



Aromanians/Vlachs: ancient people striving to preserve their culture

Ana Funa*

Abstract: Aromanians have lived in the Balkans for over 2000 years, immensely contributing to development of all Balkan states and every field of the societies, today still fighting for their recognition and struggling to preserve their culture and language.

[Toshe Proeski](#) and [Kaliopi Bukle](#) (famous Balkan singers), the Manaki Brothers (the first Balkan cinematographers), [Kosta Stojanovic](#) (founder of mathematical economics, originator of cybernetics in Serbia and minister in eight governments of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), [Fanula Papazoglu](#) (ancient historian and epigraphist), [Jovan Sterija Popovic](#) (famous 19th century dramatist), [Nikola Pašić](#) (five times prime minister of Kingdom of Serbia and three times PM of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), [Nikola Martinoski](#) (Macedonian contemporary artist), [Simona Halep](#) (top-ranking professional tennis player); these are just few of the many famous people of Aromanian descent.

*Ana Funa graduated in Law from Bitola, North Macedonia and is an alumna of the European Regional Master's Programme in Democracy and Human Rights in South-East Europe ([ERMA](#)). Her current research covers execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, transitional justice, gender and minority rights.



Portraits of famous/important persons of Aromanian origin – artist Zoran Cardula

Aromanians/Vlach/Tsintsars (Armănj) have existed in the Balkan peninsula for over [two thousand years](#), despite [disputes](#) over their origin and the long-lasting [politics of assimilation](#) by the Balkan states. A minority without a kin state, dispersed in North Macedonia, Albania, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania, playing an important part of the history of all Balkan kingdoms and states, associated with [modernity and wealth](#) yet still fighting for recognition and preservation of their language and culture.

Indigenous people, descendants of Roman soldiers, Latinised Greeks, people of Thracian origins, or Romanians separated from their homeland—are some of the origin narratives. The Vlachs were first identified as a separate group in the 11th century by historian George Kedrenos, while on 23 May 1905 (Aromanian National Day) the Ottoman Empire [recognised](#) them as a separate ethnic group with the right to elect their own mayors and organise their own education and religious services in Vlach.

Aromanian/[Vlach](#) is one of four varieties of the Eastern Romance language subgroup, with links to vulgate Latin from the Roman period, though today it borrows words from Greek, Turkish and Slavic languages.



Assimilation through the years, fewer schools, no religious services, systematic change of last names and propaganda concerning their origin have seriously contributed to Aromanian becoming a language under threat.

Council of Europe recognition

The Council of Europe (CoE) acknowledged the importance of the Aromanian culture and language with the [Recommendation 1333\(1997\)](#) highlighting that there were over 500,000 Aromanian speakers at the beginning of the 20th century but only half that number in 1997, dispersed through Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Germany, the United States of America and Australia, and numbers continue to fall.

The CoE [encouraged](#) the Balkan states which have Aromanian communities to sign, ratify and implement the European [Charter](#) of Regional or Minority Languages, inviting them to support the Aromanians, particularly regarding education, religious services, newspapers, radio and television programmes in Aromanian, as well as backing their cultural associations. The CoE further [invited](#) the other member states to support Aromanian by creating university professorships and disseminating Aromanian culture throughout Europe, whilst introducing fellowships for Aromanian artists, writers, researchers and students throughout the Balkans. Education ministers of member states were also [asked](#)

to include Aromanian history in European history books. However, 28 years later, little of this has been implemented.

The protection of minorities, including Aromanians, is guaranteed by the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities ([FCNM](#)), envisaging a spectrum of rights, with a system of monitoring of its implementation by the CoE Committee of Ministers through the Advisory Committee.

Different states, different challenges

In contrast to their position in other states, Aromanians enjoy highest-level recognition in North Macedonia, where the [Constitution](#) acknowledges them as one of the national minorities. In the 2021 census 9.208 people declared themselves as Aromanian.

Aromanian has the [status](#) of one of the official languages in the Municipality of Krushevo where the Aromanian community is traditionally most numerous. However, this recognition seems more declamatory than effectual, with no official documents or names of institutions in Aromanian. In its latest report for North Macedonia, the CoE [Advisory Committee](#) welcomed amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in 2018, resulting in significantly increased broadcasting hours for all national minorities. Programmes in Vlach leapt from three times per week to three per day. Furthermore, Vlach is taught as an elective subject on 'language and culture' to eight and nine-year-olds from third grade for one hour and from fourth grade for two hours per week. However, in the 2021/22 school year, just 382 pupils studied Vlach.

