

A Brief History of the Nekrasovite Cossacks and an Analysis of the Cossack Heritage in Romania

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to make a contribution to the clarification of certain aspects regarding the origins of the Lipovans, the Russian-speaking minority group found on the territory of Romania, which have been long rumoured to be of Cossack origin. Despite having emigrated and cut off contact with their native lands, they have managed to maintain a distinct identity, culture and language over the centuries of separation from their ancestral lands, whilst also managing to integrate well into the new cultural context initially encountered in Ottoman-ruled Dobruja, and in Romania, later. The paper comprises a presentation of the historical contexts that have led to the migration of Russian speakers westwards, reaching the territory of modern-day Romania and the influence they have exerted on said territories. It includes specific cultural and linguistic exemplifications supporting the Cossack origin thesis of the Lipovan population of Dobruja.

Keywords: Cossacks; Lipovans; Nekrasovites; Russian dialects; Northern Dobruja history; Raskol

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Introduction

In the sixth decade of the seventeenth century, beginning in 1653, Patriarch Nikon of Russia implemented a series of religious rite reforms aimed at “purifying” Russian Orthodoxy from alleged Western influences and bringing the Russian church closer to the Greek one, considered by the Patriarch as a standard of Orthodoxy. The Patriarch had reached these conclusions after discussions with the most learned Greek prelates, whom he invited to Moscow for advice. Thus the scholars of Constantinople and Kyiv convinced Patriarch Nikon that the texts belonging to the Russian liturgical books were heterodox; they had deviated from the supposed Greek originals. They were aiming for a paradigm shift, in which Russia should not be religiously independent, but should have been entirely shaped by the Greeks. Therefore, Patriarch

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Nikon ordered the issuance of new liturgical books in accordance with the reforms. Instead of being revised according to old Slavonic and Greek manuscripts, the new liturgical editions had been, in fact, translated from modern Greek editions printed in Catholic Venice. (Crummey, 2008 : 45, 53–55). All this has led to the refusal of a part of the population to move on to the new religious traditions. After the implementation of these bold reforms, Nikon used the power of the Church and of the state to suppress the old religious customs and to oppress the people who were reluctant to accept the new reforms, starting a real campaign of persecution that would last many years. Despite severe persecution by the authorities, many of the Russians who still practiced the old rite, nowadays called “raskolniki” (Russian for “schismatics”), did not give up and sought refuge in other territories. Many migrated north to take refuge in the swampy forests of Northern Russia, some to the west in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where they could enjoy religious freedom, and others to the east into the Siberian Taiga. (Tudose, 2015 : 75-93)

1. The origins of the Nekrasovite Cossacks

At the beginning of the 18th century, the rural society of the Russian space was in turmoil in the context of the radical reforms of Tsar Peter the Great, with the aim of westernizing and modernizing the old Land of Russia. These reforms had been interpreted by the population as an attack on their traditional way of life and, above all, on the Orthodox faith and values. In addition, at the time, the tsar was tightening his control over the country's territories with his ambition to create a “well-ordered police state” that would legitimize and further strengthen authoritarian rule in Russia. (Cracraft, 2006 : 64) Under these conditions, a revolt broke out and turned into a war between the tsarist government of Peter the Great and the rebellious Don Cossacks, along with the Russian peasants who had fled slavery.

The name of Lake Razelm – Razin from Dobrogea, originating from Nekrasov's Cossacks, has been preserved to this day, so named in memory of the leader of the Cossack uprising of the seventeenth century, Stepan Timofeevich Razin, also called Stenka Razin. According to the history teacher from Sarichioi, Tulcea County, Sevastian Fenoghen (“Zorile”, no. 11/2002, qtd. in Munteanu, 2015 : 58),

“The hostility of those around them - mere Old Believers - forced them to give up the namesake of Nekrasovites [...]. That is how an “oath of silence” started since the first half of the 19th century, without having an organized character [...]. Although the center of Sarichioi was destroyed by the Zaporozhian Cossacks during the Russian-Turkish war from 1806-1812, most Dobrujan Nekrasovites remained in the Delta and its adjacent areas, being forced by the context to change their name, accepting the Lipovan ethnonym”.

