man in need) foundation, to improve the living conditions of the Czechs from the South Banat region, becoming involved in various building and household development initiatives and projects, including the introduction of electrical current, television, fixed and mobile telephony, the repair and even the asphaltting of access roads, the construction of schools, the encouraging of agri-tourism, etc.” (Gecse–Gecse 2010: 55). By way of example, at the 18 February 1995 meeting of the Regional Coordination Committee of the Democratic Union of Slovaks and Czechs of Romania (UDSCR Ședința Comitetului de Coordonare Zonală), the Czech ambassador, Jaromír Kvapil, raised the possibility of the allocation, by the Czech Republic, of a development fund of 30 million Czech koruna (2 billion lei) to the Czech villages in Romania (see Kukucska 2016: 206). The Czech state envisioned that this development fund would support, with the collaboration of the Romanian government, projects “directed at rebuilding at equipping schools, the reparation of the municipal and county roads of this region, the expansion of the telephone net-

³⁶ Václav Pek also dates the last Reformed service held in the church to 1966.

work, and the operation of rural doctors' practices," (Kukucska 2016: 206). Since 2006, social care centres are operating in all six Czech settlements with the support of the Charita Hodonin non-governmental organization from the Czech Republic, with one medical assistant in four villages and two assistants from the motherland in two localities (see Kukucska 2016: 241). That is to say, alongside the Czech state support directed at infrastructure development, the aid of the non-governmental sector has also reached these villages, with the coordination of the UDSCR, the joint advocacy organization of the Slovak Czech minorities in Romania.³⁷

The significant infrastructural investments of the Czech state and non-governmental organizations represent a specific model of rural development in the Romanian mountain villages, most similar to the support policy of the German state, aimed at safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Romanian Saxon villages. Although the objective of these developments is to retain the local population of the Czech villages, some local communities are in fact already in the phase of final disintegration (e.g. in Șumița) or can be expected reach this state within a decade (e.g. in Eibenthal and Sfânta Elena, where there is still an independent community life). There are also some villages, located in scenic mountain forest areas, where the houses have begun to be bought up and to be turned into holiday homes, even by affluent urban buyers from more distant towns. This is similar to the processes taking place in the rural areas that are undergoing functional changes in the proximity of the large urban centres of Romania, where the rural landscape becomes the supplier for urban consumption and spatial experience.

Local Czech Identity

Along with the local Czech identity, it can be observed that the Czech guest workers refer to themselves as Romanians when the differentiation is made relative to the Czechs from the motherland, without invalidating the previously presented contents of their Czech ethnicity, based on linguistic and religious differences, as well as on their strong local consciousness. In the Romanian homeland, their Czech ethnicity is strengthened by the continuous reproduction of the cultural border maintained by the majority nation. Conversely, in the Czech Republic, their awareness of the cultural, mentality, lifestyle, etc., differences from their co-nationals living in the motherland result in a move toward the Romanians: "The Czech minority from Romania, we, are considered to be Romanians, while in Romania we are Czechs. I think this situation will not change so soon."³⁸

37 E.g. the historical chronology of Czech minority in Romania mentions that, on 30 January 1993, the Coordinating Council Meeting (Ședința Consiliului de Coordonare) of the UDSCR also included the following agenda item: "Discussions with the representatives of the Prague association for the Benefit of their Romanian Compatriots. They offer an aid in form of cars, in order to facilitate transport to isolated settlements inhabited by Czechs." (Kukucska 2016: 200).

38 Ion Mleziva, Bigăr (*Cehii din Banat...* 2013).

The conventions of the Czechs from Romania are held biannually in various cities of the Czech Republic where more numerous communities have formed, e.g. in Žatec (with the participation of emigrants from Sfânta Elena as well as of 4 Romanian Czech families from Bigăr) and in Plzeň (former residents of Gârnic, Ravensca and other villages from the catchment area of Moldova Nouă).³⁹ These community events represent scenes for the reproduction and strengthening of local Czech ethnicity.