According to the [Minority Rights Group](#) in the 2011 census in Albania 8.266 people declared themselves as Aromanian, although the number is disputed by community representatives. With the 2017 Law on protection of National Minorities, Aromanians have been recognised as a national minority. Stressing the right to learn a minority language, the CoE [Advisory Committee](#) emphasised that there is no formal (nor in some cases informal) education in Vlach and highlighted the particular importance of devoting attention to national minorities without 'kin states', including Vlach/Aromanians, who live geographically dispersed across Albania, to ensure effective access to minority language education through training teachers and developing educational materials. Given the complete absence of Vlach language provision, it stressed the importance of encouraging study and research of the language at university level.

Greece, on the other hand, does not recognise ethnic minorities, however, the [Minority Rights Group](#) has noted that it is more tolerant of Vlachs than other minority groups. Vlach cultural societies are permitted, and there is a Panhellenic Union of Vlach Cultural Associations. However, the [official view](#) is that Vlachs are Greeks who speak an unusual dialect and popular hostility to the use of Aromanian has been internalised by many Vlachs themselves.

The situation in Romania is also problematic. The CoE [Advisory Committee](#) noted that representatives of the Aromanian community continue to ask for recognition as a national minority and to be represented in the Council of National Minorities (CNM). However, the authorities [maintain](#) the position that Aromanians do not belong to an ethnicity other than Romanian and that Aromanian is a dialect of Romanian. Not being a member of the CNM, Aromanians lack opportunities to effectively participate in consultations with decision-making bodies. Furthermore, an issue with the right to self-identification was [noted](#) in the 2022 census where according to the nomenclature for ethnic groups, persons identifying themselves as Aromanians were counted as Romanians while Aromanian was listed as a dialect of the Romanian language. The CoE Advisory Committee [said](#) it regretted that the census questionnaire did not contain an open field, nor were Aromanians listed as possible replies to the question on ethnic affiliation. It reiterated that the right to free self-identification contained in the FCNM is a cornerstone of minority rights, emphasised the importance of the opportunity to declare multiple ethnic affiliations in the census and called on the authorities to evaluate the methodology used for the 2022 census in an open and constructive dialogue with representatives of national minorities.

In [Bulgaria](#), as noted by the CoE Advisory Committee several ethnic and linguistic minorities have had a traditional presence. The National Council for Co-operation on Ethnic and Integration Issues includes associations representing several minorities including Aromanian, which can be considered de facto recognition of these minorities. In the [2022 Serbian census](#), 327 persons identified as Tsintsars (the Serbian term for Aromanians), thus this community finally reached the threshold for recognition as a national minority and to be allowed to form the National Council of Tsintsars in Serbia, however, the state has still not done this. [Representatives](#) claim that the number of Tsintsars is much higher and census results are a reflection of long-lasting assimilation. They further claim that the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights stated that Tsintsars are recognised as a minority, but indirectly, through the co-financing of their programmes that preserve the peculiarities that define them as a minority, yet they are ‘not a sufficiently representative national community in the context of national council elections’. Representatives vowed to fight on for proper recognition and representation.

Battle for recognition continues

The Aromanian anthem [Dimândarea părintească](#), namely ‘The will of the forefathers’, exhorts parents to teach their children the language and curses anyone who abandons it in favour of assimilation. A poem by Constantin Belimace in 1888, it is now more relevant than ever.

Aromanians are still fighting for recognition as a special nation, different from the majority, especially in Greece and Romania. NGOs and individuals are trying to raise awareness of

the importance of preservation of Aromanian. Through different publications, dictionaries, books and classes they are trying to make learning it more accessible. [Modern music](#), [artwork](#), [YouTube channels](#), social media and social platforms are used to reach a wider audience, making the language and the minority more visible and interesting, especially for younger generations, since most of the active speakers of Aromanian are elderly. Nonetheless, the institutions must take serious steps to protect the culture and language of one of the oldest nations in the Balkans.