Therefore, the Nekrasovite Cossacks originate as a group that separated from the Don Cossacks during Bulavin's revolt. Having reached the Danube Delta, they came into territorial conflict with the Zaporozhian Cossacks.

2. Settlement on the Romanian territory

The migration of Russian Old Believers to Romania took place in numerous waves. There were 3 main waves. The earliest took place in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This is the first migration since the events presented in the first section of the paper, namely: the religious reforms of Patriarch Nikon and the persecution and anathema that followed. The Russians who formed the first wave came from various villages and towns in Russia, especially from the settlements around Moscow, but also from other areas such as St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Kaluga, Tula and Smolensk. The meeting points where all these groups intersected were the towns of Starodubie and Vetka in Western Russia and Eastern Belarus today, which became important centres for old-rite Orthodox groups (Chiselev, 2019: 4-45), where they had temporarily established a sedentary community (Lazăr & Hossu, 2020 : 88, 92). Later, they travelled across Ukraine and eventually reached Southern Bukovina, where they settled, and built new villages in the area. This is the group from which the Lipovans namesake most probably originates. There are several theories about the etymology of their ethnonym. According to Vascenco V., the only linguistically acceptable theory regarding the etymology of the word “Lipovan” is that it originates, as a religious group name, from the name of Filipp Pustosvyat, who was a spiritual leader who guided refugees in the first migration from Russia through Ukraine and is believed to have been the son of a Russian priest from Suzdal, Nikita Pustosvyat, who became one of the leaders of the Old Believers during the

schism (Vascenco, 2007 : 133). In this regard, this hypothesis also happens to be best backed-up by historical data, seeing as there is no doubt about the existence of the historical character, Filipp Pustosvyat. It would come as no surprise that the descendants of the groups he led came to call themselves "Lipovans", in connection to his name.

Then followed the second wave of migration, in the 19th century, from Bukovina to the Danube Delta, due to the Russian invasion of Poland, at that time, in which a significant percentage of the Bukovina Lipovan community travelled across Moldova from north to south and settled in at the Danube, where they accepted military obligations and became Cossacks. (Jescu, 2019 : 65)

The third wave the most interesting for this paper. It took place from the first part of the 18th century and lasted until the first third of the 19th century. It was formed by the migration of the Nekrasov Cossacks from their original lands in Southern Russia to the Danube Delta. By 1737, hundreds of thousands of refugees from Southern Russia had settled in Kuban, with many joining the Nekrasovites. But around 1737, the military actions of the Nekrasovites ceased abruptly. As the Nekrasovite Cossacks were Old Believers, they were under the persecution of the Russian authorities. Aware that Russian troops were approaching the Kuban river, where the Cossacks were settled, the Nekrasovite community had to look for other territories, so they relocated to the Ottoman Empire, which offered almost unconditional religious freedom with the exception of having to pay a small sum as taxes. They initially settled between the Dniester and the Danube, and later, in 1740, in the South of the Danube, in villages such as Sarichioi and Dunavățu de Sus. (Chiselev, 2019 : 12)

After the break-up of the Zaporozhian Sich in Ukraine, the famous Ukrainian Zaporozhian Cossacks migrated to the Danube Delta, where they would enter into territorial conflicts with the Russian Nekrasovite Cossacks. Each of the two parties won many battles against the other, with a part of them migrating back to Russia. With both Cossacks hosts severely weakened by the years of conflict, the Nekrasovite capital was finally overrun by the Zaporozhians.

"With the conquest of the Danube, the Nekrasovites virtually disappeared from the Balkans, some of them being relocated to Anatolia, and those who remained in the Delta were assimilated by the Zaporizhians"

(Malenko, 2006 : 181-183)

As observed from the recounted historical data, it seems that the supposition is that some Nekrasovites relocated to Anatolia, whilst the ones who remained were assimilated by the Zaporozhians. But, as the linguistic and cultural evidence presented below converges to indicate, an important part of the Nekrasovites were assimilated into the Lipovan community in Dobruja.

3. Linguistic features of the Lipovan population in Romania

This section comprises an analysis and comparison of the two clusters of Russian-speaking Old Believers located in Romania, specifically in Dobruja and Bukovina.