Ethnic Tourism

The communist regime used to exert strong control on the international mobility of the population and prevented (mass) emigration (cf. Mueller 1999: 702, Horváth 2012: 199). After the regime change, the emigrants have become the main source of information for the residents of the Czech Republic regarding the Czech communities in Romania, leading to frequent tourism activity in their villages. Here, the ethnic character plays an important role alongside the “consumption” of the traditional landscape and the “time travel”. The main tourism target is Sfânta Elena (Svatá Helena) and, during the summer festival, Eibenthal (Tisové Údolí). If visited during the summer months, the population of Sfânta Elena offers the impression of a busy and flowering community. The terrace in front of the pub is full, and people are flocking to the church on Sundays. However, they are, in fact, tourists or emigrant locals visiting the village for their summer holidays as a transitional place. The SUVs with Czech license plates and the small groups of young backpack hikers are part of these villages’ “summer landscape”. The majority of the roads leading out to these settlements, stretching along serpentines, forests, and steep hillsides, often with rock slides, pose a real challenge to the drivers. Most of them are dirt roads, with some asphalt roads that were financed by the Czech Republic. In spite of these access difficulties, the visitor may enjoy a varied, romantic landscape. One may sometimes see the meandering Danube below, while at other times, the road twists and turns at length through the lush forests, finally opening to a broad valley, where the houses are standing in the orderly rows of the Czech village. The most frequently used colours on the distinctive and harmoniously proportioned houses are brown, white, blue, and green. The gates and façades are often decorated with floral motifs. Incidentally, a young emigrant entrepreneur from Sfânta Elena operates a regular bus service connecting the Czech villages of Romania to the urban centres of the Czech Republic.

Éric Menson-Rigau uses the concept of *vendre du rêve* (‘selling dreams’) for the situation in which the tourist visiting a place or building as an object or attraction can partake of lifestyles that never actually existed, hence involving the selling out

39 Josef Hruža, entrepreneur, Sfânta Elena/Žatec (*Cehii din Banat...2013*).

of the illusion of another world/way of life (Menson-Rigau 2000: 92–102).⁴⁰ In this case, the ethnic-tinged rural tourism is especially attractive for the descendants of the locals, visiting from the Czech Republic.

The folklore festival organized since 1993 in several Czech villages of Romania is an important event that supports the tourism in the Banat region, in the Danube River valley.⁴¹ The inscriptions on the tents used for serving the tourists, offering home-cooked food, are in Czech. The main aim of the Eibenthal festival is the service of ethno-tourism, and its most important target group consists of Czech tourists from the motherland. According to media estimates, there are approximately 1000 Czech tourists annually at the festival.⁴²

An interesting conflict has also arisen between locals and tourists, after a large enterprise dealing with green energy production has installed several wind turbines on different locations of the village's border area, thus implementing a significant infrastructure development. While locals were happy about selling their land at high prices, the investments of the company, and further benefits, the tourists from the homeland called these developments a "crime against nature". In contrast with the Czechs from the Banat region involved in ethnic migration⁴³, their co-nationals living in the motherland interpret the depopulation of the villages in the framework of the globalisational loss narrative, whose most important element consists in the sense of losing the Czech localities that are gradually eliminated/transformed due to the ethnic migration. These Czech localities are associated in this discourse with the traditional life-world and ethnicity (cf. "unspoiled countryside", "archaic dialect", the idea of the "self-reliant people, living from their handiwork", etc.). This attitude is well reflected by the comment on a video sharing website by a Czech viewer from the motherland, to the documentary film on the Czechs from the Banat region: "They will regret leaving. Like the man [from the film] said, his kids didn't know where the food came from and the food tasted much better in the village. Their families had land there they could have farmed. Free houses were available from their grandparents."⁴⁴

As a tourist from Prague put it (in English) in 2013: "We live by grandma Karbulova, and she has a cow, but her husband died. One year ago. They had horses, and they don't have anymore. But she has three children, and all of them are in

40 The French author has constructed this concept with reference to the tourism based on the châteaux along the Loire River, made accessible to the wider public. In exchange for the entrance fee, the visitor can find an ordered world that he or she can try out. Essentially, this involves the commodification of a constructed idyll.

41 The first such festival was organized in Eibenthal on 5-6 June 1993, Eibenthal, Festivalul Folclorului Ceh (Czech Folklore Festival) (Kukucska 2016: 201).

42 See the news report of Observator TV, uploaded to YouTube. Published on 17 August 2017. Accessible at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JkxnmPI6lU>. Last accessed on 12 March 2018.

43 István Horváth uses the term "ethnic migration" for the "migration type" of the Jewish and German population who have left Romania, and we have borrowed it here in the same sense (see Horváth 2012: 199).