The Bukovina Lipovan dialect, although archaic, features elements typical of the central dialects of today's Russia, the area between Nizhny Novgorod, Moscow and Novgorod. It has features such as *akanye* (the phonemes / o / and / a / overlap in unstressed syllables) and the pronunciation of the Cyrillic letter traditionally corresponding to “g” as a voiced glottal fricative or a voiced velar fricative ([ɦ]/ [ɣ]). As observed in a recording featuring an elderly speaker from Iași county (entitled *Interoyu*, accessible online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ireMzEm-ju8>; also linked in the audio sample section at the end of the article), it also features occasional use of a possessive verb seeming to be a loanword from Ukrainian (*mayu*) in constructions such as *mayu shche-(y)* (meaning *I have more / I still have*) during fast speech, typical to modern Ukrainian, instead of the expected locative construction (*u menya yest'*) as in standard Russian and in the Dobruja Lipovan dialect. It is worth mentioning that this may not be satisfactorily conclusive, as the available audio data samples for the Bukovina Lipovan dialect are limited and the context in which this paper has been written was not favourable for field work. The dialect featured in the audio recording also comprises a prosthetic /w~u/ semivowel before /u/ and stressed /o/: *vokna, vulitsa*, as opposed to Standard Russian *okna, ulitsa* “windows, street”, as well as prosthetic /j/ before /i/ and /e/: *yetot, yentot*, as opposed to Standard Russian *etot* “this / this one”. These features are typical to the Southern Russian dialects encountered in the Krasnodar region or Stavropol Krai, which also happens to be the former Soviet president's, Mikhail Gorbachev's place of origin - who has a strikingly similar accent, as further extended below.

However, regarding the Dobruja Lipovan Russian dialect, there are certain peculiarities of great interest for those seeking the origins of this population. This dialect is a special one, being able to be described as a curious combination of peculiarities, where elements typical of the southern dialects of Russia predominate, such as frequent predominant *hekanye*, similar to the Ukrainian language which entails pronouncing the letter “g” as a fricative velar sound consonant - [ɣ], instead of the expected voiced velar plosive, a [g] sound, as in standard Russian), whilst also featuring Northern Russian elements, described below. It also features a slight *palatalisation* or softening of the final /t/ in the conjugation of verbs in the 3rd person *hulyayut’* instead of *gulyayut* or *duit’*, instead of *duet*, sounding like a very short and devoiced final /i/ sound. It also features a distinctive lack of vowel reduction when it comes to the final verbal reflexive particle *sya* to *s’* when preceded by a vowel (*napilasya* instead of *napilas’*, as expected in accordance with the standard Russian language, exemplified in the second audio sample below the conclusion of the paper, consisting in a Lipovan folk song, *Napilasea ea piana*). The southern & western elements (typical of the regions of Pskov Oblast’, Polesia and Belarus) are also notable, such as the occasional *yakanye*: transformation of the /je/ diphthong into /ja/ (Sussex & Cubberley 2006 : 521–526). Another peculiar feature is the linguistic process of *elision* or deletion of the consonant [g] in the ending of masculine nouns, adjectives and pronouns in the genitive and accusative cases: *yaó* (Russian *ego*), *kao* (Russian *kogo*), *dobrao* (Russian *dobrogo*). It is also noteworthy that this process is accompanied by *yakanye*. Such features are also found in the Pomorian group of Northern Russian dialects, except for the Arkhangelsk region, as well as in the northern regions near the coast of the White Sea, adjoined with *okanye*: *koó*, *dobroó*. (Farisenkova, Izotov, 2014 : 69; Kolesov, 1998, qtd. in Farisenkova, Izotov, 2014 : 69)

The only population known to feature all of these characteristics are the *Don Cossacks*, with their dialect called *gutar/hutar*, still spoken in their traditional hearth in Southern Russia, along with *Balachka*, a dialect/language spoken mainly by the Kuban Cossacks but also partially by the Don Cossacks. (Minahan, 2000 : 384) An interesting fact is that the former Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, famously speaks in a Southern Russian accent (Doder & Branson 1990 : 50; Taubman 2017 : 44) that shares phonological features with Lipovan Russian, most notably the frequent *hekanye* and replacement of standard /v/ sounds with /u/ or with a

semivowel (/w~u/) when preceded by another vowel (Sussex & Cubberley, 2006 : 521–526).

By the nineteenth century, a complex process of synthesis between the Nekrasovites and religious refugees from other regions of Russia was already occurring, eventually leading to the creation of the modern-day Lipovan Russian communities settled in the South-Eastern part of Romania (Varona, 2002 : 82, qtd. in Chiselev, 2019 : 12).

Despite the fact that the aforementioned dialectal features observed in the Lipovan Russian Dialect match the typical Cossack features observed in the dialect spoken by the rural population of Southern Russia, these features can be found, separately, in the modern standard Ukrainian and Belarusian languages, respectively. For Ukrainian, it is the *hekanye*, *okanye* and the softening or slight palatalisation of the final /t/ phoneme in the third-person conjugation of verbs, whilst for the Belarusian language, *yakanye*. As such, all of these features could possibly be of Ukrainian and Belarusian origin as influences on the original groups of Old Believers led by Filipp Pustosvyat. This would mean that a direct connection to the Cossack dialects cannot be fully confirmed as of yet. Nevertheless, when taking into account the historical data, as well as the linguistic ones, it is a sensible conclusion to draw that there may indeed be a direct connection between the two.

4. Cultural aspects specific to Russian speakers in Romania

The traditional music of the Lipovans in Romania makes its deep Slavic roots obvious, this being reflected, especially, in the polyphonic music using the traditional Slavic singing technique called *white voice* or *white singing*, sung by choirs of women and occasionally of men or mixed. This technique produces a bright, loud and rich sound. This technique is common for the two Russian regions in Romania. However, as for the Dobruja Lipovans, a significant part of the traditional repertoire consists of Cossack songs or in which the Cossacks are mentioned. Moreover, many of these songs are still found in the traditional repertoire of Cossacks in Southern Russia and Eastern Ukraine. These include: "*Za Uralom, za rekoy / Kak za Donom, za rekoy*" (*On the other side of the Ural, across the river / As beyond the Don, the river*), "*Raspryagayte, khloptsy, koney / Marusya*" (*Unharness the horses, guys!*), "*Oi, na gore kazaki stoiali / Oi, na more rybalki*" (*Oh, the Cossacks were standing on the mountain / Oh, (the) fishermen are at sea*),

“*Proyezshala konnitsa*” (*The cavalry rode*) and others. The latter, *The Cavalry Rode*, is a story about a hopeless love between a Cossack who was going to war and a woman he met on the way there, falling in love with each other. He offered her a silk scarf as a gift to remind her of him and promised that he would return to visit her when he would win the battle, but, later, upon the return of the Cossacks, she would be informed that the Cossack she had been anxiously waiting for had died as a hero on the battlefield and that he was a *garmon* player in their army. The lyrics are comprised in the table as follows:

[English]
<p>“The cavalry rode across the wide steppe, Where the green forest hummed, buzzed. Rode along the path, ahead of the detachment, The blue-eyed guy is an accordion player.</p> <p>The frisky maiden met the cavalry. He jumped off his horse. Black-eyed girl, give me some water to drink. Give water to drink to the exhausted horse.</p> <p>The rider having drunk, the guy looked into her eyes. He himself went far away to fight. He gave her a silk handkerchief. He promised to visit.</p> <p>The cavalry rode, the detachments moved. A familiar white horse is ahead. You tell me, guy, where is that blue-eyed one Who played us songs on the accordion?</p> <p>She was answered by a guy that in the wide steppe, Where the green leaf hummed, Shot by a bullet, he lies a hero, The blue-eyed guy is an accordion player.</p> <p>The cavalry rode, the detachments moved. And the breeze blew in their face, The girl stood, wiped her tears With the gifted silk scarf”</p>

This song showcases the melancholic and artistic spirit of the Lipovans and their Cossack ancestors.