44 Public comment (in English) on YouTube to the film entitled *Cehii din Banat. Minoritățile în tranziție* ["The Czechs in Banat. Minorities in Transition"] (2013), 9 March 2018.

Czech Republic. They live there, and she is alone here. She has two houses to take care about. And in October, I think, she will close it, and she will move to Czech Republic to her children, and another house will be closed. And it is a finish of a 200 years history.⁴⁵

Most tourists we have talked to mentioned the archaic Czech dialect and the folklore they can hear in it, the pre-modern rural way of life and its inherent possibilities for rural tourism, as well as the chance of personal contact with a historical tradition reaching back 150 to 200 years among their main motivations for visiting.

Summary, Conclusions

This study has analysed the causes behind the migration of the Czech population from Romania to the Czech Republic and its associated ethnicity discourses. We have drawn a parallel between the locality-related ethnicising discourses of the current, aged population of the villages and those of the emigrants, as well as of the Czech tourists “discovering” the Czech villages of Romania after the regime change. The collapse of livelihood capacity due to the post-1989 economic decline and to the isolation of the villages, along with the existential feeling of the impossibility to maintain their community life, pervade the attitudes to locality of the remaining local population, as well as of the emigrants, who use their country houses only during their summer holidays and when visiting to maintain their family and kinship ties.

At the same time, the tourism activity of the Czechs from the motherland directed at this region contributes to the revaluation of the local Czech ethnicity.

Translated by Lóránd Rigán

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Migráció és etnicitás – a bányászi csehek

A 19. század első felében cseh telepések kolóniákat hoztak létre főként a Duna délnyugat-romániai részének alsó folyása mentén lévő, erdőkkel borított hegyekben. A rendszerváltást megelőzően megközelítőleg 5500 főt számlált a romániai cseh közösség. 1989 után a csehül beszélő, római katolikus lakosság fokozatosan Csehországba való vándorlásának lehetünk tanúi. 1992-es népszámlálás: 5797 személy, 2011-es népszámlálás: 2477 személy, amely kevesebb, mint 10 év alatt 57%-os csökkenést jelent. Mi van e számok mögött? Milyen migrációs patternnek érvényesülnek és mi történik a kibocsátó közösségekkel? Hogyan alakulnak át a kibocsátó helyhez társuló jelentések a cseh migránsok körében? Hogyan jelenik meg a szülőföld a migrációs diskurzusban? Hogyan befolyásolják a tradicionális ruralitást, egzotikum élményt és időutazást kereső anyaországi csehek a romániai csehek etnicitását?

Migrație și etnicitate – cehii din Banat (România)

În prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea coloniștii cehi s-au stabilit, cu precădere, în munții împăduriți de pe cursul inferior al Dunării din partea de sud-vest a României. Înainte de schimbarea regimului comunitatea cehă din România număra aproximativ 5500 de persoane. După 1989 are loc emigrarea tot mai accentuată a populației vorbitoare de limbă cehă și de religie romano-catolică. Recensământul din 1992 a numărat 5797 de cehi în România, al căror număr a scăzut la 2477 de persoane până la recensământul din 2011, ceea ce reprezintă o scădere de 57% în mai puțin de un deceniu. Ce reflectă oare cifrele statistice? Ce fel de modele migraționale se manifestă aici și ce se întâmplă cu comunitățile de origine? Cum se transformă semnificațiile asociate cu locurile de origine în rândul emigranților cehi? Cum apare patria părăsită în discursul lor? Și cum influențează cehii din patria-mamă, aflați în căutarea ruralității tradiționale, a experienței exotice și a „călătoriei în timp”, etnicitatea cehilor din România?

Migration and Ethnicity: The Czechs from Banat (Romania)

In the first half of the 19th century Czech colonists have established several colonies, especially in the wood-covered mountains found along the lower reaches of the Danube, in the south-western region of Romania. Before the regime change Romania had a Czech population of 5500. After 1989 the Czech-speaking, Roman Catholic population has become involved in an increased outward migration to Czech Republic. According to the 1992 census their population numbered 5797 persons. The 2011 census put their numbers at 2477, which means a 57% decrease in less than a decade. What do the figures reflect? What kind of migration patterns are at work here, and what is the fate of the source communities? How do the meanings attached to the localities of origin change among Czech emigrants? How does the native land appear in the migration discourse? And how do the Czech tourists from the motherland, looking for traditional rurality, the experience of exoticism, and “time travel”, influence the ethnicity of the Czechs living in Romania?