5. Conclusion

As a result of the research process, a number of clues were discovered which converge to support the thesis of the Nekrasovite Cossack descent of the Russian-Lipovan community from Dobruja, a community that still preserves cultural and linguistic aspects of Cossack heritage that is almost three centuries old. The most probable cause of omission of the Cossack identity and, subsequently, its replacement with the name "Lipovans", may be that the Cossacks have indeed preferred this omission, considering that, given the historical context, the *Nekrasovite* namesake would no longer have been favorable, but would have been a disadvantage, as per Sevastian Fenoghen's account of the Cossack *oath of silence*. Thus, this conscious choice made by that part of Nekrasov's Cossacks which stayed in Dobruja after the conquest of the Upper Danube by the Zaporozhian Cossacks has resulted in the process of assimilation into the Dobrujan Lipovan communities, although this process seems to have exerted a significant influence on the communities, as shown above.

This article may serve as a starting point and a source of inspiration for further research into the topic, especially research involving cultural and linguistic comparisons between the two main Lipovan population clusters in Romania, in Northern Moldova/Bukovina and Dobruja. Field work is important in such research, as, with the exception of late Romanian linguist Victor Vascenco's magnificent work, these Russian dialects in Romania are scarcely studied, to the knowledge of the author, and it could aid in gaining a better understanding of the history of the Old Believer groups that settled in Romania.

The article underlines the complexity of the process of migration of Old Believers westwards into Romania, also proving that the modern-day Lipovan population of Dobruja is composed of a mixture of original Lipovans from Filipp Pustosvyat's group, of other groups of Old Believers who arrived in smaller waves and, finally, of Nekrasovite Cossacks who arrived in the 18th century. Nowadays, the Dobrujan Lipovans are a peaceful, kind and hospitable people, differing from their warlike Cossack ancestors in this respect, but the Cossack songs still resonate in the fishermen villages of the Lipovans as echoes of times that have remained in the spirit and collective consciousness of the locals up to this day.

Glossary notes

1. A *raya* is a term used in Romanian historiography to describe former Wallachian and Moldavian territories under the direct administration of the Ottoman Empire, as opposed to the suzerainty it held upon the two medieval principalities. (Romanian Academy. *Istoria Românilor: De la universalitatea creștină către Europa "patriilor"*. Editura Enciclopedică, 2001: 571-572)
2. **Cossack Host / Sich** = the highest administrative division of a Cossack group; Cossack *state*, as a political entity.
3. **Kuban, Don** = rivers in Southern Russia, north of the Caucasus mountains; the homeland of the Kuban Cossacks and Don Cossacks, groups named after the river basins they settled in.
4. **Garmon** = A type of button accordion very popular in Russian and Caucasian folk music.
5. An *oblast* is the most common type of administrative division in Russia, translated into English as *province, region, area* or *zone*.
6. A *krai* is another type of federal subject of the Russian Federation, most often translated as *territory*.

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17. The table comprises the lyrics to the song "Proyezzhalo konnitsa" (The cavalry rode) with an approximate English translation on the right column. Lyrics source: Teksty-pesenok.ru – <https://teksty-pesenok.ru/rus-kazachya-volya/tekst-pesni-proezzhalo-konnica/1817800/>

Audio data

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 6. Example of a popular Terek Cossack song sung by a Lipovan male choir/ensemble *Slavskie Rebyata - Oysya, ty, Oysya* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0jtT4DhcjU>

Dobruja Lipovan traditional polyphonic repertoire (non-Cossack):

1. Romy Gurei (2019). *A u poli veter duit'* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qsNGKhNTnM>
2. Lipovenesc (2019). *Cantece vechi lipovenesti #1* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYvST3OAUuSU> (Old Russian song, *Po moryu sinemu*)

Russian repertoire, for comparison:

1. Dukhovnost' - Oysya you oysya, Interstreet Recordings (on behalf of 3586581 Records DK), and 1 Music Rights Societies - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AevTL4CzWk>
2. Unharness the horses, guys / Raspryagayte koney, khloptsy - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfV5vnwPEno>
3. "The Cossacks are riding by / ProeZZhala Konnitsa" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-9aRAKaxzk>
4. Lyrics source: Teksty-pesenok.ru - <https://teksty-pesenok.ru/rus-kazachya-volya/tekst-pesni-proeZZhala-konnica/1817800/>